

FROM THE Editor

Editors' Choices

This issue includes our annual Editors' Choice Awards, the feature in which we list every product in every category that we recommend—complete with capsule reviews of each component. At 63 pages, The Editors' Choice Awards is by far the biggest and most comprehensive article we publish all year.

We start with a master list of every product we've ever reviewed, fact-check that list for updated pricing, distributor information, and current availability, and then the fun begins. In a series of marathon conference calls, we vigorously debate the merits of every single product to determine if that component deserves an Editors' Choice Award. Although you'll find tremendous diversity of technologies and applications among our choices, each recommended component will shine in the appropriate system. When selecting components we must look beyond our own predilections and consider the vast spectrum of listeners and systems that high-end audio encompasses. As one who listens to 600W solid-state monoblocks, I can nonetheless see that the \$1295 Coincident Dynamo 34SE, with 8Wpc and a 10-ohm output impedance, could find its niche with the appropriate speakers, and for a particular listener.

Even though we've gone through this process a dozen times, I never fail to be amazed by the fact that for every single component on our list, we have acquired a review sample; the reviewer has set up and evaluated that component; and the writer has reached an opinion on the product's performance and value. Now multiply that process by the nearly 700 components on our list, and you get a feel for the effort Editors' Choice represents.

But it's more than just sheer manpower that makes our Editors' Choice Awards unique. The Editors' Choice Awards reflect the cumulative experience, wisdom, and knowledge of *The Absolute Sound* writing team. And that experience and knowledge are vast: Ten of our reviewers have been writing about high-end audio for more than a quarter century. They are, in alphabetical order, Anthony H. Cordesman, Neil Gader, Wayne Garcia, Robert E. Greene, Robert Harley, Dick Olsher, Paul Seydor, Steven Stone, Jonathan Valin, and Greg Weaver. *The Absolute Sound* is fortunate to have such an authoritative roster of reviewing talent. I hope that you find our 2015 Editors' Choice Awards useful in building or upgrading your system.

In the previous issue I wrote a brief overview of Meridian Audio's Master Quality Authenticated (MQA) technology, a digital-audio encoding and decoding system that promises to deliver sound quality better than 192kHz/24-bit in a

lossless file such as 96kHz/24-bit FLAC or Apple Lossless. Since writing that short introduction just a few days after the technology was announced, I've spoken at length with MQA's architect, Meridian co-founder Bob Stuart, and read his and Peter Craven's Audio Engineering Society paper "A Hierarchical Approach to Archiving and Distribution" (available for \$20 from www.aes.org, preprint 9178). That ostensibly prosaic title doesn't clue you into the fact that MQA is the kind of breakthrough technology that comes along once every few decades. The paper's formidable content, which describes only a small portion of the technology, proposes a revolutionary way of converting music to digital. MQA represents a rethinking of sampling theory, quantization, and digital filtering—in other words, the very foundations on which today's digital audio are based.

Concomitantly, MQA suggests a model for archiving master recordings and for delivering the highest possible quality to listeners no matter what delivery platforms or playback devices they listen through. MQA's full sound-quality potential is realized with a decoder in the playback system, but a decoder isn't required. The first DAC with MQA decoding is Meridian's \$299 Explorer 2.

MQA would not have been possible without recent advances in neurology and psychoacoustics. New research into how the brain processes audio stimuli, revealed by advanced non-invasive brain-imaging techniques, informed Meridian's research and development. After reading the paper and learning about MQA's sophisticated approach, it's difficult to view conventional PCM encoding as anything but primitive and inefficient.

The AES paper suggests that a piece of music "can be encapsulated in a distribution file containing all the relevant spectral and temporal information in the 192kHz/24-bit original (9.2Mbps) using an average data rate of 922kbps." In other words, sound quality beyond 192/24 is possible at one-tenth the bit rate. This has important implications for a music business moving increasingly toward subscription-based streaming. Based on my brief listen to MQA, Meridian appears to have pulled the sword from the stone.

The big hurdle—and it's a huge one—is getting the record companies to transfer their catalogs using MQA. Although it's possible to realize many of MQA's benefits by starting with a high-res PCM transfer, the technology's full potential is realized only with transfers from the analog masters. Nonetheless, MQA provides a real opportunity for transcending the limitations of conventional digital audio. Let's hope that the industry seizes this chance. **Robert Harley**