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the absolute sound

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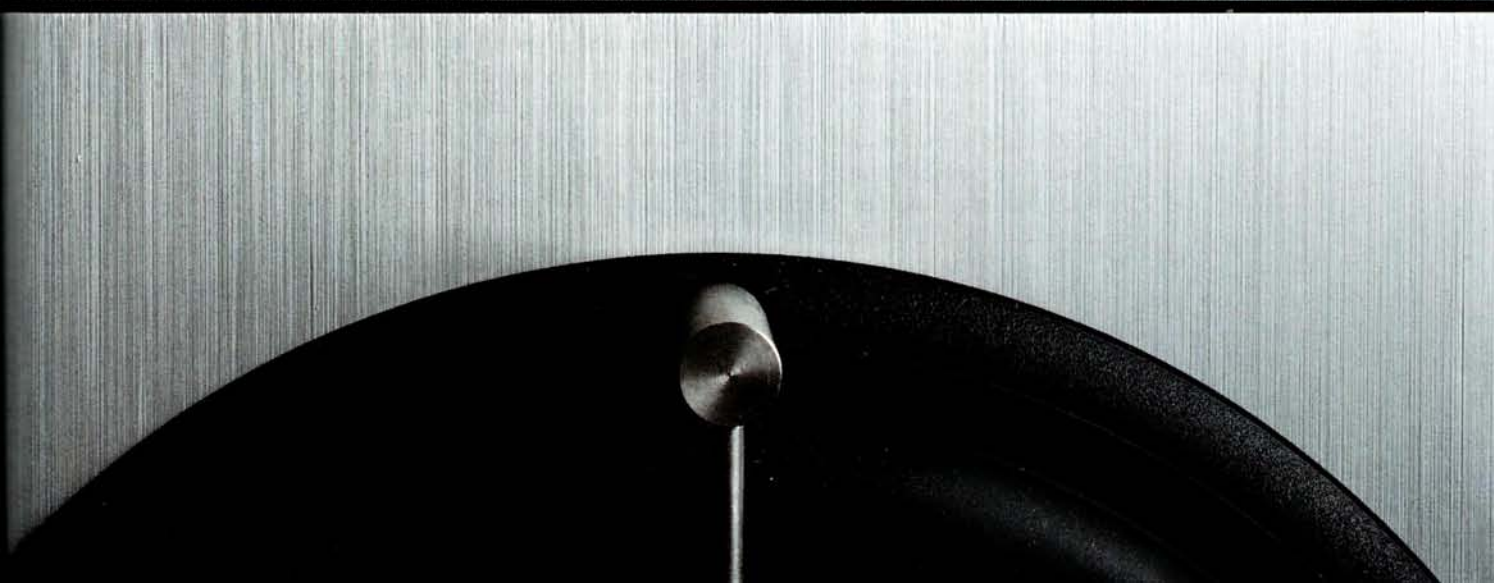
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YG Acoustics Carmel Loudspeaker

Stand and Deliver

Chris Martens



My first encounter with YG Acoustics came several years ago when I spied the firm's audacious marketing slogan—"The Best Loudspeakers on Earth. Period."—on a signboard outside a demonstration room at an audio show. "That," I thought to myself, "is one of those taglines that will either turn out to have self-evident validity or else wind up making the manufacturer look silly." And to be perfectly candid, on the basis of the first few YG demos I heard, I really couldn't determine which might actually be the case. For whatever reason, the first demos I heard of YG's larger speakers, the Anat and the Kipod, seemed almost perversely calculated to make them sound at once promising and *obnoxious* (picture potentially fine loudspeakers demonstrated in overly large rooms, and then overdriven to levels that made the speakers seem to be shrieking at the listener, and you've got the general idea). But at CES 2010 things took a dramatic turn for the better as I got my first chance to sample YG's smallest and least expensive speaker, the Carmel, priced at \$18,000 per pair.

To my surprise and delight, the Carmels produced an immediately gripping, revealing, musically engaging, and unashamedly beautiful sound—a sound that made the company's provocative slogan start to make perfect sense. What also impressed me was that the Carmels also seemed willing to stand and deliver their top-shelf sonic goods without petulantly demanding "unobtainium-class" electronics or source components. As I listened to the Carmels at CES, I experienced one of those rare moments where I felt as if the audio "spheres" were coming into alignment before my eyes and ears. I vowed then and there to ask Editor-in-Chief Robert Harley if I might be allowed to review the Carmels for *The Absolute Sound*.

Fascinating though the design and construction details of the Carmel may be (for which, see my technical sidebar "Inside the Carmels"), the real story here involves the Carmel's sound. Let me just come right out and say it: The YG Carmel is, hands down, the most accomplished loudspeaker I've ever had in my home, and it is among the ten best I've ever heard at any price (others on my personal top ten list would include the Avalon Time, the Magico Mini II, the MartinLogan CLX, the MBL 101 E, the Wilson MAXX 3 and Alexandria X2, the Quad 2905, the Revel Ultima Salon 2, and the Usher Be-20). With your kind indulgence, I'm going to take some extra time to discuss the various sonic characteristics of the Carmel, because I think it does a great job of combining certain sonic virtues that don't always travel easily together, which is a big part of what makes this speaker so special.

First, let me start by saying that, by design, the Carmel manages to combine the benefits of great two-way stand-mount speakers (e.g., the Magico Mini II) with those of fine mid-sized floorstanders (e.g., the Magico V2 or V3). On the one hand, the Carmel serves up the qualities of focus, purity, effortless imaging, and—above all—coherency that are the acknowledged strengths of great two-way monitors. On the other hand, the speaker delivers much (though perhaps not quite all) of the low frequency extension of a larger floorstanding speaker, and

with it the kind of highly realistic bottom-end weight, scale, and dynamic expansiveness for which floorstanders are known.

Many two-way stand-mount monitors provide bass that cuts off at, or even well above, the 40Hz mark, which can leave certain types of "power music" sounding somewhat "cut off at the ankles." In contrast, the Carmels offer bass that extends comfortably down to the mid-30Hz range—a numerically small difference, true, but one that causes the speaker to register on most listeners as being a full-range (or at least a "near-full-range") design. As a result, the Carmels can happily wade into powerful orchestral or bass-and-drum recordings that typically might not sound sufficiently full-bodied on smaller monitor speakers (not even the great ones, like the Mini II).

For a good example of this, try listening to bassist Dean Peer and percussionist Bret Mann's terrific jazz duet, *Airborne* [ILS Records]. Peer is both a consummate bass virtuoso and a bit of an iconoclastic sonic explorer, and on *Airborne* he plays a five-string electric bass whose signal gets routed through an elaborate chain of custom-tweaked, audiophile-grade effects-boxes. The result is that listeners get to enjoy both the clean pure sound of the bass overlaid with effects that stretch and expand the instrument's natural voice, taking it in strangely beautiful new directions. Mann, in turn, plays a gorgeous old-school German Sonor drum kit that is equipped with a broad though by no

means ostentatious mix of very high-quality cymbals. Just days before writing this review I had the privilege of attending a concert given by Peer and Mann in a small, intimate, theater-in-the-round setting in Austin. At the concert, Peer and Mann

The Carmel manages to combine the benefits of a great two-way stand-mount with those of a great floorstander

performed much of the material from *Airborne*, so later on I was able to go home to the Carmels to do a sort of time-delayed live vs. recorded comparison. The results were eye-opening.

Heard live, Peer's bass and effects chain have tremendous depth, presence, and impact, though the absolute quality of the sound is, naturally, dependent upon the quality of the sound reinforcement speakers used in the performance venue. I would say the Carmels easily matched the depth and impact of Peer's live bass sound, but that they exhibited far greater transient snap and textural subtlety, plus a more tonally balanced sound than the theater speakers were able to deliver. I found this both interesting and encouraging, since many high-end loudspeakers simply wilt when asked to reproduce the depth and dynamics of electric bass guitars heard live (remember, the fundamental of the low B string of a five-string bass falls in that critically important mid-30Hz range). To my pleasant surprise the Carmels didn't flinch one bit; they just cleared their little throats and sang with the kind of authority you might not think possible for a compact speaker equipped with a single 7" mid/bass driver.

But the comparison between the Carmel's sound and that of Mann's drum and cymbal kit was even more impressive. Mann's beautiful Sonor drum kit produces the sort of sound that would make most recording engineers weep for joy—a taut, punchy, ultra-well-defined sound full of subtle textures, yet not prone in any way to overhang or boominess. Add to this Mann's deft control of dynamics—and especially of subtle variances in



**YG Acoustics
Carmel
Loudspeaker**

Inside the Carmels

The Carmel is a relatively compact, 41-inch tall, two-way, floorstanding loudspeaker whose acoustic-suspension enclosure is CNC-milled from solid slabs of 6061-T651 heat-treated aircraft aluminum. Build-quality is stupendous; indeed, the quality and precision of YG's machining reminded me of the look and feel of internal parts found in high-quality mechanical flight instruments used in military aircraft (back in pre-CAD/CAM days, I helped pay my way through college by working as a draftsman for an aircraft instrument manufacturer—an experience that forever redefined my notion of what “precision manufacturing” really means).

The top section of the Carmel's enclosure houses a highly modified Scan-Speak ring-radiator-type tweeter mounted in the throat of a waveguide that is milled from a separate piece of aluminum and then mounted in the speaker's thick aluminum baffle. Eagle-eyed enthusiasts will note that the tweeter uses the bullet-shaped pole piece commonly seen in comparatively low-cost Vifa tweeters, rather than the needle-nosed pole piece use in Scan-Speak Revelators, but make no mistake; the unit is a Scan-Speak driver through and through, albeit with a fair amount of YG's own “special sauce” thrown in.

Down below, and positioned in a separate sealed chamber, is a modified Scan-Speak 7-inch mid/bass driver. The lower section of the enclosure looks deceptively simple at first glance, but a closer look reveals that it is tapered in two axes—side-to-side and front-to-back—to help break up internal reflections. Interestingly, the main volume of the mid/bass driver enclosure uses no stuffing material at all, and according to YG none is needed. Down near the bottom of the enclosure, however, there is an internally vented, metal-walled chamber loaded with precise quantities of a proprietary damping material. YG's larger speakers—the Anat and Kipod models—also use conceptually similar dedicated internal damping chambers, albeit ones that are implemented somewhat differently in the bigger speakers.

Dick Diamond, YG's head of sales and marketing, told me that firm's founder and chief designer Yoav Geva is absolutely fanatical about making his speaker cabinets as rigid, inert, and vibration-free as possible. To this end the Carmel's cabinet surfaces were extensively tested with high-precision accelerometers to check for unwanted vibration or panel resonances, and the design adjusted accordingly. Thus, the mid/bass driver enclosure is internally reinforced by thick, solid aircraft aluminum bulkhead panels along with solid metal component mounting blocks that are strategically positioned with an eye toward making the cabinet stiffer and more vibration resistant. The entire enclosure, which is nearly triangular in cross-section when viewed from above, rests upon a

beefy metal floorplate and is supported by three massive floor spikes, the front two of which are designed to rest upon thick Delrin pucks (as I'll explain below, there's a reason why just two instead of three pucks are used).

The crossover board is a work of art, featuring superb and quite costly Mundorf capacitors and other hyper-premium components throughout the signal path, and it is in the crossover that the influence of Yoav Geva's design expertise becomes most apparent. Whereas many designers of ultra-high-end speakers are middle-aged individuals who have spent decades perfecting their craft, the Israeli-trained Geva is by contrast a relatively young man who is, by many accounts, something of a technological wunderkind. Geva's distinct contribution to the art and science of speaker design involves the fact that he has created a proprietary CAD (computer-aided design) program that can optimize both the frequency response and phase response characteristics of a loudspeaker at the same time (a speaker designer's “Holy Grail” if ever there was one). As a result, the Carmel boasts—as do all of Geva's designs—very tight frequency response and phase response specifications (frequency response of 35Hz to > 40 kHz, ± 2 dB in the audible band; phase response maintains $\pm 10^\circ$ relative phase “throughout the entire overlap” between the mid/bass and high-frequency drivers).

Diamond explained that nothing in the Carmel's design is left to chance; even the smallest details of the design are verified both by empirical measurements and by listening tests. For example, when I asked Diamond why the aforementioned Delrin pucks were used only under the Carmel's front two floor spikes (and not under all three spikes, as one might expect), he immediately replied, “Oh, Yoav measured and listened to the speaker both ways, but we settled on the two-puck approach because it gives slightly better cabinet vibration test results, and—in most installations—better sound.” Sure enough, when Diamond and I tried the Carmels both with and without the pucks during initial setup in my listening room, they really did sound better with the pucks in place.

Similarly, the quest for superior resonance and vibration control performance is an ongoing task at YG. Late in the review process, for instance, Diamond informed me that Geva had come up with an extremely subtle revision to the Carmel's enclosure interior that yields ever so slightly better vibration-control measurements (though the changes in audible performance are said to be vanishingly small). Small though its benefits might be, the change will be implemented on future pairs of Carmels “just because”—meaning that the samples you might audition could potentially sound a hair better than the units I auditioned for this review. **CM**

dynamic emphasis, plus his ability to summon harmonically rich and at times explosive sounds from his cymbals and you've got all the makings of a rare percussion feast.

In my impromptu live vs. recorded comparisons, I found the Carmels did an unexpectedly great job of recreating the sound of Mann's drum kit—especially in nailing down the incisive, high-impact snap of his snare drum, the potent pop of his tom-toms, and the delicate yet also expansive and room-filling shimmer of his cymbals. The only place where the Carmels came up short (and then only a little short) was on capturing the sheer dynamic impact of Mann's most vigorous kick drum "thwacks" as heard from just a few feet away (the Carmels did well, but could not quite capture the chest-slapping impact of the biggest kick drum notes). That said, however, I should probably point out that the only speakers I've heard get the sound of Mann's kick drum spot on are the very costly Wilson MAXX 3s (though in the upper mids and highs, I felt the little Carmel's more than held their own versus the big Wilsons).

The point I hope to make here is that, when used in the small-to-mid-sized listening rooms for which they are intended, the Carmels offer near-full-range frequency response and unexpectedly powerful and expressive dynamics. While the Carmels might not, for obvious reasons, be quite the ideal solution for those who listen to a steady diet of pipe organ music or who want to listen to Mahler at front-row volume levels, they will do nicely for most other applications (assuming you don't plan on listening at punishing, full-on-rock-concert levels—though why anyone would sign for up for self-imposed hearing damage is frankly beyond me).

What the Carmels do particularly well is present fundamentals and harmonics of voices so they sound as if the belong together

Having established that the Carmels can "play big" despite their size, let's now focus on the other side of the sonic coin, which is that the Carmels also provide *all* the key benefits of great two-way stand-mount designs. When you get right down to it, two-ways speaker offer inherent architectural simplicity, which I would argue is very much its own reward. In the past, both Jonathan Valin and Wayne Garcia have written with insight and conviction about the benefits of two-way loudspeakers, and I would second their notion that the best two-way speakers offer—among other things—a certain ineffable sonic purity and overall coherency of presentation.

In the Carmel's case, this sense of purity and coherency is further enhanced by the speaker's ability to deliver accurate phase and frequency response at the same time. While there may be some debate as to when (or even if) the effects of accurate phase response are audible, my observation is that proper phase response can, at least on some recordings, help a loudspeaker to confer a difficult-to-describe quality of focus, wholeness, and completeness that makes images lock into place with terrific solidity, while also making hall sounds (subtle echoes, reverberations, and the like) seem more self-consistent and believable.

To hear what I mean by this comment, try playing the Bill Evans Trio's *Sunday at the Village Vanguard* [Fantasy/Riverside LP] through the Carmels. *Sunday at the Village Vanguard* is surely one of the most lifelike live jazz recordings ever made, and it typically sounds very good through most high-quality speaker systems, but through the Carmels the record comes alive in an extraordinary way. First, they present the trio's members—Bill Evans on piano, Paul Motian on drums, and Scott LaFaro on bass—at precise, stable, and believable locations on stage, and more importantly place them within the unmistakable interior of a jazz club whose patrons are listening attentively and appreciatively to the trio. The sense of place, of actually *being present* at the moment of the performance, is so convincingly rendered through the Carmels that you may feel almost as though you've stepped into a musical time machine and been transported back to June 25, 1961 (the date on which the recording was made). A large part of this has to do with the uncanny realism with which the YG's reproduce the signature sounds of the performance venue itself—the

SPECS & PRICING

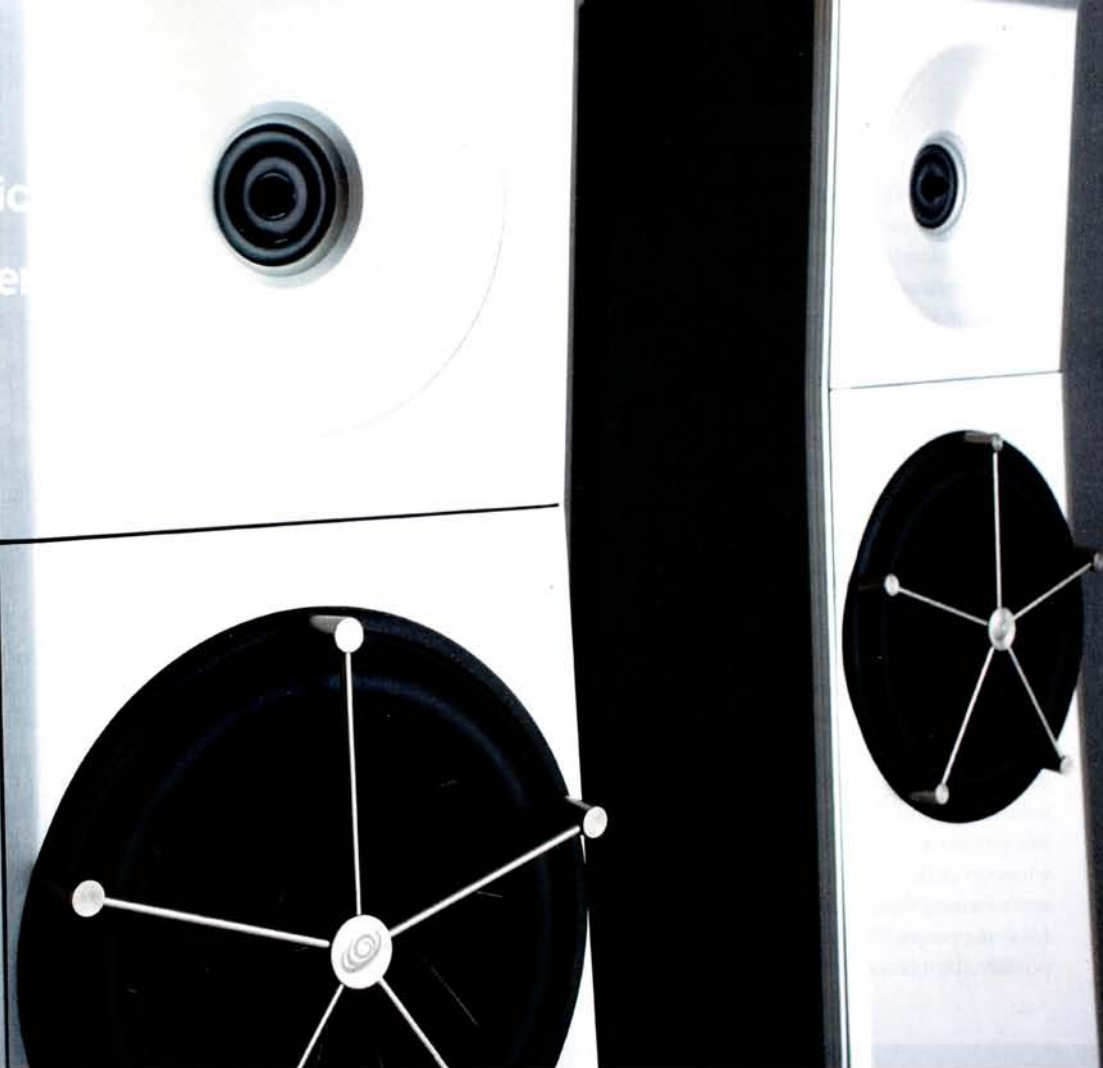
Type: 2-way, floorstander, acoustic suspension enclosure
Driver complement: Modified Scan-Speak ring-radiator-type tweeter, modified Scan-Speak 7" mid/bass driver
Frequency response: 35Hz–>40kHz, ± 2dB
Sensitivity: 87dB/2.83 V/1m, 2π anechoic
Impedance: 8 ohms nominal, minimum below 4 ohms @4 kHz
Dimensions (HxWxD): 41" x 11" x 15"
Weight: 66 lbs., each (unpacked), 177 lbs. /pr. (in shipping crate)
Price: \$18,000/pair

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Arvada, CO 80002
(801) 726-3887
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ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT
Analog: Nottingham Analogue System Ace-Space 294 tonearm/Space 294 turntable; Fosgate Signature phonostage; Shelter 901 MkII, 9000, and Harmony MC moving coil

phono cartridges.
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Amplification: Musical Fidelity kW500 and Rega Isis integrated amplifiers; NuForce P-9 preamplifier and Reference 9 v.3 Special Edition monoblock amplifiers
Headphones, etc.: HiFiMAN EF-5 and Qables iQube V2 headphone amplifiers; HiFiMAN HE-5LE and HE-6 planar magnetic headphones, and Shure SRH-840 full-size headphones.
Cables: Furutech Lineflux digital/interconnect cables and Speakerflux speaker cables; aNuForce Focused-Field digital/interconnect and speaker cables; Furutech Powerflux power cables.
Power Conditioners & Acoustic Treatments: PS Audio Soloist in-wall power conditioner, Furutech Daytona 303 power conditioner; Auralex Studiofoam and RPG B.A.D. (binary amplitude diffuser) acoustic treatment panels.

YG Acoustic Carmel Loudspeakers



sounds of glassware on tables, of hushed snippets of whispered comments exchanged between patrons during the performance, of the almost subliminal sense of give-and-take between the listeners and the musicians, and of the intimate acoustics of the space. No sonic detail is too small to escape the Carmels, and yet what really wins you over is the way the YG's weave those details together to form a consistent, coherent tapestry.

Next there are the sounds of the instruments, themselves, which the Carmels present with such disarming and natural purity that they seem almost to deflect analysis, instead inviting a more direct and emotional connection. Through the Carmels, then, you can't help but notice how Evan's piano sounds more incisive, engaging, outgoing, and alive in the club setting than it would in a studio environment. Similarly, as Paul Motian works his drum kit, the YG's help you discern that the percussionist is making very small, subtle, on-the-fly adjustments to the rhythm and feel of each song, presumably in response to unspoken communications with his fellow players. And when LaFaro improvises on his bass, the Carmels show you how a certain just barely discernible hush comes over the crowd—apparently an almost involuntary group reaction to the sheer inventive genius of LaFaro's musical lines (and to the breathtaking, virtuoso chops with which he brings those lines to life). My point is that the Carmels reach beyond the usual catalog of audiophile virtues, instead pushing toward a point where all of the science in the speaker is doing its level best to stand aside in order to let the music come through.

Let me try and zoom in on the Carmels' characteristics of focus and coherency for a moment. What the Carmels' design does

particularly well is to present the fundamentals and harmonics of instrumental and human voices so that they sound as if they belong together, and are originating from the same physical points within the acoustic space. This stands in sharp contrast to speakers that successfully attempt to delineate various elements of a given instrument's voice, but in the process somehow deconstruct those elements in a way that makes them sound like disparate and disjointed sonic entities (which is just plain wrong). The desirable qualities of wholeness, completeness, and self-consistency are things we instinctively expect to hear when listening to live music, and they are qualities the Carmels effortlessly and consistently deliver.

Perhaps for this very reason, the Carmels are spectacularly good imagers—actually much better than in this regard than most of the top-tier small monitors I've heard that claim to image well. I found the Carmels produced *much* wider and deeper soundstages than any speaker I've yet had in my listening room, though I found that their ability to render depth information properly is, as you might expect, governed to an extent by the overall quality (and resolution capabilities) of other elements in the signal path. (Once you get the Carmels to throw really deep, holographic soundstages, you'll know you've got your system setup well dialed in.) Be aware, though, that unlike some speakers that create an alluring but false sense of soundstage depth no matter what material you play, the Carmels cannot and do not "synthesize" depth information that's not actually present in the recordings, or that other components may have left out.

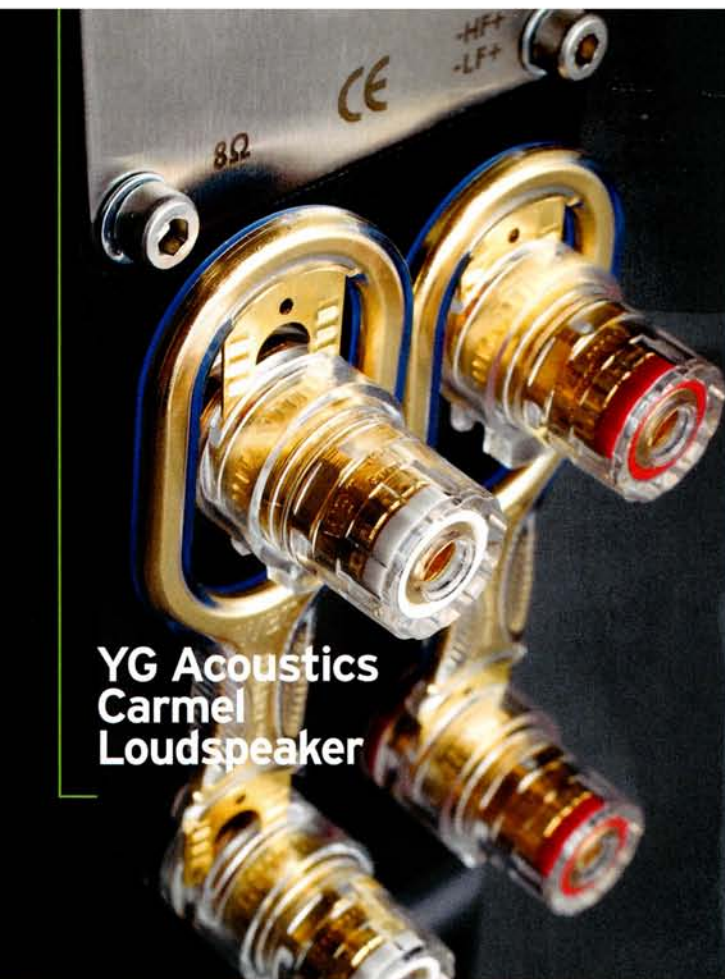
This brings me to one very important point. The Carmels are revealing with a capital "R." Tweak the azimuth adjustment

on your phono cartridge and the Carmels will immediately tell you whether your efforts were beneficial or not. Try out a new vibration-damping device under a source component and the Carmels will tell you whether it works or not. Make a cabling change in your system—*any* cabling change at all—and the Carmels will instantly give you a detailed report on the sonic pros and cons of the change. Swap out a power conditioner, and through the Carmels you may find that the entire character of the system's sound changes. My point is that the Carmels will show you the results of any system changes, no matter how small or inconsequential they might seem to be (which, of course, makes the Carmels a powerful tool for use in equipment reviewing).

But let me underscore one equally important point. Although the Carmels are undeniably revealing, they are not “*ruthlessly* revealing.” Understand, then, that the fundamental spirit of the Carmel is to be honest in its presentation, but without being punitive to the listener. On the contrary, the Carmel just wants to get the sonic facts straight, while exploiting whatever is good and right about the records you play or the equipment you own. As you would expect, the speaker can and does reveal even very small sonic flaws, but somehow—and frankly I am not quite sure how YG has pulled this off—it does so without ever browbeating the listener with whatever deficiencies it encounters. This is perhaps a roundabout way of saying that, despite its unwavering accuracy and formidable resolving power, the Carmel tends in some sense to accentuate the positive. By comparison, certain other loudspeakers, such as the

MartinLogan CLX, may push the resolution envelope even harder than the Carmel does, but they do so at the expense of becoming painfully fussy at times—shining a harsh, bright, hyper-critical light on problems elsewhere in the signal path. For music lovers, I think the Carmel's delicate balance of honesty and forgiveness offers a highly satisfying compromise.

Yet another compelling aspect of the Carmel design is that it will, as I mentioned at the start of this review, deliver most of its sonic gifts when used with excellent—but *not* necessarily hyper-expensive—amplifiers and source components. During my listening tests, I mostly drove the Carmels with Rega's superb Osiris integrated amplifier (\$8995), and the results easily surpassed those of many high-end systems I've heard that were driven by amps costing two or three times as much, or even more. I raise this point because it seems to me that some competing speakers (Magico's Mini II comes immediately to mind) seem to be considerably more finicky than the Carmels about the ancillary components with which they are used. Does this mean the Carmels are perhaps less revealing than those competitors? I don't think that it does, because the YG's proved extremely sensitive to even the smallest changes I made in my system. Rather, I think it suggests that the Carmels are comparatively easy to drive, so that—even when driven with mid-tier components—they deliver an unusually high baseline level of performance. But beware: When assessing ancillary gear, the YG's can and do show you exactly what makes great components great, which can potentially lead to upgrade addiction.



**YG Acoustics
Carmel
Loudspeaker**

For listeners with small to mid-sized listening spaces, the YG Carmel is an extraordinary loudspeaker—one that marries the virtues of mid-size, near full-range floorstanders with those of classic, two-way stand-mount monitors. But the speaker's true worth lies in its ability to let the music—*all* of the music—through to communicate with you, unfettered, unadulterated, evocative, and alive. Let me provide a brief anecdote that will illustrate this point.

One day during the review process, I played the classic Elvis Presley recording of “Fever” [*The Essential Elvis Presley*, Sony Legacy] through the Carmels for my musician wife to hear, just to get her reactions. She sat transfixed, drinking in the smooth, sharply focused croon of Elvis' sultry voice, the purity of the instruments in the backing band, the deep snap of the drums used to punctuate key phrases, and especially the vivid reverberations that give this track its rich, dark, sumptuous feel.

After the song ended I asked, “What do you think?”

“I think,” said my wife, who is not prone to audio hyperbole of any kind, “that's the most amazing thing I ever heard from any hi-fi system.”

“I take it you think the Carmels will be of interest for the TAS readers,” I said.

“Oh, not just for them,” she replied, “I think these speakers offer something that *everybody* should get a chance to hear.” I can only second that assessment. Go forth and listen. **tas**

THE ONLY COLORATION IS SILVER OR BLACK



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DualCoherent™

The crossover coherent in both time AND frequency domains



An established objective of loudspeaker design is to convey music with proper tonality. This is achieved through a flat frequency response – the flatter it is, the less a loudspeaker alters the timbre of musical instruments and voices.

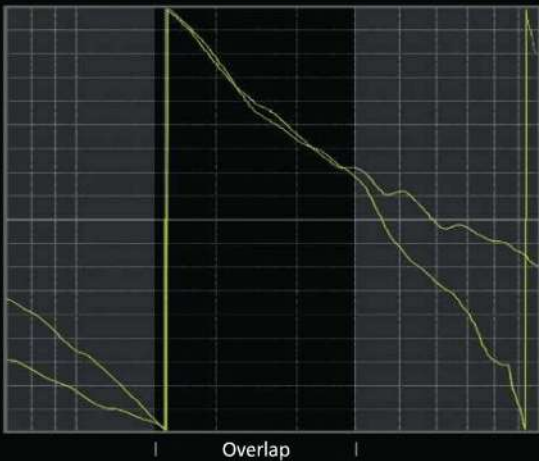
Another key objective is to preserve transients and spatial cues, which convey the impact of a musical event. This is achieved through good relative phase between drivers, i.e. they must all radiate in unison – the better the phase-match, the more a loudspeaker preserves musical excitement.

YG Acoustics™ DualCoherent™ crossovers, designed using software developed entirely in-house, are unique in delivering both a ruler-flat frequency response and near-zero relative phase. Virtually all other manufacturers use a single off-the-shelf software tool, which can only optimize either the frequency response or phase, but not both. They are forced to choose one and compromise the other.

Phase

Below is the phase response of the mid-woofers and tweeter of a YG Acoustics™ speaker, as well as that of the leading competitor. The closer the phase-match throughout the range where the drivers overlap, the better the preservation of transients and spatial cues. Both YG Acoustics™ and the competitor exhibit excellent phase: YG Acoustics™ offers $\pm 5^\circ$; the competitor offers $\pm 20^\circ$, and counters with a wider frequency-range within that tolerance. Both speakers were clearly well-optimized for phase.

YG Acoustics™ Phase
700–10k Hz. 20° div.
 $\pm 5^\circ$ throughout overlap.



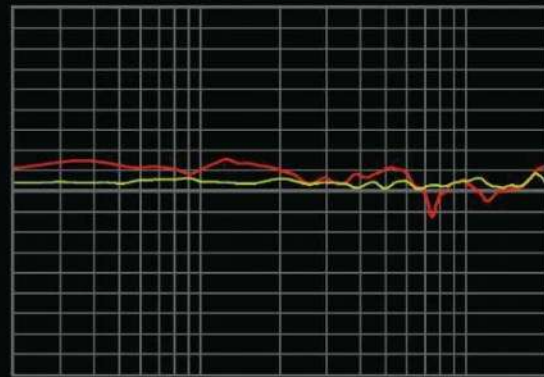
Competitor's Phase
 $\pm 20^\circ$ throughout overlap



Frequency Response

Below is the frequency response of both speakers. YG Acoustics™' response is extraordinarily flat – no compromise was necessary to achieve its perfect phase. The competitor's frequency response is good, but obviously compromised.

YG Acoustics™ on-axis. 200–20k Hz. 5 dB div.
Competitor on-axis.



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All measurements performed in YG Acoustics™ state-of-the-art lab