

A vocal celebration

THE AUDITORIUM R25A ANNIVERSARY, AN EFFICIENT THREE-DRIVER, FLOORSTANDING DESIGN, CELEBRATES 25 YEARS SINCE THE LAUNCH OF LIVING VOICE UK'S ORIGINAL AUDITORIUM MODEL. MARTIN COLLOMS FINDS MUCH TO REJOICE ABOUT IN THIS WELL-BALANCED DESIGN

Kevin Scott's diverse musical interests have led him to begin numerous audio ventures ranging from high-end retail audio to loudspeaker design and manufacture, not forgetting high-end system installations, including some on luxury yachts. He's especially proud of his own loudspeaker line, Living Voice, several examples designed by him having been in production for many years, selling in the hundreds per annum per design, while he has also been active in the extreme horn-loaded arena with examples priced at many tens of thousands of pounds per pair. In addition, he has undertaken significant research in offline power supplies and equipment support systems, to reduce both electronic and mechanical noise floors.



Given his expertise, one might expect a touch of horn-like clarity and dynamic expression from the otherwise conventional-looking Auditorium R25A Anniversary loudspeaker here, marking a quarter of a century since the launch of the original Auditorium model – and first indications suggested we were not to be disappointed.

Made in the UK, the speakers employ selected Danish-built ScanSpeak drive units, which are exhaustively researched versions of much earlier Scandinavian classics. Kevin favours bass and bass/mid drivers using lightweight pulp cone with special coatings, in what he described as an MTM arrangement. The company has been forced to navigate troubled waters to secure a supply of custom drivers which remain a good fit with their low moving mass speaker system alignments and the wish for a particularly dynamic and agile sound. Every single aspect of design and build has been minutely examined and weighed in the balance thanks to a determination to extract the most musical sound from the available components.

Fairly lightweight for their size, the loudspeakers are just 19kg each: priced at £6,000 a pair, they come with a neat square section hollow base in black satin finish, with adjustable floor coupling and levelling spikes. This base is not fixed on directly, but instead is resistively decoupled from the loudspeaker, if only slightly, by vestigial and almost fully compressed dots of Blu-Tack concealed in the corners – this compound having the right ratio of compliance to damping, avoiding any bounce or resonance.

This base adds 14cm to the overall height, bringing it to 1.17m overall including spikes, and the speaker has a certain physical presence, not least due to the beautiful finishes available, from fine veneers, book-matched in cherry, walnut,

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Specifications

Living Voice Auditorium Series R25A Anniversary

Type Floorstanding reflex-ported
loudspeaker

Price £6050/pr

Sensitivity 94dB/m/W (8 ohm)

Nominal Impedance 6 Ohms
3.2ohm minimum

Loading Bass Reflex
(rear ducted port)

Drivers 25mm doped fabric
dome tweeter,
2x 17cm Custom
pulp-cone bass/mid drivers

Frequency Response
35Hz–22.5kHz
nominal: +/-3dB

Amplifier Power 20 -90W

Maximum Level 105dBA,
pair in-room

Finishes Book-matched natural
veneers in Cherry, Walnut,
Maple, Rosenut, Black Ash,
Flat White

Dimensions (HxWxD)
117x21.5x27cm

Weight 19Kg each

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maple, rosenut and black ash, to a very modern-looking Flat White. Grilles are provided for domestic protection, but they are easily detached, the speakers sounding significantly clearer and more dynamic without them.

The enclosure is light and stiff, dissipating vibration energy quite rapidly, and built from high quality particle board with balanced veneering inside and out. There's no damping or cross bracing on the panels, and an almost vestigial quantity of low-density fibre blanket absorption within, spaced over height. Meanwhile the port is of generous cross section, so unlikely to overload, while it also short enough to avoid significant resonant length modes. The wiring is heavy-duty single strand copper formed as bound pairs of conductors.

The fun begins with the crossover which is hard-wired and built with top quality selected film/foil capacitors of generous voltage rating and with low loss air core inductors. Money has been spent here. The 17cm bass mid drivers are uniquely voiced for this design using a particular mid-range optimised diaphragm technology from the late 1970s.

Specifications include a usefully high 94dB/W sensitivity, a nominal, low reactance 6ohm impedance, this a fairly easy electrical loading, and a 35Hz to 22.5kHz +/- 3dB frequency response. They are suited to both valve and solid-state amplifiers. Suggested placement is in free space, say 0.3 to 0.5m from the wall behind them, and they may be angled to taste to fine-tune the tonal balance and image focus. I agreed with the designer in finding the best results when these loudspeakers are toed out just enough to see down the inner side walls from the listening seat.

Sound quality

With the speakers run for a few days on mixed programme at few watts, with my streamer on repeat, good sounds were emanating from the listening room right away, convincing me to get in there and begin the evaluation of these well run-in demonstrators. First impressions were of a fresh vitality with well projected vocals, and while this kind of timbre may sometimes lead to an impression of a leaner sound this was not the case here. Coloratura soloists were realistically lively, illuminating the stereo image with impressive immediacy and expression, and full vocal weight.

Symphonic works were delightful in breadth and depth, and full of detail, and it was the more difficult percussion works I frequently use for listening tests which confirmed that the self-evident quality of a particularly open and dynamic expressiveness was not contrived, but a genuine attribute. Reich's *Four Pieces for Mallet Instruments* can cause no end of trouble for some designs, which might otherwise escape censure when reproducing sweeter scoring, such as orchestral strings.

The rendition of the Reich piece was open and vital; more than this, it proved to be highly revealing of pitch and texture essential to the composition. It was also very well timed and well illuminated, the whole supported by compelling counterpoint.

With many really well-balanced loudspeaker systems there's a danger of the design recipe being overcooked, or too processed. The listener might feel the designer has overcomplicated the design, more in the pursuit of tonal accuracy than the quality of lively expression in the rendered musical replay, but this isn't so here.

Sense of performance

For recording after recording, this Living Voice design manifestly conveyed the sense of performance, drawing in listeners and firmly holding the attention. These first impressions didn't fade: at first things did sound a little too good to be true, and yet it carried on like this throughout the auditioning. Every time I powered up the system there was that fresh, communicative enthusiasm, reinforced for almost every piece of music sampled. If you ever tried to read the record liner notes, the speakers were dragging you back to the music.

By chance my finger hovered over a Vikingur Olafsson cover image on the iPad, playing Philip Glass. For this marvellous performance and recording the temptation was too great and away we went on a near dizzying ride. This grand piano filled my large room, realistically balanced and dynamic, even majestic, Vikingur's performance wholly commanding and very musical for these original and lyrical interpretations of the Philip Glass Etudes.





Vocals sounded expressive and refreshed on Susanne Vega's *Days of Open Hand*, where the essential rhythms were to the fore, but also with long-forgotten detail now clearly rendered, one might think skilfully remastered. The R25 Anniversary also proved happy with larger acoustics, superbly rendering The Hilliard Ensemble rendering of 'Regnanten Sempiterna' from the million seller *Officium* by Jan Garbarek, with scale, weight, power and space, and with every nuance of the deep acoustic fully articulated, imbued with that characteristic enveloping reverberation from that Austrian location, the St Gerold monastery.

Conclusion

Somehow this speaker transcends the sum of its parts and indeed its relatively compact dimensions, sounding large scale, well timed, dynamic, transparent and communicative. I imagine that the designer always knew what was wanted, and has laboured mightily to achieve it. The R25 Anniversary has a winning combination of efficiency and fine amplifier loading, combined with a dynamic, powerful, and revealing sound. Slim and relatively compact, this musically expressive design proved easy to install, and achieves our Audio Excellence rating.

The system

Townshend Allegri Reference control units; Naim NAP250DR power amplifier, D'Agostino Progression integrated, Naim SuperLine/SuperCap DR phono pre with Linn LP12 player with Keel chassis, Karousel main bearing and Radical motor control, Naim ARO arm, Lyra Delos cartridge, Naim UnitiCore network server and S/PDIF source, Roon Nucleus Plus server control with Qobuz; Linn Klimax DSM streamer-DAC, NAIM ND555 Streamer-DAC, 555 PS x2 (DR), Wilson Audio Sabrina X, Magico S-5II, FinkTeam KIM, Quad ESL63, BBC LS3/5a (15ohm), loudspeakers Naim Fraim racks; Transparent XL MM2, Naim NAC A5 speaker cables, Naim Super Lumina, Transparent MM2 and Van den Hul Carbon TFU interconnect cables.

Evolving the design

I asked Kevin about the naming of these designs as I was confused by the numerous designations, and he was unsurprised. 'It can be confusing at first sight – and maybe on second sight – probably because this speaker series has evolved slowly over the years into a five-model hierarchy and where each of the models in the series has evolved over 4 iterations. The first speaker to be introduced – about 27 years ago – was simply called Auditorium, and the fourth and current iteration is the R25 Anniversary, to mark 25 years of continuous production.

'This is a complete redesign from a crossover point of view and marks quite a break from the relatively minor changes that distinguish its predecessors from each other. The bass mid-drivers are made for us by ScanSpeak in Denmark, specifically for the Auditorium model, to a specification chosen after a laborious subjective iterative development process – good old empiricism. In the original Auditorium we used the Vifa C17WG driver I'd heard and admired in many designs dating from the 1980s: we prototyped a version of this driver with a more expensive cast magnesium chassis, but I still preferred the performance of the pressed steel version.

'Consequently, we had the tools for these steel chassis remade, and further optimised the diaphragm profile, also its termination to the foam surround, and the optimum position of the coil in the pole piece – again through painstaking iterative work with ScanSpeak. The foam surround also received a treatment to prevent it degrading in humid environments. Soft rubber surrounds were prototyped but did not convince.

'The tweeter is also from ScanSpeak, the D2608/913000 Revelator HF unit with a 92dB sensitivity, a specified 2kHz to 22kHz \pm 2dB response, and built on a die-cast front plate, here with a double magnet, and a hollow centre pole with termination. Over the years we have fine-tuned the enclosure construction, the cabinet panels now have a maple balancing veneer to minimise differences between the various external finishes. Maple is our favourite, superior to the industry standard backing veneer.

'Two or three years after first introducing the Auditorium we developed the Avatar, with the same form factor as the Auditorium but different drivers and necessarily a different crossover and cabinet reflex tuning. These bass/mid drivers have the same paper pulp diaphragm but a larger non-porous dustcap, while the magnets are twice as large.

'A few years later, again through demand, we made a version of this speaker with the finest implementation we could achieve using a mix of exotic and proprietary resistors, capacitors and inductors – plus selective cryogenic treatment of some of the inductors, all the film and foil caps, the internal wiring harness, and the binding posts. This model is the IBX-RW or OBX-RW, again on its fourth iteration.

'We make these with inboard or outboard crossovers, using a proprietary HF unit made for us by ScanSpeak: it's also based on the Revelator 2905-990000, but with a different diaphragm material and coating. The current models are called IBX-RW4 and OBX-RW4, the 'O' indicating the use of an outboard crossover.'