

Vienna Acoustics The Music Loudspeaker

by Roy Gregory

The more time you spend in and around the audio industry, the more apparent it becomes that some companies are noisier than others, forever trumpeting a new model, a new technology, or a ground-breaking advance – each and every one guaranteed to transform your system, your listening pleasure, your very existence... It's almost as if they believe that sufficient *sturm und drang* will overcome both market resistance and any shortcomings in their products.

In stark contrast, you'll also start to notice companies that seem intent only on the immediate business at hand, concentrating on designing and building product, while believing that those products will speak for themselves.

It's a refreshingly self-effacing approach, but the risk is that excellent products struggle to achieve the reputation and sales they deserve, while customers miss out on potentially superior performance. Of course, that's partly why magazines exist: one of their functions is to redress that balance, drawing attention to unsung excellence – and you don't get many companies that blow their own trumpet less than Vienna Acoustics.



Founded in 1989, Vienna Acoustics has become a byword for quiet excellence, with a reputation for producing beautifully crafted and subtly distinctive speaker designs. Conventional at first glance, look a little longer and you'd soon discover that there was nothing 'me-too' about Vienna's products. They follow neither fad nor fashion – and that includes eschewing the current trend for stratospheric pricing. The

Music reviewed here is the company's flagship, a substantial and elegantly engineered floorstander, with each cabinet weighing in at a grunt-inducing 82 kg and displaying exemplary standards of fit and finish that many a high-end manufacturer can only dream about. They also display six drivers in a four-way topology, all but the ScanSpeak super-tweeter being in-house designs sporting proprietary technology and including the company's signature, flat-faced dual-concentric mid/treble unit, housed in a pivoted and tilting 'head'. Even the crates they arrive in are a significant cut above the norm, from the material they're built out of to the product identity plates screwed to their lids. But as impressive as The Music is in physical and aesthetic terms, it doesn't prepare you for the ▶



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► sheer scale, power, and musical impact of their performance. This isn't just a flagship speaker because it's Vienna's most expensive product: it's a genuine flagship performer when compared to the competition. Everything about this product quietly proclaims its quality and attention to detail, yet The Music costs £21,000 per pair. Any product that really does deliver the performance benefits of a specialist audiophile atelier producer, at a price-point more commonly associated with global mass-marketeers like B&W or KEF, is worthy of both considerable respect and closer attention.

One of the nice things about The Music is that it wears its technological heart proudly on its sleeve. One of the first things you notice about The Music are the “spoke patterns” on the drivers, the flat diaphragm on the midrange unit, and that pose-able head. Together they encapsulate exactly what sets The Music (and Vienna Acoustics) apart from the crowd – and what makes this speaker such an astonishing performer. Let's start with the bass drivers. Dissatisfied by the trade offs between the colouration levels of older cone technology and the dynamic gains but harmonic losses of new generation materials, Vienna set out to develop their own material, finally settling on a proprietary (and decidedly unfashionable) mix based on TPX thermoplastic and polypropylene that they dubbed XPP. This delivered the excellent thermal stability and self-damping required for low colouration and rich, natural harmonics, while the creation of the unique, ribbed ‘Spider’ cone, complete with radial buttresses, provided the essential stiffness required for good dynamic and phase response, so long the Achilles heel of plastic cones.

Long an advocate of concentric drivers, Vienna designer Peter Gansterer again set out to eliminate the fundamental weaknesses in the concept and tailor it to his speaker designs. The key lay in an adaptation of the XPP material and Spider cone technology, but using a lighter, stiffer blend of thermoplastics reinforced with glass fibres that allowed the creation of a substantially buttressed, flat diaphragm, with superb self-damping and that still provided an impressive stiffness to weight ratio. The resulting 18cm flat driver array, with its complex and carefully tuned web of radial and concentric ribs, promises superior integration across the mid and treble, while eliminating phase and colouration issues associated with relative movement between the tweeter and the shallow horn (the midrange cone) loading it. Of course, having achieved a time and phase coherent output from around 100Hz upwards, it made sense to allow precise adjustment of driver angle and attitude – hence the creation of what Vienna refers to as the Music Center. This box within a box arrangement doesn't just allow the head unit to be rotated and tilted independently of the bass cabinet, it provides graduated, micrometer-style mechanisms to make those movements both independent of each other and repeatable.

At the same time, Vienna, realising that the attitude and placement of the bass cabinets in the room was every bit as important to the overall performance

and integration of the system, engineered a set of elegant outriggers and conical feet that are easily adjustable from above, allowing users to independently adjust both the rake angle and height of the bass enclosures, balancing the low frequency output against the bass nodes in the room, and opening or closing the angle between the bass and midrange baffles to optimise system integration and match set up to the height and distance of the listening seat. It's something that will be familiar to any Wilson WATT/Puppy owner, a proven approach that has reached its apogee in the current Sasha 2, but none of the Wilsons manage a solution as elegant or as easily implemented as The Music. Finally, three small dip-switches on the terminal plate allow users to apply subtle lift to any or all of the low, mid, or upper bass output, allowing you to contour the speaker's bottom to compensate for broad room characteristics. Being that adjustable, it should come as no surprise that The Music really rewards care and attention to set up. Toe-in and rake angle of the head units is predictably critical – but fortunately easy to adjust. What I wasn't ready for was just how critical cabinet height proved to be in dialling in and voicing the bass.

Set up would normally be the responsibility of the dealer, meaning owners don't need to get their hands dirty or understand what is a convoluted and exacting process. But it is worth looking at what's involved, simply because it goes a long way towards explaining what makes The Music different to the vast majority of its competition and just why it delivers such stellar musical performance. Starting with the cabinet level – and with the dip-switches set on zero – the speaker must be positioned for optimum bass performance, starting by ‘walking’ it forwards and backwards, side to side, working on a ►



doubt is the overall sense of coherence and the musical communication that results.

Caveats? Vienna quotes a sensitivity of 91dB for The Music, which combined with a 4 Ohm load, a -3dB point as low as 22Hz, and the lack of leading edge exaggeration from the drivers means that you'll be looking for a powerful partnering amp. A couple of hundred solid-state watts – or a very good 100 plus watts from a tube amp – should be considered a working minimum. I used big VTL amps (Siegfried monos or the S400) that worked brilliantly – and indicate just how far you can take this speaker – but at the other end of the price scale I suspect quantity is more important than absolute quality. You'll also need a reasonably-sized room: maybe not as big as you'd think given the speaker's size and bandwidth, but the more space you can give them the better. On a practical level, unweight the spikes when adjusting them and lock them in place when you have. It will stop them binding over time. Beyond that, if you aren't getting stellar performance from these speakers, and a performance that puts your music and the musicians making it right there in front of you, then look at the set up and the driving system... because that's what The Music should do – and it should do it just about anywhere.

What The Music's adjustments allow you to achieve is the best possible balance of bandwidth and overall integration from the combination of this speaker and your room. Now add in the common driver material used across the bass and midrange characterized by its rich, natural tonality and the total absence of edge or glare, its careful matching to the beautifully balanced silk dome tweeter, and the air, harmonics, and temporal precision delivered by the super-tweeter and you have a performance that is at once big and powerful, engaging, and rewarding. It's quite a show: It's also one that's able to run and run. This is a speaker that positively rewards long-term listening – another key indicator of its quality. Often, listening fatigue is laid at the door of gross aberrations: ▶

▶ number of 'best' positions, marking each and carrying on until it hits the one that really works. Next, toe-in, rake angle, and finally cabinet height all need to be adjusted. Then it's on to the head units and more step-by-step adjustments. This means working in ever-smaller increments and on each head individually (experience suggests that they probably won't end up absolutely symmetrical), but the closer integration gets to perfect, the bigger the differences to presence and dimensionality even tiny changes make.

This whole process is best carried out with a pair of helping hands and it's a lot easier if you have some experience of The Music, but it is totally systematic so you can work through it even if you've never seen the speaker before. You'll be amazed at the way this process allows you to tune the bass for weight, scale, and pace... and match it to the overall presentation of the speaker. You want monstrous scale and thunderous power? The Music will deliver it. You want a lighter, more agile response? It will deliver that too. What is never in

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▶ intrusive coloration, hardness, or some form of edginess. The Music banishes all those, with its even, natural tonality. But it is this speaker’s coherence that helps lift it above the norm. All that effort you expended on optimising the in-room bass response and system integration results in a soundstage that has scale and volume, that’s populated by clearly placed, naturally proportioned and dimensioned images. That natural perspective is matched by dynamic and harmonic coherence that tracks musical energy across the entire bandwidth. In short, everything in the recording has a place and it’s easy to hear both what each musician is doing and exactly when they’re doing it. That might seem like the obvious goal for any loudspeaker, but it’s remarkable how many miss that target – and how hard your brain has to work in making up the shortfall...

Play the Karajan/Price Carmen, and Carmen’s advance on Don José has never been so stately – or laden with such latent threat. The off-stage location of the string quartet mirroring the structure of the main score in the Barbirolli/Sinfonia Tallis Fantasia makes perfect sense, sonically and musically, while Pete Thomas’s drum patterns on Elvis Costello’s ‘Little Triggers’ [*This Year’s Model*, MoFi LP] have an almost physical weight, power, and impact. There’s scale and purpose in the performance, but also subtlety and delicacy too. The Wilson Sasha 2 has set the standard for acoustic and dynamic coherence – a standard that The Music matches but to which it adds bandwidth at both ends of the range. Few speakers in my experience match the instrumental texture delivered by The Music – and all of those are considerably more expensive. It’s a quality that brings immediacy and recognisable character to performances, fleshing out string bass where so many systems make it sound thick and thuddy, bringing the proper, breathy feel to saxophone or woodwind.

‘Feel’ might be a strange word to describe music, but it is a vital aspect of live performance, of being in the presence of real instruments – and of reproducing that impression. Working at its best and fed from a serious source, The Music has an uncanny ability to put performers in the room, to mimic the sense of musical energy coming off of instruments and a stage. It’s to do with their bandwidth, the innate accuracy of their harmonic structures, their dimensionality, and their overall coherence. But lest you think that this only applies to classical or acoustic jazz, The Music will put the performers in your room, whoever they are. Just play Nirvana *Unplugged* [DGC]: if you ever wondered why Kurt Cobain captured the hearts and minds of a generation, The Music will tell you.

The Music’s achievements are serial: available in either mixed wood veneer and piano black, or all piano black, they offer a frankly astonishing quality of fit, finish, and mechanical execution together with a musical performance that belies their price. They incorporate the same attitudinal flexibility found in Wilson’s more ambitious designs, but arguably in a neater and more easily applied form. They offer considerable bandwidth and exceptionally natural

tonality. They are, by any measure, a serious high-end design – yet at a price that no longer qualifies as high-end. A model of understated elegance, there’s nothing shy or retiring about this speaker except its ability to retreat behind the music. Instead, it’s a speaker to aspire to and to live with: a genuine destination, rather than a waypoint on some endless quest. It has the capacity to engage and surprise, to shock and seduce with equal ease. Once you’ve lived with The Music the only things surprising about its longevity (it was first seen in 2008) are that more people haven’t noticed it and that it’s not considerably more expensive. An exceptional design, beautifully realised, The Music can produce the kind of captivating musical performance that’s rare at any price. Very highly recommended! +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: 3-way rear-reflex loaded loudspeaker with super-tweeter

Driver Complement: 3×230mm VA Spider Cone LF, 1×180mm Flat-Spider MF, 1×25mm coated silk dome HF, 1×12mm ceramic dome UHF

Bandwidth: 22Hz – 100kHz ±3dB

Sensitivity: 91dB

Load: 4 Ohms

Weight: 82kg ea.

Dimensions (W×H×D): 27×130×63cm

Finishes: Sapele, Piano Black

Price: £21,000 per pair

Manufacturer: Vienna Acoustics

URL: www.vienna-acoustics.com

UK Distributor: Audiofreaks

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