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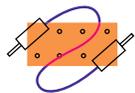
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# Vienna Acoustics Schönberg Speaker System

Up against the wall—these flat, sassy Viennese beauties prove that it's not such a bad place to be after all.

by Darryl Wilkinson

- A. The tiny Berg sounds rich and full, and it blends well with the rest of the system.**
- B. The gorgeous Schönberg measures 41.3 inches tall but only 3.5 deep.**
- C. You can mount the Webern vertically or horizontally. In its horizontal orientation, it makes a fine center channel.**

Consider the plasma TV: Sleek, slender, and sophisticated, it's quite possibly the most interior-decorator-friendly consumer electronics product ever created. Now consider the typical loudspeaker. In addition to being bulky, boxy, and traditionally butt-ugly, for the best sound, you have to place it far enough out into your room that there's no way to disguise the fact that there's a big, ugly speaker standing there.

To be fair, well before plasma TVs became a reality, designers were creating speakers that broke from the tried-and-true bulky-box mold. However, these speakers often suffered from extreme expense or poor sound quality (often both). In the last few years, however, many speaker manufacturers have sensed a trend in the wild popularity of thin TVs and have discovered the importance of combining a thin aesthetic with good sound quality.

Not slaves to the market's changing whims, Vienna Acoustics has always paid as

much attention to their loudspeakers' appearance as they do to their sound. Until recently, though, I would've referred to their speakers' general look as "refined traditional." That's not a knock. They make extensive use of gorgeous woods and beautiful finishes in finely crafted cabinets with softly rounded edges. Still, even the subtly beautiful Waltz—a recent creation designed to be wall-mounted—retains elements of the traditional box heritage.

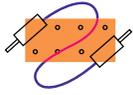
The Schönberg Series, on the other hand, bears a design that's both radical and refreshing. It's a revolutionary departure for Vienna Acoustics—and for most of the speaker industry. The Schönberg looks so different from what you'd expect (and yet so natural) that it's difficult to describe. Other than small sections at the top and bottom, the speaker has no parallel surfaces.

Instead of the typical box, imagine a wide, shallow, elliptical cylinder made out of bead-blasted, anodized aluminum with a 2-inch gap on the front just before the cylinder bends

sharply back behind itself. Then suspend a tweeter in this free-air area and mount a woofer or two on the elliptical cabinet's gently sloping front side. Unless you have a really good imagination or you're fully up to date on geometry, this description doesn't really do justice to this speaker's unusual beauty. Save yourself some mental gymnastics and look at the photos.

Three models comprise the Schönberg line: the Berg, the Webern, and the Schönberg. In keeping with Vienna Acoustics' tradition of christening speakers after homegrown musical heroes, the names are borrowed from three gents who helped revolutionize classical music in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The tallest, the Schönberg, measures 41.3 inches tall but only 10.5 inches wide and a mere 3.5 inches deep. You read that correctly—a floorstanding speaker that's 3.5 inches deep. The driver array consists of two 6-inch midbass drivers and a single 1-inch hand-coated silk-dome tweeter. The tweeter, protected by a non-removable metal grille, is mechanically decoupled from the main cabinet and sits off to the side of the upper midbass driver in the open area between the cabinet's two walls. Since there's so much open area around it, the tweeter is safe from cabinet reflections that can muck up the sound. (All three models utilize the same tweeter and isolated-mounting arrangement.) The Schönberg's top midbass driver reproduces the full extent of the midrange and bass,





GEAR GUIDE

# Vienna Acoustics Schönberg Speaker System

while the lower driver tapers off at the higher frequencies. Each midbass driver has its own chamber and port. A four-point mounting stand with adjustable spikes keeps the speaker solid and stable on a carpeted floor.

The Webern looks like a shorter version of the Schönberg (just under 20 inches tall but still 10.5 inches wide and 3.5 inches deep). The two midbass drivers are closer together, however, and the tweeter is mounted halfway down the cabinet's side between the midbass drivers. Unlike the

Schönberg, the Webern has a sealed cabinet, and both midbass drivers reproduce the same frequency range.

The bookshelf-sized Berg follows the same form factor as the Schönberg and Webern. It's a tad over 8 inches tall, 10.5 wide, and 3.5 deep, and it incorporates a single 6-inch midbass driver (also in a sealed cabinet) with the tweeter mounted midway down the cabinet's side.

The Schönberg comes in mirror-imaged pairs that stand vertically on the floor, or you can mount them on the wall with a soon-to-be-available wall bracket. The Webern's and Berg's driver alignment allows you to use them either horizontally or vertically. Each has a uniquely designed set of aluminum end-cap pieces that are held in place with magnets. To set the speaker on a bookshelf

(vertically with the optional table stand; a horizontal-mount table stand will be available later this year), you simply pop out one of the flat end caps and replace it with the included predrilled end cap before you attach the stand. To use the optional wall mounts, you pop out both end caps and replace them with end caps that sport three evenly spaced, shallow depressions. Depending on how you want to angle the speaker, you tighten two screws on opposite sides of the wall brackets into the appropriate depressions on the end caps. The mounting system is quite ingenious and provides a respectable range of mounting angles, but it's not something you should install without assistance. Unless you have three hands, holding a 17-pound Webern in place while you attempt to tighten the screws on the mount is darn near impossible—especially if you don't want to risk scratching the beautiful finish. Once they're in place, however, the mounts are quite solid and unobtrusive.

The big Schönbergs are designed to be used anywhere from 0 to 15 inches from the wall. That's right. Not only are they super-thin as far as speakers go, but—even 8 or 9 inches out from the wall, as they were in my case—they take up less total floor space than most floorstanding speakers would even if you slammed them

smack up against the wall. In this system, since I mounted a Webern horizontally on the wall for the center channel and mounted a pair of Bergs vertically on the

wall for the surrounds, just about the only way you could get less obtrusive would be to use in-wall speakers (but these speakers have so much more class than any in-wall).

I can excuse you for jumping to the seemingly obvious conclusion that these speakers must severely lack bass response. After all, such small, shallow cabinets can't possibly produce respectable bass, can they? Indeed, they can.

Peter Gansterer, Vienna

Acoustics' designer, is very good at coaxing as much bass as possible out of a small cabinet. Of course, close proximity to the wall helps, but there's much more to it than that. Instead of the thick, heavily braced front baffle that most of Vienna Acoustics' speakers sport, the Schönberg Series relies on a combination of aluminum, MDF, and a special type of rubber to create an amazingly nonresonant cabinet with the smallest exterior size and the greatest internal volume. Each of the floorstanding Schönberg's midbass drivers is isolated in its own chamber with its own very rigid port tube. Nothing is left to chance in these speakers—even the port tubes don't flex or vibrate. Vienna Acoustics designed each model's midbass drivers in tandem with its crossovers in order to generate bass that's both plentiful and of high quality.

As with most speakers, to create a truly convincing and authoritative home theater, you need a subwoofer. The guys at



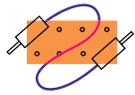
**D. The Schönberg's silver-plated binding posts rest in the border between the speaker's two aluminum walls.**

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Finely crafted fit and finish
- Unusually thin
- Designed for use near or on a wall

### Vienna Acoustics Schönberg Speaker System





GEAR GUIDE

# Vienna Acoustics Schönberg Speaker System

Sumiko Audio, Vienna Acoustics' U.S. distributor, were kind enough to let me use a REL Strata III subwoofer (\$1,295) for the last several months. While the Schönbergs were no slouches in the bass region, the Strata III provided the perfect foundation of deep bottom-end bass that only a true subwoofer can achieve.

The Schönbergs' most attractive aspect is their unfettered ability to get out of the way, in terms of both space and sonic character. The virtually baffle-free tweeter is wonderfully delicate and sweetly articulate; the longer you listen, the more open and revealing it becomes. The bass is solidly clean and tight—not tubby, as you might expect from a speaker that you place on or near a wall—and the midrange was equally smooth and natural.

Several times, I thought I'd sample a track or two off of a disc and then found myself listening to the entire disc. Take SAVAE's *Ancient Echoes*, a standard CD of ancient music from the Holy Land, which includes some Essene chants from the Dead Sea Scrolls accompanied by music played on modern reproductions of first-century instruments. Now that's music you don't find in many disc collections. It's the kind of stuff Herod might have told his kids to turn down. One exceptional track is a version of the Lord's Prayer in Aramaic, sung by a male and then followed by a female voice, both accompanied by chanting and period instruments. The Schönbergs created an expansive space in which the solo vocal appeared in front of a wide arc of chanting voices, surrounded by

sharply defined instruments. Another disc I listened to more than I intended was Ani DiFranco's *Evolve*. I can't say that I liked the music, but I became enamored of the way the Schönbergs brought DiFranco's stylistic voice and guitar into the room.

Multichannel music multiplied the experience. Eric Clapton's *One More Car One More Rider* DVD was quite spectacular no matter which channel carried the vocals or guitars (although I had to turn off the TV to avoid those excruciating images of aging baby boomers bouncing in the audience). The new multichannel SACD release of Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon* (even though I swore I'd never buy yet another copy) was equally impressive from all channels. The tiny Bergs sounded rich and full in the surround positions. In fact, all of the speakers blended amazingly well as the soundfield shifted and danced around the room.

The system was no slouch at movie sound reproduction, either. *U-571*'s submarine acoustics were as convincing as the opening sequence of *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* was engaging. The system may actually be at its best with movies that intend to scare a bowel movement or two out of you, though. The Schönbergs are so light on their acoustic feet that, with movies like *The Others* or *The Haunting*, they subtly draw you in bit by bit, encouraging you to hear every twig snap or floorboard creak until it's too late. Then they take you from comfortably relaxed to peeing in your pants in a heartbeat.

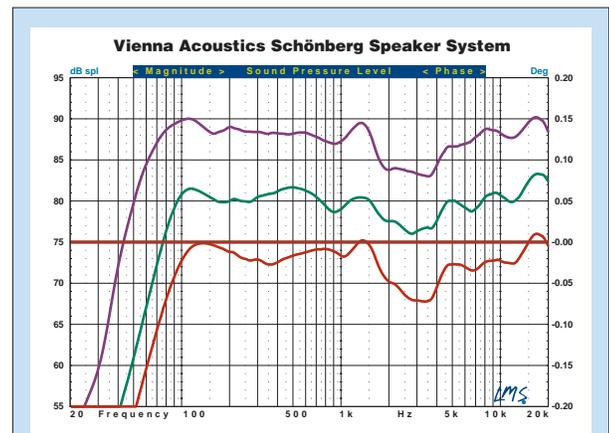
If you're a fan of slam-dancing or you're the type of person who likes to watch his beer bottle

vibrate across the top of his speakers, the Vienna Acoustics Schönberg system probably isn't for you. On the other hand, if you match your appreciation of music

<b>Schönberg Tower Speaker</b>	<b>\$2,500/pair</b>
<b>Webern Center-Channel Speaker</b>	<b>\$795</b>
<b>Berg Bookshelf Speaker</b>	<b>\$500</b>

Vienna Acoustics  
(510) 843-4500  
[www.vienna-acoustics.com](http://www.vienna-acoustics.com)  
Dealer Locator Code VIE

and movies with a desire for a more-livable space in which to coexist with your home theater, the Schönbergs are what you've been waiting for, even if you don't have a plasma TV. 📺



### HT Labs Measures: Vienna Acoustics Schönberg Speaker System

This graph shows the quasi-anechoic (employing close-miking of all woofers) frequency response of the Schönberg L/R (purple trace), Webern center channel (green trace), and Berg surround (red trace). All passive loudspeakers were measured at a distance of 1 meter with a 2.83-volt input and scaled for display purposes.

The Schönberg's listening-window response (a five-point average of axial and +/-15-degree horizontal and vertical responses) measures +1.74/-4.75 decibels from 200 hertz to 10 kilohertz. The -3dB point is at 61 Hz, and the -6dB point is at 53 Hz. Impedance reaches a minimum of 3.57 ohms at 49 Hz and a phase angle of -83.81 degrees at 36 Hz. Sensitivity averages 87.5 dB from 500 Hz to 2 kHz.

The Webern's listening-window response measures +1.65/-4.00 dB from 200 Hz to 10 kHz. An average of axial and +/-15-degree horizontal responses measures +1.45/-5.01 dB from 200 Hz to 10 kHz. The -3dB point is at 82 Hz, and the -6dB point is at 74 Hz. Impedance reaches a minimum of 3.60 ohms at 81 Hz and a phase angle of -51.61 degrees at 5.5 kHz. Sensitivity averages 88 dB from 500 Hz to 2 kHz.

The Berg's listening-window response measures +1.73/-5.71 dB from 200 Hz to 10 kHz. The -3dB point is at 89 Hz, and the -6dB point is at 78 Hz. Impedance reaches a minimum of 3.38 ohms at 76 Hz and a phase angle of -45.22 degrees at 4.9 kHz. Sensitivity averages 85.5 dB from 500 Hz to 2 kHz.—AJ

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