

2005 Editors' Choice Awards

The Ultimate Guide to Great Gear!



STEREO • MULTICHANNEL AUDIO • MUSIC

the absolute sound®



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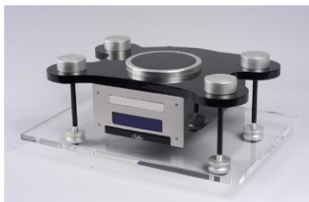
editors' choice awards

Welcome to the 2005 edition of *The Absolute Sound's* Editors' Choice Awards—our annual, comprehensive list of Recommended Products. On the following pages, you'll find the gear our writers and editors have selected as the "best of the best" in each component category. Each recommendation gets a capsule review, and most categories are divided into separate sub-categories by price range, with components listed in order of ascending price (though a few items, like cables and accessories, are listed alphabetically for clarity's sake). Naturally, some products have been discontinued

since last year's list, but they remain recommendable. This year we've also included a list of the multichannel components we've found to be most truthful to the real thing—as opposed to those that are merely spectacular with film soundtracks. (Note, however, that with the exception of founder Harry Pearson's "Super Maggie" System, which was part of a complete system recommendation, space has prevented us from including multichannel speakers. For a complete list, please take a look at the Winter 2006 issue of our sister magazine, *The Perfect Vision*.)

While most of our recommended components have already been reviewed in our pages, some reviews are either forthcoming or have appeared in our sister publications *The Perfect Vision* and AVGuide.com.

recommended products



BLUENOTE STIBBERT

\$4900

fanfareintl.com

An Italian import that gives the Lector (another Italian import) a genuine run for the money. It isn't as colored, indeed, once warmed up, it is just shy of the purely neutral, with a hint of tube coloration. But it has some dynamic limitations.

HP review forthcoming

\$5000-\$10,000



AYRE C-5XE UNIVERSAL PLAYER

\$5950

ayre.com

Serving music lovers by eschewing video playback and multichannel audio, Ayre has established a high-water mark for multi-format players. The C5 is not only consistent across all formats—it excels across all (stereo) formats by performing at or very near the current state-of-the-art.

Reviewed by SB, Issue 156



LECTOR DIGIDRIVE & DIGICODE 2.24

\$8680 (\$4290 and \$4390)

fanfareintl.com

A bit on the dark side in terms of coloration, and most sensitive to acoustic breakthrough (as are all the inexpensive CD and combo players of our experience), which makes itself manifest as a "plummy" midbass. But it sounds like

music, first and foremost, and at a price not stratospheric in terms of high-end CD playback systems. Quantities are in short supply.

HP review forthcoming

\$10,000 and Above



THETA GENERATION VIII DAC

\$10,000

thetadigital.com

Nearly 20 years ago, Theta built a business around developing superior-sounding digital-to-analog converters. The new Generation VIII digital processor is the latest in a long line of great products. The Gen VIII has every input and feature imaginable, along with an architecture that permits upgrades to new digital standards. Theta's digital processors have always excelled in three areas: bass depth and power, soundstaging, and dynamics. The Gen VIII carries on that tradition, with a center-of-the-earth bottom end that establishes a solid rhythmic and tonal foundation for the music. Bass-guitar lines simply purr through the Gen VIII. This new DAC is, however, somewhat of a departure from Theta's "house sound" in that the Gen VIII has a sweeter treble and an overall softer presentation that fosters a greater intimacy with the music. The Gen VIII is easily Theta's best effort, and a contender for state-of-the-art in digital playback at any price.

RH, review forthcoming

EMM LABS CDSD TRANSPORT & DAC6E

\$19,400 (\$7900 and \$11,500)

onahighernote.com

The first professional-grade SACD deck from the man, Ed Meitner, who single-handedly gave the multichannel DSD system high-end respectability. It's beautiful to look at, and a light-year's leap forward over the Meitner-modified Philips 1000 player that preceded it. At its best, it sounds like ana-

log, only with wider dynamics and visceral impact, and is as clean as a whistle and completely uncolored. Essential.

HP's Workshop Issues 141, 142, 145, and 152



MERIDIAN 800 CD/DVD AUDIO PLAYER

\$19,950-\$22,500

meridian-audio.com

This flagship product is the current state-of-the-art in DVD-Audio playback. If you want to hear DVD-Audio at its best, look no further than the 800. In addition, the 800 is a world-class CD player. Modular card-cage construction allows custom configuration and upgrades. A reference-quality product.

Reviewed by RH, Issue 145

JADIS JD1 PRO MKII TRANSPORT AND JS1 MKIII DAC

\$40,000 (\$25,000 and \$15,000)

pierregabriel.com

The price is ionospheric. And so are the sonic thrills this tubed French import can provide. We have had some mechanical problems with the drive mechanism, but assuming they are corrected, this may be the player to beat.

HP review forthcoming

MBL 1621 A CD TRANSPORT AND 1611 E DIGITAL-TO-ANALOG CONVERTER

\$42,510 (\$21,010 and \$21,500)

mbl.com

If you're heavily invested in Red Book CD, you may not know how good it can get until you audition this pricey-but-worth-it transport and DAC from MBL. If there is better CD playback, JV hasn't heard it—and he's heard and reviewed some mighty fine CD and SACD players. It isn't just the magical level of musical detail—much of it previously unheard—that this combo is capable of eliciting from silver disc, nor its unusually life-like timbres, nor the unparalleled extension, definition, and slam of

its bass. It is the MBLs' overall gestalt—the analog-like taste of dimensionality and solidity that it adds to virtually every CD—that truly astonishes. No, the 1621/1611 isn't a Walker turntable; it is darker, less delicately detailed, airy, bloomy, and 3-D than great analog playback. That said, it comes as close to LP's virtues as any CD player JV has had in his system, with the bonuses of CD's superior bass, sea-swell large-scale dynamics, lightning transients, and often-astonishing clarity. JV

Turntables

Under \$1000

MUSIC HALL MMF-2.1LE W/TRACKER CARTRIDGE

\$349

musichallaudio.com

This affordable model still incorporates many of the high-quality components used on Music Hall's higher-end 'tables. It retains the rich, powerful, and palpable sound quality that makes analog much more than audiophiles' preferred music source. The MMF is a simple, belt-driven, two-speed unit that comes assembled with everything the aspiring analog lover needs to start listening.

Reviewed by Thuus Thompson, AVg



MUSIC HALL MMF-5 W/GOLDRING 1012GX CARTRIDGE

\$629

musichallaudio.com

Music Hall's integrated turntable package provides the LP lover with a warm, musically engaging, and affordable vinyl playback solution. Its bass isn't the most defined, and it's a bit forward in