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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Marten Coltrane 2 floorstanding loudspeaker

By Roy Gregory

I first reviewed the Marten Coltrane back in 2004. I liked a lot of what it did, but also found it flawed by a cool tonality and overly analytical presentation and reported accordingly. What goes around comes around and that very same pair of Marten Coltranes were destined to reappear in my listening room. The intervening 18 months of solid use changed the speakers out of all recognition. Gone was the lean, pinched sound, the lack of emotional breadth. In its place a richer, fuller sound, ripe with colour and texture. In fact, a whole different speaker – and one that was a whole lot better.

Those original Coltranes weren't new when they reached me, and well aware that a speaker's performance can alter out of all recognition as it runs in, I'd beaten the review speakers to pulp (metaphorically speaking) before ever settling down to form an opinion on their performance. But here I was, confronted with the unavoidable evidence that as much running as I'd given them, it simply wasn't enough. The review I'd written was inaccurate, and worse, misleading to potential owners.

All you can do is learn the lesson and move on. Reviewing the Coltranes made me much, much more aware of just how important running in can be, a fact reinforced by a series of speakers since, many of them also using the distinctive Accuton ceramic drivers. Marten learnt the lesson too, and now their drivers are run for several hundred hours before they're even installed into speakers. Even so I approached the Coltrane 2 with some trepidation and an insistence that they stay for longer than normal. In fact, they too have come, gone and returned again – doing several shows as well as prolonged periods of constant break-in over that time, so I'm as sure as I reasonably can be that I'm actually hearing what they can do; which is just as well, because it's quite a lot. But before we get to that, perhaps we'd better understand exactly what the Coltrane 2 actually is...

The original Coltrane remains in the range and is a three-way design, pairing a diamond tweeter and 100mm ceramic midrange driver with two 200mm ceramic bass units, all mounted in a 60mm thick constrained layer baffle, constructed from two layers of solid hardwood. The cabinet is a complex, one-piece, boat-shaped molding, constructed from 25mm thick carbon-fibre. Despite a height of 1130mm and a depth of 610mm (around twice its width) it succeeds in appearing smaller than it actually is – largely due to its rounded rear contours. The Coltrane 2 is the latest addition to the Company's range, and represents a beefed-up take on the Coltrane recipe. Gone are the wimpy 200mm bass units, replaced with much more macho

280mm versions, using the latest ceramic sandwich technology from Accuton. The midrange driver has expanded to 173mm in diameter and the tweeter has increased from 19 to 25mm. The cabinet has expanded to match, being around 80mm taller and broader, although still much the same depth. The result is a squatter, more planted look that I think suits the speakers' shape much better. The drivers make a better job of filling the baffle and the whole looks a lot more balanced in terms of its proportions.

At 60kg and hard to get a hold of, the C2s are far easy to handle if you can enlist some aid, although you can manage alone if needs must. Terminals are bi-wirable WBT NextGens and a three position rotary switch beneath them allows for a degree of low-frequency bass compensation. Internal wiring is from Jorma and the speaker is supported on stainless steel outriggers and adjustable Black Diamond Racing cones and pucks – although finding any sort of horizontal surface to act as a reference for rake angle is something of a challenge. I resorted to a straightedge resting on the outriggers, which works well enough for comparative purposes, if not absolute level. Like the original version, the C2 is reflex loaded by a massive, downward facing port – and it matters what surface that port sees. Sat on my (very) solid wooden floor, the Martens sounded happier with a softer interface ▶

► immediately below the port, and a folded hand towel added an obvious sense of weight and impact to the bottom end, a more palpable and clearly defined soundstage and greater presence through the mid-bass. These are not small differences, so if auditioning the C2s (or other, similarly ported speakers) it is definitely something to consider

So much for the physical differences: for me, the real story of the C2 is contained in the numbers. Bigger cabinet, bigger drivers – that's got to add up to greater sensitivity or deeper bass, right? Well, not apparently in this case. The bottom-end extension and sensitivity of the C2 is quoted as identical to the Coltrane*, the only difference being a slightly milder impedance characteristic, now quoted as eight Ohm nominal as opposed to six. What's more, the crossover points have dropped considerably. The logic behind three-way designs is that a single driver covers the critical vocal range. This generally dictates crossover frequencies of around 300 and 4500Hz, avoiding the awkward 3kHz junction that occurs in most two-way designs. The Coltrane follows that pattern, with second order slopes centered on 350 and 4000Hz. But if you think that 4kHz is flirting with the vocal range, how about 2.8kHz – 'cos that's where the C2 crosses over from midrange to tweeter

All of which rather invites the question – why bother? Well, it all comes down to the bottom end; not so much the quantity but the way it's delivered. Those two 250mm bass drivers represent a 70% increase in swept area – and if that's not adding depth then it's being deployed in the service of sheer weight and the rather more ephemeral area of musical authority, which in turn depends on mid-bass speed and presence as much as the fundamentals. Now, given that the original Coltrane, even fully blossomed, didn't really plumb the depths with quite the aplomb you might have expected from a speaker of its size and price, the C2 starts to make some sense. Unfortunately, those driver and cabinet upgrades don't come cheap, meaning that the system price has risen too. The C2 finds itself face to face with some pretty serious competition, in the shape of Avalon's TIME (which saves some money on the speakers so that you can spend it meeting their appetite for power) and the Focal Stella Utopia EM, a speaker that despite its obvious differences, has reached several remarkably similar design decisions to the Marten. Just take a look at its crossover points and you'll see what I mean...

Even a cursory listen to a pair of warmed up (yes, ceramic drivers need 15 minutes or so to reach operating temperature) and fully run-in pair of C2s should tell you that Marten's re-balancing act has been remarkably successful. This is a speaker that enjoys an immediate and commanding presence. It delivers low-frequencies with an authority, weight and impact that was totally beyond its predecessor. With the Coltrane 2, Marten hasn't just provided that extra bottom-end drive and power, it has successfully mated it to the rest of the range, providing the solid musical foundation that's the basis of any great, full-range system. Just listen to the wide open spaces of the Kertesz/LSO performance of the Dvorak New World Symphony; listen to the percussion detonations (their detail and texture as well as their impact, the way they rebound off the rear wall) and the way the bowed basses are floated in the soundstage – as an exercise in dynamic and spatial coherence it's a tour de force that can be matched by few speakers, exceeded by very few indeed.



In order to understand the how and why of what you've just heard, it's necessary to reach for something from the other end of the musical spectrum. *This One's For Blanton* is a sparse, almost impressionistic piece of jazz interplay between Ellington's piano and Ray Brown's bass. With so little cover and such demanding, complex rhythmic interplay, few systems make it sound like music, fewer still actually make it groove. Listening through the C2s, the piano is angled left as usual. What is unusual is just how clearly the bass is located, both in depth and height. Even when Brown embarks on those fleet-fingered explorations of the instrument's lower registers, there's no slurring or smudging of the fingering or the notes themselves. Transition between the bass drivers and the midrange unit is tonally and rhythmically seamless – doubtless helped by the consistency in the materials and the gentle slopes of the second order cross-over. But also worthy of note is that the bass is neither over-blown in terms of scale nor over emphasized in terms of volume. It's amazing how this disc allows you to map the low-frequency voicing of speakers simply by following the relative weight and volume of the notes as Brown works his way up and down the range. The C2s never step out of line or push specific frequencies forward.

*In fact, the Coltrane has already undergone an evolution (in 2007) from the earlier model that I heard and reviewed. The original version was quoted as a four Ohm nominal load, with a minimum close to two Ohms. This made it far more demanding of amplifiers, and could contribute to the lean balance if the amp wasn't up to the job.

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Instead, their bass output is that rarest of hi-fi phenomena – a bottom-end that’s flat AND powerful.

That linearity of its low-frequency performance certainly explains the C2s spatial coherence, the effortless way the soundstage steps away from and extends beyond the speakers. It also explains the lack of any rhythmic slowing or hesitation. Instead, the music is fluid and contiguous, as seamless as the space in which it occurs. Does it carry the quality through to the rest of the range? Yes and no. Rhythmically and dynamically, the speaker extends just as seamlessly out to beyond audibility, with no hot-spots or false emphasis. Tonally, there is a subtle dip around the tweeter transition – a slight hollowness that collapses the separation between the close harmony vocals on Steve Dawson’s *Sweet Is The Anchor*, that adds a little extra attitude or musical edge to Janine Jansen’s violin as she sparks the Beethoven concerto into life. Let’s not overdo this. This deviation is not only so small that it will pass unnoticed in all but the most sorted of systems, the most revealing of rooms, it’s only really apparent because the speaker is so flat in every other respect, like a tiny dip in a salt-pan. Its audibility also depends on the matching amplifier – which brings us to another way in which the C2 represents a significant advance over its predecessor. The C2 is both easier to drive and makes the most of the amplifier doing the driving. You don’t need to lean the system one way or another to compensate for the speaker’s tonality, its degree of tonal and dynamic neutrality simply offers an open window on system performance – exactly the way it should be.

This lack of emphasis allows recordings and artists to speak with their own voices. Instrumental textures and the micro-dynamic detail that really breathe life into performances are reproduced with effortless clarity, making performances unforced, allowing them their own time, space and expressive emphasis. As a speaker it may not be as musically forgiving as the Avalon TIME, but there are listeners that will view that as a benefit. It is not as easy to drive or room-match as the Focal Stella, but it is both more neutral and more honest. It doesn’t just take a seat at the top-table, it makes its own space and its own case. Marten has managed to build a genuinely full-range speaker system that is both neutral and musically expressive. It goes loud with vanishingly low-levels of distortion, while its relatively benign drive characteristics make realistic levels easy to achieve with any competent partnering amplifier. All told, it’s an elusive combination that’s hard to achieve, yet they have succeeded in spectacular fashion. A speaker system is exactly that – a system comprising various parts: the baffle, the cabinet, the cross-over, the drivers and the mechanical termination. Everything has to be right to really realize the performance potential inherent in the parts. Achieving that is a tricky path, part science, part art, part evolution and mostly experience. What I hear from the C2 is a speaker that finally delivers – and in emphatic style – on the promise inherent in Marten’s sophisticated cabinet technology.

This is the best-balanced and most musically satisfying speaker I’ve heard from the company – by some distance. It might lack the absolute transparency



and awesome dynamic range of the massive Coltrane Supreme, but it also avoids that speaker system’s almost surgical approach to musical dissection. When the C2s depart they will be missed – leaving a hankering to hear just what the upmarket and the more affordable models might deliver. Undoubtedly expensive, the Coltrane 2 is an attractive and beautifully finished product. It is worth every penny. Or is that krona? +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Three-way, reflex loaded loudspeaker

Driver Complement: 2x 280mm ceramic sandwich bass drivers

1x 173mm ceramic midrange driver

1x 25mm diamond tweeter

Bandwidth: 20Hz – 60kHz ±2dB

Impedance: 8 Ohms nominal

4.1 Ohms minimum

Sensitivity: 89dB

Dimensions (WxHxD): 395 x 1210 x 630mm

Weight: 60kg ea. Net

Finishes: Black cabinet with black, oak, cherry, maple or Walnut baffle

Price: €75,000 per pair

Manufacturer: Marten Gothenburg Sweden

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