2009 PRODUCT OF THE YEAR AWARDS!

STEREO • MULTICHANNEL AUDIO • MUSIC

the absolute sound

SWEET SOUND, SWEET DEAL PRIMALUNA'S NEW TUBE AMP



YG ACOUSTICS'
KIPOD SPEAKER
WORLD'S

SOULUTION'S
AMP & PREAMP
ULTIMATE
TRANSPARENCY

BOULDER'S CD PLAYER TECHNOLOGY MARVEL

the absolute sound 2009 PRODUCT OF THE YEAR AWARDS

This is the Big One

—our annual Product of the Year Awards in which we honor the very best hi-fi gear we've reviewed in the previous year.

We select components for our most prestigious award on the basis of sound quality, value, or both. In some categories we've chosen more than one item, either because two products were equally worthy or each represented a unique combination of performance and value. In every category, one product was selected purely on the basis of sound quality without regard to price. Finally, our Overall Product of the Year Award honors that special component that is the single most impressive achievement of the past 12 months. —Robert Harley



Technology Breakthrough of the Year

Meridian 808.2 Signature Reference CD Player

\$16,995

Some Product of the Year winners are chosen after considerable debate, but not this year's Technology Breakthrough of the Year Award. The clear choice was Meridian Audio's stunning achievement in the 808.2 CD player, specifically its unique "apodising" digital filter. The apodising filter breathes new life into a CD library by making standard CDs sound like audiophile remasterings. It performs this astonishing magic trick by removing "pre-ringing," a form of distortion once thought to be permanently embedded in the recording.

It turns out that this pre-ringing is largely responsible for the characteristic "CD sound"—flat soundstaging, hard timbres, and a treble that bears little resemblance to live music. Although some recent CD players and digital processors feature filters that don't introduce pre-ringing of their own, the ability to remove pre-existent pre-ringing is unique to the 808.2.

The 808.2's singular achievement cannot be understated. The totally unprecedented (and unexpected) ability to radically improve the sound of our huge CD libraries is a boon to music lovers. That's why RH called the 808.2 "the most significant product in the history of the Compact Disc," and why it is the recipient of *The Absolute Sound*'s Technology Breakthrough of the Year award. (Issue 194)





NAD M2 Direct Digital Amplifier

\$5999

The co-winner of our Technology Breakthrough of the Year award is NAD's new M2 Direct Digital Amplifier. The M2 represents a radical departure from the traditional audio signal path and system architecture. Rather than convert digital signals to analog in a CD player or DAC, and then process that analog signal through a preamplifier and the conventional circuits of a power amplifier, the M2 functions like a DAC with enough gain to drive loudspeakers. Digital signals at the M2's input (from a CD transport, music server, or other source) are converted to Pulse-Width Modulation signals that turn on and off the M2's output transistors. The conversion from the digital domain to the analog domain occurs as a byproduct of the switching output stage and its filter. This process eliminates from the signal path the digital filter, DACs, and analog output stage of a CD player, the various gain stages of a preamplifier, and the input and driver stages of a power amplifier—not to mention the interconnects, jacks, and preamplifier volume control.

Haven't we had reservations about the sound quality of switching output stages? Yes, but NAD, in conjunction with its semiconductor technology partner, has developed a new switching output technology that, in our estimation, doesn't sound like other switching amplifiers.

Functionally, the M2 operates like an integrated amplifier (with 250Wpc) that accepts digital inputs of any sampling frequency and word lengths up to 192kHz/24-bit. Consequently, it can replace a DAC, preamplifier, power amplifier, and interconnects, meaning you need only a digital source, the M2, and a pair of loudspeakers.

NAD's M2 is a bold leap into the future, and one that succeeds not only technologically but also musically. (Issue 198)