

The Avalon Acoustics Aspect Loudspeaker (HiFi-Plus 66)

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Some products just sound the way they look. Others simply sound the way you expect. In a world with too many loudspeakers and not enough designs, products emanating from the Boulder, Colorado premises of Avalon Acoustics have always been amongst the most singular and distinctive. One look and you knew it was an Avalon; one listen and you were sure. The beautiful craftsmanship that marked out their sloped and faceted cabinets was as intricate as it was precise, as instantly identifiable as any trademark or logo.

Okay, so the more conventional rectangular boxes of the NP1 and NP2 broke that rule, but even they managed to retain a strong strand of the brand's aesthetic DNA, embodied in the shape of their grilles – grilles that like the rest of the line (and totally opposed to common practice) stay firmly fixed in place. But even if the stylistic markers weren't enough, exposure to the demanding character of even these 'entry level' speakers would quickly remind you just what you were dealing with. It's a very select group of speakers that respond quite as dramatically to the care that goes into placement and the matching of the system doing the driving. That let you hear every shift, every change in the set up. It's just the way they are... Its what makes them special; it's also what can leave you cursing on occasions.

Oh yes, if you were waiting on the arrival of a pair of Avalons you definitely, indubitably knew what to expect. Until now, that is!

The new Aspect, which first saw the light of day at the 2009 CES, doesn't just look different, in at least one significant way it really is very different indeed. It's a lesson you learn from the moment the two, unconscionably large crates containing the speakers arrive on your doorstep. This is neither a large nor a particularly heavy design, yet each of the boxes that it's packed in would be sufficient to encase and preserve a life-sized crystal sculpture of a large domestic appliance, complete with separate kitchen sink. Indeed, I can only assume that the extravagance of the packaging is matched by the enormity of the carbon footprint that trails in its wake. I understand that a slightly more elegant solution is being sought, but until it is, purchasers of Aspects (and once people hear them that number should be significant) owe it



to themselves as well as the planet to have the crates removed forthwith.

Once the speakers are freed from their ‘vaults’, you’ll be refreshingly surprised by their compact dimensions and solid feel – not to mention their novel appearance. A fairly conventional, truncated pyramidal cabinet is lifted off the ground by ‘planks’ attached to either side. This allows further shaping of the cabinet itself, a deep V section being formed in its base. The immediate benefits of this construction are obvious, the lack of parallel cabinet sides helping to minimize internal standing waves while the side panels create a stand of incredible stability. However, they actually go a bit deeper than that. In a more conventional approach, the two faces that remain parallel are the top and bottom – the two faces that are furthest apart and potentially therefore the most problematic, supporting the lowest frequency internal resonance. The Aspect’s design does away with that problem. In addition, the side-walls are reinforced and damped by the planks of the ‘stand’, the top face by a half-inch slab of granite. The angled base panels are also smaller and stiffer than a single, horizontal panel would be.

Doesn’t that leave the front and rear panels parallel? Yes, but they are tapered, with no parallel sides and the front baffle’s face is broken up by the drivers. These are the familiar 19mm ceramic dome tweeter and 165mm Nomex-Kevlar bass-mid units seen in other Avalon designs, here arranged in a two and a half way topology. The baffle is as narrow as the drivers allow, the internal volume increased by the depth of the cabinet, which is reflex loaded by a pair of long, downward firing ports, positioned one each and one behind the other (because they’re so long that they cross) in the bottom panels. A deep, felt layer, inset into the baffle, surrounds the tweeter. This is reinforced by a similar, contoured layer mounted in that area of the grille that covers the driver; and yes, the grilles should be left in place. The Aspect is single-wired via one of the excellent Cardas terminal blocks, an arrangement that also adds to the physical integrity of the critical rear panel, avoiding unnecessary cutouts or plastic plates full of binding posts.

The Aspects arrive each fitted with four rubber feet, which are certainly practical and convenient, but as soon as the speakers are positioned properly they should be replaced with the supplied spikes. Which brings us to the whole question of placement – and the least Avalon-like, err... aspect of this speaker. Unlike any other Avalon speaker I’ve used this latest design is so unfussy, indeed, so downright accommodating that you’ll be astonished just how good it sounds simply plonked in the room. So good in fact that you’ll be patting yourself on the back and thanking your lucky stars that you happened on the sweet spot by sheer chance – or because you’ve been especially virtuous in some way. Such celestial rewards are an attractive proposition but they’re well wide of the mark. Believe me; you haven’t found the sweet spot. You are probably not even close. And therein lies the Aspect’s little joke. Like the Wilson Duette, it sounds so good from the off that you’ll think, you’ll be happy to believe, that you’ve got all there is to come from the speakers. But there’s more – much, much more.

For what is a comparatively small cabinet the Aspects produce a prodigious depth of bass and sense of scale. What’s more, they do so with an easy, unforced musical generosity that is engaging and astonishing in equal measure. What it does mean however, is that despite first impressions, really careful positioning (probably a shade further forward than you expect) together with precise spiking and leveling – which means actually tightening the supplied lock nuts – delivers unanticipated dividends. And in another break with Avalon tradition, this is a speaker that seems unfailingly forgiving when it comes to partnering equipment, accentuating the positive aspects of whatever you plug into it. They are neither power hungry nor picky when it comes to preference for valve or solid-state partners. Instead they simply seem to get on with what they’re given, with the 50 Watts supplied by both the Renaissance RA-02 and VAS Citation 2 mono-blocs more than adequate to the task. Move up-market, via the (sadly defunct) Levinson 383 or Burmester 032 integrated amps, all the way to the Ayre KXR/MXR combination and the Aspects simply grow to encompass the quality and demands of the signal you feed them, yet never – ever – losing that sense of easy, relaxed grace and fluid energy that instantly marks

them out as something special.

Hi-fi reviewing is awash with cliché, yet even clichés originate with a grain of truth. So yes, the Aspect does sound uncommonly convincing when you are listening from the kitchen – and yes, even when it's simply providing background music it has that ability to stop you in your tracks and fix your attention on some feature in the playing or lyric. And yes, it makes your feet tap and stops you reading the paper. But the best bit is... it does all that and it does the hi-fi things as well. So sit and listen and you suddenly find yourself deeper into the soundstage, deeper into the performance than you expected. In fact, it's a bit of a surprise package in many, different ways...

Play a solo acoustic instrument and you'll hear all the timbral finesse and harmonic intricacy that you should expect from an Avalon speaker, coupled to considerable transparency and a significant absence of box. Julia Fischer's Bach Sonatas and Partitas (Pentatone PTC 5186072) are a peerless display of expressive poise and understated technique. The Aspects really allow these starkest of compositions to speak, not just because of the uncluttered accuracy of their tonality, their unforced, unconstricting dexterity, but because of the way they combine those virtues with a sense of instrumental body and presence. Play the Starker box (the Speakers Corner re-issue) and the effect becomes even more obvious, the physicality to the bowing, the size of the instrument even more apparent. It's enough to make you pause – and not just because it brings an uncannily lifelike verve and energy to proceedings. Somewhere, deep at the back of your mind, something just threw a switch and your hands are reaching for something meaty and big and bold and bouncy.

And yup, that subconscious impulse was right on the money. Lloyd Cole's anthemic pile-driver of a track, 'Forest Fire' ticks all the boxes. Solid, insistent drum patterns? Yes. Deep, deep, tuneful and propulsive bass? Yes. Sky-high air guitar quotient? Yes. Great vocal, beautifully captured amidst the mayhem? Absolutely. Now, if you want to wick up the intensity another notch, just reach for the Radio Session cut on the DeLuxe Edition bonus disc. The Aspects deliver this gloriously unselfconscious slab of power pop with exactly the sort of joyous abandon that has you reaching first for the volume control – and then for the repeat button.

At which point you might well be forgiven for wondering what exactly is going on? Avalon speakers: aren't they all about finesse and integration, detail, focus and control. Well – up to a point. But, even the giant step forward represented by the Isis, Indra and NP series didn't prepare me for this! These speakers don't just get down and get dirty, they get downright rude and do it with a smile!

So, what gives? Well, in part it's down to a bass voice that's a little more generous, dare I say, a little looser than some of its nearest and dearest. Add to that the standard Avalon trick of getting surprisingly deep and linear low frequencies out of what seem like boxes that are too small to support them and you've got a recipe for fun with a capital F. Next, add the Isis DNA and the unobstructive musical fluidity that comes with it and things get really interesting – and engaging.

Of course, simply turning up the bass is generally a recipe for disaster. That's not what's going on here. Just witness the clarity and impeccable musical manners displayed on everything from Cat Stevens and Janis Ian through to Charlie Byrd. This isn't about quantity per se; it's about deliverable energy – weight and dynamics that are in place and on time, providing exactly the kind of low frequency foundation that's just as important to well-recorded rock music as it is to a full scale orchestral show piece, just as important to the power of a soprano voice or solo violin.

Which invites an interesting question; where exactly does the Aspect fit into the Avalon family. In one sense at least, it doesn't, disturbing an otherwise seamless progression of ever increasing musical insight and bandwidth. The Aspect communicates in a different way – but boy does it communicate. I'd

love to hear it side by side with the Ascendent. I'm sure that the latter offers detail and a deftness that escapes the Aspect, reveals subtleties in the playing and greater spatial coherence too. But I'd also put money on the junior partner coming back loud and proud, because the Aspect is that difficult middle child: louder and more demanding of attention, but cleverer too.

There are speakers out there that have character: this one has personality! Lordy be, I hear you say, Avalon have made a 'Rock' speaker! That they have, but being an Avalon it has all that breeding and subtlety too – not so much a Rock Avalon as an Avalon that Rocks. And it rocks with surprisingly little encouragement and in systems you'd normally never dream of using with an Avalon speaker. And if you are the competition, that's very scary indeed!

Technical Specifications

Type: Two-way, three drive unit design

Ports: Two, down-firing

Treble unit: 25mm composite neodymium dome

Bass unit: 2x 175mm Nomex/Kevlar cone drivers

Nominal impedance: 4 ohms

Bi-wireable: no

Sensitivity: 92dB

Suitable amp power: 15-200W

Dimensions (WxHxD): 39x102x43cm

Weight: 34kg each

Standard finishes: quilted cherry, curly maple or figured walnut

Price per pair: £8,750

Manufacturer:

Avalon Acoustics Inc

URL: www.avalonacoustics.com