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MERRILL AUDIO

The 13th Annual Positive Feedback Writers' Choice Awards for 2016

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Beginning at the end of 2003, *PF* established its first annual awards for fine audio. The Brutus Award was established for the best that David Robinson and Dave Clark had heard in their own listening rooms during that year. You can think of it as our equivalent of an "Editors' Choice" award.

The Gizmo Award, on the other hand, was established in memory of our very good audio friend, Harvey "Gizmo" Rosenberg, and is given by David Robinson to the most conspicuous *audiomaniac(s)* of the year. Only one Gizmo is given per year.

The following is an opportunity for our editors and writers to recognize superior merit in the audio arts though their "Writers' Choice Awards". Our writers and reviewers have been given broad leeway to cite excellence in fine audio wherever they find it: products, people, recordings, events, groups, etc., so that our readers can be better informed.

It is our hope that you will find the *PF* Writers' Choice Awards to be helpful to you in your audio journey.

All the best,

Positive Feedback

Gary L. Beard

I've struggled with this year's awards for one simple reason. *Every* piece of gear I've had in my listening room in 2016 has warranted special mention, including two fine pieces whose reviews are slated to appear in the cyber-pages of *PF* yet this year. I know, I know; cop out, right? No, not really. Expensive audio gear *should* sound good, shouldn't it? And it generally does.

Whilst trying to figure out the best way to approach my dilemma, I decided to exclude gear from the unpublished reviews, and instead give awards to the products which exemplified themselves as the best high-end sound I've heard this year—irrespective of minor gripes, or whether they'd been given awards in previous years by other writers. That left me with three excellent choices, in totally different categories of audio. While certainly expensive, these superb audio products fall within the lower-tier of pricing for high-end, high-fidelity audio. To get significantly superior sound may cost a *whole* lot more.

Aurender N-10 Music Server

Retail: $7999

The Aurender N-10 Music Server was suggested by several very knowledgeable friends and readers as the ideal way to take my system to the next level for computer audio. Like many new to the game, as I ramp up and learn the ropes of all things digital, I needed something that was basically turn key and highly reliable. It did not hurt that the sound performance and user interface can compete with virtually anything currently available in the marketplace.

When matched up with either the Devialet 800 or the Playback Designs MPS-5 CD/SACD/DAC, the setup was basically painless. Though I was assigned a specific Aurender contact for technical support, I was able to get everything up and running on the first try with just a quick 30-minute tutorial from a local friend and nary a phone call.

The N-10 comes with 4TB of (2TBx2) hard disk drives and one 240GB solid-state drive cache for playback. The solid-state cache helps to eliminate electrical noise and vibration that can impact sound performance. Dual linear power supplies and robust shielding are employed which many feel is more in line with today's audiophile design standards.

The N-10 also provides a wide range of S/PDIF digital outputs (AES/EBU, BNC, coaxial, and optical) and one dedicated USB Class 2.0 output. For network connectivity, streaming, and upgrades, an Ethernet port and two USB 2.0 data ports are also included. Compatible formats that are supported by the N-10 include DSD (DSF, DFF), WAV, FLAC, AIFF, ALAC, and M4A.

Using the new Aurender Smart Copy feature, I copied several high resolution files from my QNAP NAS and WD hard drives to the N-10 without a hitch. This included a range of various PCM and DSD files. I know that many feel that some music servers and DACs can sound better for DSD and some better for PCM. I am not gonna get into a DSD versus PCM comparison here. All I can say is that both formats sounded absolutely wonderful through the N-10, plenty of detail without edge and a sense of proper body and weight that few digital components can provide. Unlike several contenders, the Aurender N-10 shines with virtually any format.

Lastly, the Aurender Conductor app is a superb example of how competitive the industry is and how quickly remote application control and related features have evolved. As a user interface, I feel strongly that the Conductor app is one of the best out there and has set a new standard for music servers. Everything is beautifully laid out and menu choices can be made with logical and efficient access. With the Aurender application at your fingertips, you will be hard pressed to ever leave your listening seat for music selection or better sound quality.

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