

ONHIFI

January 15, 2005

THE CES 2005 JIMMY AWARDS

The format of this year's Jimmy Awards had to be modified due to theft. Like a clueless rookie traveler, I packed my digital camera in checked baggage, and somewhere between Costa Rica and Las Vegas the camera was heisted. My MO includes the use of photos as mnemonic devices, but at the 2005 Consumer Electronics Show I was flying blind, having to rely on indelible impressions of components and room demonstrations. But in most cases (a notable exception is mentioned below) it's impossible to identify the prime source of good sound in a show system, so this blanket approach may actually be better. By giving out awards to entire rooms, I hope to honor those rooms' main ingredients as well. If I inadvertently give associated equipment undeserved praise, so be it. If an exhibitor has chosen components carefully, then all the pieces that played roles in the stirring epic deserve credit.

My notes (analog to the rescue!) tell me that 18 rooms blasted me out of my socks. For purposes of alliteration, I've rounded up the list to a Top Twenty, with a few Honorable Mentions. I'll start at that end. All prices cited are in US dollars.

HONORABLE MENTIONS

A heartwarming development at CES was the unveiling of several new digital amplifier designs. As a user of chip-based amplifiers from Audio Research and Bel Canto, I have grown to love the sound, cool running, light weight, and low power consumption of these computer-age designs. My spine and abdominals do not miss the massive heft of class-A/AB amplifiers, nor do my emotions, which were often hijacked by the harshness of transistorized signals. Amps that use the Tripath chip are simply easier on my ears.

I've been waiting for other manufacturers to be inspired by chips; I like to have more than one or two choices. Several rooms at CES showed new variations on the theme of digital error correction, and the preliminary results were impressive. In the fertile world of digital creativity, chip designers are becoming amplifier builders, and three systems powered by proprietary digital devices won awards. As Marc Mickelson pointed out, the time may come when magazines will test digital implementations rather than amplifiers. We'll be wondering, "Whose input board sounds better?"

JEFF ROWLAND DESIGN GROUP

Not only does the Jeff Rowland Design Group's 501 monaural amplifier use a chip (the ICEpower from Bang & Olufsen), it also incorporates a switching power supply. By substituting for the power transformer, the 501 eliminates 60Hz line noise from the signal path. As with so many subtle distortions



in hi-fi, one is usually not aware of the existence of transformer noise until it's gone. The Rowland room produced much sweeter sound than I expected, and would have received an award if I didn't think new competition will soon force B&O to update the ICEpower.

PEAK CONSULT/STEREOVOX

By the time I reached the Peak Consult/Stereovox room on the afternoon of January 9, I was CES'd-out. This may explain why my mind recognized the Peak Consult Princess speakers' inner beauty but my heart wasn't keen on a private demo. I did notice that the Princess had dynamic snap when the music called for it, but not when it didn't. After witnessing a plethora of loudspeakers with fatiguing snappiness, I considered the Princess a speaker that would probably wear well over an evening spent alone with a pair of them.

ZCABLE/BPT

These manufacturers of accessories produced clean sound from a humble system. I would like to have compared the results before and after the Z-sleeves and Balanced Power unit were installed, but they had to be doing something to make the Gallo Reference 3 speakers disappear so completely while hooked up to a \$700 receiver.

Perhaps more important, ZCable and BPT used a special CD for their demos. Their *Re-Clocking Test CD* uses Exact Audio Copy (EAC) software to reclock CDs to hard disk via .WAV files, which are then burned on a system that uses ZCable and BPT techniques of rejecting EMI and RFI. "Comped" a copy of the compilation by ZCable's Mark Hampton, I can attest to the CD's clarity in my system; it suggested a freedom from parasitic influences. I plan to recopy the CD using EAC, Plextor drives, and MAM-A CD-R discs. My logic: If my copy sounds better than the original, then the Plextors and MAM-A discs are responsible. If it sounds worse, then I'll have to give the ZCable/BPT demo disc a belated Jimmy Award.

PARADIGM/ONKYO

While touring the Las Vegas Convention Center, I heard music above the din. Shouldering aside the suited philistines hronging the demo-unfriendly LVCC, I homed in on the source of such wonderment. Lo and behold, two brands dear to my heart were playing together: Paradigm's Reference Studio speakers powered by an Onkyo AVR-702 receiver. Despite being driven hard, the 5.1-channel system re-created a DVD concert with likable fidelity and recognizable dynamics. I actually sat and listened for a while—high praise for show sound.

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THE CES 2005 JIMMY AWARDS... cont'd

The secrets of the Eben X-3's success are its drivers. The tweeter is a planar device with instantaneous reactions—other loudspeaker manufacturers should consider buying or developing such a tweeter. The midrange and woofer cones are from Audio Technology, which, as any aficionado knows, was founded by the legendary Ejvind Skaaning, of Dynaudio and Scan-Speak fame. Skaaning drivers are dearly priced, and deservedly so. A speaker using *five* Audio Technology transducers per side is bound to *seem* expensive, but I can't think of a speaker that's more exciting to listen to than the Eben X-3. In that sense, it's inexpensive. In lieu of purchasing a pair for my personal use, I hereby award the X-3's designer, Michael Borresen, a Double Jimmy.

1. USHER AUDIO

For me, the best show at CES 2005 was not one of music but of force. Usher Audio of Taiwan brought over examples of its full loudspeaker lineup. I had never seen so large a collection of such beautifully styled products in one room.



The relationship of retail price to build quality and, presumably, performance of Usher's products defies logic. For instance, the speaker that was playing, the CP 8871 II, has two 8"

low-bass woofers, a 7" mid-low woofer, and a 1" beryllium-coated dome tweeter—all in one of the most exquisitely finished wood-veneer cabinets I've ever seen. How did it sound? Well, at a suggested retail price of \$8900, who cares? But seriously—to my ears, the sound was lush, liquid, and large, but I may have been struck deaf by the CP 8871 II's appearance. For nine grand, there's nothing that comes close to the Usher Dancer series, visually speaking.

The same held true for the other Usher speakers, which were on silent display. For instance, the 14-pound S-520 minimonitor comes in rock-solid piano black or white and responds down to 55Hz. At a retail price of \$400 per pair (\$375 for wood veneer), the speaker makes likely competitors look like doo-doo. I emphasize the Usher line's presence/price ratio because sales of hi-fi products are made almost as much on looks as on sound quality.

My understanding is that not all of Usher's loudspeakers are currently available in the US. North American manufacturers should regard the respite as temporary. At some point, Usher containers will start being unloaded onto American docks, and the world of hi-fi will turn upside down.

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