



Audio Research Reference
3 Preamp: A New Standard

STEREO • MULTICHANNEL AUDIO • MUSIC

the absolute sound®

2005 GOLDEN EAR AWARDS

The Best of the Best!



Solid-State Statement! BAT's VK-600M SE Amplifier

FEBRUARY 2006

\$6.99 US / \$8.99 CAN / £4.50 UK



DISPLAY UNTIL FEBRUARY 2006

An interview with conductor Benjamin Zander • HP's golden ear awards
Echo Busters room treatment • Kuzma Stabi S turntable and Stogi S arm
Speakers from Dynaudio & Magnepan • Moscode's 401HR tube hybrid amp
17 pages of music reviews!

www.theabsolutesound.com



CHRIS MARTENS

Usher Dancer CP8571 MkII loudspeaker
\$7735 (usheraudio.com)

NuForce Reference 9 monoblock amps
\$2500 (nuforce.com)

Kuzma Stabi S turntable and Stogi S tonearm
\$3300 (themusic.com)

The veteran audiophile played one reference recording after another through the Usher Dancer CP8571 MkII floorstanding loudspeaker. He was quiet, so I couldn't tell whether his impressions were favorable or not. Finally, the veteran—who was no stranger to loudspeakers priced at five figures per pair—turned and softly asked, “How much did you say these cost?” “Around \$7700 per pair,” I replied. My guest nodded slowly and then said, “You know, if you had told me these speakers cost \$20,000 I'd have said, ‘That's a good price for them, considering their sound and build-quality.’ But at *this* price....” The Taiwanese-made Dancer, a design shaped by Dr. Joseph D'Appolito, is by no means inexpensive, but it is so good that listeners invariably compare it to speakers several times its price. Here's why. The Dancer offers essentially full-range sound, with highs produced by one of the smoothest yet most articulate tweeters you could ever hope to hear, an open-sounding midrange with explosive dynamics, punchy yet finely-textured bass, and the sort of overarching soundstage focus that is rare at any price. Factor in Usher's stunning woodwork and you have a loudspeaker that pleases in many of the ways that Wilson Audio's WATT/Puppies do, but at a fraction of the price. For audiophiles who aspire to owning top-tier loudspeakers, but whose ships have not yet come in, Usher's Dancer offers serious sonic excellence and tremendous value.

When I was a child I loved the story of David and

Goliath, and there are many things about NuForce's Reference 9 monoblock power amps that remind me of that story. These 160-watt Class D amps are small and affordable, and look unassuming, but they open up a giant can of sonic whoop-ass on most amps their price, and they sound better than many that cost more. The Reference 9s are exceedingly transparent yet not bright, and they offer potent and expressive dynamics, excellent soundstage width and depth, and world-class bass. What's not to like? Well, the amps generally don't deliver the holographic, illuminated-from-within midrange of the best tube amps, and they can at times exhibit an accurate-to-a-fault, garbage-in/garbage-out quality. But once you hear the way the NuForces uncover previously unheard nuances in your favorite recordings, I think you'll be hooked. Will other modern Class D designs sound as good as, or perhaps better than, the NuForces? Maybe, but for now the Reference 9s establish a new benchmark for affordable excellence in amplification.

Lately I've been doing a lot of listening to the simple but sophisticated Kuzma Stabi S turntable and Stogi S unipivot tonearm from Slovenia, and the combination has really won my heart and mind. As many analog lovers know, the tonal quality of background silences varies from turntable to turntable, and the Stabi S produces a deep, warm, black background that reminds me of the hush you might hear in a concert hall just before the music begins. In turn, the Stogi S is a minimalist but very effective design that can unleash the formidable performance potential of great moving coils such as the Shelter 90X. In particular, the Stogi S promotes absolutely effortless and highly holographic soundstaging, letting high-frequency details come through without edge enhancement, while providing a wonderfully solid bass foundation. But perhaps the truest indicator of the Kuzma pair's sonic goodness lies in the fact that whenever I start spinning favorite LPs on this rig, I just can't seem to stop. If that's not analog magic, what is? (See full review elsewhere in this issue.)