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**PRODUCT
OF THE YEAR
AWARDS
2010**

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Welcome to *The Absolute Sound's* 2010 Product of the Year Awards. Here we honor the very best components we've reviewed in the previous year. In many categories we've chosen more than one winner: one that represents the greatest value for the dollar, and another that represents the best we've reviewed without regard to price. We've also selected a Budget Component of the Year to recognize the single component that we believe offers the biggest bang for the buck. Finally, our Overall Product of the Year honors the one product that stands above all others as the single most impressive achievement of the past 12 months.



Budget Component of the Year

NAD C 326BEE \$499

NAD keeps giving its BEEs more sting. A recent replacement for the C 325, the C 326BEE packs 50Wpc and picks up the pace and timing with upgraded circuitry. The warmer spectral balance makes for a full-bodied and slightly darker midrange. Dynamics are plentiful; musical details are well defined; and transient speed is lively. Like all NAD amps in recent memory the C 326 employs PowerDrive technology and seems conservatively rated as if, like fairy dust, some additional wattage had been sprinkled over the final design. This allows NAD amplifiers to play *big*, with near-effortless dynamics—like an amp roughly 50% larger in output. The result is an uncommon grip on music's natural timbres and midbass weight. It's also got a front-panel input for media-player gizmos, a remote control, and a handy subwoofer output if you decide to augment your speakers down the road. Reviewed by PS, Issue 199

All-in-One Component of the Year

Esoteric RZ-1 Music System \$6000

Esoteric states that the RZ-1 is designed for "casual listening," but that's selling this specialty unit short. Discriminating listeners with square-footage issues will be very much at home with this super-stealthy combination of an integrated power amp and a slot-loaded SACD/CD transport for one big reason—it sounds terrific and operates with the luxury and precision of a fine Swiss watch. Beneath a heavy-aluminum, vault-like exterior is a 100Wpc hybrid-Class D amplifier. There's a massive amount of flexibility, too, with a USB input, 32-bit DAC, and 24-bit/192kHz upconversion via coax and optical inputs, as well as a pair of selectable digital filters for PCM-format signal-processing. There are also two analog inputs—one of which is switchable to an integrated moving-magnet phono stage. With smaller speakers of suitable sensitivity, the sonics of the RZ-1 are sweet, open, and revealing—just like you'd find in Esoteric's uptown offerings. Reviewed by NG in this issue

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EQUIPMENT REPORT



Esoteric RZ-1 Integrated Music System

"Casual Listening" for the Connoisseur

Neil Gader

Modesty is not an approach that earns high marks in the high end. Pleasing hobbyists with limited room is not usually on the to-do list. Take the once-conservative integrated amplifier. In many instances, even it has grown to Brobdingnagian proportions—the Plinius Hiato or Pass Labs INT-150, for examples. As for the diminutive all-in-one component, such as an integrated amp/CD player combo, the look you expect to get from a fellow audiophile is pitying at best.

These were my thoughts when I first saw the Esoteric RZ-1—a potent but petite chunk of gleaming aluminum that Esoteric calls “an integrated music system for casual listening.” That’s right. It’s an ultra-compact integrated amp and disc player. From Esoteric? You mean the A-100, P-03/D-03, G-0Rb Rubidium Master Clock Esoteric? Yep, *that* Esoteric. I don’t know about you but when I think “casual,” I’m thinking clock radio, which set me to wondering what Esoteric was thinking. Leveraging the reputation of high-performance luxury products is an old game in every marketplace segment. It’s the hi-fi version of the automotive world’s classic “Race on Sunday, sell on Monday” mindset.

So what *was* Esoteric thinking? A lot, actually. The RZ-1 is a

CD and high-resolution SACD player coupled with a 100Wpc integrated amplifier augmented with a USB DAC and—wait for it—a moving-magnet-compatible phonostage. To my knowledge there is no other single-chassis component that bridges so many divides. A spitting image of Esoteric’s own AZ-1 integrated amp with a couple of knobs missing, the RZ-1’s casework is streamlined and curvaceous. But it’s the rigid jewelry-like aluminum construction topped off with a 40mm front plate that grabs your attention. Esoteric proudly points out that a total of eight hours is needed to three-dimensionally process the aluminum—with one-micrometer precision.

There’s nothing casual about the topology either. The RZ-1 amp is a hybrid design equipped with a powerful analog power-supply circuit coupled to a Class D switching output stage. Esoteric states it used the largest toroidal transformer that could be stuffed in the slim housing; the hefty capacitors were also the largest possible. They do seem to take up the lion’s share of the interior. Nonetheless, speaker matching is important for the RZ-1, and you will want to use a transducer with better-than-average sensitivity. The amp is not designed to fill an airplane hanger.

EQUIPMENT REPORT - Esoteric RZ-1 Integrated Music System

The back panel includes three types of digital inputs: coaxial, optical, and a USB input (the latter supports up to 24-bit/96kHz) to support the playback of high-resolution PC-based music files. (The S/PDIF inputs support up to 192kHz/24-bit.) The DAC chip is the AK4392, produced by Asahi Kasei Microdevices Corporation. The input receiver, digital filters, and Delta-Sigma modulator are all capable of 32-bit processing. The digital filter upconverts all input data to 24-bit resolution. Esoteric's extensive high-end-design expertise was also applied to the USB input, which is outfitted with a USB isolator for the USB power supply and signal lines. This feature prevents external interference from polluting the audio signal. Esoteric literature states that two different types of user-selectable digital filters for PCM-signal-processing are available—a finite impulse response (FIR) digital filter, and a “short-delay digital filter to remove the pre-echo effect inherent in impulse waveforms.”

Convenience and ergonomics are primary to the RZ-1 experience. There are a lot of functions. (A sleep timer? You bet.) So I was expecting a glitch or two. But even with the extent of the audio switching available, the unit operated without a problem. And this included the USB DAC, which was immediately recognized by my MacBook; I had music up and streaming immediately. The sonics were impressive, even low-bit-rate MP3 tracks became listenable, and lossless sounded very good, indeed.

I gained a special appreciation for the flexible nature of the RZ-1. I liked being able to plug in the optical cable from the satellite box or stream from iTunes out of my Mac. I also relished giving my SACD collection a much-needed workout since my old Sony DVP-9000ES was laid to rest. I'm of two minds regarding the RZ-1's reliance on its remote control, which pares down the front panel to a just a handful of low-profile buttons. There's no rotary volume control, just a pair of up/down controls. I get it. But I also think that in light of the premium price, the remote control shouldn't look like Esoteric's off-the-shelf units, but something a bit more flattering and in league with the style of the RZ-1 itself. It's also overly sensitive to other IR remote controls in the room—to the extent that I had to unplug the RZ-1 in order to reboot communications between the remote and the amp.

As I began this evaluation my antennae were up for any telltale signs of the sonic compromises common to many all-in-one components—dynamic constriction, limited soundstage, lean tonal balance, crumbling low-level resolution paramount among them. What I heard, in fact, was a vivid and open personality, free from constriction. Overall spectral balance was on the lighter side but accompanied by transients and microdynamics that were quick and finely resolved. There was nothing etchy or flinty in the treble range, and midrange timbres were very natural. This is especially desirable during SACD playback, which *lives* to reproduce low-level cues and treble air. Part of this is likely due to the lack of electronic noise from the RZ-1—backgrounds are very quiet. It's no mean feat to isolate this much analog and digital circuitry in such close confines.

Although its bass response won't give you a heart attack and macrodynamics are less than Force Ten, the RZ-1 is surprisingly energetic and firmly in control of complex orchestral passages. The bass is not heavily loaded in mass and weight, at least not in the manner of big-block engines like a Plinius or an ARC DSI200.

These amps can summon a level of galvanic force that seems to well up from the baseboards and set your legs resonating like tuning forks. The RZ-1 will hint at such power, but it finally lacks the muscle to summon up that kind of low-frequency energy. For example, Chris Cheek's baritone sax during Jen Chapin's “You Haven't Done Nothin'” [*ReVisions*: Chesky] is simply not as explosive and bloomy at the bottom of its range. Likewise, Edgar Meyer's bass doesn't sustain the same thick resonant decay that a big amp can extract from the tracks on *Appalachian Journey* [Sony].

The Esoteric's tonal balance was unwaveringly neutral with just a shade of darkening in the treble. I listened repeatedly to a pair of Jennifer Warnes' tracks from *The Hunter*, “Way Down Deep” and “Lights of Lousiane,” and confirmed that in the tonal sense they didn't differ significantly from my reference ARC. The talking drums were making their reverberant voices heard, the acoustic guitars were clean, quick off the string, and nicely sustained. And low-level detail was excellent. A favorite test track for this comes during James Taylor's “Long Ago and Far Away” from *Mud Slide Slim* [Warner], where a young Joni Mitchell's luminous harmony and fading vibrato chase after Taylor's lead oh so softly and pristinely. In fact the only tiny piece of the sonic puzzle that seemed to be missing was the lift and air on the top of her vocal, which seemed to drift into infinity out of the ARC but to roll off and decay a little more rapidly with the RZ-1.

In previous encounters with compact electronics, it's often a three-dimensional soundstage that's the first thing to suffer. It tends to contract in width, sometimes dramatically. I listened to a variety of SACD and compact discs including the Brahms Symphony No. 4 and in every case came away impressed with the width, depth, and imaging precision of this combi-amp. The RZ-1 does reduce the overall scale of images and the ambient environment containing them, but it won't flatten space or shorten soundstage depth. Symphony orchestra reproduction is uncongested and individual sections are well layered. Its ability to resolve delicate interior instrumentation and low-level performance details was excellent for a component in this segment. SACD sources like the Brahms maintained the characteristic tight bass control, low-level dynamic ease, and upper-frequency effortlessness that define the format.

Esoteric has carved out a unique niche with the RZ-1. Cast as an ideal den component, it will certainly curry the favor of discriminating enthusiasts looking to complete a well-dressed Esoteric household. But I think Esoteric got it wrong when it promoted the RZ-1 as a component for *casual* listening. Fact is, you're going to enjoy giving the RZ-1 your undivided attention. **tas**

SPECS & PRICING

Power output: 100Wpc (6 ohms)
Inputs: Analog, two RCA; three digital, coaxial, optical, USB
Dimensions: 15.75" x 3" x 14.5"
Weight: 20 lbs.
Price: \$6000

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are the octaves where many speakers prune away dBs in order to elicit details, and manufacture a focus factor that's as momentarily tempting as it is ultimately regrettable. If you regard the sound of a concert grand piano as sacrosanct like I do, it's an untenable trade-off. Obviously someone at Gallo enjoys a concert grand or a strong baritone voice because the Ref 3.5 tonally nails them.

Bass response is uniform and tuneful, with good pitch and dynamics, and in my room it was rock-solid-flat into 40 Hertz region with copious usable response a bit further down. But the REF 3.5 is not a bone-rattler in the Magico V2 or KEF 203/2 sense of the word. The Ref 3.5 is not a massive speaker. It's designed to be compatible in reasonable settings, but even driven by a muscular integrated amplifier like the ARC it runs short of breath and dynamic energy wavers slightly—something I noted listening to the talking drum patterns rather too-sudden decay during Jennifer Warnes' "Way Down Deep."

Its ease with micro-dynamics, air, and dispersion are revelatory in this or any price range. Much of the credit is due to the CDT; its hemispherical dispersion and surface area convey a blissfully smooth and broad soundstage. As I listened to the complex multitracking, delicate acoustic guitar flourishes, and thunderous drum timbres sweeping across the deep soundstage during Dire Straits' "Private Investigations" from the newly remastered *Love Over Gold* LP [Warner], I noted how the entire room seemed to energize and breathe as a single organic element, completely free of box enclosure colorations, baffle reflections, and inter-driver artifacts.

Spatial relationships define the Ref 3.5 like no other factor. It does not lock one's head into a single listening position. Actually it exhibits traits more commonly found with pure omniradiators. It called to mind the MBL 121 I reviewed a few years ago. I loved that speaker, but had reservations about the omni-directional radiation pattern that I felt often added more information to the soundstage than could have existed in the recording itself. There is one crucial difference which to me improves the Ref 3.5 over that vaunted and frankly

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