



DeVore Fidelity O/96: A Few More Thoughts | REVIEW

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By Brian Hunter

My time with the DeVore Fidelity O/96 has led me to more places than any other product I've ever reviewed on my "audiophile journey." Now, some might groan a little with such an overused audiophile term in a formal evaluation, but building a relationship, swapping out pairings and ultimately settling in with the two-way floorstander has opened my eyes/ears/mind and challenged more than a few of my preconceived notions than any other. It has been a long road with this review, but in a very good way.

Former pt.AUDIO staff writer Rafe Arnott originally reviewed DeVore Fidelity O/96 way back in November of 2016. The good news for you, dear reader, is that not much has really changed for the model since its introduction 13 years ago. But for lovers of tube amplifiers, two-way designs and/or sensitive speaker enthusiasts, the sweet spot that the O/96 hits is perhaps more relevant than ever.

The DeVore Fidelity O/96 for a long while was the top dog in the Orangutan line. Recent years have seen two extensions of the model with the close adaptation of the Bronze edition (O/Bronze), and of course the big flagship called the O/Reference we covered at Rocky Mountain Audiofest back in 2018. Those

looking for something a little more accessible than the current \$16k price tag of the O/96 can easily find some of the connective tissue in the micr/O bookshelves recently reviewed by Editor-in-Chief Marc Phillips. Founder and “top banana” John DeVore has really attempted to find a little something in his lineup for everyone over the years.



DeVore Fidelity O/96: A Speaker With Intent

My personal time with John DeVore has revealed an individual who thinks deeply about his many passions, with HiFi being at the forefront of those public-facing options. I’ve had the pleasure of interviewing him twice for The Occasional Podcast, and both times left me with a very positive impression that he was one of those enlightened designers that fully draw from both pools of critical listening and measurements, a vast experience with the hobby, and a deeper understanding of what audiophiles really want – even if they may not be aware of it themselves. That last bit is quite important in my opinion, as the forums may extensively bicker about this talking point and that, those who are able to make products that fill a need best get to stay at the table the longest (something that John has proven he is well capable of over the years).

There are a total of eight models of DeVore Fidelity loudspeakers currently listed on the company website. Each of these speakers appears to fulfill a specific purpose within the market. The two in the Gibbon series fall closer to the traditions of narrow aesthetics that allow the front baffle only a tiny bit of space before the sides fall off to open up space for more real estate in the room. The Orangutan series offers up a much wider baffle design, this is of course, intentional according to John. The front baffle is also composed of multiple layers of wood and not a whole piece, as the exposed sides directly

showcase. John does not hide this fact with the DeVore Fidelity 0/96, despite some of the perceptions around this type of panel construction. This is not one “solid” piece of wood by design, but rather utilized to provide a consistent density... and hopefully better sound.

What Makes A Classic?

When I began this “journey” specifically, I was looking for a really stellar pair of speakers that could be easily handled by tube amplification. I was pointed in many directions, but not one speaker came recommended as highly, or as often, as the DeVore Fidelity 0/96. I was fresh off a trailhead that led me down to bigger and bigger speakers, and larger and larger amplification to drive said speakers. I wanted something a little more simple. Something that played sweeter tones at lower volumes. In the end this pursuit becomes exponentially complex, but the general idea and direction is not. For tube pairings, the O/96 showcases both DeVore’s intent as a loudspeaker designer and a predetermined destiny to a specific slice of the market.

Secondarily (and perhaps more generically speaking) is a two-way soft-dome-and-paper-woofer considered classic? If so, stretching from JBL to KLH and Altec in the States, and the LS3/5a to Harbeth abroad (two-way soft-dome-and-plastics), the appeal has been bouncing around for the better half of a century. Personally, I find the simplicity of the combination very dependable, and the merit given to paper as the material of choice seems well earned alongside its ability to withstand the test of time. However, does the frequency and use of the combination of 2-way + Cellulose + Silk = O/96 at the top of the heap today? From my experience, I would say yes at this point. The collection of thought here is a good one on paper, whereas the DeVore Fidelity 0/96 in execution feels like something great. Perhaps a greater-sum-than-its-parts kind of thing, maybe a classic in its own right.



The Impact Of Higher Sensitivity on the DeVore Fidelity 0/96 Sound

This all started with an exploration into tubes and higher sensitivity speakers, and whether the journey ends with the DeVore Fidelity 0/96 or just trails off into the sunset with the next pair of standmounts that rolls into the listening room, there remains an itch that still needs a scratch. Does the higher sensitivity of a speaker, in and of itself, affect the output of the sound in a positive way? Again, too many variables to confidently draw substantial conclusions across specific models, brands, tech or otherwise. However, things started to get a little funky when it came to not only power sensitivity, but

transparency and a general sense of “seeing” how other components and source material performed against a component chain ending in a sensitivity of 96 dB.

Checking the “transparent” box for the DeVore Fidelity O/96 is easy. The trueness to source is like a clean window pane that allows for viewing into the other component’s house at night. This is why things got a little tricky during the listening sessions. The three long runs of speaker wire I had on hand no longer sounded nearly the same. The difference in bass response now felt exaggerated from cable to cable and one model felt as though treble just had an exorbitant amount of information compared to the other two. Heresy of the highest level. Wire troubles aside, the bass response did also take a little tinkering to get just right. Unlike some other, perhaps bigger speakers, there were noticeable fluctuations in bass response based on the placement in the room. Not perhaps the most revelatory of statements to find in a HiFi review, but the characteristics seemed to be influenced by the mere half inches in placement. Again, the O/96s were super easy to move around physically compared to the normal hugeness of floorstanding towers in the \$10k+ range. Once the fine tuning was finally done however, a few notable observations did bubble to the top.

Yes indeed, the DeVore Fidelity O/96 can be driven from a handful of watts, how this translates into better sound is still up to a wide range of factors, but one thing is certain – if you add a few more variables to play with in your setup, and a few more might be pushed out to make way. I happened to have a fairly wide berth of amplifiers on hand during my time with the 96s, which really started with a headphone amplifier by Woo Audio called the WA5 (2nd Gen). This particular amplifier also does double duty as a 300b integrated speaker amp, and actually carries quite a reputation around in some circles. And for good reason. I found the clarity and throughput from source a force to be reckoned with. The tone was rich, but never too sweet. The mids clear as a bell, but not too dry. A perfect fit for the DeVore Fidelity O/96 in the end. For a bit more texture in the vocals, an ampsand sound stereo 17 “little nugget” power amp with the company’s stereo pre. Not quite the same as the Woo Audio house sound (also 300B vs EL84) but still an engaging realism to the mids.

All The Rest

But what makes the DeVore Fidelity O/96 so unique, first and foremost is the high end*, ultra-realistic, true hi-fi sound found in (and amongst) the transparency, fidelity and clarity. This is most apparent in mids and upper mids (in most situations) but air and upward stretch is no slouch either. Singing sounds real. Properly produced guitars also sound real. Piano sections don’t pierce the soundstage, they can float into your living space with natural timber and a true-to-life, non-fiction delivery. The second thing that really impacted me was the voicing of the bass. There is no shortage of speakers pumping out big bass, loud bass, mid bass, etc. But the way the DeVore Fidelity O/96 loudspeakers are wired is the exact way I like my bass. Perhaps not the flavor of every individual out there, but a low tight foundation with *balanced* mid bass is such a sweet combination, and one that seems to be more rare than it should be. The extension downward is phenomenal, exceptional considering the two-way design.

**If you frequent parts in the “high end” you may be aware that this does not immediately designate a particular tone or frequency response, but in the context of this piece, means merely that it can hold its own amongst the highest ilk of the hobby.*

Is the DeVore Fidelity O/96 one of the best, if not THE best I have heard in my listening quarters? Yes. Why?



1. Realistic tonality partnered perfectly with almost spiritual transparency.
2. Low bass extension and a most excellent sense of tuning in this region.

A few honorable mentions, while we are at it:

1. In this competitive set, speakers tend to get unwieldy very fast. The size here will undoubtedly win points both with those concerned about the relative amount of space speakers take up in any give room and the moveable factor – both in terms of fine tuning the positioning and logistics. Truth? A lot of speaker in this price range can hit 400 lbs or more.
2. The DeVore Fidelity O/96 loudspeakers also play well with tubes. Maybe not everyone's choice of amplification, but if you are reading this article, there is a high chance that you do.
3. Vintage styling with over-the-top care taken for both fit and finish. The default wood grain is arguably the best one.

So as long as we are including bullet points in a high-end review, we might as well drop a numbered rating – still a **10/10**.

Classic.

