SOUND &VISION

Vienna Acoustics Beethoven Baby Grand Speaker System

By Michael Fremer • Posted: Jul 20, 2011

Price: $11,250
At A Glance: Silky-smooth sonics • Refined, furniture-grade cabinetry • Depth-charge deep bass

Videophile Ready

Show Vienna Acoustics' living-room-friendly Beethoven Baby Grand system to your hesitant significant other, and you might get the long-awaited nod you've been looking for. This is a speaker system an interior-design-conscious, non–audio enthusiast can make peace with.

The $11,250 system is visually understated, sized right for small to medium-sized rooms, and is furniture-grade built and finished in a wide variety of handsome wood veneers. It won't dominate the space, nor call attention to itself. The closer you look at its fit and finish, the more you'll appreciate the small touches that help produce such an elegant look—despite what is an assemblage of rectangular boxes.

The gracefully proportioned towers are less than 7 inches wide and sit on die-cast powder black metal spiked supports. Front and rear grooved accents break up the slab-like sides and top panels. The radiused edges give the boxes a smoothly finished appearance.

The Beethoven system is as modestly handsome and low key as the much larger, dramatically curvaceous Klimt system I reviewed last year was flamboyant (Home Theater, December 2010). Once installed, the Klimt system grabbed my wife's attention—and not in ways I like. She objected mostly to the size; she prefers speakers to be heard and not seen.

When I set up the Beethoven Baby Grand system, she didn't even notice that the Beethovens had replaced another set of speakers. She looked. She approved. That leaves your spousal acceptance factor: Does Vienna's Beethoven Baby Grand system perform sonically?

Attention to Detail Great and Small

The Beethoven Baby Grand tower is a three-way, bass-reflex design that features a pair of Vienna Acoustics–developed 6-inch bass/midrange Spidercone drivers used as woofers. They are said to extend down to 30 hertz, but without any details that would make that number meaningful. These clear, radially braced XPP cones of TPX thermoplastic and polypropylene are similar to the three 7-inch drivers that Vienna uses in the somewhat larger Beethoven Concert Grand speakers I reviewed for Stereophile in 2006 (stereophile.com).

The Beethoven Baby Grand's midrange is a 6-inch driver with a more recently developed X3P cone material that's a reformulation of Vienna's original XPP cone. It uses three varieties of polypropylene in addition to TPX. This X3P cone is said to be ultralow mass, rigid, and inherently well damped, which lets it operate over an unusually wide bandwidth and produce exceptional inner detail and control. An inverted rubber surround, used in both the woofers and the midrange unit, is said to more effectively dampen cone edge resonances without loss.

A hand-coated 1.1-inch silkdome tweeter developed by ScanSpeak in association with Vienna is designed to combine high resolution, excellent dispersion, and smooth overall sonics.

The Beethoven Baby Grand has a rated sensitivity of 91 decibels (again without the necessary details to back this up). Its crossover network is said to use high-quality caps and metal-film resistors, as well as solid-core, twisted-pair copper wiring and gold-and-silver alloy terminals that are direct-mounted to the crossover circuit board. The 1.6-inch-thick cabinet baffles are 30 percent thicker than on previous models. Vienna has even given attention to the grilles, which feature an integral dispersion-controlling V-shaped aluminum diffusor that adds an additional visual dimension to the front panel.

In the high-performance twochannel audio world, $4,500 per pair for near full-frequency-response performance in such an attractive and well-built package is considered a bargain, assuming the sonic performance lives up to the physical plant's promise. In fact, the slightly larger Beethovens I reviewed in HT's May 2006 issue (only 2 inches taller and 7 pounds heavier) sold then for $4,500.

Maestro Grand Center and Haydn Grand Symphony Edition Surround

The matching Maestro Grand center-channel speaker, though modestly sized, houses a pair of 6-inch X3P Spidercone drivers in a front-firing dual-port bass-reflex configuration. There's an offset 1-inch silk-dome tweeter that features a triple-stack neodymium magnet assembly, which is mounted within an iris-shaped mounting block that's designed to reduce resonance.

The Maestro shares crossover and other technology with the Beethoven Baby Grand tower, as does the Haydn Grand Symphony Edition. The Haydn resembles an upright Maestro minus one woofer, and with the front port intriguingly placed behind the well-isolated tweeter. This is a refined, third-generation version of a speaker Vienna Acoustics has manufactured since 1995.

Principal Grand Subwoofer

Working with Scan-Speak, Vienna created a new 12-inch proprietary pulp-paper carbon-filled cone driver for its new bottom-ported Principal Grand subwoofer. It's designed to "add the last octave of bass reinforcement," powered by a "conservatively rated" 300-watt amplifier, the specs and design details of which Vienna does not offer. The relatively modestly sized box is finished with the same care and attention to detail as other Vienna Acoustics speakers. There are line- and speaker-level inputs and variable crossover and gain settings, as well as a phase switch.

System setup was relatively quick and easy since Patrick Butler of Vienna's new American distribution company has set up many speaker systems in my room while he represented the brand with another distributor. This system should be relatively easy to set up even in an unfamiliar room. All channels were driven full range, including the Haydns, while the Principal's line-level input handled only the LFE channel. Butler aimed the Beethoven Baby Grands at my listening position with the tweeters on axis.

After the setup was complete, we watched some concert footage. It quickly became obvious that this system is a real smoothie, but it also has a nicely extended and airy top end, free of grain and unpleasant etch. The Vienna team left satisfied that my big Parasound Halo A 51 amp would get the most from the speakers.

Modestly Sized Package Produces Squeals

The first movie I watched was the war/family drama Brothers with Tobey Maguire, Jake Gyllenhaal, and Natalie Portman. The first cut between the domestic scenes that set up the film and the war action produced an enormous SPL jump, depth-charge bass, and a cavernous sense of open space. Despite its relatively modest size, the Beethoven system produced the full-throttle transition from the family living room to the Afghan skies where Maguire's helicopter gets shot down and crashes. The Vienna system reproduced the compression/rarefaction effects of the helicopter blades with a physicality that only a system capable of moving a great deal of air in the listening room can produce.

Indeed, with your eyes closed, you'd know you weren't listening to five mini-satellites, but you would probably suspect that a much larger front array had manipulated such a large volume of air and produced such a tall and wide soundstage. The system's absence of etch and grain contributed to the highly desired sensation of speakers MIA, replaced by a seamless wall of sound with well defined but not overly sharp images. Given the combined four 6-inch midrange drivers in the Maestro and the Haydns and the four woofers and two midrange drivers in the Beethovens, plus the 12-inch subwoofer, it shouldn't come as any surprise that this modestly sized system can effortlessly give the impression of a

larger system. Vienna packs a lot of drivers into relatively small boxes and, more important, does so without producing bass congestion and excessive bottom-end warmth.

Aided by a capable subwoofer, this system produced high SPLs without strain. In fact, it seems to be better in this regard than the Concert Grand version, which, when cranked up to concert-hall levels, could become dynamically compressed and lose its smooth composure.

Performance Similar to the Big Beethovens

The Beethoven Baby Grand has a vivid, rich, and inviting tonal balance. Those were descriptors I used in my 2006 Beethoven Concert Grand review, and they are equally useful in describing the Baby Grand sound. "On top," I wrote in 2006, "the speaker was silky smooth, airy, open, and neither overly aggressive (unless pushed) nor frustratingly polite and soft. Bass extension—down to the 30-Hz area—was on the full, rich, supple side, but never sloppy or thick. The midrange was equally expressive and vivid, but not to where it was cloying or sounded like coloration. The speaker's rhythmic agility was well matched to its transient performance: not the fastest and cleanest, but pleasing and natural to the point where I felt the bestsounding recordings I own were worth a spin, while the shriller, less listenable ones became more pleasing."

Considering the generally crispy nature of most processed soundtracks, this balance seems to be ideal for watching movies, while also providing long-term listening pleasure with music. And, in fact, that was the case during the months the system was in my living room.

I used some of the same CDs and LPs (using an Ariston turntable and Shure M97xe into the Marantz AV7005's phono input). These included Shirley Horn's You Won't Forget Me CD and Johnny Hartman's Once in Every Life LP. Again, Hartman's deep baritone was reproduced cleanly without bloat, while the late Billy Taylor's piano lacked a bit of the percussive edge I know is on the recording.

I've heard and reviewed many Vienna Acoustics loudspeakers over the years, and these Beethoven Baby Grands strike me as having the best overall balance of any of them, though, as suggested above, they sound very similar to my distant memories of the bigger Beethoven Concert Grands. However, they seemed to produce less of a presence-region dip than I remember, although that characteristic is still there.

Of course the Baby Grands have neither the dynamic nor SPL capabilities of the big Klimts, nor do they go quite as low, but they come close enough for a fraction of the cost. And within their

still impressive capabilities, they manage to get out of the way and let the music, effects, and dialogue float effortlessly and well focused within a tall, wide, and deep three-dimensional space.

Conclusion

$11,250 isn't exactly pocket change. On the other hand, that's not an excessive amount for fine furniture. Here you get beautifully finished furniture that sounds good, too. The $4,500-per-pair Beethoven Baby Grand looks good, is beautifully built, and has a series of sonic attributes that I find work well with both movies and music.

It has more oomph than a smaller two-way monitor, yet it doesn't take up more floor space. It goes deeper and produces a bigger soundstage. Its smooth tonal balance creates an unobtrusive, non-mechanical (though thoroughly involving) sonic picture. Set up correctly, you won't "see" these speakers while you listen.

The towers blend seamlessly with the Maestro center speaker, which, though compact, gave me the impression that it goes deep. The Haydn Grand SE surround speakers would probably make a great front pair in a more modest system. As surrounds, they're probably overkill for film content. But on surround music, they really sing and blend seamlessly with the front speakers to produce a notably transparent 3D bubble.

The new Principal Grand subwoofer goes effortlessly down into the subterranean region while maintaining musicality. It also packs a wallop. It's the opposite of those compact, small-driver fart boxes that you should only use when space truly is the final frontier.

Negatives? If the 2006 Stereophile measurements are a guide, the 91-dB efficiency spec is probably seriously overstated. The larger Beethovens measured about 88 dB, which is considerably lower. So don't waste your money on these speakers unless you're prepared to drive them with powerful, high-quality amplification. I also found the word new overused in the publicity literature. All of the driver, crossover network, and other technologies that the brochures describe, they also described as new in 2006 when I reviewed the Concert Grands.

And, of course, there are those for whom the Baby Grand's smooth, forgiving character—largely the result of that aforementioned presence-region dip—would seem to deviate too far from flat. That's the Vienna Acoustics sonic signature. They're not "accurate" in the classic, technical sense. But they are musical, and if you can spend the money for a meticulously built, superbly engineered surround sound system that strives for both phyical and sonic beauty (though perhaps sacrificing tonal linearity in the process), the Vienna Acoustics Beethoven Baby Grand system should be on your short list. It could mean the end of a long wait for a physically substantial 5.1-channel speaker system in your living room.

Vienna Acoustics Beethoven Baby Grand Speaker System Specs

Speaker: Beethoven Baby Grand
Type: Three-way, tower
Tweeter (size in inches, type): 1.1, silk dome
Midrange (size in inches, type): 6, polypropylene/TPX cone
Woofer (size in inches, type): 6, polypropylene/TPX cone (2)
Nominal Impedance (ohms): 4
Recommended Amp Power (watts): 40–250
Available Finishes: Cherry, Rosewood, Piano Black, Piano White
Dimensions (W x H x D, inches): 6.7 x 38.9 x 12.9
Weight (pounds): 130
Price: $4,500/pr

Speaker: Maestro Grand
Type: Two-way, center
Tweeter (size in inches, type): 1, silk dome
Midrange (size in inches, type): polypropylene/TPX cone (2)
Woofer (size in inches, type): None
Nominal Impedance (ohms): 4
Recommended Amp Power (watts): 30–200
Available Finishes: Cherry, Rosewood, Piano Black, Piano White
Dimensions (W x H x D, inches): 23.25 x 6.75 x 11.5
Weight (pounds): 30
Price: $1,400

Speaker: Haydn Grand SE
Type: Two-way, monitor
Tweeter (size in inches, type): 1, silk dome
Midrange (size in inches, type): 6, polypropylene/TPX cone
Woofer (size in inches, type): None

Nominal Impedance (ohms): 4
Recommended Amp Power (watts): 50–180
Available Finishes: Cherry, Rosewood, Piano Black, Piano White
Dimensions (W x H x D, inches): 6.85 x 14.2 x 10.4
Weight (pounds): 44
Price: $1,850/pr

Principal Grand Subwoofer
Enclosure Type: Vented
Woofer (size in inches, type): 12, carbon–filled pulp (paper) cone
Rated Power (watts): 300, RMS
Connections: Five-way binding posts (2), line-level RCA (2)
Crossover Bypass: No
Available Finishes: Cherry, Rosewood, Piano Black, Piano White
Dimensions (W x H x D, inches): 15.25 x 15.25 x 19.5
Weight (pounds): 58
Price: $3,500

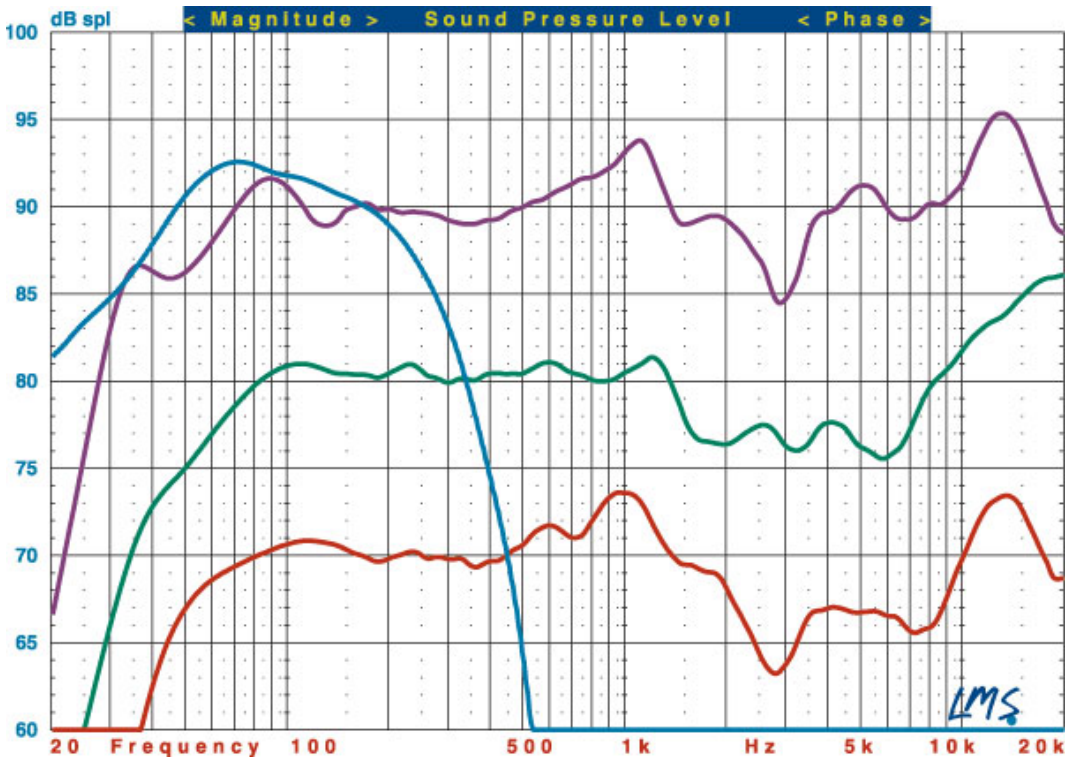
Company Info
Vienna Acoustics
(425) 374-4015
vienna-acoustics.com

Vienna Acoustics Beethoven Baby Grand Speaker System HT Labs Measures

L/R Sensitivity: 89 dB from 500 Hz to 2 kHz

Center Sensitivity: 89 dB from 500 Hz to 2 kHz

Surround Sensitivity: 88 dB from 500 Hz to 2 kHz



This graph shows the quasi-anechoic (employing close-miking of all woofers) frequency response of the Beethoven Baby Grand L/R (purple trace), Maestro Grand center channel (green trace), Haydn Grand surround (red trace), and Principal Grand subwoofer (blue trace). All passive loudspeakers were measured with grilles at a distance of 1 meter with a 2.83-volt input and scaled for display purposes.

The Beethoven Baby Grand's listening-window response (a five-point average of axial and +/–15-degree horizontal and vertical responses) measures +2.84/–6.48 decibels from 200 hertz to 10 kilohertz. The –3-dB point is at 59 Hz, and the –6-dB point is at 32 Hz. Impedance reaches a minimum of 3.00 ohms at 99 Hz and a phase angle of +42.55 degrees at 2.2 kHz.

The Maestro Grand's listening-window response measures +2.81/–3.44 dB from 200 Hz to 10 kHz. An average of axial and +/–15-degree horizontal responses measures +2.96/–3.59 dB from 200 Hz to 10 kHz. The –3-dB point is at 55 Hz, and the –6-dB point is at 41 Hz. Impedance reaches a minimum of 4.28 ohms at 193 Hz and a phase angle of +44.82 degrees at 1.4 kHz.

The Haydn Grand's listening-window response measures +2.74/–7.64 dB from 200 Hz to 10 kHz. The –3-dB point is at 54 Hz, and the –6-dB point is at 44 Hz. Impedance reaches a minimum of 5.33 ohms at 221 Hz and a phase angle of –47.80 degrees at 4.7 kHz.

The Principal Grand's close-miked response, normalized to the level at 80 Hz, indicates that the lower –3-dB point is at 45 Hz and the –6-dB point is at 35 Hz. The upper –3-dB point is at 190 Hz with the Low Pass control set to maximum. —MJP