



"Here Be Monsters..."

The Vienna Acoustics Mozart Infinity:
the audio system of the future - now?

by Roy Gregory



I have seen the future! It's shiny white and a little over three feet tall...

If the Mozart Infinity speakers currently stood in my front room were finished in piano black instead, I'd probably be feeling like those astronauts confronted by the obelisk in *2001* ... except that, while the shock is nearly as great, the sonic experience is a whole lot more musical. Okay, so step changes in the audio industry aren't as earth shaking as they used to be, but in market terms, the impact of this visually unassuming little speaker from Vienna could and should be genuinely seismic.

For years, companies have been chasing the Holy Grail of hi-fi, the compact system that offers style and convenience without compromising performance. You could argue that it started with the original Bose Wave Radio and has graduated by stages (if not in terms of actual musical performance) through B&O, Sonos and the Devialet Phantom. Despite the scale of the investment – not to mention the marketing spend – from those major players, who'd have thought that the first company to really nail the solution would be a small, specialist (and extremely traditional) loudspeaker manufacturer from Austria? But then Vienna does have a history of hosting musical revolutions...

So first, a little background, just to set the scene.

Vienna Acoustics (the company in question) has a long history of and a well-deserved reputation for crafting beautifully finished speakers that offer exceptional material and musical value for money. Outwardly conservative (with an emphasis on the 'small c')

the products have always followed their own distinct and carefully considered set of design priorities, resulting in speakers that trade lower efficiency for wider bandwidth (the exact opposite of the dominant market trend), that emphasise integration along with tonal and harmonic accuracy in place of an immediately impressive balance. Despite the beautifully finished cabinets, much of what made the Vienna speakers special was tucked away inside. An almost obsessive attention to detail resulted in carefully braced and damped cabinets and exactly balanced crossovers, factors that contributed directly and mightily to the speakers' un-intrusive and engaging musical performance. But this isn't a company that simply

follows the herd. Just how independent their thinking really is has only just become (shockingly) apparent.

The times they are a changing and slowly but surely, Vienna's (previously, assiduously concealed) light has been spilling out from under their bushel. First evidence arrived in the in the shape of the supremely practical outrigger feet that now grace all of their floorstanding cabinets. That might not sound particularly impressive, except that speakers with the Viennas' extended bottom end really, really benefit from precise adjustment of height and attitude – and few of the other outrigger systems on the market (irrespective of price) are engineered as well or are nearly as practical as the VA offering. Those substantial spikes make a very real ▶▶



► contribution to the speakers' set up and as a result, the system's sound.

More recently, we saw the introduction of the clever (and wonderfully natural sounding) Composite Cone drivers. These used a mixed material construction to combine a flat diaphragm with a large, inverted central dome – to considerable musical effect. Forget pleated paper lamination, 'deep' ceramics and nano particles, here were drivers that were as unique as they were impressive as they were astonishingly cost-effective. Hyperbole? The Beethoven Concert Grand is a surprisingly large speaker for its €12K price-tag. What's more surprising is that each pair contains a total of six Composite Cone bass drivers and two Composite Cone midrange units. This is value engineering in every sense of those two words.

But as impressive as those achievements are, they are as nothing when compared to the significance of Vienna's latest (and quite possibly, greatest) creation – the Mozart Infinity, a product that is, despite appearances, more than just a speaker system. It's actually a complete, neat and extremely accomplished *AUDIO* system!

Mozart by name – Mozart by nature...

On paper, the recipe for success should be simple: build an active speaker, add a streaming front end and DSP crossover and away you go. Except for all the countless companies who've tried it, few if any have succeeded. Perhaps the earliest and most ambitious attempt was the Meridian DSP5000. Since then, many have tried and most have failed, perhaps the most high-profile disaster arriving in the vaguely aquatic shape of Devialet's Phantom, a product that's just way too loud, in every possible way, from the stridently preposterous marketing to the nauseating sound quality – generally demonstrated at gut-churning levels. The goal of a simple, versatile and domestically acceptable sound system that actually manages to sound respectable too has, for way too long proved well out of reach. Except that Vienna Acoustics haven't just hit a home-run, in the case of the Mozart Infinity, they've knocked it clear out of the park. Perhaps unsurprisingly, they've done so by choosing a distinctive and distinctly different approach.

Mozart has long been the moniker for the company's smallest floorstander, evolving through multiple iterations while retaining the same essential size, shape and attractive proportions. Standing 39" tall, a little over 6" wide and a little under 12" deep, it's housed in a classically slim cabinet, small enough to fit into any room, large enough to generate satisfying bass depth and weight. Each cabinet houses a pair of the company's flat diaphragm, composite cone



drivers and a large diameter ScanSpeak-sourced, silk-dome tweeter, in a two-and-a-half way, reflex loaded topology. The Infinity model takes the Mozart and adds all the bits and pieces necessary to make it into an all-singing, all-dancing, two-box, 'source-plus' system. But the secret of its success lies in the bits chosen and (especially) the way in which they've been pieced together. 'No compromise' might seem like a strange phrase to use about a €12,490 (inc 20% sales tax) audio system, but the reason the Mozart Infinity works where the competition simply doesn't lies in the fact that VA designer Peter Gansterer was simply not prepared to ►►



►► dilute the essential musical integrity of the passive Mozart. That mandated an almost obsessive search for electronic elements that didn't just sound right but were consistent enough in quality and stable enough in use to offer genuinely deliverable performance.

Wireless connectivity was developed over a four-year period with Stream Unlimited and is paired with a 125 W/ Ch Hypex stereo amplifier. Bandwidth extends down to 30Hz with the help of a little light-touch DSP. The UPnP streaming solution is Roon-ready and accepts all of the popular services, with a data rate up to 384kHz/24bit and you also get HDMI, analogue (RCA and balanced XLR) and digital (RCA and Toslink) inputs. Wireless connectivity extends to Airplay, internet radio and podcasts.

Only one speaker is powered and both speakers employ a passive crossover – a VA speciality and key to the sense of musical coherence their designs have always enjoyed. So technically, the Mozart Infinity isn't an active speaker at all, as the two-and-a-half way filters are conventional, subtractive designs. Of course, with only one powered cabinet, you will need to connect it to the second enclosure using a speaker

cable, but before you throw up your hands in horror; that's just substituting one (speaker) cable for another (power cable). That might seem like a practical compromise in terms of absolute flexibility, but the gains in musical performance made it a mandatory choice as far as VA was concerned, while running a single speaker wire sure beats having to chase in the cables for a new AC outlet because there doesn't happen to be one within reach of where the second speaker needs to stand. In addition, the powered speaker can be designated for left or right channel use,



further easing the issues of connecting to existing AC outlets and overall system placement.

But perhaps most important of all is the least obvious aspect/advantage of using a single powered speaker: Locating the digital electronics in a single package, rather than trying to distribute and synchronise digital signals, makes life in the digital domain significantly easier, as well as co-locating physical media sources, or hooking up the TV and X-box. And before that causes you to throw up your hands in horror (again!) let's just remember who the target ►►

►► audience for this product is... Naturally, the whole system runs from an iOS/Android App although unusually, this one is simple, intuitive and actually works! Alternatively, you can access basic functions with any generic Bluetooth remote (VA don't supply one, allowing you to choose your own).

Take a look at the Mozart Infinity's specs and it rings a lot of my personal alarm bells. Yes, it offers analogue inputs and even a coaxial S/PDIF, but it is clearly intended primarily for use with streamed sources. It runs a digital amplifier (which is built into a speaker cabinet) and includes DSP 'tone controls' for bass, treble, loudness and parametric equalisation. But sit down and listen to it and all those objections simply evaporate. It also offers input sensitivity adjustments for both digital and analogue sources and a setting for maximum output level.

Enough already!
I could spend an awful lot of time on a nuts and bolts description of every facility and input option that the Mozart Infinity offers. I could go into detail about how those various functions are executed.

I could endlessly compare the relative merits of streamed as opposed to optical digital media. It's easy (and safer) to simply look at the comprehensive specs on the Vienna Acoustics website (<https://www.vienna-acoustics.com/speakers/mozart-infinity/>). For me to simply trot out those specs would be tantamount to missing the whole point of this product. The Mozart Infinity sings. It doesn't just play music; it plays great music! This is a genuinely engaging, sit back and be entertained, honest-to-God high-fidelity audio system – and I love it!

The first and arguably the most significant thing about the Mozart Infinity is its naturally engaging and musically satisfying nature. It's a quality that has been fully apparent throughout the review, but perhaps the most impressive demonstration dates back to the speakers' launch at

the Munich show. Set up in a(n improbably) large, airy and well-lit space, they delivered a relaxed and relaxing performance, whatever was played. Any show generates a small number of must hear products and as soon as I heard the Infinities they shot straight to the top of that short (and generally extremely expensive) list. As a result I found myself continually dragging friends and acquaintances round to the VA room where, reluctant or not, they were soon seduced. But in one sense that

wasn't what really impressed. With repeated visits, I got to follow a lot of people into that room and, without exception, as they stepped through the door you could SEE them visibly relax: their shoulders dropped as they let out a long breath and the hassles and irritations of a crowded and often sonically challenging show just fell away. That might seem like a

strange observation, but not only was it so obvious that I started pointing it out to the people accompanying me, I've never, ever seen this happen before.

Living with the Mozart Infinities is as

easy and pleasurable as that suggests. Easy to install, the speakers sound good from the get go, but a bit of attention paid to positioning and set up (and in difficult situations, their own DSP settings) will elevate the performance significantly. The review pair were fitted with VA's excellent out-riggers and spikes, which made attitude adjustments simplicity itself. You can read more about those here - <https://gy8.eu/blog/installation-notes-5/>.

As a bare minimum, position the speakers, get them stable and vertical, play with toe-in and then re-check the level. The bottom end goes deep enough to make small fore and aft adjustments musically significant, but as with other VA speakers, it's height off the floor that is the final deciding factor when it comes to really dialling them in: too low and the sound gets overly warm, the



▶▶ soundstage and individual instruments gaining weight and dimensionality at the expense of musical and rhythmic agility; too high and the speakers start to sound thin and colourless. Of course, these judgements are relative. It's hard to imagine a VA speaker ever really sounding 'thin', but work through the height range – easy given the design of the hand-adjusted spikes – and you'll hear exactly what I'm talking about. Get the height and attitude nailed (you'll want to look at rake angle too, if your sofa is fashionably low) and the sound comes alive with a sense of vitality, musical and rhythmic coherence, presence and energy. Pace is never pushy – unless the piece demands it – but importantly, the speakers allow the music to slow when it chooses, without ever becoming sluggish. All of which leads to the key characteristic that allows the Infinities not just to perform, but to perform so far above both expectations and their price point.

What this small, unassuming and affordable VA speaker exhibits is an innate, an ineffable, an effortless sense of musical balance. That same sense of balance that escapes (and whose absence undermines) so many expensive, high-end systems: which utterly escapes most of the rooms at a show like Munich. Compare the Infinities to a serious separates system, one with wide bandwidth speakers and oodles of available headroom and their limitations are clear. They can't match the scale, focus, transparency, dynamic range or resolution of a big system. But – and it's a critical 'but' – unless that big system is dialled in, the little VA speakers might well be more musically coherent, with a better overall sense of proportion. Remove the big system from the equation and the Mozart Infinities' shortcomings fade away too, hidden by that wonderfully natural balance and beautifully scaled perspective. The limitations are there, but they don't intrude, as the VA speakers execute that

hardest (and most valuable) of all audio tricks, covering their tracks.

I've bigged up the Infinities' musical performance to such an extent that I might as well base the sonic description on something properly difficult to reproduce. It's not just that Víkingur Ólafsson's *Debussy-Rameau* (DGG483 7701) can – and should – sound astonishingly like a real piano in real space, I've heard it do so on some seriously impressive rigs.



Playing it on the Mozart Infinities is just begging for them to fail... Except that isn't quite how it pans out. Sure, the piano isn't as dimensionally defined, doesn't have the sheer scale or translucent harmonics that I get out of the big CH set up with a pair of equally big speakers – but then there isn't a single element, in fact, not a single cable in that

system that costs less than the Mozarts! But what you do get is a solid, stable instrument, planted between and separate from the speakers. You get the body and weight, the layered complexity and glorious decay. You get a sense of note weight and phrasing, musical impetus and direction. And you soon forget what's missing in favour of what's very present indeed. Streamed via Tidal (the VAs will shortly be compatible with Qobuz, which I generally prefer), there's none of the fractured or stilted rhythmic discontinuity that afflicts so many (even very expensive) streaming systems. This is a world away from that dry, disjointed musical wasteland that so often seems to pass muster as high-res replay. Ólafsson's gracefully fluid playing is just as captivating as ever – and that's via Ethernet!

Okay – you've got me! I couldn't help but wonder what happens if you play the equivalent disc through the Mozart's digital or analogue inputs?

I started off by wheeling in the Heed transport and hooking it up via the co-axial S/PDIF connection. It delivered a worthwhile improvement in the note-to-note ▶▶

► definition so important to solo piano, but looking at the disc spinner sat there inevitably poses questions about the Mozart's analogue inputs. So I swapped out the Heed for a Cyrus CD8 SE player. Connecting both the S/PDIF and RCA line inputs to the master speaker, I was able to directly compare the DAC in the Cyrus to the one in the VA speaker, with interesting results. The Cyrus player's analogue output offered a rounder and slightly richer presentation, with a more explicit sense of pace and timing – but the differences were subtle and the VA DAC countered with better delineation of note weight and a more layered sense of harmonics. Which is impressive on both counts.

The speaker's internal DAC is clearly no slouch (and doubtless benefits from the intervening years of digital development), but the analogue inputs are actually pretty impressive too. Just for fun, I inserted the CH Precision D1.5 CD/SACD player/transport into the system – a unit that costs four times the price of the speakers. The player's dual-mono internal DACs and balanced analogue outputs certainly trumped its S/PDIF connection to the VA DAC, with greater weight, musical energy and vitality, presence and spatial definition. But once again, the D1.5's superior transport mechanism upped the speaker's game, the internal DAC gapped by the player's on-board dual-mono convertors, but far from embarrassed. And what the whole exercise did demonstrate convincingly was just how responsive the VA system is to input quality. Just as the qualities of different streaming services were obvious, so the benefits

of the D1.5 transport over the Cyrus or Heed, the superiority of the CH DACs' performance to the one in the Cyrus, was clearly apparent. Source quality is king in any audio system and this set of comparisons underlined (emphatically) that not only are the Mozart Infinities a *bona fide* hi-fi system, they work in exactly the same way and deliver exactly the same musical benefits as any other high-quality set-up. They might be viewed as a 'lifestyle' system, but boy do they respond to input, both in terms of signal quality and set up.

Which brings me full circle to my earlier comments about balance and musical coherence. What makes the Mozarts really special is also where they differ from


most similarly priced separates systems. Feed any audio system a really great recording and it should sound pretty great. That's the easy part. What's more difficult – and what the VA system does so well – is not sound just as good, but just as listenable, on less than stellar material. Whatever you play, the Mozarts make the most of it, their natural tonal balance, seamless continuity and rhythmic and dynamic integrity providing a firm musical foundation for everything from MP3 to dodgy streamed files, SACD on the balanced analogue inputs to vinyl via an external phono-stage. Which from an individual audiophile aspect is kind of nice to have, but in terms of the market and industry as a whole, from the perspective of the target customer, is actually absolutely crucial. ►►



▶▶ Although I started out by assessing this system in exactly the same way as any other product that comes for review – a process that left me profoundly impressed – it was essential to also recognise the context in which the Infinities will, more often than not, be used. With that in mind, I moved them from the medium sized, dedicated listening environment of the Reading Room, to the lounge, where I hooked them up to the TV (love that HDMI input) the BluRay player and, wirelessly to the home network. I don't have an X-box but if I had, I'd have hooked that up too... Operating now in a pure streaming mode, with music and TV programmes arriving wirelessly or even off a phone, I was astonished at the stability and musical coherence of the results. Yes, playing a BluRay disc delivered crisper and more dynamic sound than streaming a movie. Once or twice, I had audio streams or TV sound drop out – which never, ever happened with a hard-wired Ethernet connection – but then the walls in our house are over two-feet thick and we struggle with copper cable internet that's strung on poles in this very windy part of France (so pretty much a worst case scenario). Fibre optic finally arrives next week: hurrah! Still, despite the challenges, the VA system coped admirably and performed flawlessly. Dialogue on film and TV was particularly impressive, the speaker's rich tonal palette and natural sense of rhythm bringing an unforced intelligibility and character to voices, an expressive quality that heightened wry humour or drama with equal ease.

As I write this (choosing to do so in my front room) the system is playing the Shostakovich *Cello Concerto No.1* (Anastasia Kobekina, Edusei and the Berner Symphonieorchester – a 16/44.1 stream from Amazon) with all the bounce, vigour and dynamic contrast to the first movement that makes this such an enjoyable performance. As the second movement *Moderato* opens, there's no shortage of grace and tonal beauty to the longer lines and orchestral layers. Before this I was playing *Soultrane* (DCC GZS 1046) on the BluRay player and before that I'd taken a trawl on YouTube through the 70's pop of my misspent youth. Later, I might just watch Spurs crush Newcastle on catch-up, now that I know they didn't fold in the second half – again!

That, in a nutshell, is really what the Mozart Infinities are all about. They'll play anything for anybody, be happy doing it and make you as happy as they've been making me. They are beautifully finished, sensibly sized, have elegant proportions and come from a serious company with an excellent reputation. How they might compare to a similarly priced separates system isn't even a question. No separates system that you put together for this money is going to come even close. The relaxed (and relaxing) quality that was so apparent in Munich makes them as engaging as they are enjoyable and if one system really does have to do it all – and do it all without breaking the bank – then the Vienna Acoustics Mozart Infinities don't just set the standard, at this point in time they are the first and pretty much the only game in town.

I'll leave you with one last anecdote. One of the people I took to hear the Mozarts in Munich was Rick Rubin, a man who knows a thing about the music industry and where it's going. A regular visitor to the High-End show, I bumped into him in the corridor and he asked me what I'd heard that had impressed me? I took him to hear the Viennas. After doing the whole relaxing on entry and then sitting and being seduced thing, he turn to me and asked, “So what are we listening to?” I pointed at the speakers. He said, “Yes, but what else, what's the rest of the system?” to which I replied, “This is it.” After a couple of “What, really?” back and fourths, he looked back at the speakers and said, “Do you know how long I've been waiting for this? This is it. This is it. THIS IS IT!” (The last while leaping to his feet and waving his arms in the air) Who am I to argue? 

Vienna Acoustics Mozart Infinity
www.vienna-acoustics.com

Prices (inc 20% sales tax):

Piano black or white	€12,490
Cherry	€12,490
Premium Rosewood	€14,350
Optional Spikes	€490