



Living Voice Auditorium R25A Loudspeaker

by Roy Gregory

Those disappointed by the absence of the Vox horn speakers from the Living Voice room in Munich would have done well to swallow that disappointment, take a seat and enjoy the performance of a speaker they could actually afford. After all, if you can afford the Vox Olympians (or Vox Palladians) you don't need to visit a hi-fi show to hear them. There's a purpose built listening room back in the UK where you can enjoy them at your leisure. What Living Voice brought to Munich was the latest

version of the Auditorium OBX, the RW4, most recent instalment in the Living Voice story, a saga that started over 25 years ago. But for all of the mightily impressive performance on show in Munich – and despite the



modest size and price of the OBX RW4 speakers in the Living Voice system, they still had one of the best sounding and most enjoyable rooms at the show – the subject of this review reaches back further still, to where it all began with the original Auditorium.

Longevity is an increasingly rare commodity when it comes to audio equipment. The lifespan of high-end digital products can be measured in months, while product revisions are seemingly now an annual

event - or in some cases necessity – if only to attract renewed press attention or churn the products sitting, stagnant in the retail pipeline. Which is ironic, given that long-term satisfaction really should be



▶▶ every customer's goal, as well as representing the best possible return on investment. Yet Living Voice's Auditorium is a loudspeaker that has remained conceptually and outwardly unchanged for a quarter of a century. Not only has it enjoyed uninterrupted production for 25 years, in that time it has spawned the visually identical Avatar, IBX, OBX and OBX RW derivatives – not replacement models but a carefully calculated range, offering clearly defined steps in performance. The original Auditorium cost around £1,500/pr and quarter of a century later, the various models are spread in price from £6,050 to £15,400, yet they are still all but outwardly indistinguishable, one from another. In one sense it is a marketer's nightmare but in another it is a powerful demonstration of the power in the original concept.

Although the concept behind and the appearance of the Auditorium series have remained constant, the individual models have also constantly evolved, with changes to cabinet materials, crossover components, high-frequency units and cabling. The last model to emerge, the OBX with its outboard crossover, took almost a decade to appear and since then, it has been through four generational changes. Each and every model in the line has been through a similar developmental process. Imagine if Volkswagen had stuck with the bodywork

of the original Golf and simply developed it under the skin. That's what you've got with the Auditorium speaker range – except that in this case, the current models are even more fun than the originals. But also

like the various Golfs, they're all

based on the entry level Auditorium model. If the OBX is the GTi and the RW is the R32, it's still the Auditorium that anchors the range, providing the topological foundation on which all the other models rest: and the Auditorium just passed 25 with a major facelift – and a new spring in its step. Meet the Auditorium R25A, a speaker to engage and excite, surprise and delight. Meet a speaker that, 25-years on, is still delivering exceptional musical value in budget esoteric systems, at a time when high-value and high-performance seem to be mutually exclusive.

The Auditorium story actually starts with a Dali speaker; a speaker

that Definitive Audio had been

selling consistently – right up to the point where the brand discontinued it. That loudspeaker used a simple, two-way D'Appolito topology in a slim, floorstanding cabinet to deliver the unusual balance of bandwidth, easy drive and efficiency that happened to match Definitive's preferred, low-powered tube amplification. Faced with losing one of their core products, Definitive's Kevin Scott decided to build his



▶▶ own, improved version of that speaker, under his Living Voice manufacturing umbrella (the production arm of the company, established in 1990 with the Air Partner and later Air Scout horn designs).

Thus was born the Auditorium, an essentially simple, 30-litre box with a small plinth stand, two 6.5" doped-paper mid/bass drivers and a 25mm soft-dome tweeter. At 215mm wide, 270mm deep and a shade under 1200mm tall, the small footprint, narrow baffle and rear firing reflex port all contribute to room-friendly aesthetics and performance and if the form factor's not that unusual these days, it certainly was 25-years ago! The genius of the design lies not in the details but in its balance of virtues: small enough to accommodate (and work) in most rooms it was big enough to deliver a convincing sense of scale and weight; with 94dB sensitivity and a flat 6Ω load, it was easy enough to drive with small amps – whether that meant entry level solid-state or high-end SET; its twin bass-mid drivers moved enough air with sufficient alacrity to generate real musical impact; its soft dome tweeter was as musically engaging and communicative as it was forgiving of recordings and partnering equipment; its proportions were pleasing and its price was approachable. Best of all, its tuneful, articulate bottom-end and easy, responsive drive characteristics made it an agile and rhythmically involving performer; just the ticket for getting maximum music out of a minimalist system.

Over the years the design has evolved, retaining and building on that innate sense of balance. Some of those changes have been imposed by circumstance, with suppliers failing, or failing to deliver. Others have been the result of experience and the lessons learnt from working with the more expensive models in the line. But all have offered the opportunity to reassess and improve on the original. Cabinet material – or more

importantly, the combination of cabinet materials – has developed over the years, while the crossover has seen considerable refinement, both in terms of topology and component choice. In fact, in mechanical terms, I'm not sure that this R25A has anything in common with the original Auditorium save the basic dimensions of the cabinet, the driver topology and the M8 spikes it stands on. But while most of those advances in performance have been steady but incremental in

nature – refinement rather than revolution – the latest R25A represents a step-change in musical articulation and communication. Those cabinet materials have changed, as has the height and construction of the stand. The mid-bass drivers were discontinued by the manufacturer, which meant that Living Voice had to have them re-tooled as a proprietary unit, taking the opportunity to refine certain aspects of the design. The tweeter has changed to a more recent model while the crossover has undergone a complete revision for the R25A, of which more later...

One obvious feature that the R25A does bring to the party is a paint finish option. It might have been the German market that demanded the rather swanky white paintwork of the

review pair, but there's no escaping the sharp, modern edge it brings to the speaker's appearance. You can opt for black or a range of standard or premium wood veneers, if you want something more traditional, but the white definitely does it for me.

When it comes to set up, the Auditoriums proved even more tolerant of positioning than their predecessors – testament to their low-frequency linearity. It's not that they require less care. Rather that they give you more positional options – meaning that they're much more likely to end up where you want them or be happier where you can actually place them. ▶▶



▶▶ The R25As are bi-wirable and benefit from being bi-wired – but not at the expense of cable quality. If you already have a decent set of single wires, some quality jumpers made from the same cable probably make more sense than swapping them out for something else simply because it offers the four wire option.

As with any speakers, getting them both the same height off the floor, with symmetrical attitude (especially rake angle) and stable placement on four equally loaded spikes will pay serious musical dividends. I prefer to use a minimal amount of BluTak to attach the plinth to the speaker: a *petit pois* sized ball placed half way along each top edge of the base element and then firmly pressed into place seems to deliver the right results. Substituting Track Audio M8 spikes (and footers if required) for the stock items will give a nice and very cost effective lift in performance. It cleans up the bass transients with a related gain in midrange clarity and focus – as well as making the adjustment of attitude and locking it in considerably easier, with its own set of performance benefits. Otherwise, beyond the normal care and attention to detail, the R25A is a joy to work with.

Stood amongst the competition in your average audio store, the R25A is going to look plain, even prosaic. No flashy, sculptural plastic mouldings or separate tweeter housings, no shouty graphics and no massive, visible spikes on awkward, ugly outriggers. But for all its understated, composed and self-contained appearance, it's music that really brings this speaker to life. Listen to the competition first and once you reach the Living Voice, the musical difference will shock you. Unforced, rhythmically and dynamically coherent, naturally engaging and subtly shaded, this is a speaker that disappears behind the performance, rather than

standing between you and it. Unobtrusive it is also unobstructive, with a sense of dynamic response, phrasing and musical flow that makes many speakers at even twice the price sound clumsy, mechanical and 'gated' – both in dynamic/rhythmic and expressive terms. It's this ability to step away from the process of reproduction, allowing the performers and the performance to breathe, that elevates the R25A above the crowd and out of the ordinary.

What you are hearing is not just this speaker's ability to get out of the way, to pass the music without

leaving audibly grubby fingerprints all over it, but to help the driving amplifier do the same. By fingerprints I'm not talking about the typical tonal aberrations dissected in such minute detail by so many reviews. At the end of the day, a violin is a violin, and you'll recognise it immediately as a violin, whether it is played in the Festival Hall, the Wigmore Hall or my front hall...



What I'm talking about is discontinuities. Those kinks or shifts in energy or pace, rhythm or timing that come with dynamic demands and changes in frequency: shifts that fracture the pattern of the music, the placement and amplitude of notes. In short, discontinuities that alter not only the notes the performers play, but the relationship between the performers themselves.

Those discontinuities come from energy being absorbed by the cabinet and released later at a separate, dominant frequency; they come from poorly designed crossovers and the uneven dispersion of different drivers where their outputs meet; they come from the inability of the amplifier to meet the changing power demands of the speaker with frequency. The beauty of the Auditorium is that it isn't just efficient, ▶▶

▶▶ it's an easy, non-reactive load and that makes all the difference in any system, let alone the low-powered systems in which this speaker is most likely to find itself. But best of all, that difference translates directly into musical performance and the ability of your speakers and system to capture the sense and intent of whatever recordings you play.

To really appreciate the R25A's astonishing agility and articulation, as well as just how musically important it is, there are few better places to start than a challenging piano recording. My weapon of choice in this instance is the (in)famous Martha Argerich/ Claudio Abbado/ BPO performance of Ravel's *Piano Concert in G Major* (MQA-UHQCD DGG UCCG-40086). Sonically impressive, it's a recording that leaves systems teetering on the brink of a-musicality, unable

to respond to its sudden dynamic and rhythmic shifts. I've always found the Ravel deeply reminiscent of its near contemporary, Gershwin's *An American In Paris*, but the organised chaos of its opening movement makes the Gershwin seem almost sedate. Navigating the jaunty, carefree spray of notes generated by the orchestral parts, the sudden shifts in pace and density between their vibrant energy and the more measured contributions of the emerging solo instrument, the switches of mood and tonal colour, requires considerable clarity and a sure grasp of musical pattern. It's all too easy for the sharply contrasting parts and

the sudden changes in tempo to reduce the piece to clashing, unstructured noise, yet where so many speakers struggle the R25As allow the parts to flow, maintaining the balance between piano and orchestra, left and right hands, capturing the inner workings of the piece and preserving the coherent, musical sense of the whole.

The overlapping and constantly shifting time

signatures that are so vibrant and exciting in live performance are enough to bring out most systems (and not a few performers) in hives. But the LivingVoice speakers don't just seem utterly unperturbed by the complexity of the task, it seems to actively energise them, filling the performance with purpose and direction, whether we are talking about the frenetic opening movement

or the reflective calm and sheer beauty of Argerich's playing in the second. These speakers do big, they do small, they do intimacy and they do impact – but most of all they do the transitions between those things. Argerich's explosive energy – and her ability to control it – should underpin the slower sections, creating that vital sense of anticipation, the impression of life and energy bubbling under the apparent calm, just waiting to thrust its way into view. With the R25As on the end of the system, in the first movement you just can't wait for that to happen. In the second you simply revel in the poised and measured playing. With the R25As on ▶▶



▶▶ the end of the system, it's the music rather than the amplifier that is in the driving seat, with the result that it's the music you hear, rather than the speakers or the system producing it.

The easy grace with which the R25A allows this music to burst forth, the ease with which it tracks the performers sudden shifts in pace or level, gliding from slow to fast, to sudden and back to slow without the slightest slurring or hesitation, speaks volumes about just how open this speaker is to input. It's ability to respond to changes in level or intensity, tonal palette or tempo is familiar from other high-efficiency systems – just not at this price. Comparing this latest Auditorium with earlier versions of the speaker helped to clarify what is going on here as well as the how and why. The R25A's extraordinary articulation is down to two things – at least when compared to its predecessors. The first, which actually pre-dates the R25A, is the improved mechanical performance of the mixed material cabinet. But as is so often the way with hi-fi, cleaning up the contribution of the enclosure, eliminating the smudging and timing errors induced by stored energy in the structure, served to reveal shortcomings in the crossover. The solution was a ground-up reassessment of the network, embracing everything from topology to component parts. The R25A's crossover boasts not just significantly improved parts and a re-voiced response (in part to accommodate a revised tweeter) it has a higher crossover point and for the first time, significant effort has gone into eliminating out-of-band artefacts.

This last factor is arguably the most significant, with evidence from other speaker ranges demonstrating just how destructive this supposedly inaudible output is in reality. The result is a more complex network, but that's more than compensated for by improvements in phase coherence, overall linearity and a less complex drive characteristic. The R25A isn't just a better, lower distortion transducer, it's easier to drive, making your amplifier's job that much easier and, in effect, making it a better amplifier too! By presenting an easier, less-reactive load, the speaker allows the amp to respond to dynamic and rhythmic demands more easily. That makes it easier for the amp and speaker to track the signal, better preserving its pattern and sense and producing a more natural, more expressive performance. Play the Argerich disc and you'll hear exactly what that

means. It's apparent in the shape and the tonal/ rhythmic contrasts of that chaotic first movement, but play the second movement and the delicacy, poise and pacing of the solo piano part really reveals the stability, confidence and balance between the left and right hands, the ability to support and sustain overlapping tempi, without clashes or confusion. In fact, once you've identified the R25A's temporal confidence, you can hear it on any and everything you play. You'll hear it in the natural diction of vocals and the placing and spacing of notes, the impetus that drives musical progress or the restraint that calms it.

Which brings me to the other quality that sets the R25A apart, not just from its immediate competition, but from most of the speakers out there. One of the things that contribute to the clarity with which the LivingVoice speaker reproduces the complex dynamic and rhythmic demands of the Ravel, is its natural sense of proportion. Speed stability in a turntable, or reducing jitter in a CD player, are fundamental but often under-appreciated aspects of performance. Not in the sense that people don't pay lip service to their importance, but in the way in which they live with or ignore their musical impact. When it comes to loudspeakers, that blind spot seems to be reserved for the very real significance of awkward shifts in their impedance. In theory, load tolerant amplifiers negate this problem: in practice, few amplifiers really are that load tolerant – and none that are likely to be used with a €5K loudspeaker. Which means in turn that output and energy levels, dynamic response, presence and impact are all going to vary with frequency.

The problem with that is pretty obvious – although our auditory system demonstrates a remarkable ability to compensate accordingly. But if we come at that problem from the other end for a second... If we abandon the (somewhat fanciful) notion of recreating 'a perfect facsimile of the original performance' then the task of an audio system is to capture and reproduce the sense (and intent) of that performance: In other words, to present the available information in a pattern (temporal, spatial and dynamic) that our ears and brain can recognise and interpret. The better the system, the less work our brain has to invest in the interpretation – the more it can invest in appreciation. What made the LivingVoice OBX RW4 system used ▶▶

R25A Loudspeaker

▶▶ in Munich so impressive was its ability to let listeners relax: and that was based entirely on the confidence and clarity with which it presented the music. Not only did that system cost a fraction of the price of many other systems at the show – systems that signally failed to match its relaxed musicality – it was running on a mere 8 Watts per channel! It's a graphic example of the crucial importance of the natural sense of scale and proportion that starts with an easy speaker load – and the destructive potential of the awkward impedance characteristics so common in other loudspeakers.

But when it comes to overall musical coherence, the R25A is simply more fluid, more natural and more engaging. Play the 60th Anniversary mono/stereo re-issue of Coltrane's *My Favorite Things* (Rhino RI 666923/603497842827 – Atlantic SD 1361) and from the familiar opening bars of the title track, the easy, musical flow that the R25A brings to the performance is immediately apparent. You hear it in the subtle shape that McCoy Tyner adds to each bar, his use of note weight to give the rhythm a little nudge, to bring impetus and



But what matters here is that the R25A is cut from exactly the same cloth as the OBX RW4. 'Step change' has become a common, even clichéd term when it comes to audio reviewing, so perhaps I should define the scale of that lift in performance as applied to the R25A. With OBX RW3s in-house, I am in a position to sit the two speakers next to each other. Yes, the OBX RW3 exhibits a richer and more refined tonal palette. It gives the impression of deeper, crisper bass and, a richer, natural warmth and finer harmonic textures.

direction to the structure which under-pin's Coltrane's convoluted and increasingly inventive lines. Swap from the stereo pressing to the mono disc and on the R25A, the increased sense of body, presence and substance locks step with that dynamic and temporal structure to add even greater shape and subtlety to the playing, carving an even more engaging groove. Switch to the OBX RW3 and you lose the graceful fluidity and inner balance that is such a part of this recording. Tyner begins to sound clumsy and awkward, Coltrane's lines become more angular and disjointed. ▶▶

▶▶ More importantly, the music no longer draws you in to its stream of consciousness.

Play vocals and the distinction between the two speakers becomes wider still, whether it's the characteristic metre and accents of Ian Dury or the more intimate delivery of Suzanne Vega on the live disc *An Evening Of New York Songs and Stories* (Cooking Vinyl COOKLP763). It's all about balance, shape and yes, proportion – the almost unconscious relationship between one word and the next, the way people weight their words to add emphasis and meaning to what they say or sing. The ability of the driving amp to get hold of and control the speaker's output, right across the bandwidth, is crucial to reproducing this expressive range. In turn, the resulting ability of the R25A to draw you into the music and the performance trumps the greater subtlety and resolution of the OBX RW3 – every time. And let's not forget that the RW3 is no slouch. It's long proved well able to look after itself when compared to the competition. But what I'm hearing here is an entry-level model that, on grounds of pure musical communication, betters the previous series flagship. THAT's a step-change in performance...

In many respects, the R25A's achievement is built on the advances made with previous models, the window those versions opened on various aspects of performance in turn creating the opportunity to build a better crossover. It should be no surprise that

speaker lines, like Focal and Wilson, have made similar generational advances as a result of improvements in cabinet construction and behaviour. But the R25A brings those benefits to the most popular loudspeaker format (the compact floor-stander) at the right price and with the right system matching and musical attributes. If the object of budget esoterica is to deliver the appeal and attractions of high-end audio on something approaching an entry-level budget, then the Auditorium R25A qualifies with honours. At a time when prices for audio equipment seem to be rising at an ear-popping rate, the emphasis amongst more approachable products definitely seems to have shifted from the 'budget' to the 'esoteric'. Living Voice's Auditorium series – and the R25A in particular – redresses that balance and in doing so, it reopens the very real possibility of serious musical enjoyment without spending car prices on the speakers or the system. Summing up an earlier review of this speaker, I concluded:

"Bargains don't come much more elegantly packaged or musically compelling than this – and make no mistake, the latest LivingVoice is a very serious bargain indeed. If you've got £6,000 to spend on speakers you need to hear these. If you've got £12,000 to spend on speakers, you still need to hear these – the Auditorium R25A really is that good."

That conclusion still stands. 

R25A Loudspeaker

Type:	Two-way offset D'Appolito design with rear reflex loading
Driver Complement:	1x Scanspeak 26mm soft-dome tweeter 2x Scanspeak built, proprietary LV 170mm paper-cone bass/mid
Bandwidth:	35Hz – 22.5kHz ±3dB
Sensitivity:	94dB
Impedance:	6 Ohms, non-reactive

Dimensions (WxHxD): 215 x 1170 x 270mm
(incl. plinth)

Weight: 19kg ea.

Price:
Standard Finishes - Cherry, Maple,
Walnut, Rosenut £6,050
Flat white and Matt Black
£6,355

Manufacturer:

LivingVoice
Long Eaton, Derbyshire, UK
Tel. +44 (0) 115 9733222
Net. www.livingvoice.co.uk