

Reviewing the DeVore Fidelity gibbon Super Nines – Part 1

Posted on February 21, 2019 Author Jack



The first time I heard a **DeVore Fidelity** speaker was in 2005, and it was at Pitch Perfect Audio, a store owned by Matt Rotunda. I had gone over to Matt's to see about buying a **Shindo Labs** preamp. This trip blew my mind as I also heard the Shindo Labs gear, a pair of **Auditorium 23 SoloVox speakers** and a pair of **DeVore Silverback** speakers. They were all driven by Shindo amps, and the source was a Shindo turntable system. Oh, by the way, I did buy a Shindo preamp while I was there.

In 2017, I heard the DeVore gibbon Super Nine speakers at RMAF, and I could not believe how good they sounded. I immediately asked for a pair to review, and I was told they weren't quite ready for review yet. I've had the privilege to review the DeVore orangutan 0/96 and the 0/93 speakers, and I found them to be highly musical and emotionally satisfying. In fact, I consider them to be two of the best speakers on the market at any price.

I eagerly anticipated reviewing the Super Nines, and we presented a Beatnik Bongos Award to the named DeVore/Tone Imports room for "Best System Under \$100,000" at the RMAF 2017 show. You

can read what I said about them here (<https://theaudiobeatnik.com/presenting-beatnik-bongos-awards-2017-rmaf-part-2/>); the sound was incredible. The Super Nines were driven by a 40 watt Class A **Sugden Sapphire FBA800 amplifier**, and the source was the **SPEC** turntable paired with an **EMT** arm and cartridge.

Design Goals for the gibbons and orangutans

Since I had never reviewed speakers from the DeVore Fidelity gibbon series, I asked John DeVore, president and chief designer, about the fundamental differences in the design goals of the gibbon and the orangutan speakers? John said:

“The gibbon series goes all the way back to the beginning of the company, our first two production models were the gibbon 8 and gibbon III. In a sense this means that the gibbon speakers represent the design goals I had when I made the move from hobbyist to manufacturer. My goal then, as now, was to make speakers that appeared completely conventional and checked all the audiophile boxes such as imaging, sound staging, transparency, bandwidth, and tonality; but were much easier to drive. All gibbon models are very close to 8 Ohms across the spectrum, and tend to be fairly high sensitivity. This allows them to flourish with a great many wonderful amps that are normally considered fussy or limited in performance or capability. When you treat amps to a kind speaker load they will often perform and sound better, and as a result the system sounds better.”

I went on to ask how the gibbon series differs from the orangutan series. John said,

“In comparison, the orangutan series has a narrower focus. While again trying to maintain a fairly conventional look and modern audiophile performance, I wanted to push the amplifier-compatibility even further into the ‘exotic’ realm of single-ended and flea-watt tube amps. To do this they had to have even higher sensitivity and higher impedance, moving away from the ‘normal’ expected 8 Ohms to around 12. This made them marginally less compatible with some amps designed to push into punishing speaker loads, but opened a whole world of SET 300Bs and such to people who would never put up with the difficulties or compromises of horn speakers and single-drivers.”

I also asked John why the orangutans use a wide baffle and the gibbons use a very narrow one. He said,

“All DeVore Fidelity cabinets make use of Fibonacci ratios, so when the necessary net internal volume is determined, the shape follows certain guidelines. The gibbon series speakers use smaller drivers and are intended to look understated so they have narrow fronts. So they need a deeper cabinet to make up the internal volume needed. The Orangutans need to be higher sensitivity, and so use larger drivers. This dictated a wider baffle, and I used this feature to tune the response at the listening position. With a wider front, they only needed a shallower cabinet depth to achieve the internal volume required.”

About the Super Nines

The Super Nine speakers are 2.5-way, compact floor-standers with a design goal to get as much of the performance of the big gibbon X (\$15,890) in a smaller package making it easier to place in a room. They also cost \$6,000 less as they retail for \$9,900. The speakers are also easy to drive at 91dB sensitivity and an even 8 ohm load.

These speakers were also designed for a wide sweet spot so that they need very little or no toe in. Each speaker has a pair of wide bandwidth 7-inch paper cone drivers, and they use the same .75-inch treated textile dome tweeter that was first used in the gibbon X. The crossover uses high-quality paper in oil and film capacitors. Even with its feet, it's a little under 39 inches tall and only 8.5 inches wide. They are deeper than wide at 13.75 deep.



As with the rest of the gibbon line, the new Super Nine is made out of eco-friendly solid bamboo and comes in three finishes: an amber bamboo called “Cherry”, a deeper stain color called “Mahogany” and then “Mink,” which has the bamboo stained a dark anthracite grey. My review samples were stunning in the “Mahogany” bamboo.

Setup and Placement

When it comes to setting up a listening room and placing speakers in the room, it’s important to remember that every room is different. Still, I highly recommend you read and use the information from Jim Smith’s book, **Get Better Sound** book and DVDs. If you look at my reference system description (<https://theaudiobeatnik.com/reference-system/>), you will see that the room my system is really odd. It took some work, but in many ways this is the best room I have ever had for a listening room. The main reason for this is that, as I learned

from Jim Smith it is easier to place the speakers once you have established your listening spot. I have found that the position of the listening chair in my room has a much greater effect on the bass than the placement of the speakers. I expect this is the case when setting up most rooms.

Well, it’s time to get on about placing the Super Nines. Like all of DeVore’s speakers, they are designed to work well and look good in the average living room as well as in an audiophile’s listening room. Still, these speakers like space. I expect if placed on the long wall in a room they could be placed closer to the wall behind the speakers and further away from the side walls.

This placement isn’t possible in my room. I ended up placing them on the short wall with the tweeter being 124 inches from the center of my listening position. This placed the tweeters about 63 inches from the wall behind the speakers. If you can’t pull them out this far into the room, you should try placing them further apart. This also results in the speakers being 84 inches apart and about 31 inches from the side walls.

I also tried different toe ins, but in the end, these speakers sounded best and produced a better soundstage no toe in at all. While the Super Nines benefit from very careful set up, they also sound really darn good placed just a little out from the wall behind them and wide without being up against the side walls. Please remember, however, every room is different, so don’t be shy about determining what works best in your room.

OK, so now it’s time for a little listening. I will be trying a few different amps and also a couple of different sources, including both analog and digital. Part 2 of this post covers my actual listening experience.

DeVore gibbon Super Nines Review - Part 2: Listening Notes

Posted on March 13, 2019 Author Jack



In Part 1 of this review, I teased Part 2 by looking forward to listening to the Super Nines with various amps. Because I had five amps in the house when I started the review, I have to admit that the listening was a lot of fun.

First, I gave the **Linear Tube Audio MicroZOTL MZ3** that I recently reviewed about a five-minute listen, as I knew one watt wasn't enough. I kept the MZ3 as the preamp, however, and hooked up Nelson Pass' incredible little **First Watt SIT-3**. I know it's only 18 watts per channel, but it is a pure class A, no negative feedback, push-pull amplifier, and the Super Nines are easy to drive and fairly efficient. The next amp I used was another Nelson Pass design, my own **Pass Labs XA30.8**. The

other two amps used for this review were the **Sugden A21SE Signature Integrated Amplifier** and **Parasound's** new ZM2350.

Here's the rest of the review system:

- **Preamp:** Linear Tube Audio's MicroZOTL MZ3 for the preamp with all but the Sugden, which is an integrated amp
- **Vinyl Source:** AMG V12 with AMG 12JT Turbo Tonearm mounted with the DS Audio DS-W2 Optical Phono Cartridge and the DS Auto Master 1 Preamp/Equalizer
- **Digital System:** Innuos Mini music server with a BorderPatrol DAC SE
- **Cables, Cords and Power Distributor:** All cables Audience Au24SX, power cords Audience Au24s, and an HB Cable Designs PowerSlave Marble Power Distributor

Initial Listening Impressions

One of the first things that I noticed about these speakers is that they are a bit more modern sounding than my Teresonic Ingenium XRs or the DeVore Orangutan speakers. By this I mean the tonal balance is more accurate and refined combined with pure beauty. That said, the detail is exceptional, and they definitely stand on the 'juicy' side and not the 'dry' side of tonal balance.



Factory glue-up of a Super Nine speaker with Lulu Bear, one of the DeVore Fidelity cats supervising.

If I can trust my memory, the Super Nines produced the best soundstage I have ever heard in my room. I know I often say the ability of a system to produce a soundstage isn't that important to me, and it is way down on my list of priorities. Therefore, if I can get a sound that has plenty of tone, sounds a lot like live music and emotionally involves me in the performance, I find it very fulfilling when it also produces a great soundstage. The Super Nines do just this, and they also produce the widest and deepest soundstage I have ever heard from my system. It is also a very coherent soundstage with a real solidity to it that is in no way distracting from the music.

These speakers are also incredibly dynamic. They have the best startle factor I have heard from any speaker in my room. Although they may not startle as often as some speakers that are speed demons, when something startling came out of the pure beauty of the performance, I literally upset the table by my listening chair.

All About the Amps

The Super Nines sounded really good with all four amps, but they sounded different with each. The Pass Labs XA30.8 built the sound on a foundation of bass, mid-bass and power. This amp also had the tightest bass. The Sugden A21SE Signature was the most tube-like, and it had one of the deepest soundstages that I have ever heard.

The new Parasound ZM2350 was the biggest surprise of the bunch. It is less than half the price of the next-lowest price amp I had in house, and it pretty much held its own with them all. I will be doing a full review of this amp soon, so watch for it.

OK, so this will come as no surprise to those of you who know me. In the end, it was the First Watt SIT-3 paired with the LTA MZ3 that really made these monkeys sing.

Listening to the Super Nines



Size comparison of the gibbon X and the Super Nine for scale with Roxy the cat

Overall the sound of this combo had an organic quality that breathed depth and life into the music. The sound was rich, layered and dimensional allowing me to hear real detail that sounded very

natural and alive. I really don't think you could listen to music on this combo without thinking it sounds beautiful.

Comparing this sound to my reference speakers used with the SIT-3, the first thing I noticed was that the Super Nines played deeper and were more extended in the top-end. The Super Nines were richer with better tone from top to bottom. Also the soundstage was considerably wider and deeper.

In addition, the Super Nines were also very dynamic and had very good micro-dynamics. The music was exceptionally energizing, life-size and powerful. They kept drawing me into performances in much the same way live music draws me in. I should add that while I was preparing to write this review, Becky and I heard both Tuck and Patty and Steve Tyrell live. Because I had just heard these artists, I had very recent reference points to compare the sound of the Super Nines to the real deal.

Drawing Conclusions

At first I thought the Super Nines fell slightly short of my Teresonic speakers and to DeVore's own Orangutan O/96 speakers in the areas of micro-dynamics and tightness in the upper bass. However, the longer I listened to the Super Nines, I came to feel they are not only equal to these two speakers, but in several ways they are slightly better.



Like the DeVore Orangutan O/96 speakers, the Super Nines had the ability to transport me to a live performance in a way that few other speakers have in my room.

These speakers have plenty of power, scale, refinement and transparency. They brought music into my room and my heart and created a very soul-satisfying experience.

About the Bass

The tightness of the Super Nines' bass was dependent on the amp. It was very tight and deep with the Pass Labs XA30.8. It was more tube-like with the Sugden. It was powerful and somewhere in between with the Parasound. But like Goldilocks' porridge, it was just right with the First Watt SIT-3.

It was never overly tight or overly full with any of the four amps. The bass of the Super Nines created a fundamental foundation for the rest of the music to stand on. The

upper-bass and lower-midrange was just tight enough to bring the rhythm of the music into the room. They allowed me to hear the wood tones of a standup bass or piano. They also produced air around and within the instruments in a way that made them occupy space and sound like real instruments. At the same time, the micro-dynamics were quick and lively enough to let the plucking of a bass or rimshots of the drum kit and especially cymbals sound startlingly alive.

Space and Dynamics

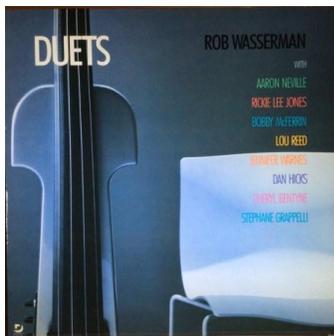
I was also impressed by how each instrument and singer seemed to occupy their own space. This was especially evident with how I could hear each backup singer on many albums. I went back and listened to Elvis and the Jordanaires like I did when I reviewed Wayne Picquet's Restored Quad ESL 57s a few years ago.

The Super Nines were just as amazing as the Quads in how I could hear Gordon Stoker and Hoyt Hawkins in their own space. I'm not talking about their voices hanging in space, but the performers occupying space in the room. The Super Nines did this without the beaming of the Quads and with much better dynamics.

Let's Listen to Some Tunes

Now let's move on and talk about some specific LPs and how they sounded played through the DeVore Super Nines. Purposely, I chose the same LPs that I used when reviewing the Orangutan O/93s.

Duets – Rob Wasserman



I carry this LP around at audio shows, and use it to evaluate systems. Very few systems at any price can hold it all together with the cut **"Angel Eyes."** On this cut, Cheryl Bentyne's voice goes from very soft to very loud and then back down to almost a whisper, and then it explodes to end the cut. It is a real test of a system's dynamics, harmonics and ability to sound as good when played very softly as well as very loudly.

Over the Super Nines, Bentyne's voice went from very low volume to extremely loud and never broke up. Wasserman's bass sounded visceral, rich, and quick. The Super Nines played this cut as well as and better than most speakers at any price point. Her voice and the strings sounded sweeter and juicier than I hear with most speakers. Wasserman's bass sounded simply beautiful.

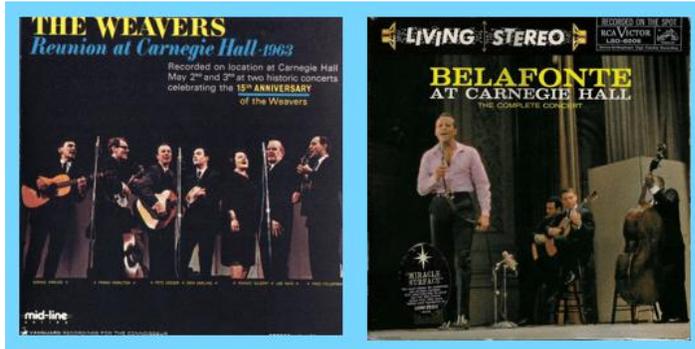
Blue – Joni Mitchell



In 1971, I was a 17-year-old freshman at Baylor University and I discovered Joni Mitchell. The album, **Blue**, was my first exposure to her beautiful voice and her intriguing music. Well, it's 47 years later, and I still love this album. The truth is, I probably enjoy it more now than I did when I was young and listened to it on KLH 17s, on Double Advents, and then on Quad 57s for years. The last few years it has been on my Teresonic Ingenium XR Silvers.

I know this LP inside and out. Played over the Super Nines, Mitchell's voice sounded just right with that beautiful angelic lightness of her youth. She was placed right there in the soundstage. The piano sounded exceptional and the guitar sounded as good as I've ever heard. The emotions of this performance came through with great impact over the Super Nines.

The Weavers Reunion At Carnegie Hall *and* Belafonte Live at Carnegie Hall



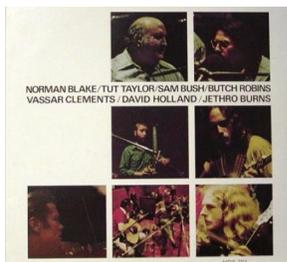
Speaking of LPs that I have listened to for many years, these are two recordings that, thanks to Harry Pearson, almost every audiophile from the early days of **The Absolute Sound** had to own. The Weaver's recording was done very simply. It was recorded on three tracks with an Ampex 300 at 15 1/2 IPS. All three mics were

Schoeps M-221B/26 condensers.

Both of these recordings can show the best and the worst of the way some audiophiles listen to music. So, let me say, I'm not interested in hearing tape splices, how many feet one singer is from the other or other such non-musical artifacts. These are two albums that should be real fun to listen to; they should show musical artistry that is seldom heard from folk groups or pop singers.

The listening experience of these two albums should definitely be from the perspective of you are there and not that they are in the room with you. The Super Nines are very special in that they let you hear the audiophile artifacts without keeping you from feeling as if you are in the hall enjoying a couple of incredible performances.

Sauerkraut and Solar Energy



This Flying Fish album with Norman Blake, Tut Taylor, Sam Bush, Butch Robins, Vassar Clements, David Holland, and Jethro Burns is DAWG music at its best. On many modern speakers, this album is all about the leading edge and speed. In the review of the Orangutan O/93s I said, "There should be more to this recording. Played over the O/93s there was richness and real sweetness with the strings. It portrayed the instruments nicely on the

stage with air and space around and within the instruments. This recording should be loads of fun, and it was on the O/93s."

I feared might sound too modern on the Super Nines, but I was wrong. Like the two LPs above, it did a good job of sounding both modern and still letting me experience the tone, interplay and fun of this great DAWG music.

Gershwin: Rhapsody In Blue / An American In Paris



Back when I was in high school, this was one of my first ventures into what I then thought of as classical music. That mean's, I have enjoyed this recording for over 40 years now. For these and a few other classical LPs, I preferred the Super Nines to any speaker I have heard in my room. The orchestra floated wide and deep from the front of the speakers to well behind the speakers. It was a very coherent soundstage with the instruments occupying real space. You could easily hear the hall, but it wasn't all about the soundstage. The instruments sounded like themselves

from the basses to a triangle. The violins were so sweet and airy. Overall, I had never enjoyed classical music more in my home.

It would just be wrong to talk about this album and not talk about how the piano sounded. Now you should remember, I have spent the last ten years listening to single-driver speakers as my reference. This has meant that when most speakers play piano recordings, I found the sound slightly incoherent. This has not been the case with the DeVore Orangutans or Super Nines. Pianos played over the Super Nines sounded coherent from top to bottom and with more top and bottom too. Most of all, on this recording the piano sounded simply beautiful.

Summing Up

When I heard the DeVore Fidelity Super Nines at the Rocky Mountain Audio Fest, I knew they were special. In fact, I gave them a Bongo Award for best product debut, but I never expected they were as good as they turned out to be. The Orangutan O/96 speakers were the first speakers in seven years that had tempted me to replace my reference speakers. As it turns out, I wasn't the only reviewer to be tempted, and some of the most respected reviewers did just that, but I resisted and finally returned them to DeVore. That will not be happening with the Super Nines, and this is a shock to me.

There is something very special about this tweeter that was first used in the DeVore gibbon X. As a result, the Super Nines have slightly more sparkle, shimmer and beauty than the DeVore Orangutans or my reference speakers. I also found the bass to be more to my taste.

And, yes, I must admit that I really enjoyed their incredible soundstage. I would never buy a speaker for its soundstaging abilities, but it is surely a nice bonus coming with a speaker that has such a rich and beautiful tone.

With vocals, solo instruments, orchestras, big bands or rock groups they demonstrated startling realism that is as good or better than the DeVore Orangutans and my reference speakers. In the end, Becky and I both found the DeVore gibbon Super Nines to be speakers we want to continue to enjoy in our home.