



THE 50 HOTTEST PRODUCTS OF 2013

Editors Pick the Best of the Best

stereophile

DECEMBER 2013



Wilson's stunning new Alexia speaker:

POWER MEETS GRACE

STATE-OF-THE-ART DIGITAL SOUNDS

from Parasound & Electrocompaniet

OUTSTANDING ANALOG PLAYBACK

from Thrax, Channel D, Michael Fehlaer

HOT, HIP HEADPHONES

from PSB & Sennheiser

AMPLIFICATION FROM SUPREME TO PERVERSE

from Simaudio, Lindell, Sophia



ARE AUDIOPHILES SNOBS?

Summoning Nashville's Spirits:

TONY JOE WHITE



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.

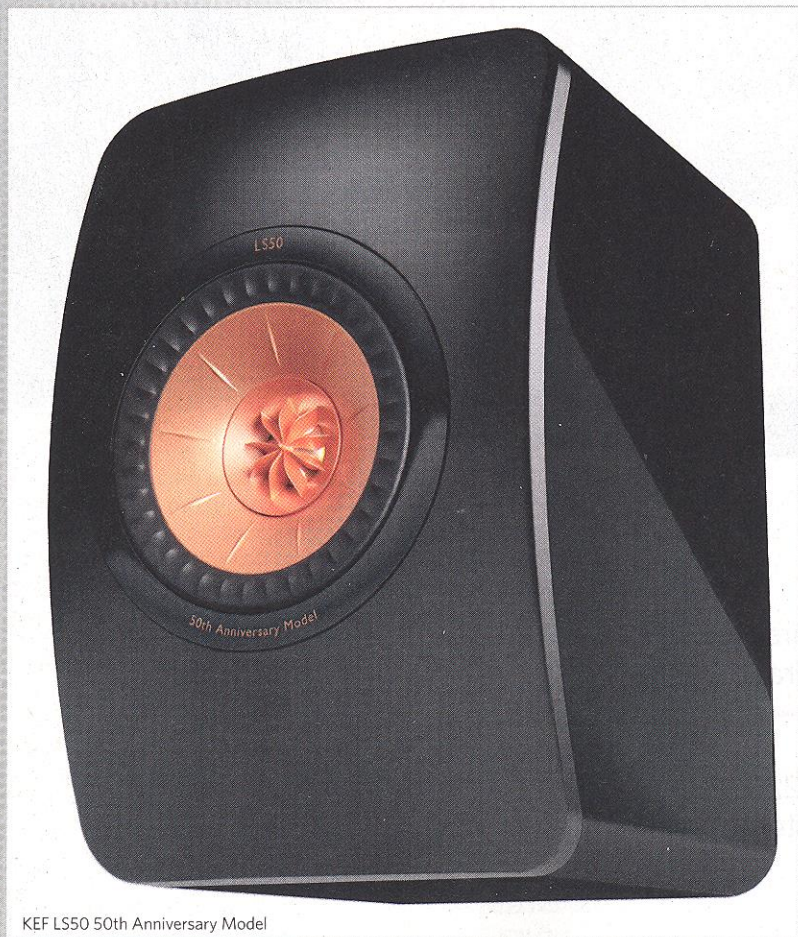
See what I mean? The Budget category rules—all of our candidates are worthy of the prize. But with five first-place votes, and more total votes (22) than any other component in any other category, it was KEF's LS50 loudspeaker that pulled away from the pack.

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:

KEF LS50 50th Anniversary Model loudspeaker

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

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. ■

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

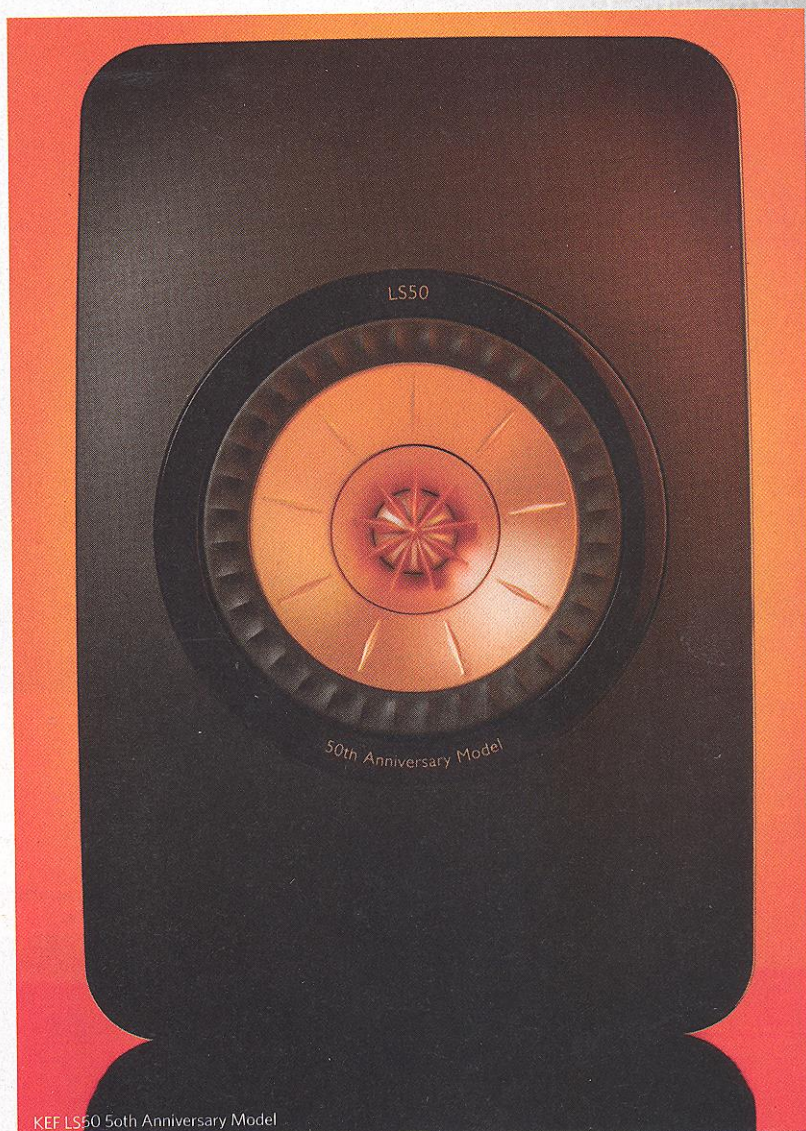
Spiral Groove SG1.1 turntable

with Centroid tonearm

Wilson Audio Specialties

Alexandria XLF loudspeaker

YG Acoustics Sonja 1.3 loudspeaker



KEF LS50 50th Anniversary Model