

# Vienna Acoustics Klimt Speaker System

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**Price:** \$58,390 **At A Glance:** Huge dynamics • Enormous, transparent soundstage • Foundation shaking, boom-free, tuneful bass • Exquisite musical delicacy



To produce room-filling sound, a speaker has to move a lot of air—even in a relatively small room. Moving a lot of air, particularly in a big room, necessitates a large woofer placed in an even larger box.

Refrigerator-sized speakers were commonplace in audiophiles' living rooms back in the 1950s. When stereo arrived and required two large expanses of wood-framed grille cloth, significant others objected. Downsizing began, aided in part by Edgar Villchur's invention of the sealed-box acoustic-suspension woofer.

To the detriment of good sound, speakers have been downsizing ever since, further exacerbated by surround sound's need for multiple speakers. No wonder we live today in a world of fist-sized, tinny-sounding cubes augmented by puny, "long-throw" fart boxes posing as subwoofers. And that's when people allow their speakers to be seen in a room at all.

Today's big speakers have come a long way since hi-fi's early days when boxy studio monitors were camouflaged with veneer and sent packing into living rooms. Take a good look at Vienna Acoustics' Music floorstander at the top of the Klimt line. It's a large, gracefully tall and slender, magnificent-looking piece of furniture that just happens to reproduce sound. Clearly, if you're building a dedicated home theater and want to place speakers out of sight behind a scrim, you aren't likely to make the considerable investment in furniture-grade speakers.



### **The Kliment Series**

Named for Viennese painter Gustav Klimt (1862–1918), the line's various models take their names from Klimt works of art. These include the large, floorstanding Music, the Poetry center channel, and the stand-mounted Kiss, which I used as surrounds (Vienna sells them for stereo use as well). You could also build a system around four Musics or four Kisses. Google Klimt for more about the artist and, if you're interested, to see the paintings these speakers are named for.

Vienna claims that the new coaxial, flat midrange/silk-dome tweeter driver produces a true point source for frequencies in the seven octaves that cover the human vocal range and beyond. The stiff, flat panel is made of a proprietary blend of materials that lets the tweeter and midrange driver be physically in the same plane. In theory (but not necessarily in practice), this should produce phase- and timecoherent response. Unlike that old blue-coned Jensen coax rotting on the package shelf of your AMC Pacer, this design avoids midrange wave-launch interference since the tweeter and its support flange aren't in the way—not that you'd care in the car.



The coaxial driver rests in its own adjustable subenclosure. You can both swivel the driver and adjust its rake angle toward the listening position regardless of the positioning of the Music's main cabinet and of the Kiss' cabinet and stand. This produces great placement flexibility and image optimization, and it allows the all-important midrange driver to be physically decoupled from the bass cabinet's vibrations. In theory, this should reduce colorations and produce more stable imaging.

### **Facing the Music**

Available in Piano Black lacquer and Sapele veneer finish, the Music is a true furniture-grade product built by an Italian fine furniture manufacturer to Vienna Acoustics' specs. Despite its imposing size, the stunning curved lines and impeccable finish let the big speaker fit nicely in my moderately sized living



The Poetry sat in between the pair of Musics on its dedicated stand. It houses a pair of the rearported 9-inch woofers mounted on either side of a coaxial driver for a claimed frequency response of 32 Hz to 20 kHz. It also claims an unusually wide dynamic range for a center-channel speaker. Despite the fact that my sample was finished in stealthy Piano Black lacquer on all sides, I couldn't help but notice that the Poetry was in the house. It was what most visitors commented on first.



It wasn't easy to shoehorn both of the Kiss speakers into tight corners at the back of the room. However, the swiveling midrange/tweeter head made it effortless to optimize the sound.

### **A Pair of REL Subwoofers**

For this review, I teamed the Klimt speakers with a pair of REL Britannia B1 subwoofers. They added the foundation to a system that already claimed to be capable of performance below 22 Hz. REL's flagship Britannia B1 features a forward-firing 12-inch long-throw, dual-ported, bottomvented woofer driven by a 500watt, DC-coupled MOSFET amplifier. Claimed in-room response is a stomach-turning 13 Hz. The front-positioned REL handled the LFE channel, while the surround-channel speaker terminals drove the

high-level inputs of the REL that I placed in the rear of the room, to the side of the listening position. This helped to create full-range surround channels.



## **That's a Mess of Transducers, but \$58k Worth?**

Vienna's setup whiz Patrick Butler dialed it all in, without using electronic room EQ. When you spend this kind of money, you can be sure that Vienna won't leave you to do it yourself, unless you want to.

Otherwise, your dealer will do the setup, hopefully as expertly as Butler did. Don't even think about getting a system like this without driving it with topgrade electronics. The system sounded good fronted by the Integra DHC-9.9 surround processor, but it really came to life when the Cary Cinema 11a (HT, May 2010) directed. Parasound's Halo A51 multichannel amplifier provided the power.

In terms of scale, the Klimt array painted an enormous sonic picture and pushed huge amounts of energy through the air toward the listener. Butler played a Bluray Disc of Jeff Beck performing live at Ronnie Scott's, and the presentation was effortless. The ease with which the system produced the deepest, pitch-correct electric bass notes and the most intense cymbal crashes and woody rim shots put this system in a league of its own. It easily competed with my two-channel rig in all of the parameters I hold fundamentally critical, thanks in part to the uncompressed, lossless audio we're now so lucky to have with Blu-ray. Spatially, this recording's surround sound was far more enveloping than two-channel sound and easily put you in the club. With big, full-range surrounds, the sensation of full envelopment in the environment went from suggested to undeniable. I cranked the volume to center-front-table nightclub levels. The system's dynamic capabilities—combined with its wide-range frequency response and enormous sense of scale—induced first immersive physical awe and then laughter as all of my senses became overheated and then overwhelmed.

This system includes ten 9-inch woofers, two 12-inch subwoofers, and five 7-inch coaxial midrange/tweeter units precisely aimed at the listening position. It pressurizes the room and almost leaves you feeling like you're under attack, but in a good way. The multichannel SACD layer of Beck's melancholy masterpiece *Sea Change* left me mesmerized. Each acoustic guitar strum body-surfed across my torso, leaving in its wake all of Nigel Godrich's backdrop of shimmering electronic bleeps and blops to crystallize and then evaporate into the three-dimensional ether. Few fanatical two-channel audiophiles forced to accommodate a multichannel home theater system into their listening room would feel as if they were sacrificing or compromising anything with this system in terms of scale, spatiality, or dynamic range at both ends of the scale. This system's spatial and tonal coherence was faultless. Low-level resolution was equally impressive.

## **Cinema and the Vienna Acoustics House Sound**

Vienna Acoustics' chief designer Peter Gansterer attempts to achieve a uniform house sound throughout his speaker lineup. I've reviewed a few over the years, and the Klimt toes the line—but on steroids. While everyone talks up neutrality, every speaker represents a series of compromises. The final result depends on where you put the speakers on axis, off axis, and along the spectral continuum—and how you set them up to interact with your room and your listening position. That's one reason why all of the speakers at a hi-fi show—including the world's most respected—sound different from one another, even though many of the best speakers share common attributes.



Even the biggest Klartone speaker exhibits the somewhat relaxed and very inviting Vienna Acoustics sound. This includes a slight warmth-inducing boost in the lower midbass and a slight dip in the presence region that draws the listener in rather than attacking outward. It also features a response that sounds somewhat rolled off above 10 kHz. This makes both bright and tonally neutral recordings sound more pleasing. The incredibly flexible rotating and rack-angle-adjustable head unit lets you (or your installer) dial in your balance preference by altering the direction of the axis to alter the perceived balance of the midrange/treble region at a given listening position.

Since art informs the marketing, if not the line's design philosophy, I'm happy to say that the Klartone system is artfully voiced to produce rich, satisfying musical performance as well as exciting cinema sound. An assortment of three-channel RCA Living Stereo orchestral SACDs demonstrated that the Music and

Poetry produce a truly seamless and enormous panoramic soundstage. Small center-channel speakers can appear as tiny islands of sound in between the larger left and right speakers. There can be sonic voids halfway between, especially when the voicing doesn't match. That wasn't the case here.



### **An Impressive Balancing Act With a Few Small Reservations**

A famous Rubinstein piano concerto engineered by the legendary K.E. Wilkinson demonstrated that the Klippel system was not so soft sounding that the piano lost its percussive edge. Instead, the attack was appropriately intense, and the harmonic structure was complex. Violins had a satisfying amount of sheen and grit. Can you find more air and sharper edges from other speakers? Yes. But those can be annoying sounding on bright recordings and on many overly processed soundtracks. Great musical scores like the ones recorded by Shawn Murphy (Dances With Wolves, Titanic, Glory) sounded fully realized through this system, which is equally impressive at reproducing sound effects. The difference between one-note boom bass and harmonically complex low frequencies brought forth the weight and complex structure of explosions. The sound designers tune these things depending upon the intended weight of the effect and its placement in a scene's dramatic structure. This work often gets lost in the one-note boom that tiny box subwoofers produce. In this system, two really capable subwoofers placed at opposite sides of the room combined with the main speakers' prodigious low-frequency performance. During District 9, this occasionally produced lateral, foundation-shifting, shuddering sensations that were truly frightening. The

big full-range surrounds helped produce a fuller sense of envelopment in a three-dimensional acoustic. The surround sonic action was unusually large compared with what the typical tiny tots can produce. This system produced a more physical (and sometimes more frightening) sound.



Shortcomings? When I played the multichannel Dark Side of the Moon SACD mix, I was somewhat disappointed by the sound of the alarm bells. They should ring and assault the senses. Instead, they were a bit polite and soft. I also found that the presence recess somewhat reduced dialogue intelligibility at low SPLs. However, at higher volumes, the big center speaker was more convincing with dialogue, particularly in terms of scale, than any center channel I've encountered—with the exception of the big one from Aerial Acoustics.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, the Klont system lived up to its price tag and then some. Blindfolded, you'd hear that you were in the presence of a big, dynamic, full-range, and incredibly capable system. You might not know how much it cost, but you'd know it was expensive. With your eyes open, you'd see that you were paying for gorgeous cabinetry and superb fit and finish. This system is aimed at wealthy folks with a big room who need an elegant-looking speaker system that's equally adept at reproducing music and film sound. It hits the intended target dead center. So, wealthy folks, don't be ashamed of having speakers showing in your great room. I had the Klont here for last winter's Super Bowl. While the game looked good on the 100-inch Stewart screen with a JVC DLA-HD750 projector, my friends all agreed it was the best-sounding Super Bowl they'd ever heard.