



## The DeVore Fidelity O/93 loudspeaker long-term review

By [Rafe Arnott](#)

DeVore's designs are some of the most beautiful speakers I've ever seen.

There's something about John DeVore's loudspeakers that intrinsically connect me to the music.

Jazz, blues, EDM, folk, rock, or pop... it doesn't matter. The electron translations being performed by **DeVore Fidelity** designs – like the O/93 graciously provided to me by [Soundhounds](#) in Victoria, B.C., being reviewed here – would be listened to with envy by those involved with maintaining harmonious diplomatic relations between countries with disparate languages at the United Nations.

They don't impress me with platitudes, there's no sweetening of what's being said here – they shoot straight – the O/93s (like their bigger sibling the O/96) simply vanish from the signal path, and allow more of what's in the source file – be it LP, reel-to-reel, or digital audio – to make its way to my ears without impediment. This is not a trick performed only by DeVore's designs, this is the parlance of numerous transducer implementations available across a broad spectrum of prices, but it's the way that DeVore's speakers do it that is so captivating to my ears. It's the honesty of those electron translations being carried out: A snare drum skin sounds

exactly like a real snare drum skin. A cymbal crashes, splashes, sparkles, and has airborne sonic decay as if a drum kit is being played in front of me. A singer's voice has chest resonance – not just throat vibration – which signals my brain to believe that vocal emanation is being projected by an organic, physical mass, just like a real singer standing in the room would sound.



Attention to detail in every aspect of construction is evident in these hand built loudspeakers. Many speaker designs I've heard, while excellent, do not translate as lifelike to my consciousness, rather, they can come across as high-fidelity approximations, or hyper-real approximations – but not lifelike. Not human. There can be too much size, and weight to reproduction from large, multi-driver speaker arrays in my experience, and while this makes albums or songs sound massive, and huge, they do not sound like real life. They sound bigger, or grander, or more forceful. Or contrarily, they can lack the visceral punch that a live performance in a small club setting is capable of imparting. They can sound too processed, too small in their scale, or be overly focused on one part of a performance. It's all a balancing act, and it's that balanced presentation I covet the most. I have no expectation that any system is ever going to mimic the experience of sitting in the audience for a symphony orchestra, or fifth row centre at a rock concert. Those are economies of scale – in my opinion – that cannot be *honestly* reproduced at any price point. But a classical quartet, a jazz trio, solo cellist, or a vocalist being accompanied by piano, or band in a smaller space (think 20 feet x 20 feet) can be

reproduced in a manner that can consistently fool my brain into believing that those musicians on the recording are arranged in front, or beside me. It is this type of listening experience that I aspire most to.



18 watts of Class-A power from Audio Note was more than enough headroom for the highly-efficient O/93.

It is this type of experience that the O/93s are capable of recreating – with few peers – when properly matched to a quality source, amplification, and cabling. That’s definitely not to say they don’t rock out, or insist I get out of my chair, or off the sofa to dance when Daft Punk is pulsing through them – as I said at the drop of this article, they connect me to all types of music – but since I love smaller jazz, folk, classical, and rock ensembles (in studio, or live recordings) for critical listening the most, I tend to talk more specifically about those recreated musical experiences.

Performers spatial-placement cues within a recording are rendered distinctly from recording to recording with the O/93. When I change amplifiers, cables, or sources the change is immediately parsed by the ’93s. Being built in a holistic manner, and constructed from varied, yet sympathetic woods, with attention paid to working with cabinet resonance, the O/93s – like the O/96s – are *reasonably* sensitive to room placement, and what type of flooring is underneath them (I had them in two separate spaces as I moved halfway through this review to a larger place). Because DeVore voices the entire cabinet – including the feet – when he designs

his loudspeakers, I experimented with the speakers as-is on carpet, with spikes on hardwood, spikes on carpet/rugs, wooden coasters on a Persian rug, and finally settled on placing the cabinets on a rug. In each instance in both homes, the most satisfying presentation was *as-is*. The speakers sat roughly two-and-a-half to five feet out from the front wall (depending on the room, and the amount of damping in each room), and were approximately six to eight feet apart (again, depending on which room they were in) with only a slight toe-in. I played around with positioning a fair amount one afternoon in both spaces (a couple months apart), and in both cases ended up with them almost exactly where I had initially placed them.



Placement preference to sound by my ear always had the O/93s as-is on a rug rather than spiked, or on hardwood.

With a listed frequency range of 30Hz–31kHz, a 93dB sensitivity, a nominal 10-Ohm impedance, a minimal crossover feeding a “gently horn-loaded” one-inch silk-dome tweeter, and 10-inch untreated paper-cone woofer equipped with a phase plug, the O/93 shares some physical, and technological similarity to the O/96. To help keep costs down, the '93 features a more simplified woofer, and driver assembly with the magnet, coil, pole, and gap differing substantially from the '96. According to DeVore, one of the goals behind the '93 was to bring that same cohesive, point-source sound of the O/96 (\$12,000 USD) in at a lower price point (\$8,400 USD).

**John DeVore:** *“Absolutely to bring the “O” sound (and capabilities) to a lower price point. It was*

*an interesting thing to balance as well, since not all the bits of the O/96 could be translated equally, and still be able to reduce the price significantly. Each performance parameter was carefully examined, and weighed to retain a balanced final result. A bit from the sensitivity column, a bit from the transparency column, a bit from the aesthetic column, etc.”*

One of the most impressive things I noticed about these speakers when I got them first set up (other than how gorgeous the lacquered finish is) was how easily they pressurized the living/listening room, and how deep, and taut the bass extension was. They had much more authority, and presence to them than I anticipated. The wood finishes that DeVore provides clients with is varied, and exquisite in its colour, and grain. “*Fiddleback*” is how it is described, and if you’ve ever seen a cello, or violin body you instantly understand the association.

The first album that I chose to write about for critical listening was *Masterpieces By Ellington*. This was a 16/44 Tidal HiFi streaming file played back via Roon through the totaldac d1 integral DAC/network player (which I used for all digital files in this review). This is an astounding recording for a number of reasons, not least of which is the incredible amount of spatial information contained on its tracks regarding placement of band members in Ellington’s orchestra. From the opening notes of piano twinkle, and sparkle from the Duke himself on this album, I was captivated at the sheer realism of weight each hammer on string in the piano’s body conveyed. The trombone work of Lawrence Brown, and Tyree Glenn, and the trumpet playing of Cat Anderson, Shorty Baker, and Fats Ford (to name but a few) on the opening cuts of “Mood Indigo”, and “Sophisticated Lady” are so laden with juicy *blaat*, note grip, brassy texture, and sheen it goes straight to your spine. The slides in pitch as each artist’s embouchure changes were revealed in exquisite detail. The O/93s projected Yvonne Lanauze’s plaintive, languorous vocals directly into my cerebral cortex as she waxed poetic with lines like “*In the evening when lights are low, I’m so lonely I could die...*” Louis Bellson’s percussive force through the DeVores had honest-to-God slam, and not only had solidity, and form in the lowest registers, but real speed, with attack on the leading edges of each drum-stick strike, or kick-drum punch – especially on the cut “Vagabond.”



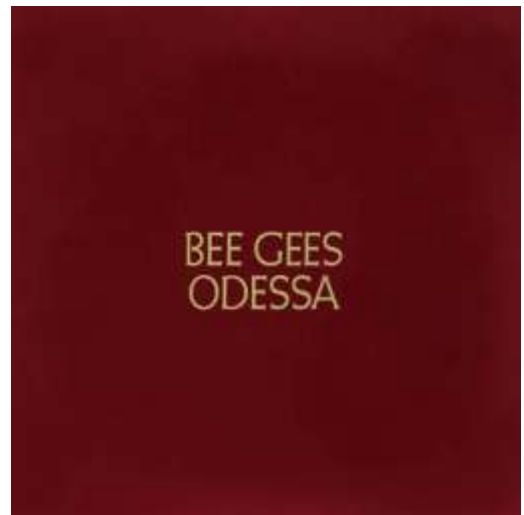
Chan Marshall has the breathy, behind-the-beat cadence to her singing at times that reminds me of Billie Holiday, and on (*I Can't Get No*) *Satisfaction*, the first cut of “Cat Power: The Covers Record,” (16/44 Tidal HiFi/Roon) she immediately gets you to drop your guard, and draws you into the small circle of space surrounding her as she sits strumming her guitar, and singing into what sounds like a vintage stereo microphone. Every subtle vocal nuance is fleshed out with husky clarity, the aural sensation of her lips forming the words “It’s coming round my soul, It’s way beyond control” on *Troubled Waters* had me leaning ever farther forward from my



listening chair as I sought to catch each lyric as it hung starkly alone in the air between myself, and the DeVores. Spatial rendition of the recorded space made me feel like Marshall was singing in a very modest studio space, or small empty club. I found out later that the bulk of the recordings were done across from Penn Station in New York at Night Owl Studios. On *Sea of Love*, the album's last track, Marshall feels even closer to the mic, as does the guitar she's using, which has a noticeably different tuning than any previous cut. This tuning, and mic'ing approach created a sad, haunting decay to the recorded space that allowed her voice to carry even more lilt, and melancholy heartache than I had already gone through on the

album, which when finished left me spent, and exhausted from the emotional price of listening that the O/93s extracted.

The Bee Gees probably aren't well known by many for their musical talents outside disco, which is a shame, because it is their earlier albums that I was exposed to as a child, and came to love. Their 1969 LP "Odessa" (double LP, vinyl, 2009 Reprise/RTI-pressed remaster) is a tour de force of complex, finely-wrought songwriting, and lyrical mastery at the fore of every cut. The title track Odessa (City on the Black Sea) resonates with heartache, and loss, and is a sweeping historical love song that takes me for a sonic rollercoaster of a ride on the right systems. This is a complex cut which conveyed real scale to the layered, orchestral instrumentation multi-tracked over the Gibb brothers' (Robin, Andy, and Maurice) plaintive vocals. This cut for me has the ability to evoke the sensation of a place, and time outside personal experience, which is always the hallmark of a great recording in my mind. The bass on the title track features a number of moments with incredibly deep, resonant plucking by Maurice that made the O/93s both *feel*, and *sound* as if their entire cabinet was throbbing to convey the lowest octaves. The delicate, ringing piano start on *Sound of Love* belies how quickly Robin can switch up his style to pound out big, reverberant notes during the track's progression which carried real weight, and showed off the speakers ability to handle big dynamic swings.



Over the course of the review I spoke back-and-forth with DeVore about the O/93, and since I drove the speakers with amps ranging from 18 watts to 150 watts, both with absolutely superb

results, I was interested to hear more about the design process, the speaker's construction, and the materials used for the both the cabinet, and the driver assemblies.

*RA: The Orangutan line of loudspeakers could be described as "simple wooden boxes," with two drivers, one crossover point, and are designed for high-efficiency, so what's the secret sauce that makes them sound so incredibly lifelike, detailed, and true-tone? As consumers we're told we need lots of drivers, skinny chassis, complex crossovers, and that loudspeakers needn't be efficient because watts are cheap. What gives?*

JD: Ha! Well, that's a good question to start off with. Yes, many are convinced that you need a skinny box with an enormous parts count to get great sound. More than anything else it's fashion. Nearly 30 years ago when I got my first job in HiFi retail, one of my favourite speaker companies was Boston Acoustics. They had killer speakers: the "A" series. They were easy to drive and sounded great. Some of those upper models still hold their own today. Then a year later they changed over their line to the "T" series, a similar line-up, but they lost the magic that the "A" series had. They went from full, rich, expressive and engaging to flat and lifeless. They also went from wide-baffle, shallow depth cabinets with big woofers to slim towers. When I spoke to the guys at the company they even agreed with me about the sonic downgrade, but told me they had to do it, as customers all believed narrow speakers were "better" and more modern.

In a VERY general sense, there are some traits that could be attributed to a particular cabinet geometry – things like diffraction and step response –but an accomplished design will have to take these things into account no matter what the size or shape.

*RA: The finishes on all your speaker designs are incredibly beautiful, the Orangutan series in particular with their wide, veneered front baffles seem perfect for showing off the fine grains you choose to lacquer. But there seems to be a method at work in the way the cabinets are constructed, can you talk about the choices you made in the way the baffle attaches to the cabinet?*

JD: We use multiple materials in the Orangutan cabinets, depending on where it is in the cabinet and what we need there. The O/93s have two types of plywood, and two types of fiberboard. The O/96 adds a third type of plywood and some solid hardwood to these materials. It's about tuning the cabinet, getting resonances to behave the way I want. Rather than damping the enclosure down with mass, I let the various panels do their thing in a carefully controlled way. I tune the cabinets so none of the resonances "pile up" in one frequency range, or cancel out to form an out-of-phase suck-out in the room response. The speakers are a type of instrument that is supposed to perform ideally in a normal room, and so I keep this in mind and develop the "room energy" of the speaker towards a certain goal.

*RA: The drivers for the O/93 are SEAS sourced I believe, but have specific customization done at the factory for you. Can you talk about the process you went through to finally arrive at the units in use now, and how that work led you to some of the new drivers you're designing now*

*for the updated O/96 that is in the works? Will future iterations of the O/93 and O/96 see updates based on the design breakthroughs you're experiencing now? For example, new horn throat/loading shapes, driver materials, magnets, coils etc.?*

JD: Yes, SEAS builds all my drivers, but we don't have to mod them here, they are fully built to our specification, they are not off-the-shelf drivers. It's been a very long process getting these drivers right. In fact, eight to nine years ago when I started the Oragutan project, I was working with another company in the UK. I showed a pair of prototypes at CES in 2010 and the director of SEAS came in to see what I had been up to. Since we'd worked together for years on other driver designs this was pretty normal, but when he saw the Orangutan speakers with non-SEAS woofers he was intrigued. Over a meal later that day I'd confessed to having a lot of difficulty with consistency from this other supplier, and by the end of dinner we'd worked out a couple of driver ideas that he was going to put together and send to me.

Partnering with SEAS was a huge part of what made the O's a reality. There's something about working together with a long-time trusted partner that produces better and more consistent results. The engineers at SEAS know me, they know what I'm looking for, they know how to interpret and implement my designs, and likewise, I think they've been inspired a couple of times by some of the things we developed from my ideas. And they simply build the best, most consistent drivers around.

Things are getting insane with Orangutan development, and SEAS is currently waiting for me to send some handmade custom woofer chassis we had cast and are machining now. The next round of prototypes is going to be pretty wild...



Weight, gravitas,, and finesse. All words I use to describe the sonic signature (or lack thereof) of the DeVore O/93.

## In Conclusion

When seriously looking for an *end-game loudspeaker*, one has to take into account whether you have the rest of your system in place, as the transducer is the final arbiter of the signal path. Source, amplification, cabling, all of these things will help determine what is being fed into your room through the translation devices we call speakers. I paired two completely different, but synergistic music-playback systems with the O/93s, and was deeply impressed on both fronts by what the DeVores were capable of vocalizing to me. They spoke with both barrel-chested authority, and whispered, empathetic compassion when asked for compliance. They, were both thought, and emotion provoking, and most of all they did what all the greatest loudspeaker designs do: they vanished, and allowed the musical intention of the artist at hand to come through into my listening room to captivate, and enthrall me every time that I called on them to do so. I cannot recommend the O/93 highly enough, not only are they cerebral in their intimations, they also speak to the heart, and that to me, is what an end-game loudspeaker must be capable of.



—Rafe Arnott



Associated equipment for review:

- totaldac d1 integral DAC/network player
- Pro-Ject RPM9 Carbon w/Evo Tonearm
- Sumiko Blackbird Low-Output Cartridge
- Modified Stellavox reel-to-reel player
- AudioQuest Wind interconnects

- AudioQuest Oak speaker cables
- Pass Labs XP-10 Preamplifier
- Pass Labs XP-15 Phono
- Pass Labs X150.8 stereo power amplifier
- Audio Note Soro Phono SE Signature integrated amplifier
- Audio Note S2 Step-Up Transformer
- Audio Note Lexus speaker cabling/interconnects
- PS Audio P10 Power Regenerator

