

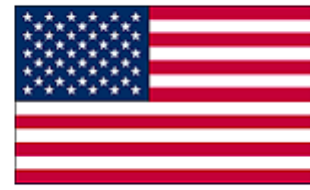


JULY 2011



AVALON ACOUSTICS TRANSCENDENT

country of origin



USA

This review first appeared in the June 2011 issue of [hi-end hifi magazine High Fidelity](#) of Poland. You can also read this [review of the Avalon Transcendent](#) in its original Polish version. We publish its English translation in a mutual syndication arrangement with publisher Wojciech Pacula. 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.

Reviewer: Wojciech Pacula

CD player: Ancient Audio Lektor Air

Phono preamplifier: RCM Audio Sensor Prelude IC

Cartridges: Air Tight Supreme, Miyajima Laboratory Waza

Preamplifier: Ayon Audio Polaris III with Regenerator power supply version II

Power amplifier: Tenor Audio 175S, Soudation 710

Integrated amplifier/headphone amplifier: Leben CS300 XS Custom version

Loudspeakers: Harpia Acoustics Dobermann

Headphones: Sennheiser HD800, AKG K701, Ultrasonic PROLine 2500, Beyerdynamic DT-990 Pro

Interconnects: CD-preamp Acrolink Mexcel 7N-DA6300, preamp-power amp Wireworld Platinum Eclipse

Speaker cable: Tara Labs Omega Onyx

Power cables: Acrolink Mexcel 7N-PC9300

Power conditioning: Gigawatt PF-2

Audio stand: Base

Resonance control: Finite Elemente Ceraball under the CD player, Pro Audio Bono platform under CD player

Review component retail in Poland: 68500 PLN standard veneer | 84000 PLN optional veneers

On their website Avalon writes that the Transcendent uses a combination of different technologies created by the company during the last 10 years and used before in the models Isis and Time. And further: "Never before has such a compact system utilized the sophisticated dynamic control technologies found exclusively in our most advanced designs. Octave-to-octave energy balance is equivalent throughout the bandwidth envelope and developed without compression while critically damped, thus delivering a spatial presentation that is faithful to the recording. The result is a dynamic system that focuses images palpably within a panoramic sound stage without sacrificing transparency or low frequency solidity." I remember well how the Ascendant performed which I [reviewed](#) not so long ago. That model was the basis for the Transcendent which to a large extent could have been described by way of the precursor.



When the new loudspeakers were shipped to me, then unpacked and set up by the Polish distributor, I expected that they would be a further development on the theme first heard with the Ascendants. Those are closely related loudspeakers after all – three driver two-ways with concave tweeters using ceramics and mid/woofers with diaphragms from woven Kevlar-Nomex fiber, a DuPont material developed to protect firemen. In audio the material is called *hexacone*. It is very light and rigid with very good internal damping. Drivers based on this material are manufactured by Eton. The Avalon speaker enclosures too also similar. At the base we have a "lossy hole" resembling but not functioning as a traditional bass-reflex port. As will become clear, these similarities are external only. Apparently small changes like the fully ceramic tweeter in place of the composite, slightly different mid/woofers, a larger enclosure and a single lossy opening instead of two all combine into a *completely* different product.



Selection of recordings used in the test: *Tron Legacy*, OST, muz. Daft Punk, Special Edition, Walt Disney Records, 9472892, 2 x CD; Arimasa Yuki & Hisatsugu Suzuki, *Duet*, Sony BMG Masterworks/JVC, UNACD-10-01, XRCD24; Bill Evans Trio with Monica Zetterlund, *Swedish Concert 1975*, Jazzhus Disk, JD-7606, CD; Bill Evans, *Everybody Digs Bill Evans*, Riverside/JVC, JVCXR-0020-2, XRCD; Brian Eno, *Craft On A Milk Sea*, Warp Records, FLAC 24/44,1; Carol Sloane, *Hush-A-Bye*, Sinatra Society of Japan/Muzak, XQAM-1031, CD; Charlie Haden & Antonio Forcione, *Heartplay*, Naim Label, 24/96 FLAC; David Munion, *Pretty Blue*, Stockfisch Records, SFR 357.6072.2, CD; Depeche Mode, *Enjoy The Music*, Mute/Sire/Reprise, 921490-2, Maxi-SP CD; Diorama, *The art of creating confusing Spirits*, Accession Records, EFA 23450-2, CD; Don Friedman Trio, *Circle Waltz*, Riverside/JVC, VICJ-60258, XRCD²; Frank Sinatra, *Sinatra At The Sands*, Sinatra Society of Japan, UICY-94366, SHM-CD; Freddie Hubbard, *Open Sesame*, Blue Note/Audio Wave, AWMXR-0012, XRCD24; George Michael, *Faith*, Epic/Sony Music, 7753020, 2 CD+DVD; Grabek 8, *Polskie Radio*, PRCD 1372, CD; J. S. Bach, *Solo Suites Nos 1,3&5*, Mischa Maisky, Deutsche Grammophon/ Universal Music Company [Japan], UCG-50085, SHM-CD; Laurie Anderson, *Homeland*, Nonesuch Records, 524055-2, CD+DVD; Metallica, *Master of Puppets*, Vertigo/ Universal Music Company [Japan], UICY-94664, SHM-CD; Stan Getz & Joao Gilberto, *Getz/Gilberto*, Verve, 24/96 FLAC; Stan Kenton & June Christy, *Duet*, Capitol/Toshiba-EMI, TOCJ-9321, CD; Wynton Kelly, *Kelly Blue*, Riverside/JVC, JVCXR-0050-2, XRCD2.

Trying to write this review I was faced by a serious problem. This time I dealt with loudspeakers I couldn't 'make mine'. Despite clearly being splendid and very mature designs with certain exceptional aspects, they simply were not my cuppa tea. The challenge was thus how to approach them without letting subjective reactions interfere with objective truths (the latter within the possible boundaries of course). In other words, how to subtract the—lack of—emotional excitement from all the other cognitive functions reviewers use.

The most important message here is that these *are* perfectly crafted excellent loudspeakers which nevertheless utterly missed my taste and did not fit into how I've assembled my system over the years. I listened to them for a long time. They replaced the [Ascendo System ZF3 S.E.](#) which in their turn replaced the [Ktêma Franco Serblin](#). In the meantime there was also the Avalon Ascendant. This was a nice group of very expensive very good loudspeakers. From amongst it the two Avalons were cheapest and today's model costs half of the first two. Obviously it also isn't as good. Except for a few elements which were almost as good as the Ktêma and one or two in the ZF3 S.E., it was apparent how these are lower-priced loudspeakers for a reason. I do not have a problem that this very clearly wasn't a sound even half as good or 1/3rd. But my system also turned out to not be a very good environment for them.



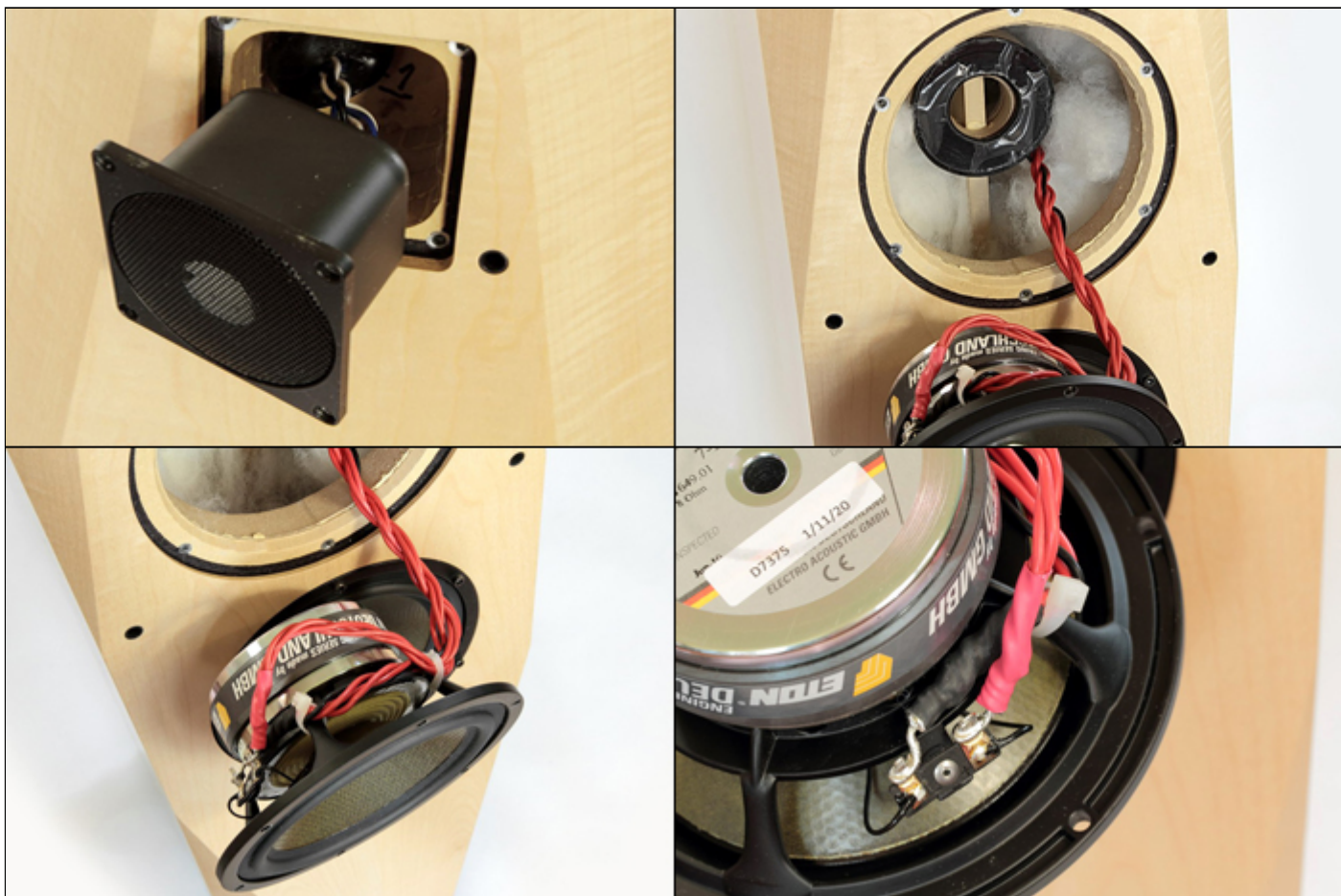
The Transcendents are completely different than the Ascendants. They are quick, open, well developed, dynamic and impressive from the start. In their sound the very precise and very resolved treble dominates. Not that there is a lack of bass—absolutely not!—but the energy of cymbals, trumpets and everything above the 2-3kHz is very potent. This makes for a very clean sound, a result I think of using the concave ceramic tweeter known also from the upper Avalon

models. The Ascendant had a ceramic dome resembling the tweeter used in the Revel Ultima. It could be heard immediately and without any extensive listening that the driver in the Transcendent is far superior. I reviewed many speakers with these tweeters. Because they tend to be a perfect tool for it, during the last few days I listened mostly to XRCD discs. The resolution, precision but also *massiveness* and substance (somehow related to saturation) of the treble allowed me to fully appreciate the skills of the people who invented this way of mastering but also the mastery of the sound engineers who made the recordings of the 50s and 60s.

Perhaps a transistor amp will actually perform better than some tubes (I will return to those in a moment). The Avalons are not as easily driven as it could seem. On first glance this isn't apparent. The Ascendants were easy to drive, with a sensitivity only 1dB higher and a similar impedance. The Transcendents reach audibly lower and the bass is more dynamic and potent. This requires better control to not become boomy. A good transistor amp with low output impedance thus would be a good choice. On the other hand how a good tube amplifier using KT88 or EL34 builds up its sound, how it harmonizes everything into a coherent whole is something the Avalon would seem to pray for.

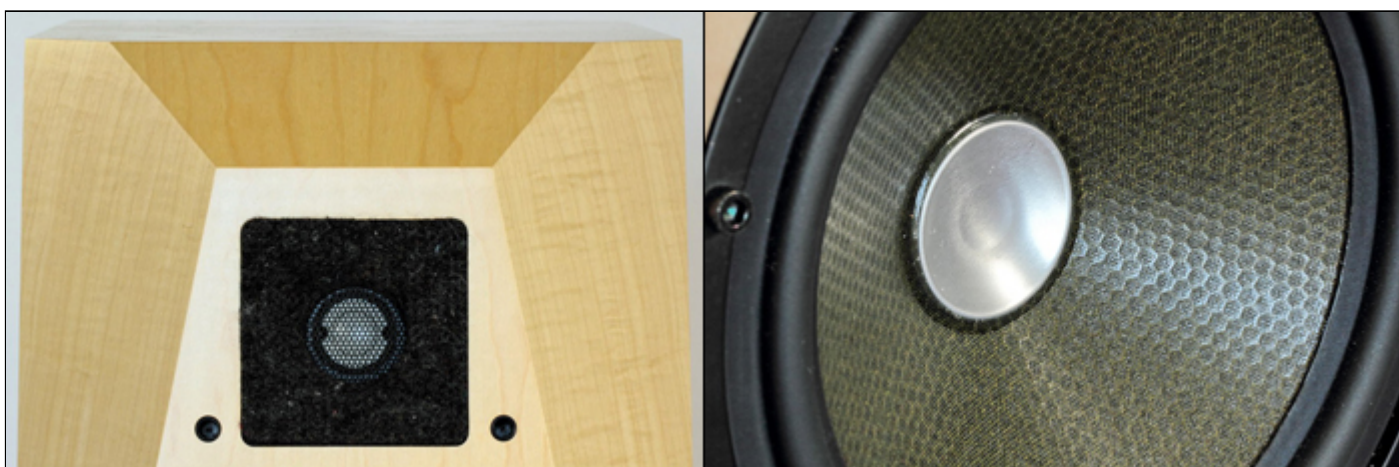
Enough about the upper part of the spectrum. As I mentioned already, there is no problem with the *amount* of bass. Frankly speaking, the Transcendents have exactly the right amount. With Jazz the double bass was never louder than necessary. It's in fact a rather quiet instrument but with electronica like the excellent Grabek 8 it can hit very hard indeed. With a amplifier capable of high current the quality of the bass is fantastic. It can appear in different places on the stage not bound to the middle or loudspeaker box. Its location depends solely on where the sound engineer or producer placed it.

This bass is a very dynamic part of the audible spectrum and for the most part responsible for this loudspeaker's impressiveness. My friend Andrzej who visited during the audition commented on this after one piece, an atypical Depeche Mode version of *Enjoy The Silence (Harmonium)* on a maxi single. The piece was recorded with an air-powered reed organ. There isn't much spectacle in it but the Avalons made it spectacular nonetheless. They expanded the soundstage and added an element of extra dynamics and bass fortitude. We sat enchanted almost seeing the guy sweating while pumping away on the reed organ.



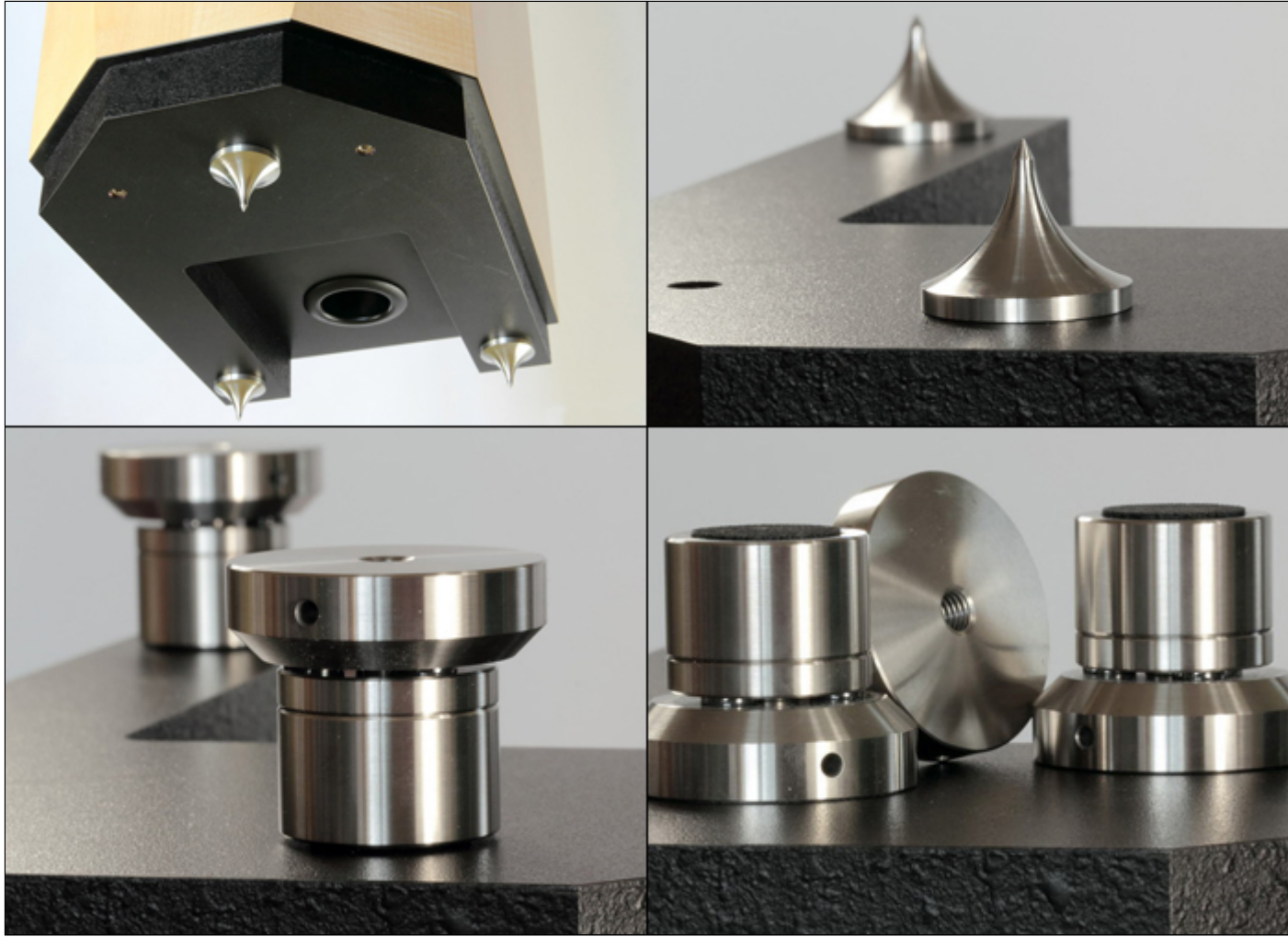
So soundstaging is one of the most important virtues here. The first plane is drawn slightly behind the base line of the speakers to work well with all kinds of material. With recordings where vocals dominate like Carol Sloan's *Hush-A-Bye* or June Christy & Stan Kenton's *Duet*, they are big and fleshy but not in front of the loudspeakers. In the window between the speakers there is drama far behind and in the depth there are the elements related to the recording venue. This can be especially appreciated on live recordings like *Sinatra At The Sands* which the Avalons promptly turned into a true spectacle again due to their exceptionally dynamic response and handling of the bass.

At first glance the Transcendents are bass-reflex speakers. But there is no port on front or rear but the bottom. This controls the air loading because the floor distance will remain constant regardless of position within the room. Of course how far the front wall is remains important because the plinth of the loudspeaker blocks the single port (the Ascendant had two) on three sides to channel its output to the back. The company refers to it as a lossy hole not tuned to any specific frequency to not be a classic bass reflex alignment.



The cabinet is typical for Avalon, known around the world and has been copied again and again. This is a faceted diamond shape identical to the pricier models with five cut surfaces to stiffen the enclosure and prevent standing waves. The Transcendent is a 'full' version of this shape where the Ascendant omitted the lower facets. Actually the cabinet here very much resembles the Time model. Even the grilles are identical, with only the shape of the holes cut into the felt different. Front baffle and back panel slope toward the back. The cabinet walls are very thick and the

loudspeaker is reinforced in the middle with a solid brace. Most important is the vertical bulk head with thick MDF rings. Thick rubber glued to these rings supports the mid/woofers from behind. The signal reaches the drivers with thick copper wires where three individual runs are soldered together to increase cable cross section. The tweeter with its solid cast mounting plate fires into a very rigid chamber routed out from stacked plates. The inside of the enclosure is densely filled with synthetic wool.



The Transcendent comes with three sharp cones per side but will sound much better on finite element supports. Although this increases floor distance to change the non-port loading, this can be handled with an intermediate element to simulate the floor.

Technical data (according to manufacturer):

Frequency response: 26 - 25.000Hz
Nominal impedance: 4Ω
Efficiency: 88dB
Recommended amplifier power: 50 - 500W
Dimensions (WxHxD): 254 x 1050 x 370mm
Weight: 44kg (a piece)

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Avalon Acoustics [website](#)