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December 2009

Rad Bennett's Best Audiophile Releases for 2009

Looking for the best sounds of 2009, regardless of format? Look no further. In compiling this list, I heard the future of high-end sound. Only one CD made the cut, and quite a few of the downloads provided significant upgrades from their CD counterparts. In no particular order, here's the best of 2009.

Beethoven: Symphonies 1 & 5
(Paavo Järvi, Deutsche Kammerphilharmonie Bremen)
Label: RCA 33835-2
Format: Multichannel SACD/CD
Genre: Classical



Musical performance: ****1/2
Sound quality: ****1/2
Overall enjoyment: ****1/2

This third installment in Paavo Järvi's traversal of the symphonies of Beethoven is a high-voltage event, with fast tempos and a savagery that is never crass. The close-up recording has podium presence, with the woodwinds and brass easily heard, and the effect is thrilling. The string attacks in the last movement are so real that you feel as if you're on the podium, watching the players along with the conductor.

Jen Chapin: **ReVisions: Songs of Stevie Wonder**
Label: Chesky SACDS 347
Format: Multichannel SACD/CD
Genre: Jazz



Musical performance: ****
Sound quality: ****1/2
Overall enjoyment: ****

A daring decision to make this a trio session (singer, saxophone, and bass), without a chording instruments such as a keyboard or guitar, pays off in a recording that is among the most intimate I've heard. The miraculous recording catches every performance nuance yet never sounds clinical, having both clarity *and* warmth. Also available as a superb 24-bit/96kHz download from Chesky's HDtracks

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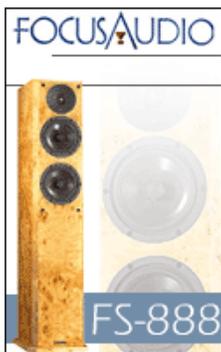
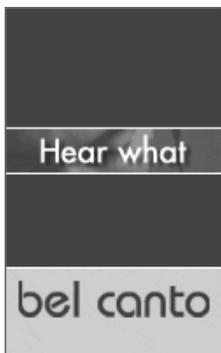
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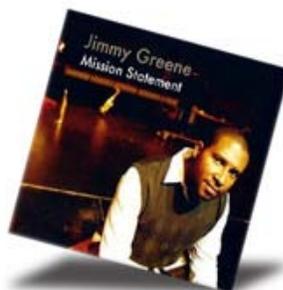


(stereo only). The double-bass harmonics at the beginning of "Visions" are amazing, as is the clarity of all three performers going full tilt in "Master Blaster." The perfect, hand-in-glove balance of Jen Chapin and bassist Stephen Crump at the beginning of "Renewable" took my breath away.

Jimmy Greene: **Mission Statement**

Label: Razdaz SSC 4608
 Format: CD
 Genre: Jazz

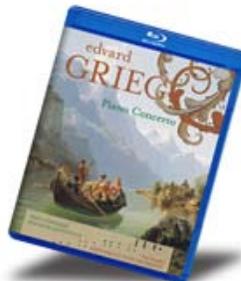
Musical performance: *****
 Sound quality: ****1/2
 Overall enjoyment: ****1/2



For this ambitious recording -- sometimes mellow, sometimes boisterous, always exuberant -- saxophonist Jimmy Greene is joined by Lage Lund on guitar, Xavier Davis on keyboards, Reuben Rogers on bass, and Eric Harland on drums, with Stefon Harris sitting in on vibraphone for "Revelations." The recording is close-up yet a marvel of clarity, considering there are so many musicians going in so many directions. Harris's mallet work in "Revelations" is absolutely clean, yet seems to come from within the ensemble rather than being spotlight. Each musician sounds equally a part of the whole ensemble.

Grieg: Piano Concerto (Percy Grainger, piano roll; Rolf Gupta, Kristiansand Symphony)
 Label: 2L 60
 Format: Blu-ray, Multichannel SACD/CD
 Genre: Classical

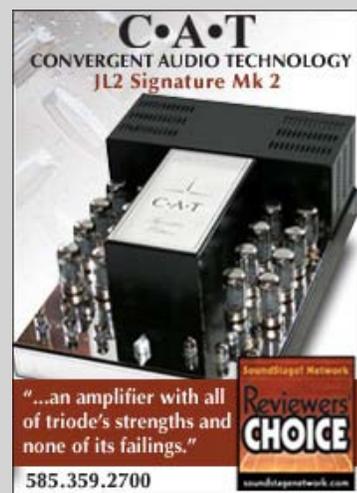
Musical performance: ****1/2
 Sound quality: ****1/2
 Overall enjoyment: ****1/2



Percy Grainger, one of the 20th century's chief exponents of Grieg's famous concerto, is here brought back to vivid life via a piano-roll performance, recorded in 2009 with a superb Norwegian conductor and orchestra. The performance -- recorded in sparkling, spacious, transparent, detailed surround sound -- is offered (on two discs) in 24-bit/352.8kHz DXD, in 24/192 DTS-HD Master Audio, 24/96, 2.0-channel LCPM, and DSD stereo and multichannel. The detail in the interplay of piano and orchestra throughout, especially in the playful bridge passage of the third movement that occurs just before the grand finale, is striking.

Helge Lien Trio: **Hello Troll**
 Label: Linn Records
 Format: 24-bit/96kHz download
 Genre: Jazz

Musical performance: ****1/2
 Sound quality: ****1/2



Overall enjoyment: ****1/2

Helge Lien's playing is at times reminiscent of Dave Brubeck's, while the lyrical, ruminative drift of the melodies reminds one of Bill Evans.

The sound ranges from consonant and lush to dissonant and playful. The recording is warm yet detailed, with perfect balance among piano, bass, and drums. The piano sounds very three-dimensional, and the drums are as clean as a whistle in an overall warm ambience. This sound is so appealing that I felt I could spend days instead of just minutes with this recording -- and, indeed, I have.



Houston Jones: **Calico Heart**

Label: Blue Coast Records
Format: 24-bit/96kHz download
Genre: Singer-Songwriter

Musical performance: ****
Sound quality: ****1/2
Overall enjoyment: ****1/2

Houston Jones is a West Coast band than blends acoustic, blues, country, and bluegrass into a most appealing sound. Cookie Marenco, CEO and chief engineer of Blue Coast Records, felt that their new album deserved the extra halo of air that a 24-bit/96kHz transfer would give, and I agree. The voices sound entirely natural, while all the plucked and picked string instruments have just the right amount of twang. Once the levels were set, everything was in the hands of the musicians, without any electronic twiddling. The opening of "Coward's Game" is deliciously twangy, capped by a shimmering struck cymbal; when the lead singer comes in, the instrumentalists back off naturally rather than being electronically turned down.



Sara K.: **Made in the Shade**

Label: Stockfisch 357.7052.2
Format: Blu-ray, SACD/CD
Genre: Singer-Songwriter

Musical performance: ****1/2
Sound quality: ****1/2
Overall enjoyment: ****1/2

Sara K. has said that this will be her last album. Whether that ends up being true or not, this Blu-ray audio-only disc is a fine testament to her artistry. The album is acoustic music at its best, various instruments being used to support the singer's warm voice in the center channel. The program is also available on SACD/CD in comparable sound. Listen to the intricate concert harp filigree in "Watching You Fall Into Sleep," the pointed striding piano and bass in "Manchild," and the shimmering Hammond organ backdrop for "Sizzlin'."



Shakespeare's Tempest

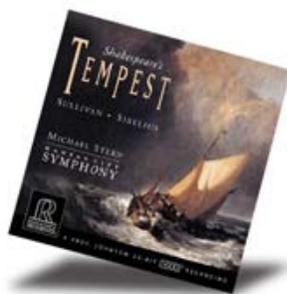
Sullivan, Sibelius: Incidental Music for **The Tempest** (Michael Stern, Kansas City Symphony)
Label: Reference Recordings
Format: 24-bit/96kHz download

Genre: Classical

Musical performance: ****

Sound quality: ****1/2

Overall enjoyment: ****1/2



Conductor Michael Stern's bold, detailed readings of this music by Sir Arthur Sullivan and Jean Sibelius are ideal. So is the warm, spacious recording, which couples a focused, solid soundstage with excellent presence, whether the music is loud or soft. This is big concert-hall sound as heard from row 10. Sustained notes from the winds and brass don't disturb the rapidly whirring violins in Sullivan's *Act IV Overture* or Sibelius's *The Storm*; each part can be heard clearly, yet all combine to make a cohesive, dramatic whole.

Various Artists: **AIX Records**
Music Calibration Disc and HD Music Sampler

Label: AIX

Format: Blu-ray

Genres: Jazz, Singer-Songwriter, Classical

Musical performance: ****1/2

Sound quality: *****

Overall enjoyment: ****1/2



A perfect marriage of hi-def audio and hi-def video, the seven tracks on this disc point the way to the future. Pure sound, not just mastered, but recorded at 24-bit/96kHz, provides an unparalleled intimate experience: a superlative studio recording that you can also see. Tests for setting up your audio equipment are big bonuses. Revel in perfect vocal imaging and instrumental timbres, ideal balances, and overall sound so clean and clear it's as if you've invited the artists into your listening room.

Various Artists: **Audiophile Jazz**
Prologue III

Label: Design with Sound DSW-8001

Format: DVD-ROM (24-bit/192kHz, 24-bit/96kHz) and CD-R

Genre: Jazz

Musical performance: ****1/2

Sound quality: *****

Overall enjoyment: ****1/2



The recording is warm and close, avoiding any unpleasant edge. It's as if you're in a perfect small club with ideal acoustics; you're sitting at a table near the center, and all the annoying sounds of other customers talk, rattling glasses, and scraping silverware are gone -- it's a private show by the musicians, just for you. The opening bowed double bass in "You'd Be So Nice to Come Home To" is amazingly realistic, turning over to plucked bass and guitar supporting the singer with perfect balance and clarity.

... Rad Bennett

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