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MASTER OF DETAIL

THE AVALON ASCENDANT

By Jeff Dorgay

AVALON

Having recently spent some quality time with Avalon's flagship speaker, The Sentinel, I was very curious to hear just how much of that sound I could expect from Avalon for 7% of the price that the Sentinel commands. After listening to the Ascendant for a few months now, I am very impressed.

The Ascendant aptly named, being at the beginning of Avalon's lineup following their NP Evolution Series and their Symbol Series (which is directed more at the home theater market) is priced at \$9795 per pair in quilted cherry, curly maple or figured walnut. A pair in their premium finishes of myrtle or walnut burl are somewhat higher at \$13,295 a pair. They have a bit smaller footprint than the Eidolon series, only being 10" wide, 13" deep and 37" high. Weighing 75 pounds each, they should not be too difficult to move around in your room, though I would suggest having a little help with unpacking duties. You wouldn't want to put a nick in these cabinets!

Removing the grille reveals a pair of 7" Nomex-Kevlar composite woofers and a 1" dome tweeter in a 2 way configuration. This tweeter uses the same composite neodymium technology that is featured in the pricier Avalon models. The Ascendants come packaged in a very substantial crate and fit like a glove, with the grilles packaged separately in the top pocket. They also include spare posts for the grilles, should one ever snap. This is the kind of attention to detail that makes you feel at ease about spending close to ten thousand dollars on a pair of speakers.

The Long and the Short of It

Having been at the Rocky Mountain Audio Fest for the week, my test speakers had some time on the clock so they only needed a few days to go from great to outstanding. I am told a brand new set will need about 300 to 400 hours for full break in.

**The more time
you spend with the
Ascendants, the more
you realize what
masterpieces of fine
craftsmanship
they are.**

A quick knuckle rap of the front panel felt like I was hitting a piece of granite. When Avalon's sales manager Gary Mulder stopped by to take a quick listen of the Ascendants in my room, he pointed out that the front panel where the drivers are mounted is 3 3/4" thick; I must say that these are the most inert cabinets I've experienced. This is what contributes to the detail these speakers are capable of resolving, the music is not smeared at all by cabinet colorations or resonance.

I had very good results using the Ascendants on the long or the short wall in my main listening room, which measures 16 x 24 feet. My trusty Leica Disto made it a snap to get the speakers positioned very quickly and optimize my couch for the perfect listening position. The best position? That depends on what you prefer. If you would like a touch more depth, the short wall is the optimum situation, but if you are like me and want the ultimate in soundstage width, the long wall is the way to go.

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As I improved the quality of the source and amplification, they just got better.

Both were so seductive, I had a hard time deciding but after about a month of moving the speakers back and forth, I settled on the long wall. Normally, I sit about 8-9 feet away from my reference speakers, but I found that the optimum spot for the Ascendants to be about 10 feet back, so plan your listening area accordingly.

Bottom line, the Ascendant is very easy to set up. If you don't have the skill or the patience to completely finesse the installation, they will still offer up an extremely engaging performance. That last hour of getting them in the exact position will yield a bit more precise imaging and a bit more depth if you want to spend it, but these are not fussy speakers in any sense of the word.

Once that perfect spot is located, the spikes are mandatory. The Ascendant is ported on the bottom of the enclosure and getting them up on the spikes will maintain the proper distance from the port to the floor. The three machined spikes are easy to install, just tip the back up and install one at each corner, then slip the third one under the middle of the cabinet in front. Don't step on these, or you will be in pain!

It's All In The Mix

With an 89db sensitivity rating and a 4-ohm impedance, these speakers are very easy to drive. While I did the majority of my evaluation with my reference Conrad-Johnson Premier 350SA amplifier (solid-state, 350 watts per channel), I tried about eight different amplifiers that ranged in power from 30 watts per channel on up to get a good feel of just how well these speakers would work in any situation.

I particularly liked that the Ascendants would offer up very musical sound no matter what I pair them up with, from the Prima Luna Prologue 1 all the way to the Premier 350. Many people tend to build a system around their speakers so if you are in this camp, rest assured that if you can comfortably build your system around the Ascendants. I would not shy away from using these speakers with the best source components available. As I improved the quality of the source and amplification, they just got better. *(continued)*

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My Bias Exposed

The whole Avalon line excels at achieving a perfect balance of dynamics, transparency, coherence and above all tonality. These speakers reproduce acoustic instruments so well that you feel as close to the music as recorded music gets. And for me, that's what it's all about. I've heard almost all of the other speakers in the Avalon line and they all do a superlative job in these areas. Including the new Indra which we will also be finished reviewing shortly. Remember, I'm the panel guy that loves transparency, coherence and midrange magic, so a dynamic speaker has to be exceptional to get my attention.

I'm also a tough customer because I listen to an incredibly wide range of music and my mood changes like the wind. One minute I want to listen to opera and the next I want to listen to Metallica. For me the perfect speaker has as much detail and resolution as I can get without being harsh or offensive, but I want as much musicality as I can get without things getting muddy. This is a very fine line that few speakers can walk, but the Avalons do it with ease.

This balance drew me back to the Ascendants every time I would substitute another speaker in their place. That extra layer of guitars, or that extra backing vocal track that I wasn't quite hearing before was easy to discern with the Ascendants in the system. Having this kind of clarity available is easy to get used to, no matter what kind of music you enjoy.

These speakers also did an outstanding job at conveying spatial cues in all dimensions and offer up a stereo image where you can just pluck things out of the air. Again, one needs to listen to some acoustic music to get a better picture of this "rightness" that the Ascendants possess. A drum kit takes up a certain amount of acoustic space in a room, as does a piano or any other instrument. If you have a friend that is a musician, spend a little bit of time listening to them play their instrument in a room for you and listen carefully. Close your eyes and try to save that mental picture. When you listen to the Ascendant, you'll see what I mean. *(continued)*

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That's what the Ascendants always delivered a big dose of in my room; they had spot-on tonality but not quite the sheer size that the real thing delivers. You will have to step up to the Sentinels to get all of that! If you dig the Avalon sound, you just get a smaller helping of it with the Ascendant than with their bigger speakers. (As you go up the model range, you get more with each one) For those of you that don't have the room for a pair of Sentinels, the Ascendant will put a big smile on your face.

Tone, Tone, Tone!

Often the best test of tonality is to listen to acoustic instruments, but sometimes speakers that do a good job here fall down when they are asked to play complex, dynamic music or heavy rock music. I went through quite a few of my favorite records and was consistently impressed with the fine balance of rendering musical detail along with the tonal accuracy they provided.

Listening to the Blue Note test pressings reviewed in this issue was a real treat. When Dexter Gordon blasts his sax on "Dexter's Calling" at 45 rpm, it's damn convincing. When the backing female vocalists chime in saying "Six in the morning, yeah" on Snoop Dogg's "Gin and Juice" it's spooky, it sounds like they are ten feet to the left of the left speaker!

The final hurdle for a great speaker to overcome is the way it handles musical contrasts. The Ascendant's ability to start, stop and control the musical waveform is what gives it such a window of clarity on the music. This is when you have those rare moments listening to your system where you get fooled into thinking it just might be the real thing. The clarity and lack of distortion is what made listening to these speakers for eight hours at a time a great pleasure.

Definitely A Music Lover's Speaker

Even in the ten thousand dollar range, there are still some compromises to be made, but the Ascendant doesn't ask you to make many sacrifices. The only real compromises I feel you have to make with this speaker is just that last touch of ultra low bass (the Ascendant is rated -1.5db at 28 hz) and the ability to play at ultra brain damage levels. If your musical diet consists of only rock music that you need to blast at all times, this may not be your cup of tea. But that would be like getting mad at a Porsche because it can't go down the drag strip as fast as a fuel dragster. The Ascendant is about finesse.

If you enjoy a wide range of music, you will be thrilled and if you happen to listen to a lot of classical music you will be in heaven. Let's face it; *Morph the Cat* is going to sound pretty decent on anything, but handling the violin section has a higher degree of difficulty.

In the end, the Avalon Ascendant is on my very short list of all time favorites. ●

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MSRP: \$9795-13,275 per pair, depending on finish

MANUFACTURER

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PERIPHERALS

Preamplifier: Conrad-Johnson ACT2 Series 2

Power Amplifier: Conrad-Johnson Premier 350SA, Conrad-Johnson ET250, Nagra PSA, Classe CA-2100, McIntosh MC275

Integrated Amplifiers: Prima Luna Prologue 1, Sim Audio Moon I-7, Luxman 590 A-II

Phono Preamplifier: ASR Basis Exclusive

Analog Sources: Oracle Delphi V w/ SME iV.Vi arm, MoFi 3.5C cartridge, Rega P9 w/RB1000, Shelter 9000 cartridge

Digital Sources: Naim CD555, Sooloos Music Server w/Wadia 521 DAC

Interconnects: Cardas Golden reference, Shunyata Antares

Speaker Cables: Shunyata Orion

Power Cords: Essential Sound Products The Essence "Reference", Running Springs Mongoose

Power Conditioning: Running Springs Danielle, Running Springs Jaco

Vibration Control: Finite Elemente Pagode Signature racks with Cerapucs and Ceraballs

Room Treatments: GIK 242 panels, GIK Bass traps, Sonex Classic