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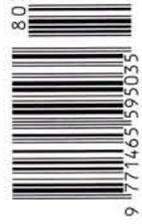
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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Vienna Acoustics The Kiss Loudspeaker

By Roy Gregory

A casual glance at the Vienna Acoustics range might not spot it, but the company has a strong streak of individuality. It's there in the choice of drivers and development of the in-house SpiderCone technology, but it really becomes apparent when you take a look at the top of the line Klimt series. The floorstanding The Music is striking enough, but nothing quite prepares you for The Kiss, with its articulated cabinet and asymmetric stand. This is a carefully considered and finely balanced response to the compromises inherent in a stand-mounted design; from a purely sonic point of view, the stunningly beautiful appearance is by way of a bonus, but it is still an essential expression of the meticulously crafted whole.

The exquisite exterior of The Kiss – a quality that also characterises every other Vienna Acoustics product whose company I've enjoyed – is simply the surface manifestation of designer Peter Gansterer's guiding principal; the creation of loudspeakers as single, holistic expressions of an all-embracing design process.

At first glance you could mistake The Kiss for a two-way, its tweeter housed in a large faceplate. But this is very much a three-way design, and that upper cabinet holds a proprietary concentric driver, its flat, molded plastic midrange diaphragm surrounding a 25mm silk dome. What – no beryllium or diamond, no carbon-fibre, exotic paper or ceramic? No – instead, this fascinating drive unit depends on a synthetic polymer, derived from the TPX lightweight thermoplastic first developed by Audax, but Vienna Acoustics add small but critical amounts of polypropylene and other materials to create a unique new formulation dubbed X3P, in search of the Holy Grail of stiffness and excellent self-damping. To maximize those benefits it's also necessary to create a low moving mass – the traditional Achilles heel when it comes to plastics. But one glance at the Vienna drivers will show the web of radial and circumferential ribbing that is used to stiffen them, a complex engineering solution that optimizes the balance between weight and resonant behavior and led to the Spider Cone tag. Used extensively on the Company's bass cones, it's a technique that reaches new heights in the concentric driver. Here,

“It makes different decisions as to what is musically important, and as a result chooses different sonic compromises.”

the material is further refined with the addition of tiny glass particles, while the structure is almost inverted – the ribs being extended in depth to support the flat face. Each buttress or brace is then further shaped using FEA to trim unnecessary mass while retaining material exactly where it is required.

But, you might well be asking, why go to all that trouble? Because existing coincident driver designs, for all their advantages in terms of coherence and dispersion, all suffer, to varying degrees, from an inherent compromise: the phase-related distortions and subtle horn loading that result from mounting the tweeter in the neck of the cone. You hear it as a change in the character of high-frequency notes when produced simultaneously with output at the bottom end of the driver's range. The flat diaphragm of the Vienna design effectively minimizes phase issues, while doing away with horn loading. It has also enabled Vienna to push the bass/mid crossover point down to around 100Hz – much lower than the 300-500Hz more normally found in three-way designs. This avoids blending drivers right in the heart of the human tenor range, a clear indicator of just how much importance Peter Gansterer places on the coherence and natural harmonic colours of the mid-band. Plastic driver materials will always struggle to match the likes of carbon-fibre, paper or ceramics for weight and speed of response, but where they score is in terms of the control they offer over resonant behavior and as a result, their ability to generate low bass and low colouration. If you can deal with the mass, then you receive the payoff in terms of superior texture and tonality.

Once you start adding that to other design choices (the complex and massively reinforced cabinets, the gentle slopes used in the crossovers, the attention paid to apparently minor details like the close

tolerance, in-house inductors and terminals) you start to build a picture of just where this speaker is coming from. Those first or second order slopes for instance, require carefully tailored and close tolerance drivers to work at their best. Perfect then, for in-house cone designs and final assembly by those perfectionists at Eaton. Complete that loop by designing and engineering crossovers in tandem with each driver and what you create is of a kit of philosophical (and physical) parts that fits together seamlessly to produce a coherent whole.

Taking The Kiss in detail, the concentric driver is mounted in a sealed cabinet, above a 230mm Spider Cone bass unit, itself mounted in a deep, rear-reflex ported box of minimal frontal area. The crossover, offers up an unusually broad mid-band, stretching from an exceptionally low 100Hz to 2.6kHz, and is fed via a single pair of terminals. The upper cabinet sits in its own, separate 'shoe' that allows it to be turned and tilted relative to the bass box, the complete moving element being shared with the floorstanding The Music, and that midrange driver alone covers virtually the entire human vocal range. Movement is facilitated by a beautifully executed and graduated vertical spike and horizontal gear, allowing the user to make precise and repeatable adjustments. The cabinet sides incorporate a subtle curve to aid rigidity and help dissipate resonance. Given the considerable depth of the cabinet(s) and overall attention to detail on show here, it should come as no surprise that that curve continues down both the outer and inner faces of the stand's upright. No cutting corners here – sonically or aesthetically. The stand, or more properly I guess that we should call it a 'base', bolts securely to the underside of the speaker, is internally stiffened with steel rods and is supported on four adjustable spikes.

Why the adjustable head unit? Given its not inconsiderable bulk, with many a floorstander commanding a smaller footprint and less real estate to accommodate it, The Kiss does a good job of looking smaller than it is, and whilst one speaker might look a bit odd with its asymmetrical stance, the mirror-imaged pair are striking; the more so if they're not pointing straight at you. The problem is, pointing right at you is how the concentric driver works best. Again, Vienna Acoustics are giving you the best of both worlds – precision set-up for the best musical performance combined with optimized aesthetics and some welcome latitude when it comes to positioning the bass unit. Small, rear mounted dip-switches allow for a modicum of subtle but useful room compensation in bass and treble,

With a paper bandwidth of 38Hz to 20kHz and 89dB sensitivity (which should be considered optimistic if my experience is representative) this speaker was never going to be easy to drive and so it proved. I don't have details but judging from the positive way in which they react to power – especially solid-state power – I suspect their impedance curve could be sufficient ▶



▶ to make all but the most capable valve amps go weak at the knees. VTL 450 mono's were a notably successful match (in power terms at least) as were the Bernings, but I'd not recommend anything of lesser stature than that. Indeed, the best results I got were from the Jeff Rowland Design Group's new Model 625, a compact but beefy amp in the very best JRDG tradition. Hooked up to the matching Corus pre-amp, The Kiss really started to sing with the sort of propulsive bass drive and impact that leads me to suspect a bit of judicious mid-bass voicing might be at play here. Isn't that at odds with all those high-minded ideals regarding mid-band accuracy? Not if it's done carefully. In fact, when it comes to stand-mounted speakers, even moderately sized floor-standers, some degree of bass engineering is pretty much a fact of life. What really matters is that the bass energy appears in the right place.

The holistic sensibilities that inform its philosophical background and construction are immediately, obviously apparent in its musical presentation. Instruments and voices presented by The Kiss have a natural colour and substance to them, performances a coherent and singular presence that places them almost physically in the room. In part that is down to the emphatic low-frequency performance, one that offers up a solid rhythmic foundation and plenty of well-directed energy: in part to the fulsome harmonic envelope the speaker provides. These are strengths that it is both easy to demonstrate and hard to match. Even the most unlikely material benefits: Black Uhuru's 'Youth Of Eglington' from the magnificent Red album is wonderfully motive and purposeful, the solid rhythmic drive reminding you that it's Sly and Robbie in the engine room and Chris Blackwell at the controls. But it's the sheer beauty of Michael Rose's vocal, the expressive range and surefooted phrasing, the sublimely intuitive harmonies of Puma Jones and gruffer underpinnings of Duckie Simpson that make you remember that you are listening to the only serious pretenders to Bob Marley's crossover reggae crown. That wasn't to be, but that's another story. You can simply submerge yourself in this subtle and musically engaging legacy, but before you do, consider this: Marley was a great communicator and so was Michael Rose, and on this basis, so too is The Kiss.

So far so very, very good – but like most things in hi-fi, every advantage arrives with an associated cost, and the chunky substance that makes Red such a compelling listen also points to those areas where The Kiss pays its dues.

As an example of sheer musical intensity, the stark, raw simplicity of Gillian Welch's 'Time The Revelator' is a tour de force – one that presents any system with a whole range of challenges, plenty to feed on and plenty on which to fail. The Kiss doesn't disappoint. Few speakers are able to separate so distinctly the two closely grouped voices and guitars, in height and in tone. The image, solid, central and near life-

size is instructive too. But the presentation also lacks the surrounding acoustic space and the immediacy that other speakers deliver. It's a moot point whether that almost etched transparency and leaner, quicker sound is a sign of those speakers stripping away harmonic weight in search of heightened definition, or genuinely higher resolution – but the facts is the facts and when it comes to speakers you takes your choice of presentation. The Kiss delivers a more composed, richly hued and contained performance, poised and poignant but lacking that suppressed anger. In its place you get the beautifully balanced interplay of the voices and guitars, a window straight into the structure and sense of the song.

Absent other evidence you can simply take your pick and indulge your preference, but having heard the track on a range of genuinely full-range transducers I know that the truth lies somewhere in between these two extremes. Gillian Welch's voice isn't as refined as The Kiss would have you believe and those guitars have greater attack and edge. The recording does have acoustic boundaries and it's actually the combination of regret and anger that can make the track a truly coruscating musical experience. All of the speakers mentioned come up short. What I admire so much about The Kiss is that it has the courage of its convictions, the self-belief to serve up its own, chosen compromise for your consideration.

The natural scale and easily distinguished height of the Gillian Welch recording is no fluke. The Kiss delivers remarkably natural soundstages and perspectives from a whole range of material; so much so that it makes you realize just how congested, curtailed and bent out of shape many stereo pictures are. This isn't the flashy, reach out and touch imaging so beloved of audio reviewers ▶



looking for ever-greater hyperbole. This is essentially natural, in terms of spread, scale and presentation. If you can't hear the boundaries of the stage (and no speaker that's less than full range will deliver those) at least you get the whole area and the right shape. Ever wondered how the violas manage with the percussion sat in their laps? The answer is that in reality they don't have to – and you don't have to when you listen on The Kiss.

If you were feeling unkind, you could describe The Kiss as old-fashioned – and in a limited sense you'd be right. The combination of a wide-band plastic driver and a soft-dome tweeter certainly harks back to the early eighties, but this is an extreme evolution of that original DNA and there's no mistaking its sonic accomplishments, a musical presentation that qualitatively speaking, sits easily beside its peers. But it's interesting to note that in one respect at least, this Vienna Acoustics model does hark back to its forebears; I found The Kiss remarkably sensitive to volume level. To give of its best it needs precise adjustment on a disc-by-disc basis; too low a volume and the music seems flat and lacking in urgency, too high and it starts to shout, a discernable shelf appearing roughly (I'm guessing) where the tweeter meets the midrange driver. I find myself wondering just how comfortable that tweeter is dropping quite so low? But get it spot on (within a half notch on the Rowland's display) and the performance springs to life with solidity and purpose, a substance and coherence that belie the speakers' modest internal volume and sensitivity. I suspect that both of these effects might well be rather less obvious in the kinder and less revealing acoustic offered up by the average domestic environment, but they're things to look out for on audition.

If you want to dissect this speaker's presentation then you can point to three distinct aspects: its choice of a silk dome tweeter (which might broadly be characterized as the choice of tonality over bandwidth); the unusually broad bandwidth of the midrange driver (with the resultant gains in coherence) and the bass voicing. Ah yes, that bass – a subject worthy of deeper discussion because, as usual, the numbers don't tell the whole story. The quoted low-frequency limit of 36Hz is devoid of defining limits. If we were to assume that the figure is the (industry standard) –3dB point, then that would represent significant extension given the modest volume of the bass cabinet. Ignoring the numbers and going on the aural evidence, you'd have to say that the impressive bass impact and drive, coupled to the relative lack of acoustic information would lead one to conclude that the centre of bass energy at least, is significantly higher up the range. The result is that whilst music is presented with a powerfully propulsive sense of purpose, the largest orchestral crescendos will lack that swelling sense of absolute power: upright bass lines, whilst tactile, do start to fade towards the very bottom of their range. Is this a deliberate choice on the designer's part? Given the apparent thought and attention to detail that is obvious in every other aspect of the speaker it seems an equally obvious conclusion; obvious too because of the way it serves the music. No small speaker (and in real terms, despite its height and depth, The Kiss is a small speaker) can hope to offer really convincing low frequency scale and power. It's more a case of getting as much out as you can for most of the time – and in this regard The Kiss succeeds brilliantly. Actual bass output goes deep enough to properly underpin the rightness of those glorious mid-band harmonics, while the slightly larger than life mid-bass delivers the sense of drive and substance that prevents the music (and speaker) sounding small. Yes, as a result you hear more of the instrument, less of the space in which it was recorded, more weight than shape from the notes, but it's a trade-off that, given the upsides, I for one would gladly accept.

So what are we to make of the sublimely enigmatic Kiss? This speaker is an immaculately turned out, cultured and impeccably mannered prima donna. It is (as befits its station) fussy, demanding and unforgiving of dull or inadequate company. But cherished and treated with appropriate care – especially if spoiled a little bit – it is a welcoming and rewarding partner. Perhaps most interestingly of all, it's a speaker that breaks quite a few loudspeaker rules. No slow seduction here, no period of adaptation or growing familiarity. The Kiss was right from the start. It was inviting, engaging and deeply communicative. It doesn't necessarily deliver what you expect, but it also has the capacity to charm and surprise. It doesn't do everything but it does more than enough. In fact, odd though you might consider the name, having lived with the speaker, I can't think of anything more appropriate. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Three-way, reflex loaded stand mount

Driver Complement: 1x 180mm concentric driver with patented flat spider X3P diaphragm and 25mm silk dome tweeter
1x 230mm X3P spider cone woofer

Bandwidth: 36Hz – 20kHz (no limits specified)

Sensitivity: 89dB

Impedance: 4 Ohms

Crossover Frequencies: 100Hz and 2.6kHz

Weight: 66kg ea (complete)

Dimensions (WxHxD): 273 x 1270 x 540mm

Finish: Piano black, optional Sapele cabinets

Price: £12,500 per pair

Manufacturer: Vienna Acoustics

Net: www.vienna-acoustics.com

UK Distributor: Audyus Distribution

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Net: www.audyus.co.uk