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THE SUM OF ITS PARTS

Living Voice OBX-RW3 Loudspeakers

By Marc Phillips

Scot Hull told me an interesting story when I went to his house to pick up the Living Voice OBX-RW3 loudspeakers for review. Scot owned an earlier version of the OBX-RWs, and he explained how *Part-Time Audiophile* almost didn't happen because he was so satisfied with the Living Voice's performance. He almost got off the high-end audio merry-go-round once he put those speakers in his system. "I was done," he told me. He was happy to spend the rest of his life with these amazing UK-built transducers. Almost, because we all know the rest of that story.

My own experience with Living Voice was confined to considering the high-efficiency Living Voice designs for use with my sublime 2wpc Yamamoto Sound Craft A-08 45 power amplifier more than a dozen years ago. I put them on the short list with other speakers such as the Audio Note AN/E HE series and perhaps even a pair of Klipsch La Scalas, but this was back in the days when I first started reviewing equipment and had to sell the Yamamoto because I simply couldn't review very many loudspeakers with them.

But the entire Living Voice approach to high-sensitivity designs was very seductive, so much so that I could have jumped off the carousel as well if I had pulled that proverbial trigger.



Let's settle back into 2020. If you read any of my show reports from High End 2019 in Munich, you'll know how impressed I was with the Living Voice R25A Anniversary loudspeakers. I haven't heard a pair of speakers at that price, roughly 5000 euros/pair, that could fill such a big room with a balanced and authoritative sound. I asked Living Voice to put me on the short list for review, but they weren't in production yet. (I'm still hoping to get my hands on them ASAP.) Instead, Scot asked me if I wanted to spend some time with the current version of the larger and more expensive OBX-RW3s, and I jumped at the chance.

OBX-RW3

The Living Voice OBX-RWs, now in their third version, are the flagship of the line next to the outrageously opulent horn-loaded Vox Olympian and Vox Elysium models. These speakers feature outboard crossovers that are available in the same lustrous veneers as the speakers and are roughly as big as your average British integrated amplifier. My speakers were finished in a gorgeous Rosewood Santos optional finish that brings the price of the OBX-RWs from the base price of \$13,525/pair to \$14,050. Other finishes

include cherry, walnut, black ash, maple, flat white, matte black, ebony, burr oak and glossy ebony (the last which retails for \$17,750/pair).

The OBW-RWs are indeed efficient—they are rated at 94dB with a nominal impedance of 6 ohms. I used them with a variety of low-powered amps, everything from the Luxman LX-380 integrated I reviewed for the Spring Issue of *The Occasional* (20 wpc) to my reference Pureaudio Duo2 power amplifier (25wpc in pure Class A) to the Linear Tube Audio Z-10 integrated (12wpc) that I've already reviewed. Most of the time, however, I used the Unison Research Unico 150 integrated amplifier, which offers 160wpc into 8 ohms and 220wpc into 4 ohms. Pairing such a powerful beast with a 94 dB pair of speakers seems counter-intuitive, and I had to use a great deal of discretion when turning the volume knob, but I liked the ease of connectivity with the bi-wired Triode Wire Labs bi-wired speaker cables that Scot provided.

I felt the 150's sweet treble was optimal for the extended high frequencies of the OBX-RWs, and I settled in for the long haul.



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Sound

My first impression of the Living Voice OBX-RW3s was the superb delivery of the lowest frequencies, perhaps the best I've had in my current listening room up to that point. (I use this qualifier because I have some BIG speakers on the way.) The Living Voices have a measured frequency response of 35 Hz to 30 kHz, but they coupled to the room in a way that allowed deep bass to rise from beneath the floorboards and create a soundstage that was extended on all three axes.

Placement of the Living Voices was fairly straightforward, even though I had to make room for the crossovers (I placed Cardas Audio wooden blocks underneath them so those lovely veneers wouldn't get damaged on my bare wooden floor) and account for the added height of the integral wooden stands. Instinctively I felt that the stands made the OBX-RW3s seem a little too tall, and a little too narrow and somewhat precarious. In addition, that considerable height made leveling these speakers even more important. (My suspended hardwood floors aren't as level as they should be.)

Once I started listening, however, positioning these speakers correctly in my room was relatively easy and I left the stands in place. One factor was the lightness of the enclosures—without the crossovers and stands, the Living Voice OBX-RW3s are only 20 kg each and very easy to push around. Most of the speakers I used at around the same time tended to be compact but heavy, so I appreciated the break in my audiophile workout regimen.

Once settled in, the OBX-RW3s made an immediate impression that wasn't too far from Scot's opinion that Living Voice speakers can easily be the end of the road for even the most demanding audiophiles. In addition to the superb bass performance, the Living Voice OBX-RW3s are exceptionally well-balanced, with a top-to-bottom coherence that is downright staggering in its ability to let the music shine.

Sound

My first impression of the Living Voice OBX-RW3s was a richness and beauty that is downright uncommon. I don't want to overuse the adjective smooth, but that's what they were. At the same time, I was equally impressed with the Living Voice's ability to project an incredibly satisfying tonal balance while

presenting a wide frequency response that verged on ultra-realistic. I've already mentioned the superb bass response, one that accurately presented the lowest octaves with complexity and depth. I've also hinted at the superb tweeter, a custom version of the beloved Scanspeak Revelator.

That certainly provided me with all the highs and lows I desired, but a high-efficiency speaker must also handle the midrange frequencies with finesse—especially if you're going to use a low-powered amp like an SET. You want that “hanging in mid-air” feeling to music, that you can reach right out and touch those voices and instruments, that everything is right there even if you can't see it. Even with the beefy, powerful Unico 150 integrated I was generously treated to that remarkable illusion. Voices, in particular, were incredibly lifelike. These were not mere notes that I was hearing, but a real and in-the-flesh human being just a few feet away that was communicating something essential to my listening experience.

Conclusion

I intended to hold onto the Living Voice OBX-RW3 loudspeakers for just a few weeks more, since I had some exquisite amplification from Mactone on the way and I knew that the 23wpc tubed power amplifier would make fast friends with these British speakers. (That's something that was echoed by Steven Mishoe of In Living Stereo in NYC, who's sending me the Mactones. He was excited when I mentioned I'd be using the Living Voices.)

Then I got a phone call from Scot. He wanted to know if I was done with the Living Voice review. “I miss them,” he said. I totally understood, and I brought them back with considerable reluctance.

The Living Voice OBX-RW3 offered quite a rare feeling, though, that if you looked at the individual parts—those wonderfully finished outboard crossovers, the modest speaker enclosures that were small enough and light enough to defy expectations, the Triode Wire Labs cables that seemed to be the perfect match—you were truly in the presence of something that was much greater than the sum of its parts.

These loudspeakers are indeed special in every conceivable way—like the finest components, they form an emotional bond with the listener that cannot be overestimated.

—Photos in article by Marc Phillips

