

A Fitting Tribute to the Last of the Romantics

Vienna Acoustics Mahler Speakers

BY MYLES B. ASTOR

Why would an Austrian high-end audio company with speakers honoring the memory of Beethoven, Bach, Haydn and Mozart, name their statement product after Mahler? Is it the Viennese connection? Milton Cross and David Ewen give the first clue to the relationship between Gustav Mahler, the composer and Mahler, the speakers. In their seminal work, *The Milton Cross New Encyclopedia of the Great Composers and Their Music*, the duo describe Mahler as an “uncompromising artist with the highest ideals—as a composer as well as conductor.” Further insights into the mysterious link and parallels between the person and the inanimate will become much clearer, the more you know more about Mahler and the sound of this phenomenal new state-of-the-art speaker.

A SPEAKER FOR LARGE SCALE MUSIC

Gustav Mahler's orchestral pieces are renowned for their sheer size and magnitude. His *Symphony #8*, otherwise known as the “Symphony of a Thousand,” is a mammoth work requiring the full forces of two mixed choruses, a boy's choir, eight solo voices and a huge orchestra—and the Mahler speakers follow in his footsteps. Like Mahler's *Symphony #8*, the speakers exhibit a spaciousness that engulfs the listener. The tight, solid bass completely fills the room—but unlike other speakers, the low end isn't boomy or ill defined.

Conrad-johnson's ART preamplifier serves to even better illustrate the Mahler's utterly unrestricted soundstage width. The ART preamplifier inverts absolute phase, and every so often I slip up when placing a new amplifier into the system, forgetting whether the positive and negative leads are reversed at the speaker or amplifier end. A moment is all that is needed to ascertain that the twenty-foot wide soundstage indicates the speakers are out-of-phase. Well, when the Mahlers were installed, that old twenty-foot wide soundstage cropped up again—only this time the phase was correct. Of the many speakers that have passed through the system, and the list

includes Wilsons, Ensembles, Alons and Aerials, none even remotely approaches the realistic holographic soundstage thrown by the Mahlers.

The Mahler's ability to focus instruments between the speakers is noteworthy but not the entire story. They do the unheard of: they float a holographic image of the performer—all the way out to the furthest edges and deepest recesses of the soundstage. Take Roger Waters' *Amused to Death* (Columbia CK47127). For the very first time, there are groups of individuals, not just a crowd, speaking at the outside edges of the stage.

Then there's the matter of seating perspective. The Mahlers are one of the few speakers whose listening perspective really changes with the recording and the type of music. The soundstage of most speakers begins either even with or in back of the speaker. With the Mahlers, chamber music, which is usually closely miked, was presented in a more up-front manner. Full-scale orchestral works such as the *Power of the Orchestra* (RCA VCS 2659) were set in back of the speakers. Good rock recordings showed a greater sense of variation in placement and depth of instruments than orchestral music. No matter what type of music was on the table or transport, the

speakers just completely disappeared within the sound field.

Large speaker/panel lovers may quibble over the Mahler's image height (tilting the speaker back addresses this problem somewhat). Image height isn't quite up to the standards set by the best of line sources—but the speakers never give the impression of a balcony seat or Lilliputian orchestra. The Mahlers project, when the occasion calls for it, an image a good foot or so above the cabinet; many will not miss the image height save when listening to vocalists or capturing the size of a close miked jazz double bass.

THE ROMANTIC PERIOD

Mahler was known as the last of the great Romantic composers. Their music reflected a rebellion as Cross and Ewen note, “against intellectual formalistic classical tradition and return to simplicity and naturalism.” Among the many contribution of the Romantic composers, and Mahler was no exception, was the innovative use of orchestral color or timbre.

Timbre also defines the sonic signature of many pieces of high-end audio gear. Designing a neutral speaker is no easy task given the wide variety of musical instruments and the frequency range, 20 Hz to 20 kHz that needs to be covered. Every speaker that has resided here has displayed a readily and easily identifiable sonic signature (colored, resolution challenged, analytical, romantic, bright, dark, detailed, etc.).

Pegging the Mahler's true character turned out to be easier said than done—for they're by far the most neutral and coherent speaker that I've encountered in a long, long time. Every time it seemed that the speakers had finally revealed their true colors, I'd switch components or music source—and the speaker instantly revealed the character of the component. For the record: in the course of the review, four different amplifiers (cj Premier 12, Mark Levinson N° 336, Linn Klimax and Audio Aero Capitole), several speaker cables (most notably the Cardas Neutral Reference—an outstanding performer and Transparent Audio Reference XL), two interconnects (Nordost Quattro Fil and Transparent Audio Reference XL) and three digital front ends (Sony SCD-1, Metronome 24/96 T10 DAC/T20 Transport and Altis Audio 24/96 Reference DAC/CDT-3 transport with the Cal Audio

CL-20 used as a DVD-audio transport), and my normal VPI TNT Mk. IV analog rig were put to good use.

First, there was a period when I thought the Mahlers were a touch dry. That was followed by a time when I thought they were slightly analytical. Then, I thought there was a slight upper midrange illumination. To test the latter observation, I placed that classic blockbuster, *The Power of the Orchestra*, on the analog front end. If there were any aberrations in this area, the strings would most certainly sound bright. Wrong again. Not only weren't the strings bright, but they were oh-so rosiny. Each musician and row was faithfully delineated. The upper midrange region, the bane of all speakers (either it's too dark or bright) was near spot on with the Mahlers. I'm still searching for the proper description since the speaker's character is so totally dominated by the sound of the upstream equipment. If anything, the Mahlers are just ever so slightly cool sounding.

Many will find musical nirvana in the speaker's ultra-neutral upper bass through upper midrange region. Vocalists have a naturalness, a sense of ease and smoothness. Instruments sound extremely coherent and open-aided in large part by a single driver reproducing the region from 70 to 4,000 Hz. The other secret to the Mahler's ultra-neutral midrange is its proper balance between the bass and midrange drivers. All too often dynamic speakers, because of an imbalance in the amount of air moved by the bass drivers relative to the midrange and tweeter drivers, come across as being too dark, fuzzy or veiled. The Mahler's designer's attention to the speaker's low frequencies, especially the crossover point, gives the midrange a phenomenal sense of transparency and clarity.

Unlike an electrostatic, the Mahler's musical purity encompasses both ends of the frequency spectrum. Cymbals such as on *Favorite Chinese Instrumentals* (FIM XRCD 019) sound metallic and there's the feeling of air trapped in the space between cymbals. Not only do you feel the explosive strike but also the whoosh of the air leading up to the cymbal clash.

That said, some would note that the Mahlers don't move the quantity of air that you'll get from a big panel speaker. Electrostatic lovers will observe a slight loss of incisiveness on the leading edge of the waveform. But the Mahlers are the

first dynamic speaker whose strengths truly offset the tradeoffs.

MARK OF A TRUE ROMANTIC

Cross and Ewen describe Mahler's music as complex, yet clear and full of musical imagery. Mahler, the speaker, possesses a degree of transparency, clarity and resolution that is rarely found at any price point. This transparency is even more remarkable in light of the speaker's exceptional low frequencies—the bane of transparency if improperly executed. This speaker transcends transparency and opens a new window upon quietness. There is a clarity and transparency even when the speakers are even at rest. Dead silence. An absence of distortions that veil intranote silence. A sense of openness and clarity for voices or instruments regardless of stage position. Perhaps we're really hearing for the first time what Keith Johnson meant when he

talked about the settling time of speakers and electronics.

As good as the Mahler's transparency is, its low-level resolution is simply astounding. Just when I thought I'd retrieved everything there was to hear on Gene Ammons' *nice an' cool* (Analog Productions APJ 038) or Muddy Waters' *Folk Singer* (MFSL 1-201), the Mahler showed up and revealed the softest, low level reverb added to the sax or voice. Reaching this level of transparency, resolution and clarity wouldn't have been possible without three products: the MOBIE (see review in this issue), Optrix CD cleaning fluid (see upcoming review in the Winter issue) and Nordost's Quattro Fil interconnects. Kudos also goes out to Sony's new SCD-1 DSD player.

DIVINE INSPIRATION?

Mahler was a complex individual as Freud can attest. Many of his pieces dealt with the



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forces of nature. His symphonies encompass tremendous ranges of musical dynamics—and the speaker certainly does Mahler justice here. His namesake has tremendous dynamic capabilities, especially in the low frequencies and an ability to reach dynamic peaks without distorting. More than one person jumped when confronted with the impact and tightness of the “big” drums at the beginning of track one of *The Sound of Rhythm* disc (Top Music TMCD 1026). The Conrad-Johnson Premier 12s ran out of steam long before the Moussorgsky’s “Pictures at an Exhibition” from *The Power of the Orchestra* reached its final climax.

THE CODA

While the Mahlers don’t quite have the ultimate speed of an electrostatic or move the air and possess the image height of a large panel speaker, they significantly narrow the gap between the two technologies. Couple that to the speaker’s incredible sense of transparency, dynamics, neutrality, tonality and soundstaging and we have an elite design that acquits itself well against the very best—and that list includes Martin-Logan Statements, Magnepan MG20s, Verity Audio Parsifals, MBL 101Ds and JM Labs Grande Utopias. The Mahler’s rather conservative sensitivity rating (it’s actually closer to 96 dB) and benign load speaks well for its use with smaller wattage amplifiers, even those of SET variety.

The baton has been passed down from composer to speaker! Vienna Acoustics’ Mahlers are an uncompromising, world-class speaker design that sets benchmarks for tonality, transparency and soundstaging. ©

► **Vienna Acoustics Mahler Speakers**, Distributed by Sumiko, 2431 Fifth St., Berkeley, CA 94710. Tel.: (510) 843-4500. Fax: (510) 843-7120. Designer: Peter Gansterer. Type of speaker: 3-way, dynamic, employing integrated, dual ported subwoofers Non-biwireable. Drivers, Bass: 2-10 inch Eton honeycomb cone; midrange: 2-7 inch Scan Speak carbon fiber-filled, air-dried paper cone; tweeter: 1.2 inch Scan Speak silicone-layered, silk dome. Frequency response: 25 Hz to 25,000 kHz. Crossover points: 70 Hz, 4 kHz. Sensitivity: 90 dB. Impedance: 6 ohms (nominal)/4.2 ohms (minimal). Recommended minimum power: 50 watts. Weight: 150 lbs each. Size: 8.6 x 51.2 x 18.3 inches. Price: \$9,800.

TECHNICAL HIGHLIGHTS

Peter Gansterer’s first priority in designing the Mahlers is to no one’s surprise the midrange. To realize his vision, Gansterer began with a pair of the “classic,” 7-inch Scan Speak drivers, world renowned for their tonality, transparency and effortless quality. Much of the driver’s magic according to Gansterer derives from the special ribbed, hand-thrown paper cone that is treated with a number of high tech fibers including Kevlar and carbon. Only one of the two 7-inchers runs from 70 Hz to 4 kHz; the other driver’s frequency response tapers off with increasing frequency, giving the speaker more fullness in the upper bass yet avoiding beaming and lobing effects higher up. The side firing woofers allowed Gansterer to use a narrow front baffle to minimize diffractive effects. To provide better low frequency control, each driver fires into individually sealed “sub” cabinets ala KEF.

Lower down, Gansterer crosses over to two 10-inch ultra-rigid and light Eton carbon fiber honeycomb drivers. The Eton drivers are 70 times more rigid and 30% lighter than comparable drivers. Each bass driver fires into a complicated “sub-cabinet” and is rear ported. The cabinet makes extensive use of non-parallel walls and extensive bracing; front and rear panels are 2.5 inches thick and each veneer panel is matched and hand selected. A two-position toggle switch on the back of the speaker provides for a flat or +2 dB frequency output.

Up top, the Mahlers cross over from the midrange drivers to a modified Scan Speak D-29 1.2-inch silk dome tweeter at approximately 4 kHz (using a true first order, 6 dB/octave slope). Only the highest-grade parts are used in the crossover including hand built German MKP Select capacitors. A second toggle switch found on the back of the speaker adjusts the frequency response of the tweeter for flat output or a gentle rolling off of the upper octaves (0.6 dB/octave above 6 kHz). In my room, both switches were set to the flat response.

One special aspect of the speaker’s design is the decoupling of the tweeter from the speaker cabinet. According to John Hunter of Sumiko, “I had felt that KEF’s approach in the 80’s of decoupling the bass units was precisely backwards. That is, we want to couple the bass drivers, in as direct a manner as possible to allow their energy to pass through into the cabinet and be dissipated through the mass and density of the cabinet/floor coupling away from the woofers. After some experimentation, we decided to use silicone gel injected into the cabinet recess to decouple the tweeter from the cabinet—and attain a new level of upper octave purity!”

SETTING THEM UP

Positioning the Mahlers is fairly easy; it is nevertheless worth touching upon the two most commonly accepted methods of speaker positioning. One school believes that the speakers should be widely spaced and severely angled-in so that the soundfield converges “behind” the listening position; the other school situates the speakers closer together and slightly toed-in.

I’ve found the latter solution works best in my room. To get the correct intra-speaker distance, I primarily listen for two characteristics (the distance from the rear wall seems relatively constant for speakers in my room): transparency vs. centerfill. I begin with the speakers 4 to 5 feet apart and separate them until the sound becomes more transparent. A little more adjusting to optimize transparency followed by toeing-in for proper center fill completes the job.

The tiptoes sent with the Mahlers proved more problematic: they weren’t tall enough to penetrate carpeting (in the end, I used three Mod-Squad tiptoes under the speaker). I’d like to see the speakers sent with screw-in, lock down type tiptoes so the speakers can be angled for optimal soundstage height, yet ensuring rigidity.