

EDITORIAL

ARCHIVES

December 2009

Publisher's Choice: My Five Favorites of 2009

The end of the year is when we plan what will happen *next* year at the SoundStage! Network, but it's also when we reflect on which were the best products of the year just ending. Then, in January, we hand out our Product of the Year awards at the annual Consumer Electronics Show, in Las Vegas. You won't know who's won until we announce the winners on January 1, but right now I'd like to single out the five products that most impressed *me* in 2009. Four are audio components; one is a music release.

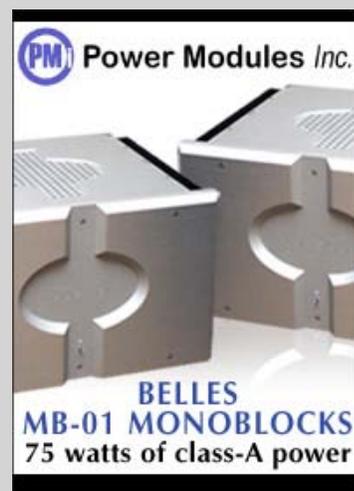
The first product is, to some, one of the most outlandish I've ever reviewed: the Zandèn Audio Systems 2500S CD player. It plays only CDs, uses 20-year-old DAC chips, doesn't oversample or upsample, and costs \$22,000. Given the continuing decline of CD sales and its archaic technology, the 2500S might seem an overpriced dinosaur. But live with it a while, as I did, and you'll realize that it's a CD player like no other.

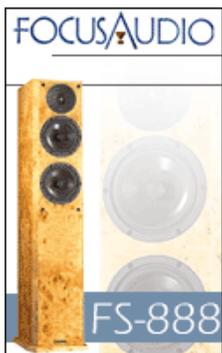
The 2500S has a distinctive sound: full but slightly soft bass, and highs that are ultraclean but a touch subdued. But it's silky-smooth throughout the entire audioband, and its midrange has a startling purity and transparency unlike that of any other player I've heard. Voices sound drop-dead gorgeous, and piano and guitar sound startlingly natural and really come alive. It's also one of the easiest-on-the-ears CD players I've ever heard. I've listened to music on it all day long, with never a hint of listener fatigue. And it's just as easy on the eyes -- the 2500S's appearance is as unique as its sound; it is, without question, the best-looking CD player I've ever seen.

The 2500S is expensive but distinctive, and destined for the wealthy buyer who wants something unique -- a real gem. I can't afford it, but I love it anyway, and envy those who can.

At the other end of the spectrum is the NAD C 565BEE CD player, which retails for \$799 -- less than 4% of the cost of the Zandèn 2500S. My review of the C 565BEE won't appear until December 15, but here I'll let a little bit of the cat out of the bag.

The C 565BEE is nicely built, with a set of exceptionally well-designed controls to make using it easier. For instance, while the player stays powered as long as it's plugged in, the Standby button on the front turns it fully on for daily use. Nothing unique there -- lots of players do this. But if Standby is turned off, there's a disc already in the drawer, and you





want to get it playing quickly, you don't have to push Standby, then Play -- the C 565BEE comes to life as soon as you push Play. Or, it will turn itself on when you press the Open/Close button. I wonder what's taken manufacturers so long to implement one-button play -- I first thought of it in 1984, when I bought my first CD player: "Doesn't pushing Play strongly imply that I also want the player to be turned on?" But better late than never.

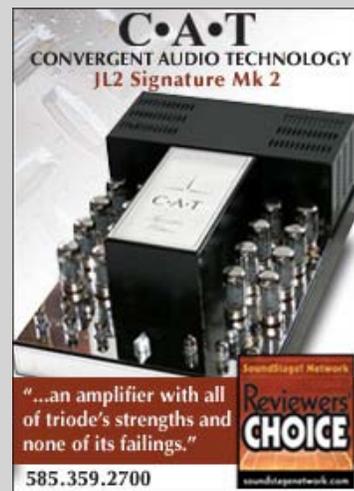
The NAD C 565BEE will also shut down automatically if it's left idling too long (about ten minutes). This saves power, and is convenient if, as I do, you doze off while listening to music. And there are other nifty features: three upsampling options (Off, 24-bit/96kHz, and 24/192), five digital filter options (labeled Filter 1 through Filter 5), and the ability to play up to 320kbps MP3 and WMA files stored on an external device such as a hard drive or a USB stick, and hooked up to the NAD via the USB port on the front panel.

But as rich in features as the C 565BEE is, I was most taken with its sound -- very full, richly textured in the mids, and able to unravel a lot of detail. In fact, it sounds a lot like Simaudio's Moon Evolution SuperNova (\$6500), which in many ways represents the state of the art. So if you want a new CD player and, like most people, can't afford the SuperNova -- or, for that matter, the Zandèn 2500S (who can?) -- head straight for the C 565BEE. Right now, it's one of the best values in high-end audio.



Zandèn's 2500S (top) and NAD's C 565BEE

As with the C 565BEE, my review of the Revel Ultima Salon2 loudspeaker will appear on December 15. Its price, \$21,998/pair, is almost precisely that of the Zandèn CD player -- and it's worth every cent. This 4.5'-tall, 160-pound behemoth is a four-way design that includes all the speaker-building knowhow possessed by Harman International's Revel division -- and it shows. The Ultima Salon2 reaches down to 20Hz, sails up to 45kHz, and sounds as neutral as anything else out there at all frequencies in between. The Salon2 can also play extraordinarily loud while remaining always in control. Hear a pair and you'll find very little to fault. And read my review on December 15 and you'll know why I think it's not only the very best speaker I've reviewed this year, but the very best I've ever reviewed. 'Nuff said for now.





Revel's towering Salon2

I didn't formally review the last audio product I'll mention here, though I wrote about it in my October editorial, "[A Bridge Between Two Worlds](#)": the Anthem Statement D2v preamplifier-processor (\$7499). The D2v is the newest version of the Statement D2 pre-pro, which received high critical acclaim. The D2v has more inputs and outputs, along with better video processing. What makes it special is the high level at which it reproduces music *and* movies -- something, I've found, that not all pre-pros can do. Usually it's the sound that suffers, but not with the D2v -- which helps make it one of the most appealing products on the market right now for anyone who wants to set up a great audio/video system with the least amount of fuss.

Currently, a Statement D2v is the centerpiece of my A/V system. I can listen to music -- as I'm doing right now -- and not feel I'm being shortchanged in terms of sound quality. Then, a couple button-pushes later, I can be enjoying a movie, assured that I'm seeing the best image possible -- which is what I'm more than likely to do as soon as I finish writing this article (*Heat* has just been released on Blu-ray). In short, the hallmarks of Anthem's Statement D2v are versatility and quality.



Anthem's Statement D2v

Now for that music release. I receive a lot of SACDs and CDs in the mail, but I don't listen to many of them. I've been known to pass them along to other reviewers, or toss them on a pile on the floor and leave them there. It was the enthusiastic comments of our own Roger Kanno about Norwegian label 2L's *Divertimenti*, a music-only Blu-ray release by the Trondheimsolistene, that caused me to retrieve some 2L discs from the floor and listen to them. Roger said that *Divertimenti* was perhaps the very-best-sounding disc he'd ever heard, and that, to know what my

system was truly capable of, I just *had* to hear it.

Although *Divertimenti* indeed sounds very, very good, it was another 2L release, **Stone Rose**, by composer-pianist Ola Gjeilo, that blew me away. *Stone Rose* was recorded digitally in 24/96 PCM by 2L's own Morton Lindberg, August 5-8, 2007, in Oslo, and was released later that year. (Was it on my floor that long?) But don't let its age stop you from hearing it. The disc 2L sent me is a hybrid with two- and 5.1-channel tracks on the SACD layer, and two-channel "Red Book" tracks on the CD player. The album is also available for download from 2L's website in two-channel 24/96 FLAC format. Because, at the moment, I have only CD players, I've heard only the stereo CD layer -- but that's enough for me to praise it.



2L describes the music as "reflective" and "tuneful," saying that its themes focus on Gjeilo's love for New York City, where he now lives. That doesn't make it sound like much -- one of the reasons it spent so long on my floor. I think it's better described in terms similar to those that Roger used to describe *Divertimenti*: *Stone Rose* is a startlingly good-sounding piano recording that, through a good pair of speakers such as Revel Ultima Salon2s, sounds *this close* (fingers pinched together) to real -- so real that, one day when I was playing it, my wife and son peeked through the doorway to see what was going on in my room. A lot of stuff comes up the stairs into my listening room, and I knew what she was thinking: that perhaps she'd missed seeing an actual piano being delivered. She hadn't -- but this recording is good enough to fool almost anyone into thinking so.

But a good recording gets you only part of the way -- the music must be worth listening to in the first place, and in this case, it is. In fact, once I'd loaded *Stone Rose* into the NAD C 565BEE, during my evaluation of that player, it didn't come out for three days. I just played it over and over, appreciating it more each time -- something that rarely happens with new music releases today. Most of the tracks feature only Gjeilo on piano, though on some he's joined by flugelhorn, violin, or cello. But even with full accompaniment, it sounds sparse and intimate -- and never boring. There's not a single throwaway among the 15 tracks, though some stand out more than others; "The Line" and "Madison" are my particular favorites. I plan to make them part of my CES 2010 demo CD and impress others by playing them at the show. I've also just received a sample of Ayre Acoustics' Q-B9 24/96 DAC; I plan to download 2L's 24/96 FLAC file of *Stone Rose* and see how it differs. Great job, 2L!

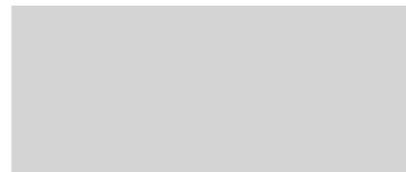
Zandèn's 2500S, NAD's C 565BEE, Revel's Ultima Salon2, and Anthem's Statement D2V -- if, last January, someone had asked me to predict what I thought would be my favorite audio products of 2009, I wouldn't necessarily have named these four right off the bat, particularly the CD players -- the format is dying, and, in time, such sources will indeed be extinct. Only after I'd used these components for a while did I realize that each was quite special and needed to be singled out -- if not by our team, then at least by me.

And I never would have thought my favorite musical discovery of 2009 would be Ola Gjeilo's *Stone Rose*. Thankfully, Roger convinced me to literally pick it up off the floor and listen to it. I encourage you, too, to pick it up -- chances are you won't find it in a record store, but Amazon.com carries it, and it's available through 2L's website, www.2l.no.

Now that we've finished reflecting on 2009 and are planning 2010, I'm already wondering what products I might pick a year from now. Time will tell. Until then, look for the announcement -- on January 1, 2010 -- of

the winners of our SoundStage! Network Product of the Year awards.

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