

Auditions



Avalon Symbol

A distinctive floorstander from the USA

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Avalon Symbol

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Avalon is a US brand run by Neil Patel, a man who has some individual ideals about loudspeaker design, and these ideals certainly result in some quite individualistic-looking speakers.

Avalon began in the 1980s as a sister company of Jeff Rowland Research, the well-known amplifier maker, but Neil Patel acquired the company after he'd become an enthusiastic owner of its products. And, as MC noted in his February 2003 review of the Eidolon, Neil has been developing his design skills ever since.

So, the Avalon models are individualistic – but not well documented. I found that trying to extract information from the company about what makes its speakers tick was no trivial exercise. Its doesn't readily divulge much information. Perhaps the best way to look at the Symbol and other speakers in the range is as holistic designs. They are that way because that's the way they work most best. Beyond that, the most that can be done is to make some general points about the Symbol floorstanding speaker (tested here) and the range of which it's a member.

The Symbol is not just a floorstanding stereo speaker. It is the core component in a 5.1 channel surround sound package which is said to be special in the way that the directivity of the various speakers mesh together in a more than usually coherent way (or 'a revolutionary concept in polar response blending', to quote from the horse's mouth).

Construction is from flat, wood-veneered MDF panels, with a tapered shape that reduces visual

intrusion while placing the tweeter high enough to be on the seated ear axis at normal listening distances once the angle of the tweeter baffle plane is taken into account. Dimensions of the Symbol are 1090 x 130 x 230mm (hwd) and the speakers weigh 16kg each. There are almost no right angles. All panels, including the sides, lean inwards, and the front and back taper together at the top. The front baffle is split, the main section leaning back. The sub-baffle carrying the tweeter tilts slightly further back. This is a shape that is meant to discourage internal resonances, or at least to distribute them as widely as possible across the frequency band.

With no prior experience of Avalon, or any detailed knowledge of the company's reputation or history, I approached this review with little of the usual unavoidable baggage of expectations or prejudice. The compact dimensions did predispose towards a limited low frequency output, but here the Symbol sprang a surprise. Although not a genuinely meaty full-bandwidth speaker (frequency response is quoted by Avalon as 45Hz–24kHz (± 1.5 dB anechoic)), the Symbol is much closer to this end of the market than compact models like the Revel Performa M20 [HFN Sept '03], with which it shared house room during the review period.

There's no magic involved here; clearly the shape of the Avalon, and its (unspecified) internal volume are deceptive, but the net effect is that the Symbol is capable of making a credible attempt at creating a realistic orchestral image scale in moderately size rooms, though you'll need a moderately powerful amplifier as at 86dB, this is far from being the most sensitive loudspeaker in its class.

Okay, so there's no watertight explanation for the bass extension experienced from the Symbol, beyond perhaps an element of optical (or sonic?) illusion, but there is a touch of magic about the Symbol as a whole. Like all the very best party

tricks, though, it's not easy to understand quite what's going on. All that can be said is that it's a neat conjuring trick, and that over the course of several weeks, my respect for and pleasure in the Symbol's performance has grown steadily.

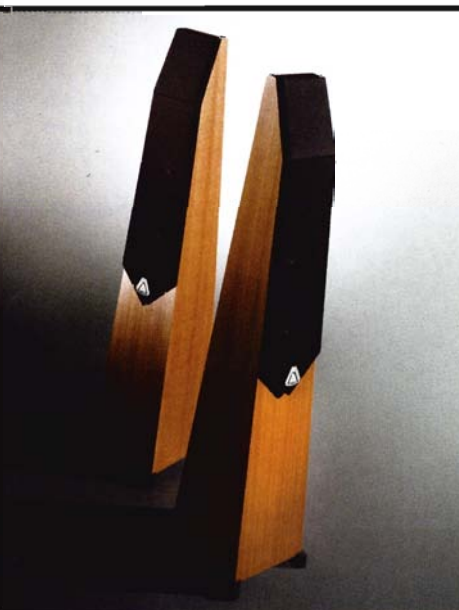
Without going to the extremes of suggesting that other good, comparably priced speakers sound box-bound, the Symbol produces music in a style that's remarkably free of the means of reproduction. A style that's almost completely detached from the loudspeaker enclosure itself, and that takes up residence as an almost corporeal entity in the listening room.

There's a warmth and depth to this speaker that could suggest coloration. But if it is coloured, the coloration is gentle and benign. The Symbol is not as analytically precise as the previously mentioned Revel speaker, but cliché or otherwise, the Symbol is almost exquisitely musical. It has a grace and inner vitality that helps the music spring to life. What you're listening to a genuinely vital recording, the Symbol makes this very clear.

As suggested by Avalon, imagery is one of the Symbol's particular strengths. The bold, stable soundstaging is one factor in this, and so is the sharply defined positioning encouraged by the tall but ultra narrow baffle. Another may be the crossover, said to be unusually simple for an Avalon network at 'only about 20 elements' – though even this information came to me from a third-party.

With its other qualities, this is also a very practical speaker, which has been meticulously tuned for musical performance, and which is attractive and compact enough to live in harmony with real-life surroundings. Despite being relatively insensitive and apparently not altogether easy to drive (5 ohm nominal impedance), in a compact high quality system, which for this test included the Arcam FMJ A32, its musical integrity is hard to gainsay. ■

Alvin Gold



The Avalon Symbol demonstrates a breadth of sound that belies its compact dimensions

Technology

The main drivers are 130mm ceramic-coated units, connected together, both of which cover the bass and the midband, making this a true two-way speaker. The inverted 25mm dome tweeter looks familiar, looking like part of the Focal catalogue. The unit is said to be by Avalon to be 'proprietary', but 'customised' is maybe more accurate as the titanium dome is built to Avalon's requirements by the French company. The speaker is raised on bolt-on feet, allowing room for the downward-facing reflex port to breathe. Cables are connected to single wire screw terminals hidden near the port.

Features

- Successful, musical overall sound
- 130mm ceramic-coated main drivers
- Lowish impedance and sensitivity