

The Vienna Acoustics Beethoven Concert Grand Loudspeaker

by Paul Messenger

Vienna Acoustics has contributed just three models to the thousand or so speaker reviews that have accumulated in my computer's memory over the past decade and a half. I therefore had very little previous with this Austrian speaker brand, but that's partly because the company only started up at the end of the 1980s, and didn't arrive in Britain until ten years later.

Furthermore, the three which I have tried gave somewhat mixed results. The Bach and Mozart models, belonging to the same series as this Beethoven Concert Grand, were noteworthy for combining delicious cabinetwork alongside a decidedly laid back presentation. From a very different series of Vienna models, based around highly distinctive, imaginatively shaped and rather effective alloy enclosures, the Schonberg model gave a decent account of itself, but is clearly aimed more at those putting together silver-finished AV packages.

Recently, US distributor Sumiko (responsible for REL and Vienna in the States) acquired the UK sub maker. So, it seemed logical to reverse engineer a few of their distribution deals, meaning that REL are now the UK distributors for Vienna, which with Sumiko's muscle behind them should raise their profile a bit.

Although there are two still larger models in the catalogue, this Beethoven Concert Grand sits well up towards the top of the Vienna ladder. The standard version, available in three finishes (cherry, as reviewed, maple or piano lacquer black), costs a substantial £2,995/pair; rosewood is available for an extra £300. The highest standards of craftsmanship are evident in both the beautifully figured veneer itself, and the

layers of lacquer laid on top to give the final lustrous finish. Furthermore, the techniques used to achieve subtly radiused front and rear edges, which will have acoustic as well as aesthetic benefits, is further evidence of the quality of workmanship. The phrase 'top quality real wood veneer' appears so often in speaker reviews it has become something of a cliché, but few deserve it more than Vienna Acoustics.

Veneer is applied to all six faces; all five drivers are flush mounted into the front panel; and the grille is held by some very discrete sockets.



Although the speaker arguably looks best with its grille removed, the latter's aluminium alloy frame incorporates a central spine which is bound to – and indeed intended to – modify the acoustic performance somewhat, especially the tweeter dispersion. The enclosure construction sandwiches a relatively deep side/top/base wrap between two slim but very hefty front and back panels, each nearly two inches thick, and with several extra internal braces, turning the scales to a substantial 33kg, the whole thing feels exceptionally solidly built. Physical stability is one potential problem with all slim, tall floorstanders, and the preferred solution is usually some form of plinth to extend the spike footprint. Vienna Acoustics has its own variation on the theme, using two solid yet compact castings per speaker, one across the front and the

other across the rear. Each provides a solid mounting for two massive and easily adjustable spikes, though regrettably there's no attempt to include lock-nuts here.

This is a full three-way design, achieving a generous bass cone area while keeping the front view fashionably slim through the sensible expedient of using three matching bass units. Although these drivers are identical, the loading arrangements are arranged to avoid generating major internal standing waves by subdividing the bass enclosure so the lower enclosure, half the size of the upper one, loads just the lowest driver; each sub-enclosure has its own reflex port. A slightly smaller driver with different plastics cone formulation and construction is situated above the bass array and below the fabric dome tweeter that appropriately sits bang on seated ear height.

Vienna's designer Peter Gansterer believes that the cone is the most important part of a drive unit, and his proprietary cone technologies use clear plastics throughout, claiming that the current mixtures offer: "marvellous midrange clarity without any hardness". The bass driver cones, developed using finite element analysis, are mostly TPX compound stiffened by a series of radial ribs, and known as 'spider-cones' because of their web-like appearance. The midrange cone, dubbed X3P, combines some TPX with three kinds of polypropylene. The cones themselves are fabricated in Austria, but shipped to Norwegian OEM driver specialist SEAS, which then builds them into drivers. SEAS also supply the tweeters, which are a ▶



► specified variation on the D29 theme.

Top quality components are used in a crossover network that is deliberately kept as simple as feasible, favouring first-order (6dB/octave) slopes where possible, up to second-order Bessel if necessary. In fact the Beethoven's bass drivers are rolled off (low-pass) at 12dB/octave; the midrange rolls on (high-pass) at 6dB/oct, and off (low-pass) at 9dB/oct; a 12dB/oct filter feeds the tweeter.

Peter stresses that his main design priorities are naturalness, homogeneity and musicality, and that measured performance – a particularly useful tool at the beginning of driver development – takes a lower priority when creating and finalising a complete speaker system. A key manufacturing priority is to ensure that production samples are as close to the original development reference as possible, which involves painstaking measuring and pair-matching at a component level. All components are compared to known references based on the original prototype design references, and once the complete speaker has been built, it too is compared directly to a reference standard.

The description of how the tweeters were pair-matched took me right back to my first job in the hi-fi industry, when I joined Spondor some thirty years ago. Spondor's main task was building accurate monitors for a very picky broadcast industry, and one of my early jobs was measuring and pairing the Celestion HF1300 tweeters the company was then using, and grading them precisely for sensitivity. Each pair was then partnered with a pair of crossover networks with the correct matching

autochokes to suit that sensitivity and ensure accurate crossover transition. Vienna Acoustics is clearly adopting a remarkably similar approach in seeking to achieve a similar degree of rigorous production consistency.

I've also heard that the company supplies superb after-sales support for all its customers, which is a further bonus, though no reviewer is equipped to evaluate this part of the operation of course. While I can't comment on the after-sales service, I have to say that the pre-review service was first class, as the speakers were delivered by Sumiko/REL's owner John Hunter, who took great pains to adjust the precise positioning of the speakers for optimum performance in my room.

He certainly did his best, even though he eventually admitted he wasn't entirely happy with the end result, but I have to say the speakers worked very well in the positions he chose, even though these were not too dissimilar to where I normally place speakers – just a couple of feet wider apart, and a few inches closer to the wall.

Interestingly, and perhaps significantly, the speaker positions John Hunter chose were very similar to those selected by Bosendorfer designer Hans Deutsch when setting up his VC-1s a year or so previously.

John might not have been entirely happy with his set-up, but the in-room-averaged measurements that I subsequently made only served to confirm that he'd done a rather good job of finding the locations that gave the most even bass delivery. The Beethoven Grand Concert is by no means the flattest or most neutral speaker I've either measured or auditioned, but it does

have important strengths nonetheless. In basic tonal balance terms the bass end goes very deep (-6dB at 20Hz) and is notably even with it, if not particularly smooth. In fact, barring the odd peak or trough, the balance is impressively flat all the way up to 1.3kHz. Above that point, however, there's a quite abrupt drop of about 4dB when measured under far field conditions. The presence and lower

treble, from 1.5kHz up to 5kHz, is arguably

a little too restrained, though above that point there's a slight recovery. Despite this anomalous feature, the top end as a whole is again usefully smooth and even. Although the measured far field balance doesn't tell the whole story by any means, it does explain at least some of the BCG's character, and while some might find the significant presence restraint a little frustrating, others will probably welcome the lack of aggression this feature brings to the overall sound.

If you like the sort of speakers which bring a bit of bite and attack to the party, this is probably not the best choice; if you like your music lush, warm, laid back and beautifully enveloping, this could well be the perfect choice.

For the record, the measurements also reveal a sensitivity of around 90dB, which is a thoroughly respectable figure, but also one that's rather compromised by a load that is low throughout the bass region, and dips briefly below 3 ohms at around 90Hz. Clearly, an amplifier with ample current reserves is preferable here, and one should exercise ►



► suck-it-and-see caution if contemplating using valve power amplification.

The two adjectives that best sum up the sound of the Beethoven Concert Grand are 'delicious' and 'relaxing'. Surprisingly perhaps, given its very restrained presence, this speaker doesn't sound particularly or obviously 'shut in', though I did find it necessary to turn up the volume a little higher than normal when listening to speech. This factor seems altogether more positive with musical sources, helping to mollify the unwelcome effects of over-close-miking that's all too common in commercial recording practices, and delivering choral works with a spacious airiness that was positively magical.

A key factor in this lovely spaciousness is a superb freedom from boxy colorations, indicative of the painstaking care that has gone into the enclosure construction. Furthermore, slim enclosures not only look good, they also help promote wide and spacious imaging with good focus and depth perspectives, and that's very much the case here. Besides their delicately beautiful physical appearance, these speakers do a remarkable job of simply disappearing from the acoustic soundstage, so that one is quite unaware of their exact locations.

Another acid test of a high quality speaker is an ability to play both softly and loudly with neither fear nor favour, and again the Beethoven Concert Grand proved exceptionally able. Laid back speakers tend to sound most convincing when playing at highish levels, as they avoid the aggressive nature of more forward

designs, and often fall short when asked to play whisper-quietly at 3am. The BCG showed no such favouritism. It deftly avoids aggressive tendencies when working hard, yet is equally happy maintaining full detail when competing head on with the dawn chorus. Even applause continued to sound realistic when the volume was at rock bottom.

Immediately prior to installing the BCGs, I'd spent some



days enjoying a pair of B&W's magnificent and much more costly 800Ds. While the comparison did reveal some limitations in the Vienna

model, most obviously in some lack of grip and dynamic tension in the nether regions, and in bottom end weight and drive in general, this very stern comparison also confirmed how good the BCG was in nearly every other aspect of performance.

Yes, I will bring the 800Ds back into the listening room soon, and again enjoy their tremendous authority and dynamic range, especially with



rock and dance material. But I'm not rushing to do so, simply because I'm finding the Beethoven Concert Grands such a relaxing and downright enjoyable experience, especially with classical and acoustic material. When playing Radio 3, for example, their sheer delicacy and sumptuous sweetness is both inviting and immensely involving, and their tonality has an essential rightness

that's thoroughly convincing. While some may well find the BCG

a little too restrained and polite for their personal taste, many more will discover that its good mannered acoustic and physical presentation is accompanied by an innate and immensely appealing musical literacy. ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	3-way floorstanding loudspeaker
Drivers:	3x 7-inch bass, XPP 'spidercones' 1x 6-inch midrange, X3P cone 1x 1.1-inch hand-coated VA silk dome
Impedance:	4 Ohms
Sensitivity:	90dB measured (2.83V)
Bandwidth:	28Hz - 22kHz
Crossover	3-way, 6dB and 12dB Bessel 1% tolerance MKP capacitors Air-core 0.7% tolerance mid/tweeter coils Powder-core bass coils 1% tolerance metal film inductance free resistors
Finishes:	Piano Lacquer black, Cherry, Maple or Rosewood (E300 extra) real wood veneers
Dimensions (WxHxD):	190x1130x400mm
Footprint:	240x450mm
Weight:	33 kg
Price:	£2995/pair

UK Distributor:
REL Acoustics
Tel. (44)(0)1656 768777
Net. www.vienna-acoustics.com