

Vienna Acoustics Beethoven Concert Grand loudspeaker

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I told a friend that I'd received a pair of Vienna Acoustics' new Beethoven Concert Grand loudspeakers for review. "They're designed more for music lovers than for audiophiles," he said. I can't imagine a more damning statement—about audiophiles.



506vienna.jpg

"What are you saying?" I sputtered. "That being an audiophile and being a music lover are mutually exclusive? How can a speaker designed for someone who loves music not be a speaker designed for an audiophile?"

His cryptic reply: "Let me know what you think after you listen."

Until the Beethoven Concert Grands arrived in my listening room, I'd never heard a Vienna Acoustics loudspeaker, nor was I very familiar with the company or its products. I'd seen them, of course, at American distributor Sumiko Audio's exhibits at Consumer Electronics Shows, but during those visits I'd paid more attention to the

flashier-looking Sonus Faber line, which Sumiko also imports (footnote 1).

I'd met Vienna Acoustics designer Peter Gansterer during a trip to Europe in winter 2004. It was a social call; I more clearly remember playing with his Rhodesian ridgeback hound in the company's sun-splashed offices than talking about loudspeakers. I do remember running my fingers over the speakers lined up in the office, noting the narrow baffles I'd come to appreciate while reviewing Audio Physic products, and pressing the unusual ribbed, transparent woofer cones, and admiring the overall superb craftsmanship, especially the woodworking.

Then, a few months ago, Sumiko's John Hunter asked if I'd like to review a pair of Vienna Acoustics speakers, and suggested the recently redesigned Beethoven Concert Grand. Knowing nothing about the VA line, or where in it the Beethoven fit, I said, "Okay."

Shortly thereafter, two tall, narrow boxes arrived, each light enough for one person to handle, but I decided to wait a few days for Hunter to arrive and go through Sumiko's traditional speaker-setup routine with Jennifer Warnes' "Ballad of the Runaway Horse." It didn't take him long to discover that the Beethoven Concert Grands sounded best when placed very near where every other pair of speakers has sounded best in my room.

Description

As John Hunter went about his work, I couldn't help noticing the quality of the Beethoven's workmanship and the careful attention paid to small details. The cabinet's curved front and rear baffles, meticulously veneered and lacquered, are 1½" thick. The powder-black, high-pressure, die-cast aluminum vestigial stand, fitted with thick steel spikes, is among the sturdiest I've seen. It not only lifts the cabinet's base off the floor, it wraps around and protects the base like a scuff guard, its thick metal curving and tucking under the speaker for extra-rigid support. A narrow insert runs about two-thirds of the way up the speakers rear baffle and incorporates two ports and a single pair of knurled speaker terminals, and is finished in an opaque, soft-textured black that was especially pleasing to the touch.

Think of the Beethoven Concert Grand as a small (42.7" H by 7.5" W by 15.7" D), two-way, rear-ported

speaker run almost full-range, with the good fortune to be integrated into a ported passive subwoofer-and-base. The five drive-units are all newly designed by Vienna: a 1.1" hand-coated, silk-dome tweeter (made by ScanSpeak), a 6" X3P-cone midrange driver, and three transparent, 7" XPP Spidercone woofers. While they're all mounted on the same baffle, the midrange is internally isolated in its own chamber (its rear port shares the rear baffle with the larger woofer port). The result is 21" of woofer power that, thanks to being divided among three drivers, promises to be able to move a great deal of air while being fast and responsive.

XPP is a proprietary, Japan-sourced thermoplastic that VA molds in its own tools, then sends to ScanSpeak for final driver assembly. X3P is XPP with three more new polymers, to give the midrange driver an unusually wide bandwidth and high resolution of detail, per VA. The woofers are ribbed with XPP for stiffness. The midrange and woofer drivers take advantage of a newly developed inverted rubber surround that VA claims offers a "breakthrough" in "no-loss" damping of cone edge resonances.

Also new in the Beethoven Concert Grand is a linear crossover layout to which are directly connected new gold-silver-alloy speaker terminals and new, proprietary internal copper wiring. Crossover components include 1%-tolerance MKP capacitors and 1% metal-film resistors. Even the grille is special: its aluminum frame is fitted with a V-shaped phase diffuser to control tweeter dispersion. VA specifies 91dB sensitivity, a frequency range of 28Hz–22kHz, and a nominal impedance of 4 ohms. Sounds like an audiophile speaker to me.

First impressions

But Beautiful: The Best of Shirley Horn (CD, Verve B0004068-02) had arrived the day before the Beethoven Concert Grands were set up, and I very much wanted to hear the new bonus live tracks, recorded at New York City's Au Bar in January 2005, eight months before Horn's death (and when she was still playing piano in concert). I popped the disc in the Musical Fidelity SACD player and went straight to the first bonus cut, track 12. (I liked the idea of first hearing something totally unfamiliar.) Halfway through Billy Eckstine's "Jelly, Jelly," with Roy Hargrove on trumpet, the first word that sprang to mind was *vivid*. The second was *rich*. The third was *inviting*, followed closely by *delicate*.

Horn's voice had a buttery, palpable presence, her piano sounded warm and clear, and drummer Steve Williams' snare had a nice *pop* and pleasing sizzle. Hargrove's trumpet was a little dry, Ed Howard's bass a bit prominent and boomy. There was good soundstage depth, but that often goes along with excess midbass. However, not knowing the recording, I wasn't drawing any conclusions.

I skipped back to the familiar first track, "I Just Found Out About Love," originally released in 1991 on Horn's comeback album, *You Won't Forget Me* (CD, Verve 847 482-2). I concluded that the Beethoven Grand was a vivid, rich, inviting, and delicate-sounding speaker that produced good soundstage depth, but not because its midbass was excessive or boomy—that was an issue with the recording and/or mixing of "Jelly, Jelly." In contrast, the Beethoven's bass was articulate, detailed, and extended on the earlier track.

I then played the entire CD, the speakers producing in me a relaxation I usually associate with cognac. When the disc ended, I thought, *This speaker is designed more to draw you into the music than to bowl you over with it*. At the end of that first session, I concluded that while the Beethoven was drawing me in by slightly recessing and softening the presence region, designer Gansterer hadn't overplayed that card—the sound never led to boredom, nor did I hear any overt colorations. It was more a feeling and a sensation.

Wondering how the Beethoven might handle a sparkly harpsichord, I pulled out a Vox Box of music by François Couperin, performed by Alan Curtis (3 LPs, Vox SVBX 5448), that I've enjoyed for (gulp!) 36 years. The harpsichord—whose strings, unlike a piano's, are not struck but plucked—can sound raucous,

<http://www.stereophile.com/floorloudspeakers/506vienna/index.html#oPvpjpb75splXWLF.97>

but should sound brilliant (as in *bright*), with a buzzy undertone. The Beethoven took a bit of edge off the transient attack, but not to where it sounded muted or soft, and there was plenty of air behind the instrument.

Footnote 1: Sumiko Audio advertises on Michael Fremer's website, www.musicangle.com.

Recordings of solo piano demonstrated that the Beethoven was capable of handling that most difficult instrument without muting or softening it, though the accent was more on the piano's felt and wood than on its strings. One disc in a treasure trove of classical LPs I was recently given is a 1981 Chandos Super-Analog recording of pianist Lydia Artymiw playing Schumann's *Davidsbündlertänze* and the *Humoreske* in B-flat Major (Chandos ABR 1029), recorded direct to Studer A80 at 30ips without noise reduction or compression. It's a wonderfully spacious, well-focused recording of a solo piano, though the Rosslyn Hill Chapel, in Hampstead, England, sounds somewhat hard and reflective. The Beethovens produced an impressively large acoustic—not in the same league as the [Wilson Audio Specialties MAXX2s](#), but big enough to suggest a large space—and reproduced the piano's transients and the hall's reflective character with sufficient speed and detail to make this a compelling listening experience.

Next I played the great Johnny Hartman's *Once in Every Life* (LP, Beehive BH7012), recorded in 1980 and impeccably engineered by Ben Rizzi, who today runs the Astoria Sound recording complex in Long Island City. Past his singing prime and sometimes forgetting the words, the deep-voiced Hartman still manages to turn in a superb performance, backed by Count Basie tenor-sax man Frank Wess, pianist Billy Taylor, and an ensemble of lesser-known but equally talented sidemen. Because Hartman's deep baritone can produce bloat and congestion, it's a tough test of a speaker's (and a room's) midbass–midrange clarity. The Beethoven Concert Grand delivered Hartman's rich voice with admirable clarity and appropriate warmth. I'm used to a bit more percussive edge to Taylor's piano in "Easy Living," but the Beethoven expressed Joe Wilder's flugelhorn with exceptionally rich, wet, Technicolor-like textures. The refined yet detailed-sounding Beethoven completely aced this test of midbass clarity and freedom from midbass coloration.

Okay, so the Beethoven Concert Grand could handle solo and small-ensemble jazz and classical recordings exceptionally well. How about rock and large-scale symphonic music? I returned from a visit to Classic Records, where I'd witnessed the remastering of the Who's *Tommy*, with test lacquers of "Underture" and "Pinball Wizard." These weren't the final versions—when I played them through the big Wilson MAXX2s, they sounded slightly brittle on top and had a midrange suckout—but they were dynamically astounding, with startling clarity and resolution of inner detail.

I didn't expect the Beethoven to be able to express the Wilson's dynamic range, and it wasn't, but neither was it noticeably limited macrodynamically—at least until I cranked it up to high SPLs. That's when I discovered the speaker's most serious limitation: It didn't like to be pushed hard or played extremely loud. When it was, its pleasingly smooth tonal demeanor turned a bit hard and occasionally downright nasty, and dynamic compression set in. The good news is that I'm talking about playback levels that will approach the excessive in rooms of small to medium size—SPLs you'll hear at a live rock concert but are unlikely to experience in a concert hall or jazz club. In other words, the Beethoven Concert Grand shouldn't be cranked way up in a big room.

When I turned the volume down to less than ear-splitting levels for the *Tommy* lacquers, I found the Beethoven more than capable of rocking, with very good bass extension and weight on the nimble-fingered John Entwistle's bass parts and a nice *thwack* to Keith Moon's tom-toms and kick drum.

Long-term listening pleasure

For well over a month, the Beethoven Concert Grand provided me with exceptionally well-balanced, nearly full-range listening pleasure. On top, the speaker was silky smooth, airy, open, and neither overly aggressive (unless pushed) nor frustratingly polite and soft. Bass extension—down to the 30Hz area—was on the full, rich, supple side, but never sloppy or thick. The midrange was equally expressive and vivid, but

not to where it was cloying or sounded like a coloration. The speaker's rhythmic agility was well matched to its transient performance: not the fastest and cleanest, but pleasing and natural to the point where I felt the best-sounding recordings I own were worth a spin, while the shriller, less listenable ones became more pleasing. That strikes me as an excellent real-world balance. Wine analogy: less Cabernet than Merlot.

While the Beethoven could rock and deliver large-scale symphonic thrills at reasonable listening levels, it excelled at putting me in the room with small acoustic ensembles—especially those recorded live. Then, its airy, smooth, somewhat laid-back, enriched harmonic presentation offered a sufficiently well-developed illusion of reality to keep me coming back night after night, never feeling as if I were missing anything, and keeping me guessing the speaker's price.

Conclusions

I didn't learn the price of Vienna Acoustics' Beethoven Concert Grand until just before sitting down to write this review. It came as a bit of a shock.

This speaker is meticulously built, from the cabinet, to the 10 coats of lacquer applied to the natural veneers, to the custom drivers and crossover and speaker terminals, and it offers a pleasingly detailed, harmonically rich sound complete with the unlimited spatial vistas usually offered by narrow-baffled speakers.

The only clues to the Beethoven's low price were how it reacted to being pushed hard to perform at ultrahigh SPLs, and its restricted dynamic presentation when compared to more expensive systems. So while I hoped that the price tag would be well under \$10,000/pair, my guess of \$6000/pair was still too high by 25%. I like when that happens. No, \$4500 isn't pocket change, but for what you get, the Beethoven Concert Grand is an outstanding value. How many audiophile products can you say that about, other than a \$90,000 turntable?

The Vienna Acoustics Beethoven Concert Grand is an excellent value, both for its high build quality and for its carefully and pleasingly balanced set of sonic attributes, and its limitations in dynamics and output won't be issues for most listeners. Designer Peter Gansterer has nipped and tucked with surgical precision to produce an outstandingly musical loudspeaker for a very reasonable price.

I spent more than a month listening with complete satisfaction to every kind of music, only occasionally wishing for that Maxell Moment that only bigger, more powerful—and more powerfully priced—speakers can provide. I'll take Gansterer's carefully crafted compromises over a speaker that can play louder and perhaps faster, but fails to deliver the near-full-range tonal and harmonic satisfaction consistently served up by the Beethoven Concert Grand.

While no speaker will please everyone, and some listeners will be drawn to a brighter, more forward sound, many of you will still be happy to come home to the Vienna Acoustics Beethoven Concert Grands long after you've written your check for \$4500. And that will be true whether you're an audiophile, a music lover, or both.