



JULY 2010



# AVALON ASCENDANT

This review first appeared in the May 2010 issue of [hi-end hifi magazine High Fidelity](#) of Poland. You can also read this [review of the Avalon Ascendant](#) in its original Polish version. We publish its English translation in a mutual syndication arrangement with publisher Wojciech Pacuła. As is customary for our own reviews, the writer's signature at review's end shows an e-mail address should you have questions or wish to send feedback. All images contained in this review are the property of High Fidelity or Avalon. Ed.

**Reviewer:** Wojciech Pacuła  
**CD player:** Ancient Audio Lektor Air  
**Phono preamp:** RCM Audio Sensor Prelude IC  
**Preamp:** Leben RS-28CX  
**Power amp:** Luxman M-800A  
**Integrated amp:** Leben CS300  
**Loudspeakers:** Harpia Acoustics Dobermann  
**Headphones:** AKG K701, Ultrasonic PROLine 2500, Beyerdynamic DT-990 Pro 600 Ω  
**Interconnects:** CD-preamp Wireworld Gold Eclipse 52, preamp-power amp Velum NF-G SE, speaker cable Velum LS-G  
**Power cords:** Acrolink Mexcel 7N-PC9100 (CD) and 2 x Acrolink Mexcel 7N-PC7100 (preamp, power amp)  
**Power conditioning:** Gigawatt PF-2 Filtering Power Strip  
 audio stand Base  
**Resonance control:** Finite Elemente Ceraball under the CD, turntables change continuously, as do cartridges  
**Review component retail:** zł 45.930/pr in Poland



Avalon is a legendary but not legacy company. They did not gather appreciation, recognition and respect over many long decades in small steps but stormed straight to the top. Company owner and protagonist Neil Patel (each project has its own engineer) created a company which in cosmetic terms builds *iconic* loudspeakers. His Avalon Eidolon is perhaps the most copied speaker in the world for its diamond-faceted enclosure.

Then there are Avalon's preferred drivers, almost exclusively ceramic cones and diamond domes. Only the woofers may occasionally embrace Nomex or Kevlar. That's exactly the case with today's entry-level Ascendant. Something else that distinguishes Avalon the brand are *prices*. They used to only offer from expensive to very expensive products. Only recently more affordable options became available. For counterbalance, Avalon also introduced the *incredibly* expensive Sentinel. Hence nothing really changed. Taking this into account, one might rightfully conclude that Avalon is overpriced and tries to dazzle us with unusual shapes and drivers. I think some audiophiles would agree.

I too could were it not for the choices of real professionals whom I respect. I think of speaker 'guru' Martin Colloms of Hifi News and HifiCritic using the Avalon Diamond; of Mr. Winston Ma, owner of [First Impression Music](#) who uses the Avalon Isis for evaluating his master tapes and final discs (and earlier ran Diamonds – please look at his system [here](#)). To me that's meaningful.

Even so, I personally was never touched by the sound of Avalons. I listened to them many times at shows where they proved never more than passable. Now my review session of the Ascendant suggested that probably the speakers in my prior encounters were never properly set up. Something simply must have been wrong. This does not happen often but the Avalons require *ultra-precise* positioning. If we don't pay proper attention, they might sound okay but really, there's only one single spot in any given room where they will sound as they should. And the burn-in... the company talks 300-400 hours and then you have to add settle-down time even if they have arrived already preconditioned. This is something Jeff Dorgay mentioned in his review: "The more time you spend with the Ascendants, the more you realize what masterpieces of fine craftsmanship they are."



**Sound: Discs used for this review** - Bill Evans Trio, *Bill Evans Trio at Shelly's Manne-Hole*, Riverside/JVC, JVCXR-0036-2, XRCD; Danielsson/Dell/Landgren, *Salzau Music On The Water*, Act Music+Vision, ACT 9445-2, CD; Deep Purple, *Perfect Stranger*, Polydor/Polydor Japan, 25MM 0401, LP; Depeche Mode, *Fragile Tension/Hole to Feed*, Mute Records, 12BONG42, 2 x 180g, maxi-SP LP; Diorama, *Cubed Deluxe Edition*, [Acsession Records](#), A114, 2 x CD; Frédéric Chopin, *The Complete Nocturnes*, piano: Gergely Bogányi, Stockfisch, SFR 357.4051.2, 2 x SACD/CD; Jean-Michel Jarré, *Zoolook*, Disques Dreyfus/Polydor Canada, Jar 5, LP; Julie London, *Julie Is Her Name. Vol. 1*, Liberty/EMI Music Japan, TOCJ-90014, HQCD; Keith Jarrett, *The Köln Concert*, ECM/Universal Music Japan, UCCE-9011, gold CD; King Crimson, *In The Court Of The Crimson King*, Universal Music Japan, UICE-9051, HDCD; Lars Danielsson & Leszek Możdżer, *Pasodoble*, ACT Music, ACT 9458-2, CD; Shota Osabe Piano Trio, *Happy Coat*, Sho Studio of Music/First Impression Music/Lasting Impression Music, LIM K2HD 031, K2 HD CD; Thelénious Monk, *Brilliant Corners*, Riverside/Universal Music Japan, UCCO-9220, CD; Thom Yorke, *The Eraser*, XL Records/Warner Music Japan, WPCB-10001, CD; Wes Montgomery, *Incredible Jazz Guitar of...* Riverside/JVC, VICJ-41531, K2 CD; William Orbit, *My Oracle Lives Uptown*, Guerilla Studios/[Linn Records](#), AKH 351, 2 x 180g LP.



Figuratively speaking, the Ascendants don't forgive much and praise even less. Before I get to that, I would like to summarize what follows by noting that these are classy high-pedigree speakers which performed better in my home than *any* Avalons I'd previously heard at shows, presentations or informal listening sessions. The Ascendant frankly sounded splendid, in many aspects superior to my own Harpia Acoustics [Dobermann](#). This wasn't true across the board—I will talk about that later and I also had to be very thorough setting them up—but they performed so well and were so interesting to listen to that my review period was pure pleasure. Now I know far better what I miss in my Dobermanns and what their successors will have to improve upon.

But first about forgiving; or rather, the lack thereof. The Avalons quickly show errors in the preceding signal path and flaws in the recordings. Yet they treat those elements differently than the Dobermanns by being in fact friendlier towards the recordings. I will return to this. The system for the Ascendants must be maximally balanced with a focus on bass control and a lack of upper midrange forwardness. Any step away from this—a slight loss of discipline in the lower frequencies or hardened attacks around 1-2kHz—will be revealed very directly. It is interesting how this does not make the sound unfriendly. It can in fact translate into a sound that's *more* attractive than the natural sound, being more saturated and direct than what we hear live in acoustic settings.

But it does take time to ascend the Ascendant to its peak. Placed in the same spot as the bigger Dobermann, the Avalon had a bit too much mid bass. This is fairly normal. My room isn't large and the loudspeakers do not stand far away from the walls. I know the room very well though and know exactly what I must take into account when evaluating speakers placed in it. This is usually enough but wasn't for the Avalons. They needed to be placed further into the room to make their elevated range fuse with the rest of the spectrum. With the Harpias I managed that by plugging their ports. I tried to with the Avalons (their ports fire down) but the changes were minimal. Hence I needed to place them further away from the front wall.

Placed accordingly, they became very *coherent*. Unexpectedly, the Ascendant proved to have a rather creamy saturated fulsome sound. At shows they often sounded harsh or vague and I became used to thinking of them that way. But placed precisely and powered adequately, they showcased traits I usually associate more with [Harbeth](#) or the Combak Bravo speakers. With emphasis on the latter, the Americans really did sound like one *single* slightly warm driver. The issue of baffle slant and grills was important too. The grills polarize reviewers and music lovers alike. When two Audio Systems folks delivered and placed the loaners, a discussion ensued. One of them claimed that one should

only listen *with* the grilles as this removes a slight problem in the upper midrange (measurements show a slight depression there), the other that the only listening option is *without* the grilles because "a grille sucks the life out of the Avalons".

Both were right. One can set up the Ascendant for *with* and *without*. I eventually ended up without. To achieve smoothness with the grilles (which are most probably used during measurements and the design process) and an open clean treble without them or the boosted midrange in the 1-2kHz region, I had to cross their axes right in front of my nose. Toed in like that, the Avalon was incredibly vivid and showed more harmonics responsible for sonic depth than my Dobermann. The latter as well as models from KEF and Monitor Audio create a splendid sonic *picture* but somewhat emboss the edges with brilliant speed and openness. The Avalon meanwhile was similar to the small Japanese Bravo which portrays the instruments and events in a more holographic fashion. This is an additional dimension not only of the soundstage proper but also of timbre and dynamics – what we recognize as pedigreed sound like the ennoblement of a *Sir* in front of a name. This could be heard on each disc and on any kind of music. Classical and jazz sounded best however. Chopin's *Nocturnes* were tremendous. This is a masterful recording of that difficult instrument, musically brilliant, slightly dense and with a clear first plane exactly as Stockfish main sound engineer Günter Pauler does it. The Avalons showed this immediately but did not *emboss* this feature. They simply showed it and then the sound reached deeper and became even fuller. This was similar on all XRCD recordings like the *Bill Evans Trio Live*.

Rock and electronics too were very interesting. I promised to return to the issue of recording quality and how the Ascendant handled it. The Avalons are rather merciless but in the case of recordings not by underlining harshness or splashy treble. What they won't tolerate is *compression*. Discs recorded uncompressed—older ones like Julie London, more current ones like Danielsson/Dell/Landgren or those where compression was used very moderately like Danielsson & Mozdzer—sounded phenomenal. But not Diorama's *Cubed*. There the vocal band was raised, many instruments were used and slight chaos became the result. Here the Dobermanns fared better. While showing compression, they were still able to separate everything sufficiently to prevent the sound from collapsing. Here *Cubed* did not sound as bad as over the Avalons. It was still juicy with a very good rhythm and kick but the flattened tracks were flatter than necessary.

While talking rhythm, the Americans always were authoritative. A part of their recipe was a strong mid bass – when placed far enough away from the walls. This was a certain departure from linearity and needs to get mentioned clearly. It's why the sound was so full and complete. Compared to it most loudspeakers sound thin even when they measure absolutely flat. This could be heard on all discs but was demonstrated best with *Pasodoble* by Danielsson and Mozdzer. The contrabass was a bit larger than usual, a bit stronger as though the microphone was placed right in front of it. This wasn't unpleasant—quite the opposite in fact—but not very accurate either. Frankly this is one of only two areas where more expensive loudspeakers will do better. The other is related to the slightly elevated and not perfectly smooth area above 1kHz. This is slightly hardened. It's why proper set up and good electronics are so important. 90% of recordings won't be problematic but on electronica and harder rock, transients in the mid/treble transition band were slightly emphasized.

Those are the only two elements which would prompt me to buy more expensive loudspeakers than the Ascendant. The recorded acoustics could be shown better but when talking about the soundstage around the instruments, it was hard to complain about this extraordinarily creamy, smooth and vivid sound. That's so *not* how I'd imagined the Avalons to behave. I was most impressed by what came out of them. The bass extended low and with color and only the lowest notes could have stood more control but integrated well with the rest to act like a lone widebender or dual-concentric. This was an exciting and very satisfactory sound with brilliant lower and mid treble. I was frankly unaware that a metal tweeter could do things I'd previously only associated with diamond domes or Oscar Heil transducers from ADAM or Burmester. The upper treble was not as resolved and precise as the SEAS in my Dobermanns to remind us why more expensive Avalons run with ceramic and diamond drivers. But I repeat, the final sound here was very coherent and *creamy* - a beautiful sound from a beautiful loudspeaker (and legendary brand as bonus).

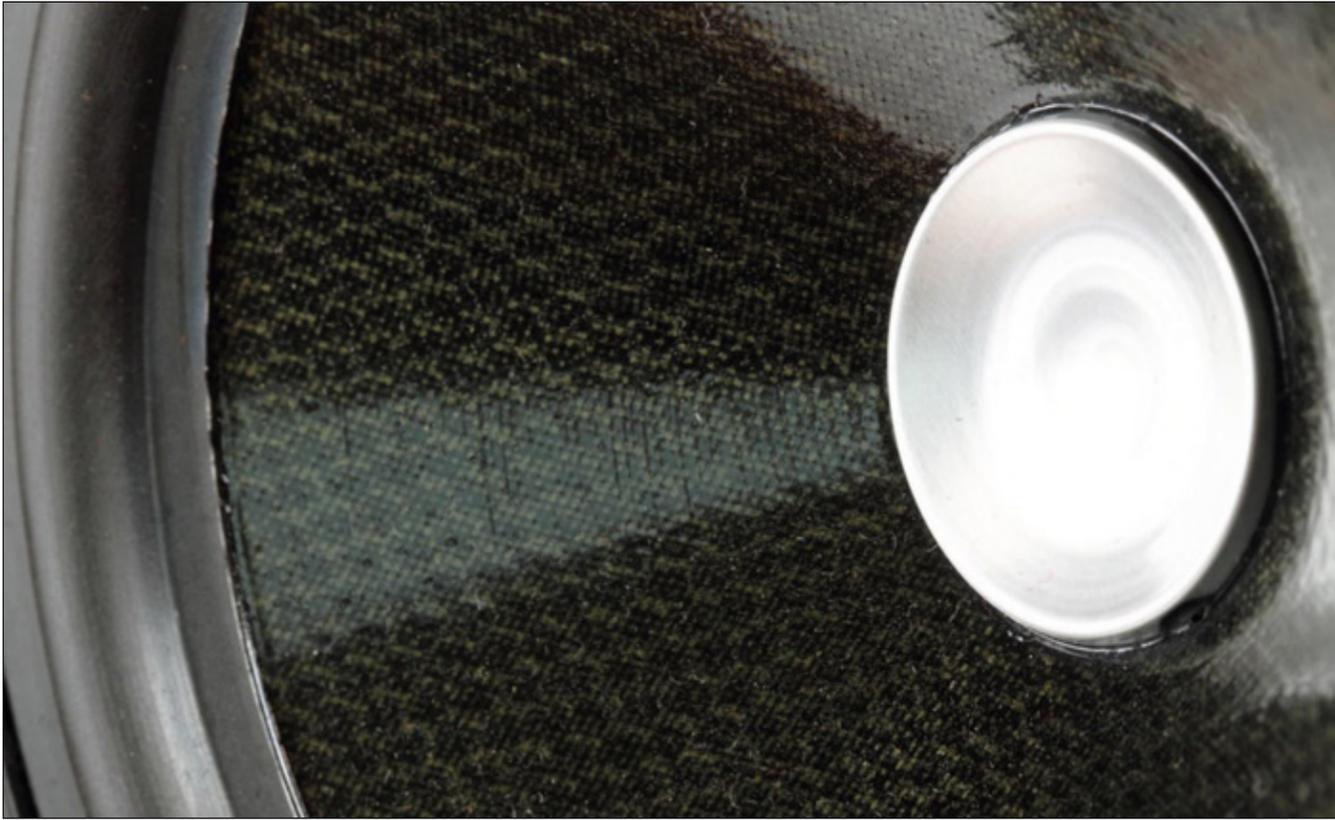
**Description:** The Ascendant is one of the cheapest Avalon models. Despite being built around three drivers, we deal with a two-way whose two 7" Nomex/Kevlar woofers work *almost* in parallel (Nomex/Kevlar refers to woven Kevlar fiber covered with Nomex). According to Neil Patel, the signal reaching them is processed to correct for phase differences in their physically different vertical locations. The drivers have very solid cast baskets bolted to the cabinet with six bolts.

The diaphragm is mounted on a rubber suspension and instead of the usual central dust cap or phase corrector, a metal cone works as heat sink for the voice coil. The treble is handled by a 1" metal dome tweeter covered by a ceramic skin as we have seen it from [Revel](#) or [Infinity](#). Here the large neodymium motor was taken from elsewhere however. The Ascendant reviewed was the second iteration of this model, the first having utilized a 25mm titanium dome. The cabinet is twin vented out the bottom to make 89dB efficiency at 4Ω. Powerful amps are preferred.

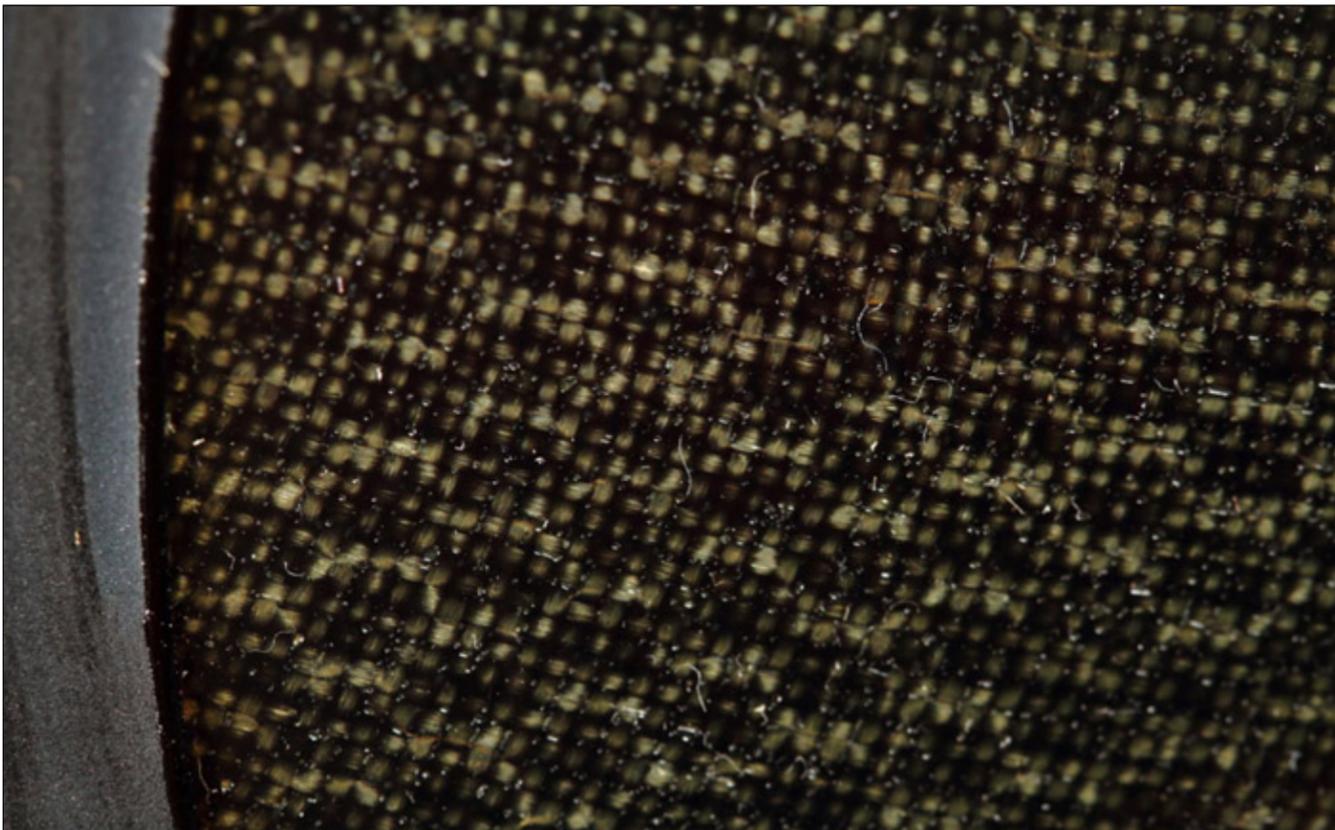


The faceted cabinet is trademark Avalon with internal braces and natural veneers. I received a pair in the basic color. One must decide whether to listen with or without grilles as this veneer quickly bleaches in the sun to make it clearly

visible whether the grilles were on or not. Upgraded veneers cost a significant premium.



The rear baffle slants too but merely for cosmetics. The loudspeakers look 'lighter' than with a straight back. There's a small plaque and beautiful Cardas terminals allowing for all types of spades but not bananas. The Ascendant are beautiful and will ornament any room.



**Technical data (according to manufacturer):**  
Frequency response: 28-25 000Hz (+/- 1.5dB)  
Nominal impedance: 4 $\Omega$  (min. 3.6 $\Omega$ )  
Efficiency: 89dB  
Recommended amplifier power: 50-200W  
Dimensions: 254 x 940 x 330mm WxHxD  
Weight: 32kg/ea.

