

# Vienna Acoustics Liszt Loudspeakers - The Audio Beat

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Let's start with delivery: not only did the company tell me exactly when the speakers would arrive, they turned up strapped to a pallet and in immaculate condition, the cartons wrapped in a plastic shrink as weather protection. The cartons themselves are just as thoughtfully executed. Thick cardboard skins wrap deep, resilient foam end pieces that preserve and protect the speakers and their components, a solid-foam accessory box adding an extra layer of protection to the top of the speaker where it's not shielded by the pallet. It might seem a little odd to get quite so excited about a cardboard box, but consider this: the single skin structure and foam skeletons mean that not only is the packaging lightweight (saving the planet in terms of carbon footprint and you money in terms of shipping costs), there is substantial air space to absorb any penetrating impact. But once unpacked, the carton can fold flat for storage and even the foam can be condensed.

Actually read the instructions and assembly is simplicity itself. I've rarely come across a manual that is such a model of helpful clarity when it comes to both assembly and setup. The substantial cast-steel outriggers fit perfectly, as does the fixing hardware. The spikes that anchor the speakers to the ground are truly things of beauty: massive in terms of both diameter and length, with knurled top caps and locking collars that mean they can be easily and precisely adjusted from above, so attitude adjustments,

rake angle and rock-like stability are easily achieved. You even get proper footers with nice, deep pits for the tips, so there's no danger of the speaker walking off its protective discs as you are moving it on a hard floor.

Each Liszt has a single pair of terminals placed at the bottom of the cabinet's rear baffle, making for tidy and cost-effective cabling and installation. Unified ground paths in the crossover and concentrating funds into single cable runs are generally good things, while keeping cables as short as possible and steering them well away from reflex ports is also to be applauded. The terminals themselves will take bare wire, spades or banana plugs, the large locking collars making for really secure connection. Even the grilles are spot on: thin covers with padded magnetic fixings that ensure that they're easy to fit and remove as required, protecting when necessary but easily banished for serious listening.

Yep, when it comes to the seemingly trivial details, Vienna Acoustics have really gone the extra mile. I say "seemingly" because despite their apparently peripheral nature, all of these things will have a direct impact on the way your speakers end up sounding. How so? Because, just like every product has "a package," it also has a potential -- the maximum performance it can possibly achieve. Sadly, just as few products come with a truly complete package, few ever achieve their potential performance. However, the easier the manufacturer makes it to work with the product, the easier it is to install and adjust, and the clearer and more comprehensive the instructions, the more of that potential you are going to realize. Obviously, that's always a good thing, but in this case it's especially good, because when it comes to the Liszt, there's an awful lot of potential to play with.

This is a particularly handsome and beautifully engineered speaker, a beauty that's as much about conception as execution. Tall, slim and upright, the Liszt offers somewhat awkward proportions until you fit its outrigger feet, at which point it takes on a far more solid and purposeful appearance rather more in keeping with its substantial 100-pound mass, a weight that's contributed to by no fewer than seven internal braces. The cabinet is available as standard in black and white lacquer finishes or a cherry veneer, along with the premium rosewood supplied on the review pair, a beautiful, sustainable but nonetheless costly option. All are paired with the black-lacquered front and rear baffles, black hardware and grilles.

The Liszt is a three-way system employing three 178mm (7") bass drivers and a 152mm (6") dual-concentric midrange/tweeter. All drivers are in-house designed and built, their unique materials and construction another clear indicator that far from following the me-too speaker-design herd, Vienna Acoustics knows its own mind and follows its own distinct path. Let's take the midrange driver as an example. The flat white diaphragm is molded from the company's proprietary X3P polymer, in this case mixed with glass fibers for added stiffness. The flat surface is supported and stiffened by a set of radial ribs (or buttresses) in what Vienna Acoustics term a "spider cone" configuration. Look carefully and you can just see the ribs spreading like spokes around the tweeter "hub." The result is stiff, light and mechanically well behaved, helped in no small part by the massive 50mm (2") voice coil, in the middle of which sits the 30mm (1.2") coated silk-domed tweeter.

Vienna's approach offers a significant theoretical advantage over other dual-concentric drivers, the lack of a cone flare removing the horn-loaded coupling of the tweeter in more conventional designs. The problem lies not in the horn loading itself, but in the fact that the relationship between the tweeter and the horn mouth/walls is constantly changing -- which helps explain the ever-widening flange that surrounds KEF's

UniQ drivers. Of course, the Vienna tweeter's "baffle" is also moving, but because it isn't loading the tweeter's output in the same way, and the majority of its motion is at frequencies that are outside the high-frequency pass band, it's a far less significant issue. Both the tweeter and the midrange driver are vented, the latter by a rear-firing port. The three bass drivers also use X3P polymer spider cones, this time without the addition of glass fiber. They are run in parallel but are differentially reflex loaded, the bass cabinet being split by a sloping internal baffle. Again, the ports are rear-facing.

Crossover slopes are modified first or second order, with the bass roll-off placed at a surprisingly high 280Hz, a testament to Vienna's ability to use its proprietary cone material to control the mechanical and out-of-band behavior of its drivers. Overall system efficiency is quoted as 91dB with a frequency response that extends from an impressive 28Hz to 25kHz -- although the roll-offs aren't specified. Load is a relatively benign 4 ohms, and whilst I don't measure review products, listening to the Liszt, there's a ring of truth to the sound and drive characteristics that lend credibility to those numbers.

One set of measurements that I can give you with certainty are the speaker's dimensions: each Liszt stands 198mm (7.8") wide, 1148mm (45.2") tall and 435mm (17.2") deep, without the outriggers and spikes attached. Those will add another 100mm (4") of width and anything up to 50mm (2") of height, depending on how high you set the spikes. It makes the Liszt a tall speaker, but it is not as visually imposing as you might expect, due to the narrow frontal aspect -- of which more later.

**W**ith the speakers assembled and roughly positioned, there are several things you should know before getting to the setup. The first and most obvious (which hopefully you didn't discover inadvertently during unpacking) is that the top section of the cabinet is a full-depth, pivoting head, mounted on a large-diameter, smoothly turning and centrally located hub. It's a simplified version of the arrangement employed throughout the brand's flagship Klimt series, dispensing with the beautifully executed, geared rake and toe-in adjusters in favor of a simple manual lateral offset adjustment. Sensibly, once you've arrived at your preferred setting, the hub is easily lockable. Even more sensibly (but less surprisingly), Vienna Acoustics supply the long hex-tipped screwdriver for the job. Of course, this introduces a new variable into the setup process: the relationship between the tweeter/midrange head unit and the bass cabinet. It also leaves you wondering what to adjust in which order.

The process is actually quite straightforward once you get your head around the logic. Start with the head unit inline with the cabinet. Adjust the bass cabinet for fore and aft positioning, lateral spacing (probably slightly wider than you expect) and toe-in. Zero off the speakers for vertical and ensure that they're the same height off the floor. Now, release the lock on the hub and start to gradually angle the head unit in until you achieve optimum balance and focus. The idea here is to split the toe-in between the bass towers and the head unit, allowing you to balance dispersion/integration through the crossover point, achieving better integration. It also has the incidental benefit of standing the bass towers somewhat straighter in the room, which looks rather neater. Don't try pointing the bass elements straight ahead and using the heads to achieve all of the toe-in; you'll end up with poorer bass response, a result of running the cabinets parallel with the side walls (I'm not entirely sure why this is the case, but it is universal and both consistently and readily demonstrable) as well as too wide a lateral displacement of bass and midrange drivers.

That will get you a long way toward rewarding sound, but there's still more to come if you are prepared to stretch the setup envelope even further. As comprehensive as the instructions are, there's still plenty more performance potential inside the Liszt just waiting to get out. Those large spikes are for more than just show, and the fact that you can adjust them so easily from above makes fine-tuning of speaker attitude simplicity itself, making the setting of the spikes part of the range of adjustment rather than an end point. This is something that came out of my interaction with Stirling Trayle, and the more we played with it, the more remarkable the results became, to the point where we started to discuss the methodology and develop a systematic approach -- since dubbed the "6Axis Set Up," as it involves all six planes of adjustment (forward/back, sideways, offset/toe-in, height, rake, cant/azimuth). You can do this with any speaker that offers adjustable feet, but few offer the sheer range or ease of adjustment you get with the Liszt.

Once you've done the (three) standard steps that apply to most setups (adjustment to the rear and side walls as well as toe-in), it's time to get the speakers into neutral attitude -- meaning vertical and the same height, for which you'll need a laser level. That's the point we've already reached with the Liszt setup. The next step is to play with the height of the speakers off the floor, adjusting all four spikes in concert, raising and lowering the speakers by a complete turn at a time. You'll soon get a feel for what's happening and whether or not you get better bass weight, pace and integration by raising or lowering the speakers -- and by how much. As you zero in, you'll probably be working in fractions somewhat smaller than a quarter of a turn, but the accessibility of the spikes and their large knurled tops make even small tweaks easy.

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Once you've really dialed in the bass, it's time to adjust the rake angle and azimuth. The Liszt is a tall speaker, and I ended up raking them slightly forward. Make this adjustment by raising (or lowering) the rear spikes. You can get a sense of what's required in the listening seat. Likewise, rocking side to side slowly will reveal whether or not the speakers need to be angled in or out from vertical in the lateral plane. If you move your head sideways and you hear the sound lock in and gain energy and attack, that indicates the speaker should be tilted into the soundstage slightly. If you get that sense on one side only, the opposite speaker probably needs to tilt out. What you are hearing here are pressure variations in how evenly the speaker drives the room. Think in those terms and it becomes clear that these are adjustments and a technique that apply to almost all speakers, but the nature of the Liszt, with its tall, narrow baffle and easily accessible adjustments, makes this a speaker that demonstrates just how effectively such adjustments can extend musical performance. As good as the Liszt sounds in the default, vertical attitude, really dialing it in raises its performance several levels, to a point where it starts to question the value of products at several times its price.

A lot of that appeal lies in the innate sense of balance and integration that Vienna Acoustics have achieved with this speaker, something that is very much the company's party piece. Naturally, the material and constructional consistency across the bass and mid drivers is a significant bonus, as is the fact that they're all purpose-built in-house. But it also reflects and serves to remind us just what you can achieve with the carefully tailored mechanical response and excellent self-damping that are possible with polymer cone materials. Like the Wilson Benesch speakers that bear more than a passing resemblance to the Viennas, both sonically and technologically, the sense of color and physical presence they bring to recordings is a world away from the lean, mean excesses that can bedevil speakers built around aluminum or ceramic drivers.

Of course, there are plenty of lousy speakers using polymer cones too, and a few decent ones that employ metal or ceramic drivers. As always, there are no silver-bullet solutions in hi-fi. It's not what you use but how you use it that matters, and that's very much the core strength of the Vienna designs. Their polymer cones are undoubtedly extremely clever and very well behaved, while their complex structure keeps weight down. But they'll never be as light as ceramic or as stiff as aluminum, meaning that in a straight fight, they lose out in terms of microdynamic textures and leading-edge rise time. That's where the designer's balancing act comes in. Their neutrality and lack of ringing mean that they are devoid of edge or glare, so it makes sense to combine them with a coated soft-dome tweeter with similar sonic characteristics to avoid tonal discontinuities, using a light-touch, low-order crossover that will have a minimal impact on system dynamics. Throw in a carefully constructed dispersive cabinet design that will dissipate rather than store mechanical energy and you have a combination that makes the most of the drivers' strengths and ameliorates (or at least doesn't aggravate) any weaknesses.

That might not sound too clever or sexy, but believe me it's remarkable just how many designs fail the simple test of internal logic, irrespective of their price. The Liszt is the product of careful consideration, sound engineering, experience and a healthy disregard for fashion -- and all of this shows when you listen to it.

I ran the Liszt with a variety of matching electronics, ranging from the Naim NAC-N272 and NAP-300DR on the one hand to the Audio Research Reference 10 and Reference 150 SE on the other, with various others in between. Indeed, the Liszts have that welcome ability to play nice with all comers, whether it's the kids from next door or a bunch of holiday makers. They just get on with it, bringing their own strengths to the mix while also showing off their partners. The Naim setup was delightfully quick, engaging and forceful; the Audio Research electronics were simply delightful. I also used the speakers for a series of cable and cartridge comparisons, and each time the different strengths and characters of the partnering products, as well as the differences between them, were laid bare. This essential honesty also means that the speaker really responds to careful setup and attention to detail. I can't imagine a speaker as inherently viceless as the Liszt ever sounding actively bad, but boy do they respond to input. You do it and you'll definitely hear the result, whether it's tightening the spike collars, cleaning the connectors on your speaker cables or doing something much further upstream.

As I've already suggested, the core strength of the Liszt lies in its ability to present the tonal and harmonic structure of instruments and voices, their body, shape and presence. It throws an impressively dimensioned and coherent acoustic space and peoples it with convincing, three-dimensional images. You hear it in the broad spread of the orchestra on the Batiashvili/Salonen Shostakovich Violin Concerto No.1 [Deutsche Grammophon Gesellschaft B0015203-02], the natural weight, complexity and texture of the

bass drum and timps, their separation from the articulate and resonant bowing of the string basses, the rich presence of the brass. You hear it in the easy separation between horns and trombones on the Maazel/VPO Sibelius Symphony No.1 (from the *Decca Sound -- The Analogue Years* [Universal/Decca 478 5437]) and just how apparent the identity of each separate group of instruments is as Sibelius dovetails them into his extended, sweeping movements.

But as impressive as these Vienna Acoustics speakers are on large-scale classical recordings, their quality really starts to shine on smaller, more intimate material, where their portrayal of individual instruments is almost ghostly at times. Just listen to the track "St. Thomas" from Sonny Rollins' *Saxophone Colossus* LP [Prestige OJC20 291-2] and you'll hear it in the attack and hollow tone, the different volume and timbre of each of Max Roach's drums. You'll hear it in the unmistakable nature of Rollins' sax, the column of vibrating air and bell-mouth that produce the sound. And you'll hear it in the effortless separation of the four instruments on this mono recording. There's a real sense of instrumental presence and substance, harmonic development and tonal breadth to the sound, with no glaze, glare or edge to distract from the work and identity of the instruments. But it's on tracks like this that you get to dial in the Liszt's performance. That natural tonality and harmonic development are pretty much a given with this speaker. The dynamics, transparency, rhythmic articulation and immediacy all come from the setup. So if the speaker is sounding overly warm or muddled, you've got some work to do. Fortunately, their design and nature make things easy for you.

With the speakers working at their best, you might not achieve the see-through transparency and micro-textural definition that are possible with smaller, bandwidth-limited designs or those that trim harmonics in the pursuit of speed, but there's no shortage of presence, immediacy and impact, rhythmic articulation, musical momentum and sheer, hook-you-up, foot-tapping fun. A recent discovery is the Bahama Soul Club's double LP *The Cuban Tapes* [BUYU Records BU 013 VL], a joyous riot of Latin brass, rhythms and re-mix madness that's full of life, energy and attitude and a sure-fire recommendation for anybody who liked Us3. The tracks combine Bahama Soul Club's signature jazz/soul mash-up with guest rhythms and guest vocals from current Cuban stars like Telmary Diaz and late greats like Bessie Smith. It's a recording that's full of different textures, environmental sounds and samples, each with its own acoustic or timbral thumbprint. The Liszt does a brilliant job of revealing the layers while also building the tracks' musical momentum, shape and motive energy. There's a holistic coherence and a substance to the sound that make its rhythms infectious and its sheer energy and presence compelling.

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Sure, if I play it on the Wilson Sasha 2/WATCH Dog setup, driven by the dual VTL S-400 II amps, then I get even more space, more drive, better separation and more bandwidth, but then it's a system that's a lot more demanding -- especially when it comes to space and cable -- and a lot more expensive. That's the key to what makes the Liszt so special. It delivers a remarkably cultured, rounded and engaging performance, it does it on the end of a range of systems, and it does it for something approaching a



reasonable price. Yes, you can always get more -- but it's going to be difficult in a smaller, more versatile or more affordable package than this. What I love about this speaker is that it manages to sound big and solid, even in small rooms and on the end of smaller systems. If you want the last word in detail, you might well look elsewhere, but if you want the sense of the music and the sense of it being performed in your room, then the Liszt will take some beating.

Beatrice Rana won both the silver medal and the audience prize at the 2013 Van Cliburn Competition, a performance that was rewarded with a Warner Classics recording contract. Listening to the Prokofiev Piano Concerto No.2 on her debut disc for the label (with Antonio Pappano and the Orchestra Dell'Accademia Nazionale Di Santa Cecilia [Warner Classics 0825646009091]), it's not hard to understand why she has already enjoyed such success at the ripe old age of 22. Her playing is fluid and dynamic, carving vivid phrases and lines underpinned by an iron sense of temporal security. It's a combination of virtues that plays to the Liszt's strengths, resulting in a performance that is acoustically big and expansive, with natural scale and perspective, yet anchored and driven by the solo instrument. There's a richness and solidity to the piano that is all too rare, especially in those long, undamped and overlapping left-hand chords that emerge in the fourth movement, their waves of overlapping harmonics building beautifully, yet never getting confused or blurred by the orchestra's bottom end. This level of low-frequency separation, texture and tonal differentiation are phenomenal from a speaker of this size and price. If her speed, sheer dexterity and the suddenness of her attack are slightly muted, it's only slightly and it's a small price to pay for the sense of overall coherence and musical purpose you get in return. The suddenness of her *fff* chords is never in doubt, and the dynamics and orchestral tuttis will still make you jump (and if the Prokofiev isn't to your taste, then wait until you hear the Tchaikovsky 1st that it's paired with).

Don't go getting the idea that these speakers are just about classical music, either. The fabulous acoustic/electric mix that is Shawn Colvin's *A Few Small Repairs* [Columbia CK 67119] is every bit as impressive, with an easy, engaging solidity to the loose-limbed, loping rhythms and a beautiful sense of natural intonation, body and articulation to the vocals. Just listen to the clarity and layering of the vocal overdubs on the title track and you'll get the picture -- especially when the lead vocal reappears, big, solid and believable, convincingly separate and dimensioned in front of them. The bottom end is weighty, rounded and tuneful, without ever being slow, and once again that ability to reveal time and timbre at the bottom, seamlessly hitched to the incredibly natural tonality and dimensionality of the midband, hits it out of the park.

Slow and moody or upbeat and funky, the Liszts don't care -- they simply get on with the job and the job is digging out the life, energy and presence captured in your recordings and reconstituting them as a tangible presence in your room. *Stereo* actually translates as *solid* and for once, listening to these speakers, it's not hard to understand why.

**W**ith the arrival of Focal's *Sopra 2* -- due in for review shortly -- and Wilson Audio's *Sabrina*, as well as a few other interesting models, the Vienna Acoustics *Liszt* sits squarely in the middle of what looks like it's about to become a hotly contested area of the market, populated with speakers that people can actually afford, actually accommodate and their systems might actually drive. Currently, the *Liszt* is making the running, setting the standard both when it comes to serving up musical satisfaction and in terms of its completeness as a product. It's not just *capable* of impressive performance; it delivers the tools to ensure that owners actually *achieve* that

performance, even in this day and age when so many international manufacturers find it harder and harder to guarantee the necessary in-country dealer support for their products. It's an enviable standard and one that competing manufacturers must meet or beat.

Of course, there's more than one way to skin the audio cat, and different folks will be looking for different strokes, but the Liszt's rounded, well-balanced and impeccably mannered performance deserves to win it a lot of friends. Like Vienna Acoustics' other speakers, this one's a keeper, a speaker that aims to deliver long-term satisfaction and a lasting musical relationship rather than a quick and torrid affair. Unlike some of the more expensive models in the range, it's not quite as shy about its qualities. The flagship Vienna designs don't exactly trumpet their virtues, but the Liszt should leave listeners in absolutely no doubt, either about its qualities or their appeal. Let the games begin. 🎵