

PRODUCTS  
OF THE  
YEAR  
AWARDS  
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THE 50 HOTTEST PRODUCTS OF 2013

Editors Pick the Best of the Best

# stereophile

ELECTRONICALLY REPRINTED DECEMBER 2013



BY STEPHEN MEJIAS

# THE YEAR'S BEST AUDIO GEAR

It's time to celebrate another memorable year in high-end audio. Each December since 1992, *Stereophile* has named a few special components its Products of the Year. These are components that not only define the present audio landscape, but that we hope will someday be seen as *dassies*—things you'll want to pass on to future generations of audiophiles and music lovers. This year, we've awarded components in five primary categories: Loudspeakers (including subwoofers), Analog Components (turntables, tonearms, phono cartridges, phono preamps, phono accessories), Digital Components (transports, processors, music servers, disc players, DACs), Amplification Components (preamplifiers, power amplifiers, integrations), and Accessories (all those extras that keep us busy and satisfied). Our two favorite and most important categories are Budget Component of the Year and Overall Component of the Year—the former leaves us with the most cash to spend on music; the latter made the biggest splash of all.

From 2010 to 2012, we gave awards for Headphone Components and Computer Audio Components, two categories of gear whose popularity and potential for reaching an audience outside traditional hi-fi were then, and continue to be, unrivaled. However, because the lion's share of headphone and computer-audio reviews now appear, respectively on two of our sister websites—*InnerFidelity.com*, edited by Tyll Hertsens; and *AudioStream.com*, edited by Michael Lavorgna—we've decided to omit those categories from this year's competition. As you'll see in the following pages, headphone contenders were judged within our Accessories category, while computer-audio contenders were judged within Digital Components. Also note that previous winners

were not eligible for nomination in this year's competition; despite the strong continued success of such products as AudioQuest's DragonFly USB DAC and Rega's RP3 turntable, you won't see them here. In one last bit of housekeeping, we've reinstated our Editor's Choice category, with personal selections from John Atkinson and me.

While every year sees at least one or two products that manage to reveal more detail in our cherished recordings or set new benchmarks for what can be achieved at certain price points, this year, more than any other in recent memory, we auditioned a number of products that exhibited high performance *and* unusually high value. Let's hope this marks a return to true high fidelity—a hi-fi renaissance in which all music fans will turn their backs on poor MP3s, earbuds, and boom boxes, and come to expect their favorite music to be readily available in CD-quality (or better) sound, reproduced using real high-end gear. And please remember that *high-end* does not necessarily mean *high-priced*. As I mention in this issue's "The Entry Level," the lines that once clearly separated audiophiles, music lovers, and the general public are becoming increasingly blurred. Intelligent audio companies are producing high-quality products that are attractive,



easy to use, and truly affordable. And while there will always be cost-no-object components designed for a few very privileged enthusiasts, there's no longer any reason we can't *all* enjoy high-fidelity sound.

We select our winners using a two-part process. First, each of *Stereophile's* hardware reviewers is asked to nominate up to six components in each of the seven primary categories. To be a contender, a product had to have been reviewed in one of the 12 issues of *Stereophile* published from November 2012 through October 2013, in a full Equipment Report, a Follow-Up review, or in one of the regular columns by Art Dudley, Michael Fremer, John Marks, Kalman Rubinson, Sam Tellig, or me. That way, only those components could be nominated for which a writer had put his opinion in print for public scrutiny. We then put together a ballot form listing all components nominated by three or more writers and/or editors. This process ensures that most of the nominees in most of the categories will have been auditioned by most of the reviewers. Thirteen of the magazine's writers and editors gave three votes for his first choice in each category, two votes for his second choice, and one vote for his third choice (if any). John Atkinson tallied the votes; address your love letters and hate mail to him. (See JA's comments on how the voting process works at [www.stereophile.com/aswesecit/1207awsi/index.html](http://www.stereophile.com/aswesecit/1207awsi/index.html).)

The prices listed were current as of the end of September 2013. To order back issues mentioned in this article, call (888) 237-0955, or visit [shop.stereophile.com](http://shop.stereophile.com) (MasterCard and Visa only). "WWW" indicates that the review is available free of charge in our online Archives.

*And the winners are ...*

## THE WINNER:

**KEF LS50 50th Anniversary Model loudspeaker**

(\$1499.99/pair; reviewed by John Atkinson, December 2012, Vol.35 No.12 WWW)

Jeez, man! This year, perhaps more than any other in the history of our competition, the Budget category was positively *stacked* with awesome contenders. Selecting only from our runners-up, I could easily put together a totally badass little system that even Tinwoman's ex-husband couldn't dismiss (see this issue's "As We See It"). Imagine having either the Peachtree decco65 or the Croft Phono Integrated drive Pioneer's SP-BS22-LR loudspeakers, while using as a source VPI's Traveler turntable, our Analog Component of the Year. Sweet. Or how about a second system comprising PSB's Alpha PS1 powered loudspeakers mated with either the Schiit Audio Bifrost or Meridian Explorer DAC

and an Oppo Blu-ray player? Yummy. Or... for the ultimate portable music system, you could match our Accessory of the Year, B&W's P3 headphones, with Astell&Kern's gorgeous little AK100 media player.

See what I mean? The Budget category rules—all of our candidates are worthy of the prize. But with five first-place votes, and more total votes (22) than any other component in any other category, it was KEF's LS50 loudspeaker that pulled away from the pack.

While other loudspeaker companies might've built a cost-no-object behemoth to celebrate 50 years in business, KEF went small, sleek, and affordable. How cool is that? But don't underes-

timate the LS50. This beautiful little speaker is packed with state-of-the-art technology. The two-way, reflex-loaded design uses KEF's Uni-Q coincident-driver array with a 1" vented aluminum-dome tweeter and a 5.25" woofer with a cone of magnesium-aluminum alloy, and the gorgeous, computer-modeled MDF cabinet incorporates a convex front baffle, offset port, and damped internal cross-bracing for optimal suppression of external sound radiation and internal standing waves.

Even though the LS50 is relatively affordable, KEF refers to it, along with its Muon and Blade floorstanders, as a flagship. And rightfully so. The LS50's combination of overall neutrality and top-to-bottom clarity worked wonders with all types of music, but especially benefited voices. "I would go so far as to say that the LS50 is one of the finest speakers at reproducing female vocals that I have heard—for less than what you can pay for a set of high-end interconnects!" said JA.

A marvelous speaker, indeed—and a downright bargain.



KEF LS50 50th Anniversary Model

**RUNNERS-UP** (in alphabetical order)

**Astell&Kern AK100 portable media player**

**Bowers & Wilkins P3 headphones**

**Croft Phono Integrated integrated amplifier**

**Meridian Explorer USB**

**D/A processor**

**Oppo Digital BDP-103 & BDP-105 Blu-ray players**

**Peachtree decco65 integrated amplifier** (\$999; reviewed by Art Dudley, March 2013, Vol.36 No.3 WWW)

**Pioneer SP-BS22-LR loudspeaker**

**PSB Alpha PS1 powered desktop loudspeaker** (\$299/pair; reviewed by Stephen Mejias, July 2013, Vol.36 No.7 WWW)

**Schiit Audio Bifrost D/A processor** (\$349; reviewed by Jon Iverson, August 2013, Vol.36 No.8 WWW)

**VPI Industries Traveler turntable**



## THE WINNER:

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This is the first time since . . . um . . . Hold on a sec. I have to consult the archives . . .

Well. Yes. This is the first time *ever* that our Budget Component of the Year has also been our Overall Component of the Year.

Have we mentioned that the components in our Budget category are awesome? Have we mentioned that the KEF LS50 is *especially* awesome?

The rave reviews began with the speaker's official debut at the 2012 Munich High End Show: KEF had knocked it out of the ballpark. The LS50 was something special. We were in for a treat.

In October 2012, at the Rocky Mountain Audio Fest, the little LS50 made another big splash. Driven by Parasound electronics, its sound was both delicate and full-bodied, JA reported. I missed the LS50 in Denver but got to hear it a month later, when I visited KEF's factory in Maidstone, England. Driven by Arcam's A38 integrated amplifier, the LS50 made absolutely beautiful music, sounding bigger and far more confident than I'd imagined possible, while delivering all the detail, clarity, and spatial abilities for which the best minimonitors are known.

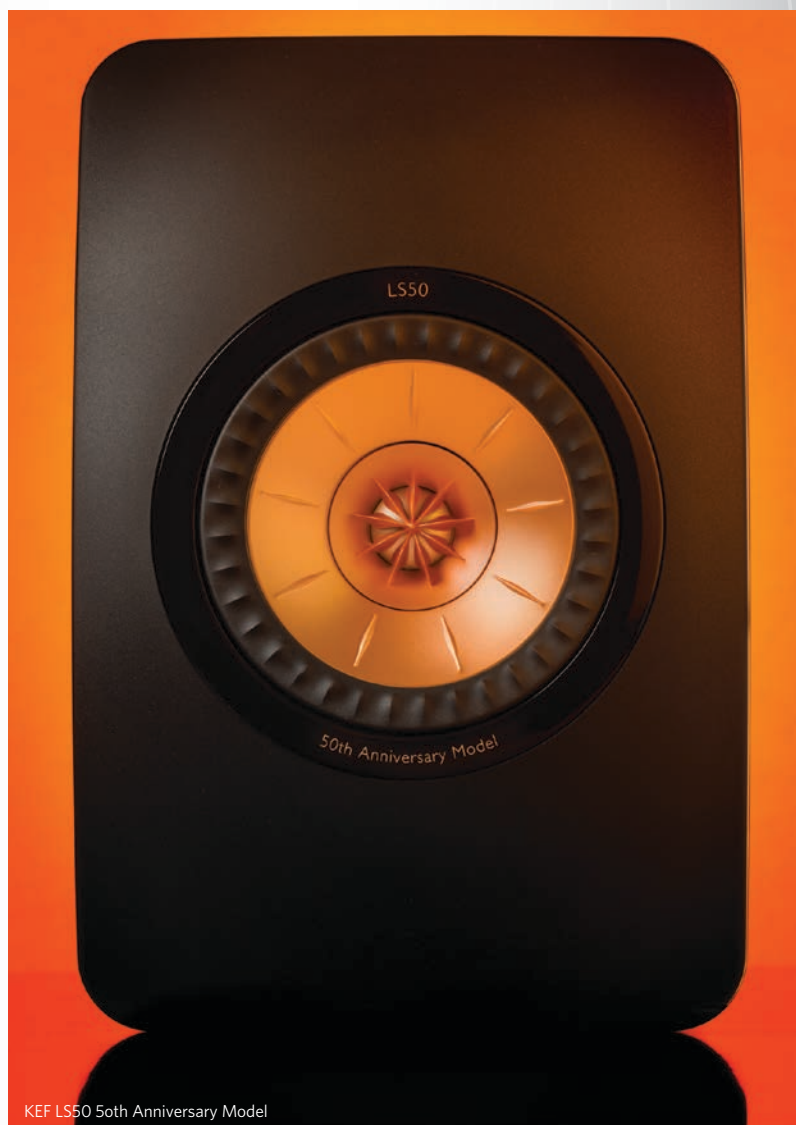
Just as I returned from England,

mind still thoroughly blown by what I'd heard, the LS50 appeared on the cover of our December issue. "EXQUISITE PERFORMANCE FROM THIS TINY PACKAGE," we giddily wrote. "CLASS A SOUND FROM KEF'S 50TH ANNIVERSARY LS50 SPEAKER." Indeed, by the following April, the LS50 had taken its rightful place in Class A (Restricted Extreme LF) of our "Recommended Components"—alongside speakers costing up to 40 times as

much.

Today, thanks to its unique combination of first-rate sound and exceptional value for money, the KEF LS50 takes our top prize. "It is rare to find a loudspeaker that offers this combination of clarity and neutrality," JA wrote in his review. "For KEF's 50th Anniversary Model to do so for a penny under \$1500/pair makes it even more remarkable."

Right on. ■



KEF LS50 50th Anniversary Model

**RUNNERS-UP** (in alphabetical order)

**Audio Research Reference**

**CD9 CD player**

**Audio Research Reference 5 SE**

**line preamplifier**

**Ayre Acoustics AX-5 integrated amplifier**

**Dan D'Agostino Momentum**

**monoblock power amplifier**

**Devialet D-Premier integrated amplifier**

**Lamm Industries ML3 Signature**

**monoblock**

**Spiral Groove SG1.1 turntable**

**with Centroid tonearm**

**Wilson Audio Specialties**

**Alexandria XLF loudspeaker**

**YG Acoustics Sonja 1.3 loudspeaker**