

Second Coming...

THE VIENNA ACOUSTICS LISZT REFERENCE

By Roy Gregory

Vienna Acoustics has long ploughed its own, singular yet highly fertile furrow. Understated and often overlooked, the company has been quietly producing consistently musical and beautifully finished loudspeakers for several decades. If there is a more under-rated (and, at around €35K – a price that includes 20% sales tax – under-priced) loudspeaker on the market than Vienna's flagship model, The Music, I want to know what it is! What's more and despite the surprisingly affordable prices of their products, they still develop and use their own driver designs, a process that has culminated in the current range of flat-diaphragm, composite cone drivers: except that in this case, 'composite' is used in its true sense, referring to the use of mixed materials, rather than as shorthand for carbon-fibre. Those drivers first saw the light of day in the (third tier) Beethoven series, but their remarkable performance has mandated a swift revision of the higher end models, starting with the Liszt...



This is a physically distinctive design – to say the least. Like The Music, it involves a pivoting head that contains a dual-concentric mid/treble driver. In the flagship, that head allows users to rotate and tilt the midrange driver to achieve an ideal listening axis, a feature which, combined with the sloping front baffle, gives the speaker an elegant, slightly laid-back air. As befits its more affordable price point, the Liszt is both simpler and more upright. The baffle – indeed the entire cabinet – is resolutely vertical, while the head allows rotational movement only. Along with the narrower baffle and slimmer overall dimensions, the result is altogether more prim and proper, standing at attention rather than leaning with one elbow on a bar.

Remove the neat, magnetically attached grilles and you'll find three 7" composite cone bass drivers, and a 6" midrange with a ¾" 'ring radiator' tweeter lodged in its throat. If the drivers look different, it's because they are. The flat diaphragms are moulded from X4P, Vienna's fourth generation polypropylene blend, the planar surface supported by carefully profiled and tapered radial buttresses, fully 18mm deep in the case of the bass drivers. This complex and precisely calculated form is unique, dubbed 'spider cone' by VA due to its array of 'legs'. Earlier iterations with transparent cones allowed you to view the stiffening ribs, but the composite cones offer up an opaque, grey face to the world. The carefully formulated, proprietary material and construction extend the benefits of polypropylene's mechanical stability and self-damping while offering a light and incredibly rigid structure, carefully optimised for the driver's intended pass-band. The centre of each low-frequency driver's diaphragm takes the form of a soft, inverted, treated fabric dome. This offers smooth extension while limiting cone break-up and out-of-band artefacts. The midrange driver's diaphragm is also moulded from X4P, but is smaller, thinner and lighter as befits its function, both the diaphragm and buttresses of the 'spider cone' using mid-band optimized profiles.

Despite the slim cabinet (198mm wide by 435mm deep, or a little under 8" wide and 18" deep) the three-way Liszt offers a claimed (and in this instance credible) bandwidth of 28Hz to 35kHz – at the price of a 4Ω load and a somewhat less than friendly impedance characteristic. The mid-range head is rear ported, while the bass cabinet has two differential ports, helping to support the claim of a healthy 91dB efficiency, although there's no escaping that this, like other VA speakers, is happiest in the company of beefy driving amplifiers. The single-wired crossover employs a mix of 6 and 12dB Bessel slopes, keeping the whole thing clean and phase coherent.



Handle the Liszt and you soon realise that it can be an awkward so-and-so. At almost 50kg/110lbs it is heavy enough to command respect, but at the same time comes with a strict diktat to avoid lifting or grabbing it by the pivoting section. Rather like a baby, you end up juggling it so that you lift by the body but still support the head. Along the way you also have to bolt the substantial cast outriggers to the base of the cabinet, best achieved by laying it on its side, supported by blocks of packing foam. However, once stood upright, the cabinets are easy to move, helped by the finger holds offered by the rear ports. Once the speakers are roughly in position, insert the spikes. The threads are reasonably fine, with a reassuringly large diameter, so make sure you grease them – or better, use Copaslip (being careful to avoid inadvertent 'transfer' of the bright orange paste) to ensure smooth rotation allowing really precise adjustment.



By now, you might well be wondering about the wisdom of pivoting heads and spikes and outriggers, all of which make initial contact with the speakers more challenging than it might be. But with assembly complete, you are now ready to move on to the set up phase, which is where those features come into their own. Assuming that you start with basic positioning for best bass balance, you'll quickly appreciate the value of the outriggers and the long, threaded spikes. They're not just there to add stability to the tall, slim cabinet. They also give you extremely precise control over the cabinet's rake angle, azimuth and a far wider than usual range of adjustment when it comes to its height off of the floor. Now consider that the Liszt reaches deeper and does so with more weight than most speakers in its price range and believe me, you are going to appreciate the adjustability offered by those spikes.

Furthermore, the ability to rotate the midrange axis independent of the bass cabinet means that you can locate the ideal positioning for low-frequencies and then adjust 'toe-in' to optimise mid and treble without having to adjust or alter the placement of the bass drivers. Okay, so the cost and complexity of the cabinet precludes the statement, "One day, all speakers will be built this way..." but it doesn't stop me wishing it were true!

With the Liszt, the approach to placement allows you to concentrate fully on the bottom end, first for fore, aft and lateral positioning and then height off of the floor. Before you start, set the spikes at one-third height and check that both speakers are exactly the same distance off the floor. With my floorboards, the excellent footers that come with the speakers makes nudging and noodling them into the best position pretty straight-forward. On carpet, depending on the nature of pile, try moving them on the outriggers with the spikes barely touching. Get the bass as good as you can like that and believe me, when you wind the spikes down things are going to get a whole lot better! That's a process in itself, whether you are starting with the spikes supporting the speaker or not. First level both speakers and re-check their height off of the floor. Then start adjusting the speakers with a simultaneous full turn on each spike, listening as you go. The bottom end of the Liszt is sufficiently weighty and textured to make small shifts in height readily apparent, especially when it comes to pace, articulation and phrasing. Too low and the bass will be thick, slow and changes in pitch will be hard to detect or follow. Too high and the sound will be fast and agile but lacking body, colour and dynamic impact. Getting in the zone is fairly easy. Getting it spot on takes time and often a few revisits to refine or tweak the height, as the system settles in and you listen more.

Having achieved the best initial position and height, the real beauty of the spikes is that you can use them to dial in not just the bass balance, but also the mid-band integration and listening axis. I usually start by nailing down toe-in (using the rotating head), rake angle (generally tilted a little forward, given the height of the cabinet) and azimuth. Then I start to play with tiny, incremental changes in height, making sure that once I've reached the desired balance of bass weight, energy, rhythmic continuity, mid-bass/mid-band integration and dynamic coherence, I correct for rake-angle/listening axis. It's a time-consuming and involved process, but the external positioning of the spikes and the fact that you can adjust them by hand makes it an awful lot easier than it might be.

Stand the Liszt next to the Beethoven Concert Grand and the similarities are as obvious as the differences. Leave aside the dual concentric driver in its pivoting head and the squarer, deeper cabinet. What connects the two speakers is the three identical bass drivers, the diaphragm for the

midrange unit, the three-way, five-driver topology and the same mechanical grounding/spiking system. But what makes this particular review situation even more interesting is the availability of the original Liszt, with its previous generation drivers and their distinctive, transparent/translucent spider cones. When I reviewed the Beethoven I suggested that it eclipsed the performance of the original Liszt – a suggestion reinforced by the rapid (at least in VA terms) appearance of the Liszt Reference. Here's the opportunity to listen to all three and map the company's developmental path and assess the success with which it has exploited its own Composite Cone technology. Given the care and attention (not to say precision) demanded by the Liszt when it comes to set up, as described above – a consideration that applies equally to all three speakers – such a comparison is far from straightforward. But it is also to good and interesting an opportunity to miss...



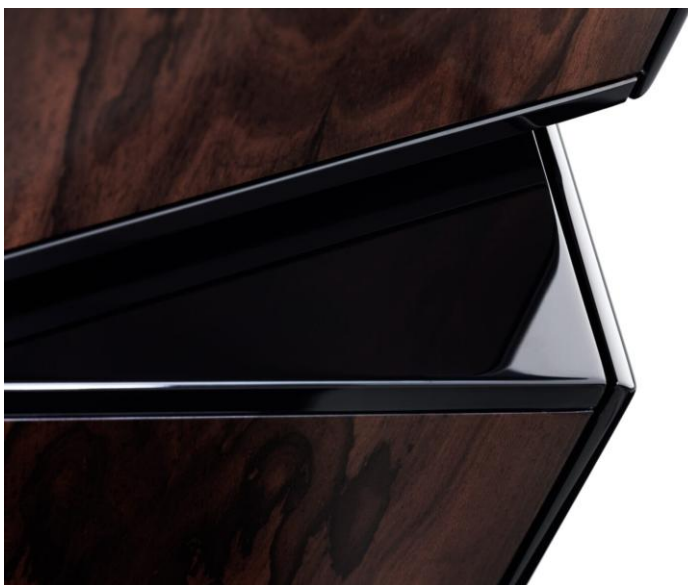
The Liszt, Beethoven Concert Grand and Liszt Reference – from left to right – solely for visual comparison: you can't compare speakers set up like this!

Beethoven – meet Liszt...

Reinstalling the original Liszt delivered a strong reminder as to just why this speaker remained a reference point around these parts for so long. Its combination of bandwidth and natural tonality imbues voices and instruments with body and presence. It sets up a convincingly proportioned soundstage that stands free of the speakers. It allows music to breathe and gives it a life of its own, independent of the system or the actual process of reproduction. It makes for an engaging, convincing and relaxing listen, long on musical virtues and devoid of intrusive, hi-fi artifice.

But the Liszt was never perfect and despite the grace with which it covered its musical and hi-fi tracks, the arrival of the Beethoven Concert Grand Signature (to give the speaker its full, unwieldy title – or BCG for short) showed up the shortcomings of the older but more expensive model. The new speaker took the virtues of the old and added a healthy dose of musical energy, purpose and

sheer vigour. Wider dynamic range coupled to a more rhythmically fluid presentation made for a speaker that was more articulate, sure-footed and expressive. The BCG offered greater dynamic discrimination and more space around and between instruments and singers, resulting in easier separation of musical lines, more definite phrasing, a greater sense of ensemble and musical integrity, a broader expressive range. Those benefits are not small or trivial.



For the close comparisons, driving system was the CH Precision D1.5 CD/SACD player, L1 line-stage (both with X1 power supplies) and the A1.5 amplifier. Cables were from the interesting Brandt Audi line, whose natural tonal palette and easy breathing quality suited the electronics/speaker combinations perfectly. As well as setting up each set of speakers individually and locking in placement and attitude, I selected a short run of discs chosen to both confirm the set-up and expose the differences. Those discs were:

Duke Ellington and Ray Brown, *This One's For Blanton* (Analogue Productions CAPJ 015) – an acid test for rhythmic integrity and proper placement...

Isabelle Faust, Giovanni Antonini, Il Giardino Armonico

Il virtuoso, il poeta – Locatelli Violin Concertos (Harmonia Mundi Hmm 902398)

Anastasia Kobekina, Kammerorchester Basel, *Venice* (Sony 19658828072)

Eliza Gilkyson, *Land Of Milk And Honey*, (Red House Records RHR CD174)

Playing the Locatelli disc on the BCGs delivered not just better separation between Faust's solo instrument and the supporting orchestra, it made much greater sense of the relationship and conversation between the two. The soundstage was deeper and better defined, with a greater sense of space between and the dimensionality of individual instruments. Instrumental lines were more articulate, with more textural insight and a greater impression of the player's input and energy. The sheer physicality and directed purpose in Anastasia Kobekina's playing was more obvious and more musically impressive, the intimacy of the relationship between instruments in the duets more apparent and more affective. The character and scale of her Cello's body was more clearly defined but also the instrument was much more present, immediate and vibrant. Eliza Gilkyson's distinctive vocal intonation and phrasing was much more natural, the heartfelt songs on the album carrying much more emotional power, from the desolate 'Tender Mercies' through to the insouciant intimacy of 'Wonderland'.

As impressive as the Liszt still is, the BCG is bigger, bolder, more immediate and simply more engaging. It gives nothing away in terms of weight, natural tonality or harmonic development. The extra dynamic range that it delivers and the body and presence that result gives it more bang for the buck – considerably more given its lower price. It's another fully signed up member (if not the class leader) of the underrated VA speaker ranks.

All of which make it a tough act to follow...

Beethoven – meet Liszt too...

Listen to the two speakers and it's not hard to understand why the BSG mandated a significant update to the original Liszt. Wheel in the Liszt Reference and it's like starting over. The first and most important point to make is, that to get the best out of the new model Liszt, you need to make sure that you are exploiting every last ounce of its available bandwidth. As outlined above, that implies a stringent balancing act involving the precise height adjustment off of the ground. Prior to conducting these comparisons, I'd been running the Liszt Reference on the end of the CH Precision I1 integrated. Swapping to the A1.5, the sound of the speakers fell flat and lifeless. Indeed, it didn't spring back to life until I'd dropped the speakers two full turns on their spikes, the extra bottom end weight that resulted giving the sound a much-needed injection of body, shape and energy. Far from speeding things up, the lighter bass of the higher setting was emasculating the system's true potential. The moral of this story? The VA speakers in general go deeper than you might expect – and they are so well balanced that if you don't exploit their full capabilities you'll be selling them seriously (and obviously) short.

With the bottom-end hooked up, the Liszt Reference takes on a whole new persona. Rather like the BCG, which took the strengths of the original Liszt and built so effectively on them, the Liszt Reference takes everything that the BCG does and then adds its own special virtues: poise, clarity, grace, refinement and a natural sense of perspective and proportion that not only bring shape and sense to performances, but generate a more convincing impression of the original event. Get used to the Liszt Reference and in comparison the BCG sounds overly enthusiastic and a bit bumptious. Listening to Isabelle Faust on the Liszt Reference the subtle control and her mastery of technique are effortlessly apparent. The shape and embellishment she brings to the solo phrases are an object lesson in graceful, musical beauty, breathing life into both the performance and the title of the album. Locatelli's works are indeed a playground for virtuoso technique and expression – a playground to which Faust takes without fear or hesitation. Played on this speaker, this isn't just a better performance by the soloist, it's both better, more intelligible music and better music making from the orchestra.

That last point is important. If the individual musical elements are more finely wrought, the relationship between them is more clearly defined, the structure and shape of the whole is more obvious and powerful as a result. The directness of that connection, the emotional power that results elevates a song like 'Ballad Of Yvonne Johnson' to a completely new level, running the full gamut from horror and desperation to hope and redemption. There's an almost aching intensity to 'Separated', a quiet determination to 'Not Lonely'. The Eliza Gilkyson album as a whole is a touchstone for emotional range that highlights the musical integrity and communicative qualities of the Liszt Reference perfectly.

The overall scale, proportions and perspective are also significantly more natural, a major factor in making the (normally well-behaved) BCG sound unruly, boisterous and slightly overblown in comparison. It also adds a convincing quality to acoustic performances, enhancing the sense of the balance and relationship between performers, whether a small scale recording like the Kobekina or the more substantial offerings of the Faust disc. Although I used the *Blanton* mainly to check the set up and integration of the speakers before serious listening, there was no escaping both the clarity with which the Liszt Reference established the physical spacing and relative scale of the two instruments, and also the way the relative location enhanced the connection and conversation

between them. Sound staging in general is anything but a fixed commodity, with different listeners looking for different degrees of separation and different presentation. Done well, the sound stage should be an extension of the time and phase relationship within the recording and between the musicians. It shouldn't be a separate quality but an integral part of the reproduced performance. This is the threshold that the Liszt Reference crosses. The BCG's enthusiastic energy and presence is still engaging and rewarding, especially on pop and rock recordings. Step outside our limited list of discs and play albums like Neil Young's *Sleeps With Angels* or The Cure's *Seventeen Seconds* and the drive and momentum generated by the BCGs makes for an infection listening experience. But enter the acoustic realm and the subtle scaling and integration achieved by the Liszt Reference, its sense of overall musical coherence and the utter seamlessness of its integration and spatial presentation bring a wonderful inevitability and clarity to performances, giving each its own voice and its own existence.



The three Vienna Acoustics speakers again – emphasising the differences in cabinet construction and driver technology, but also the similarities in size and overall topology.

Liszt two...

With the pecking order firmly established, it's time to investigate the Liszt Reference's qualities more closely. I ran the VA speakers with several different systems, including the Levinson 585 and the latest CH Precision I1 integrated amplifiers, the VTL TL-5.5/S200 pairing and the CH L1/X1 and A1.5. Although varying in both type and ambition, these amplifiers all have a substantial power output in common. Experimenting with lower powered partners merely underlined what I already knew: the Liszts like power and it's even better if that power is clean, simple and uncluttered. That suggests capable, solid-state amplification the natural (but not exclusive) way to go. The VTL pairing fed the speakers' natural warmth, colour and body, delivering convincing scale and presence along with a beguiling intimacy. In practice, it's the power that matters. The speakers are neutral enough

that they'll cleave to the positive qualities of the driving amp, as long as the drive is there. And as long as the drive is there, the more amp you give the speakers, the better they sound. I've rarely had a speaker so adept at embracing and displaying system upgrades – or one that reacts so positively to them. You'll have to go some to outrun the Liszts' musical capabilities.

Interestingly, despite obvious similarities in the character of the I1 and A1.5, swapping between the two CH products demanded a significant change in speaker height, approximately two complete turns on each spike for the I1. In terms of adjusting the bass balance, that's a significant difference, reflecting both the grip and control available from the two amplifiers, but also the remarkable potential embodied in the Liszt's bottom end – just how carefully it needs to be handled and the degree to which it can accommodate partnering components. Providing that the power is there, the Liszt II isn't picky when it comes to playmates. Getting them to play nice will take some care and attention and the more TLC you give them, the nicer they'll be – and when they're good, they're very, very good indeed.



Looked at on paper, the Liszt Reference isn't exactly my kind of speaker. I value rhythmic articulation, presence and immediacy in my loudspeakers, qualities that generally go hand-in-hand with higher sensitivity designs, whose speed, attack and dynamic range feed into my listening biases. The Liszt is the polar opposite, a wide bandwidth design that trades efficiency for bass-extension. That allows the slim cabinet and three 7" drivers to reproduce a pretty convincing 28Hz – at the expense of a 4Ω load and 91dB sensitivity. Yet listening to the Liszt you'd be hard pressed to tag those numbers. The speaker sounds way more present, substantial and immediate than you'd expect – which helps explain my long-term affair with it. But what's really interesting is how it achieves that trick...

Let's take the disparate qualities I've referred to (presence, immediacy and musical/rhythmic articulation) and combine them under a single umbrella, an umbrella we'll call 'musical impact' for the sake of argument. We can express impact as mass times velocity. All those sensitive speaker systems I enjoy are trading on their speed to deliver that impact. But there are two factors in the equation. The Liszt certainly ain't slow, but it combines its limited speed of response (at least relative to really efficient systems) with an unusually accurate feel for instrumental mass. That accuracy is important. Too much mass in the wrong place or at the wrong time and you end up with an embarrassing mess. But the Liszt combines a carefully engineered, phase-coherent crossover with the natural tonality and excellent out-of-band behaviour of its clever drivers to deliver a natural perspective that gets the right amount of energy in the right place at the right time. Meanwhile, the speaker's control of the whole-note envelope (rather than leaning on the leading edge) and its harmonic resolution adds body and complexity to those notes, concentrating their energy in space and time. Take that organized, naturally proportion and concentrated energy and give it some boot and there- you have it, a convincing sense of body, presence and immediacy, built on unusually extended bandwidth and bought at the expense of a design that if not exactly power hungry, certainly leans that way.

Hidden figures...

Vienna Acoustics speakers have always majored on natural presence and tonality, seamless musical and spatial coherence. But the Liszt Reference takes those well-established qualities, adds in a dose of the BSG's musical ebullience and reinvigorates the recorded performance. Playing music through these speakers invests it with a sense of substance and vitality that, combined with their ability to capture the character, the tonal, textural and harmonic identity of voices and instruments, makes their big name price peers sound two-dimensional and gutless, insipid and lacking any sense of musical impetus. Play the *allegro* from Vivaldi's *Cello Concerto in E Minor* (from the Kobekina/*Venice* disc) and you'll experience exactly what I mean. It's not just the articulation in the playing, it's the intent and purpose. Both orchestra and soloist attack the score with such vigour that there's a serious sense of effort transmuted into musical energy. Sat front and centre, Kobekina's bowing is so vivid that you can almost picture it, her phrasing and the orchestral accompaniment punctuated emphatically and in bold. That's exactly the sort of vibrant, immediate quality I normally associate with more efficient speakers, but in this case you can clearly appreciate that it's a function of not just the textural and harmonic resolution of the speakers, but their sense of organisation and focus, that ability to concentrate musical energy exactly where and when it should be.



A close up of the composite cone drivers: note the flat diaphragm, radial ribs for stiffness and the large diameter, inverted central fabric dome.

Step up in scale to the Elgar *Introduction and Allegro* (from the excellent John Wilson/Sinfonia of London recordings of English string music, this on Chandos CHSA 5291) and you hear the same drive and purpose, rich colours and musical substance, writ large. The dramatic opening passages are predictably impressive and energetic, but the quieter sections emphasize the speakers' coherent portrayal of space and depth, their easy grasp of the longitudinal/temporal domain and their ability to build in level and musical density. This has quickly become a favourite recording of this often difficult piece, a work that so often either burns too bright or falls flat. Wilson scales the orchestra's effort perfectly and the Liszts keep that effort moving firmly forward. If you think that a natural tonal balance and proper instrumental warmth go hand in hand with a sluggish, rounded and dynamically constipated sound (as, in fairness, they all too often do) the Liszt Reference will have you revising that opinion.

Tonally and dynamically, in this case you really can have your cake and eat it.

As revealed by the close comparisons to the BSG (and other speakers), what makes the Liszt IIs so musically engaging and rewarding is not just their ability to invest instruments and performers with natural body, colour and presence, but the way they let the performance breathe, the way they encapsulate the individuality in the event. Víkingur Ólafsson's recording of Bach's *Goldberg Variations* (DGG 483 7701) may lack the transparency, body, immediacy and the complex, layered instrumental dimensionality of his Debussy/Rameau disc, but played on the Liszt Reference the piano has a crisp presence and solidity, the performance an uncanny grace and agility. It might not have the absolute clarity of attack and note weight that make the earlier disc so convincing, but the pacing and phrasing has an effortless continuity and shape which cuts right to the heart of the musical evolution, capturing both what is being played and the instrument it's being played on. It's an object lesson in sonic character welded to musical insight. The ability to capture an instrument's character is about more than tonal and harmonic accuracy. It's about the energy envelope and its continuity across the musical range. Ólafsson's *Goldbergs* certainly make that point, with the utter coherence of their sound and dynamic coherence across the keyboard, but if you want to really appreciate just how naturally the VA speakers express the inner workings of the piece, it's another version you need.

Space/Time continuum...

In 2006, Julian Rachlin, Nobuko Imai and Mischa Maisky recorded a *Goldberg Variations* transcription for string trio (DGG 477 6378). It's a fascinating performance that casts the familiar music in a whole new light, the interplay between the instruments illuminating it as if from within, playing with the right/left hand relationship. While the piano version rests firmly on the right hand, a role you might expect to pass directly to the violin while the cello takes the part of the left, the presence of the viola throws a real curve ball, splitting its affections between its partner instruments, adding depth and shifting the musical focus accordingly. The Viennas keep the three instruments effortlessly separate, both in space and tonality. In the case of the centrally placed cello that is easy enough, but the woodier, richer tones of the viola are equally unmistakable and distinct, both in terms of their location and, crucially, their contribution to the overall musical balance and evolution. Given that a piece normally played by two hands on a single instrument is being split across three, the relationship between the performers is key – as is the system's ability to capture it. On the most basic level, the intra-instrumental understanding has to be spot on if the piece is to retain its overall sense of shape and structure. But at the same time, if the distinction and the separation between each instrument's contribution isn't clear, the exercise becomes entirely academic. In musical terms, the piece has to hold together but you want the viola to act as the 'third hand', literally adding another musical dimension. In this recording the playing and the understanding between the players is exquisite, while listening on the Liszt, the speakers preserve the layers and relationships within the performance with a musical ease and clarity that reveals that whole new aspect to the work that fuelled the project.

Few speakers anywhere near the price of the Liszt Reference can achieve this simultaneous clarity of separation and musical purpose, mapping each instrument's individual contribution while still presenting a lucid sense of the musical whole. In the same way that the articulation in Ólafsson's playing is so apparent, the linkage between the three instruments is explicitly preserved. It speaks volumes for the spatial and tonal coherence of the speaker, especially through the crossover point. Listening to the instruments ranging up and down, their lines joining, weaving and separating and there's an almost preternatural sense of stability to the performance: Neither their location nor their sense of body or overall harmonic character changes with frequency, a quality that makes for a more convincing event and much more intelligible music.



If you want to hear this in action, listen no further than Variation 24.

The piano injects the piece with jaunty brilliance and lightness of touch in the right-hand that contrasts with the developing complexity in the left. Played by the string trio, the mood shifts dramatically. The contrasting lines are more poised, the tempo more studied, the affect deeper and more reflective. The arrangement quite literally adds another dimension to the piece and the performance, both spatially and emotionally.

As always, vocal performance is the acid test of a speaker's communicative qualities, the intelligibility of lyrics and their emotional range, but also just how familiar a 'familiar' voice really is? When it comes to intelligibility, there are few more exacting tests than the layered mixes, multiple overdubs, interjections and 'particular' vocabulary of rap. Listen to the classic, quick-fire delivery on 'Hypnotize' (The Notorious B.I.G. *Life After Death* – Puff

Daddy records 78612730112) and it's not just that the words are clearer and more easily understood, the speakers grasp the complex rhythms and set up a wicked groove – a groove that belies any thought that the Liszt Reference is all about acoustic or classical recordings. It's a realisation underlined by the multiple voices, deep samples and mixed messages of 'Mo Money Mo Problems'. If ever a track captured the joyous, underlying musicality and rhythmic imperative of great rap, this is it. The Viennas navigate its different layers and interlocking rhythms with a sure-footed temporal integrity that captures both the playful aspects in the performance and its dance-floor discipline.

In contrast, the challenge with Nanci Griffith has always been to get past her almost girlish voice and into the deeper sense of her songs. 'Drive In Movies And Dashboard Lights' (*Storms* – MCA MCAD 6319) is a perfect example, the breezy tune and almost naive delivery mask the darker, more disturbing subject matter of the lyric. The Liszts effortlessly capture the subtle inflexions and emphasis that puncture the veneer of simplicity and optimism, unravelling the words that tumble together in the careful rush of the phrasing. The tonal truth in the reproduction somehow makes the gap between the music and the subject matter even more poignant. Eleanor McEvoy's distinctive voice, accent and delivery are captured with unmistakable accuracy, perhaps the sternest test of all.

The natural tonal and spatial presentation of the Liszt makes it an uncannily inviting listen. A recent diversion into the less familiar paths trodden by Leonard Bernstein has found me playing his Shostakovich and Sibelius symphonies. I'm so used to reaching for Berglund, Barbirolli and Gibson that I didn't even know that he'd recorded the Sibelius! Listening via the Liszt, the innate musicality of the speaker makes the different perspective on these familiar pieces immediately apparent, the characteristic emotional depth the conductor elicits from these contrasting works setting them apart from more familiar readings. It's this ability to open up recordings, to grant unfettered access that made the original Liszt such a great speaker. The Reference revision takes that ability a whole lot further. You hear more of the (musical) performance and (even) less of the speaker. There are other speakers at this price level that can perform a similar trick – but none of them offer the bandwidth delivered by the Liszt, the quality of its low frequencies or the acoustic coherence and dimensionality that result. It's a recipe that sees the Vienna Acoustics speaker (just like so many of

its stable-mates) punching well above its weight. But even by VA's stellar standards, the Liszt Reference is a standout, in terms of value and performance.

Take the inherent musicality that Vienna Acoustics seem to accomplish so effortlessly with all their speakers: add the resolution, refinement, transparency and longevity that the Liszt Reference brings to the mix, along with its astonishing ability to grow with a system and you get a speaker that should be fast approaching classic status. That far less deserving designs from 'louder' companies with larger marketing budgets enjoy that accolade is a sad reality of the audio industry. But don't let that dissuade you from listening to the Liszt. It might be harder to find – and harder to find out about – but it's well worth the effort. The antithesis of those instantly impressive, boom and tizz loudspeakers that grab attention on the shop floor only to start irritating as soon as you get them home, the Viennas are true thoroughbreds. They demand more care than most of the competition when it comes to set up and matching, but will reward that care with a delivery that elevates the musical experience well above the norm. It doesn't matter what you ask them to play, anything from Lizzo to Ligeti, Lonnie Johnson to Constant Lambert, the Liszt will make sense of the performance and the performer. That puts it in a select group of audio products, in amongst some pretty exalted and seriously expensive company. If you want serious, high-end audio performance without the price-tag – or you just want great music at home – look no further than the Vienna Acoustics Liszt Reference: the little(ish) speaker than can – and does!

Vienna Acoustics Liszt Reference

Finishes – Piano Black, Piano White, Cherry, Premium Rosewood

Prices – Piano Black, Piano White, Cherry – €15,690 (including sales tax)

Premium Rosewood – €18,305 (including sales tax)

Manufacturer:

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