

## 2009 PRODUCT OF THE YEAR

# AMPLIFICATION COMPONENT



### Ayre KX-R preamplifier

(\$18,500; reviewed by Wes Phillips, Vol.31 No.11, November 2008 WWW)

**W**ow. The jewel-like Ayre Acoustics KX-R preamplifier won significantly more first-place votes *and* more overall votes than any other product in our competition. In fact, with its total of 26 nods, the KX-R *doubled* the tally of our first runner-up, the magnificent Parasound Halo JC 1 monoblock. Put another way, only five of our 16 reviewers chose *not* to vote for the KX-R, and the majority of those who did ranked it as their top choice. While mention must also be made of the Peachtree Audio Nova D/A integrated amplifier, which won three first-place votes, the Ayre KX-R is certainly respected, admired, and often *loved*, by all who hear it.

Designed to match Ayre's MX-R monoblock—which in 2007 topped this very category in similarly indisputable fashion—the KX-R is a zero-feedback, fully balanced design milled from a 75-lb billet of aluminum and forming one cool hunk of audio *presence*. It uses Ayre's Variable Gain Transconductance topology to maintain a constant signal/noise ratio independent of volume setting, for improved resolution of low-level detail. Wes Phillips was convinced. He praised the KX-R for its astonishing transparency, and enjoyed how deep—how *very* deep—it took him into the soundstage. "If it's not the eighth wonder of the modern world, I say demand a recount."

No recount needed in this poll, Wes. The Ayre is the clear winner.

### 2009 RUNNERS-UP

(in alphabetical order)

**Benchmark DAC1 USB Pre D/A preamplifier** (\$1595; reviewed by John Atkinson, Vol.32 No.3, March 2009 WWW)

**Boulder 865 integrated amplifier** (\$12,000; reviewed by Wes Phillips, Vol.32 Nos.4 & 8, April & August 2009 WWW)

**Conrad-Johnson Classic SE preamplifier** (\$1750; reviewed by Sam Tellig, Vol.32 Nos.2 & 7, February & July 2009)

**Nagra BPS phono preamplifier** (\$2399; reviewed by Michael Fremer & Fred Kaplan, Vol.32 Nos.6, 8, & 10, June, August, & October 2009 WWW)

**Parasound Halo JC 1 monoblock power amplifier** (\$8000/pair; reviewed by Wes Phillips, Vol.32 No.9, September 2009 WWW)

**Pass Labs XA30.5 power amplifier** (\$5500; reviewed by Brian Damkroger & Erick Lichte, Vol.32 Nos.5 & 8, May & August 2009 WWW)

**Peachtree Nova D/A integrated amplifier** (\$1199; reviewed by John Marks, Vol.32 No.8, August 2009 WWW)

**Simaudio Moon I-1 integrated amplifier** (\$1700; reviewed by Robert J. Reina, Vol.31 No.12, December 2008 WWW)

**Simaudio Moon Evolution P-8 preamplifier** (\$15,000; reviewed by John Atkinson, Vol.32 No.9, September 2009 WWW)

**VTL MB450 Signature monoblock power amplifier** (\$15,000/pair; reviewed by Wes Phillips, Vol.32 No.3, March 2009 WWW)

## ACCESSORY PRODUCT

### Sennheiser HD800 headphones

(\$1400; reviewed by Wes Phillips, Vol.32 No.7, July 2009 WWW)

**T**he race for Accessory of the Year is one of the most interesting because it involves such a diverse cast of contenders. This year, the XTZ Room Analyzer (a favorite of multichannel man Kal Rubinson) and the Keith Monks Omni record-cleaning machine (a favorite of LP-loving Art Dudley) locked room modes with brush blocks in a tie for second place. But it was Sennheiser's HD800 headphones that stood apart from the pack.

The HD800 is an all-out attack on the state of the headphone art. Its 56mm ring-radiator transducer is the biggest dynamic driver currently used in any headphone, and its large earpieces are made

from a combination of absorbing composites and functional metal accents that looked and felt great on Wes Phillips's happy head. What Wes found most impressive was the HD800s' "awe-inspiringly huge" soundstage, a quality that even his beloved AKG K701 'phones, winner of our 2006 Accessory of the Year award, couldn't match.

Though the AKG K701 remains a top contender, Wes crowned a new champion: "I was stunned by the Sennheisers' ability to project scale, to reveal dynamic



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(in alphabetical order)

**Channel D Pure-Vinyl LP-ripping program** (\$229; reviewed by Michael Fremer, Vol.32 No.3, March 2009)

**Keith Monks Audio Works Omni record-cleaning machine** (\$6495; reviewed by Art Dudley, Vol.32 No.5, May 2009 WWW)

**PS Audio Power Plant Premier AC regenerator** (\$2195; reviewed by Robert Deutsch, Vol.32 No.2, February 2009 WWW)

**Shure SE310 earphones** (\$300; reviewed by John Atkinson, Vol.32 No.9, September 2009 WWW)

**XTZ Room Analyzer program** (\$320; reviewed by Kalman Rubinson, Vol.31 No.11 & Vol.32 No.11, November 2008 & November 2009 WWW)

nuance, to present timbre with realism," he said. "It may very well be the best headphone I've ever heard—for me."

## JOINT DIGITAL SOURCE COMPONENTS



Clockwise from top: dCS Scarlatti SACD playback system, Ayre Acoustics QB-9 USB D/A converter, Meridian 808i.2 CD player.

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(in alphabetical order)

**Ayre Acoustics CX7-eMP CD player** (\$3500; reviewed by Robert Deutsch, Vol.32 No.10, October 2009 WWW)

**Bel Canto USB Link 24/96 digital processor** (\$495; reviewed by John Atkinson, Vol.32 No.5, May 2009 WWW)

**Boulder 1021 disc player** (\$24,000; reviewed by John Atkinson, Vol.32 No.7, July 2009 WWW)

**Cambridge DacMagic D/A processor** (\$479; reviewed by Sam Tellig & John Atkinson, Vol.32 Nos.3, 6, & 8, March, June, & August 2009 WWW)

**Oppo BDP-83 universal player** (\$499; reviewed by Kalman Rubinson, Vol.32 No.7, July 2009 WWW)

**Wadia Digital 170iTransport** (\$379; reviewed by John Atkinson, Vol.32 No.6, June 2009 WWW)

**Wavelength Cosecant v3 USB D/A processor** (\$3500; reviewed by Art Dudley, Vol.32 No.6, June 2009 WWW)

### Ayre Acoustics QB-9 USB D/A converter

(\$2500; reviewed by Wes Phillips, Vol.32 No.10, October 2009 WWW)

### dCS Scarlatti SACD playback system

(\$79,996; reviewed by Michael Fremer, Vol.32 No.8, August 2009 WWW)

### Meridian 808i.2 CD player

(\$16,995; reviewed by John Atkinson, Vol.32 No.4, April 2009 WWW)

**O**ur Digital Sources category was the only race for which we could not determine a clear winner, and it seems appropriate that the award would be shared by three companies—Ayre Acoustics, dCS, and Meridian—that live on the cutting edge of design and are always interested in redefining the state of the digital art. The voting couldn't have gotten much closer than this, and we couldn't have been happier with the outcome: Though the Ayre QB-9 USB DAC received votes from the most number of writers (seven), the dCS Scarlatti SACD system and Meridian 808i.2 CD player each received four first-place votes, one second-place vote, and one third-place vote, which added up to the same total.

It's also interesting that we've selected three unique products, each the result

of a distinct vision. While the Meridian strives to squeeze the best from the familiar Compact Disc format, the Ayre is poised to reap the most from the future of high-resolution downloads, and the dCS system looks, at least for now, to be *entirely* future-proof.

The gorgeous Meridian 808i.2 uses a proprietary Resolution Enhancement algorithm and a new apodizing reconstruction filter to upsample CD data to 176.4kHz before feeding it to high-quality delta-sigma DAC chips. At levels approaching concert-hall volumes, the 808i.2 produced the correct scale and depth of classical orchestral works while avoiding any midrange congestion or treble hardness, and made John Atkinson a very happy audiophile.

The impressive Ayre Acoustics QB-9 USB DAC marries Gordon Rankin's Streamlength software for the Texas Instruments TAS1020B USB receiver chip

to Ayre's new Minimum Phase (MP) digital reconstruction filter, while maintaining Ayre's philosophy of zero feedback and fully balanced operation. The result was a huge, physical sound from PC audio files that charged old songs with new life. Wes Phillips had his soul "psychedelicized," and JA was impressed by the way Ayre's asynchronous USB mode handled the grueling Miller/Dunn jitter test.

Finally, the ultracomplex, ultrasophisticated dCS Scarlatti is a four-box system comprising Transport, Clock, Upsampler, and a DAC employing dCS's patented Ring DAC topology and switchable reconstruction filters. This imposing system has an imposing price, but according to Mikey Fremer, it's worth every dime: "dCS has built a jewel of a system that will make you very happy for a very long time, no matter what the audio future brings."

2009 PRODUCT OF THE YEAR

## OVERALL PRODUCT OF THE YEAR



### Ayre Acoustics QB-9 USB D/A converter

**T**hough Wilson Audio's big MAXX 3 loudspeaker earned more first-place votes (four) than any other product in the running, the forward-thinking Ayre QB-9 led the pack with the most votes overall, to take the year's biggest prize. And Charlie Hansen and all the other hard-working, music-crazed kids at Ayre Acoustics should be doubly proud; their KX-R preamp took the bronze, trailing the Wilson by just two votes. Other products with at least one first-place recommendation were the Meridian

808i.2, YG Acoustics Anat Reference II Professional, Peachtree Nova, and the bargain-priced Cambridge Audio DacMagic D/A processor.

But it was the Ayre QB-9 that had Wes Phillips shouting hallelujah. Once Wes had gotten a taste of his favorite recordings in their native resolutions, he couldn't go back. Dude wanted more and more and more of that large, corporeal, electrifying, 24-bit rush. And it wasn't just a physical thing—it was emotional. Wes felt *closer* to his favorite performers than ever before. But if you're one of those who couldn't care

less about physical and emotional hoo-hah, the QB-9 can drop the science on you, too. Ask John Atkinson. While conventional USB DACs normally suck—*hard*—on the jitter front, the Ayre's asynchronous USB mode worked like a charm.

Well engineered, and offering outstanding performance in both the analog and digital domains, the QB-9 promises to deliver our music simply, directly, and in its purest form—more reason for celebration. Congratulations, Ayre, and thanks. ■