



ULTRA HIGH-END

Audio and Home Theater Review

YG Acoustics Carmel Loudspeaker Review

January 15, 2013



YG Acoustics received a great deal of well-deserved attention and accolades at CES 2013 for its new flagship Sonja loudspeakers. Not only are they beautiful to behold, with seductive curves replacing the angular design of the Anat III, but they take the sonic achievements of their predecessors to new heights, remarkably with barely a bump in price. The Sonja series comes in three configurations: the 1.1 (\$38,800) is comprised of only the monitor section, which houses two Billet-Core midrange drivers and one Forge-Core tweeter in an MTM configuration; the 1.2 (\$72,800) adds a bass cabinet to extend low-frequency response to 17Hz; and the 1.3 (\$106,800) adds an additional subwoofer cabinet to further extend low-frequency response to 14Hz. The Anat III and Kipod II remain in the line-up. Also remaining in the line-up is YG Acoustics' hidden gem: the entry-level Carmel loudspeaker (\$18,000), which is the subject of this review.

The Carmels are the perfect size for my smaller listening room which measures 12' by 14'. The speakers are triangular in shape with their 8" front baffle tapering to a 3" rounded rear spline. The cabinet body dimensions are irregular (and non-parallel) as well, with the 14" wide base angling up their 41" height (with spikes) to a 10" wide top. Because they are constructed entirely

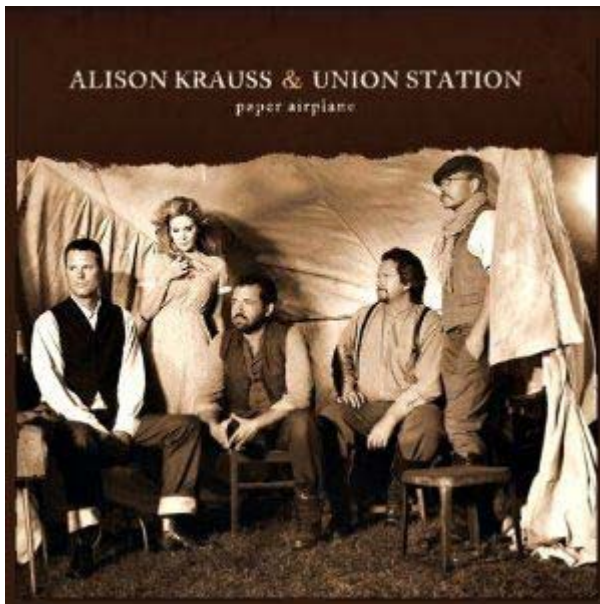
of aircraft-grade aluminum alloy, I expected them to be lightweight. Boy was I wrong. They weigh in at a deceptively hefty 66 pounds each. They come in both silver and black anodized finishes. My black pair virtually disappeared into the room, which my significant other, used to seeing my Magnepan 1.7s, applauded. For more information on the unique design and construction of YG Acoustics' speakers, you can read about my fascinating factory tour.



The front baffle houses a 7" woofer-midrange with useful output down to 35Hz, and 1" ring radiator tweeter which extends out to 40kHz. Both the woofer-midrange and tweeter are sourced from Scan-Speak to YG Acoustics' specifications. In addition, upon arrival from Scan-Speak, the tweeter is completely disassembled and highly modified prior to being mounted in it's milled waveguide. The proprietary Dual-Coherent crossover, which uniquely is simultaneously optimized in both the frequency and time domains, turns over at 1.75kHz. Sensitivity is slightly lower than average at 87db, with a nominal impedance of 8 ohms, dipping to below 4 ohms at 4kHz. Two pairs of top-of-the-line WBT five-way binding posts at the rear of the base allow for biamping and biwiring. I used Kimber Select KS9033 jumpers in lieu of the supplied WBT connector plates. In short, the Carmels combine the size and virtues of a state of the art monitor with a narrow front baffle to minimize the effects of edge diffraction, and a bass cabinet barely larger than a stand to provide wholly realistic low frequency extension.

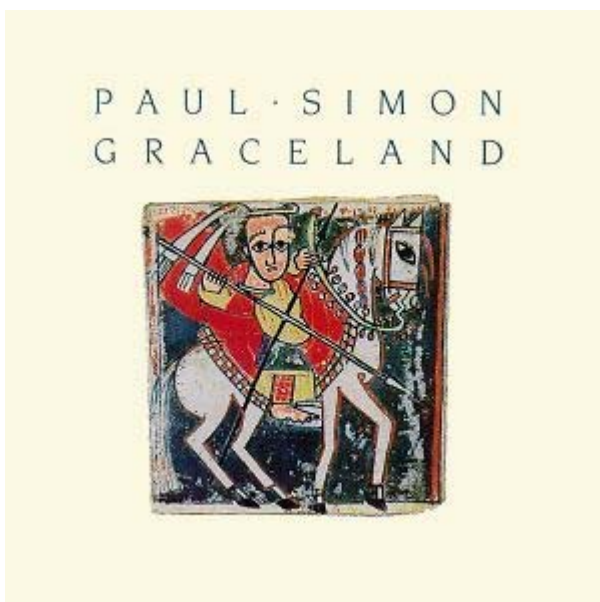
Setup was relatively straight-forward. After some trial and error, I found placing the Carmels 38" from the back wall and 30" from the side walls provided both the best soundstage width and depth. The distance between the speakers was 80" measured from the center of the tweeters. I toed-in the speakers so that they were aimed at the listening position just over 8' away. (I can't believe that Michael Fremer listens to the gargantuan Wilson XLFs from the same distance.) The only caveat is that, if you need to use the spike discs to protect your floor, YG recommends that you only use them for the front two spikes, and leave the single rear spike anchored to the floor. Accordingly, they only include four discs. So to move the speakers, you have to tilt them forward from the rear, and slide them on the front two discs, which is a bit cumbersome. You also have to be careful that the rear spike doesn't come down on your speaker cable. The spikes are so sharp, you are likely to damage your cables if they do. My recommendation is that YG include six discs, so you can slide the speakers around easily during setup, and then simply remove the rear disc when you have the location dialed in. Obviously I'm struggling here to find some recommended area of improvement to provide balance for the review.

Although the speakers were run in at the factory prior to shipment, I gave them an extra month or so of use before conducting any "serious" listening sessions. But I can tell you I was having fun while they were breaking in, so don't have any hesitation about setting them up and immediately enjoying them. To be honest, I'm not sure if it was the speakers or my ears breaking in anyway. Aural memory is problematic to begin with. It's not like you are going to have two identical pairs of speakers, and do a blind A-B comparison after one pair is run in to confirm your judgment. Like many things, I think the issue is way overblown among audio journalists.



Alison Krauss and Union Station's latest album, *Paper Airplane*, is a treasure. The title cut begins with Rory Block finger-picking his well-worn 1938 Martin D-28 a little left of center. Old Martins have incredible projection and his is miked to perfection to fully capture its signature woody soundboard as well as the micro-dynamic pings of the plucked treble strings. Alison Krauss's vocals appear so realistically center and deep behind and above the speakers it is spooky. She has such a gorgeous, sultry voice. Dan Tyminski joins in for a riff on mandolin, and then it's Jerry Douglas's turn on dobro. Playing in a Bluegrass group, these are all instruments I am intimately familiar with, though when you hear them played by artists like Union Station, you

ask yourself why you bother. This song is so emotionally engaging that you get that tight feeling in your chest. When that happens, you know you are listening to a special system, and not just an expensive hi-fi. The third cut, *Lie Awake*, highlights Barry Bales' acoustic bass, with each note distinct in tone and texture jumping out at you and laying down the pulse of the tune (amazingly from a 7" woofer), never getting lost in the waves of sound from the other instruments. In *Dimming of the Day*, Alison Krauss is accompanied by Jerry Douglas. The detail is astonishing. You can hear the sound of the strings vibrating against the slide as it is moved up and down the neck, and the transients of the metal picked strings are lightning fast. Each track on this album is revelatory through the Carmels.



Paul Simon's *Graceland* has long been one of my favorite albums. It opens with *The Boy in the Bubble* and immediately the sound emerges wall to wall from well behind the speakers. The speakers themselves are simply not there. The synthesized accordion begins, followed quickly by four thunderous and startling drum whacks, wood on skin, and continually provide the relentless rhythm and pace for the song. Cymbal crashes are distinct, and the background vocals encircle Paul Simon's lead. It is a vivid picture thrown up before you. Likewise, in *Under African Skies*, the background vocals are clearly in a different plane than the lead vocals (including a cameo appearance by Linda Ronstadt). This separation provides a depth and texture to the music that

is frequently flattened by lesser transducers. The most distinctive track on the album is *Homeless*, where Paul Simon is joined by Ladysmith Black Mambazo, a male choral group from South Africa that sings in the traditional Zulu acapella style. The strong, layered melodies are woven together in a complex and seamless whole, punctuated with unique vocalizations, that is breathtaking. Liberal use of reverb makes the soundstage huge. It's a joyous album.



Changing genres and slowing things down a notch, I listened to Mozart's *Sinfonia Concertante* performed by the Israel Philharmonic conducted by Zubin Mehta and featuring legendary performers Itzhak Perlman and Pinchas Zukerman. Though originally written for a much smaller orchestra, it certainly scales well to a modern full-sized symphony, though I'm sure that statement might find resistance among the original instruments crowd. The Carmels provide a view of the orchestra which seemingly transcends the boundaries of my room. I never felt hemmed in. Unlike the previous two studio albums, which allowed your mind to focus on the tiniest details and precision imaging, reproducing a symphony orchestra is about

blending 100 or so instruments into a unified soundscape, while at the same time providing sufficient aural clues so that you know the first and second violins are on the left, the cellos and double basses are on the right, with the violas in the center, in front of the woodwinds, which are in turn in front of the brass – in other words, sufficient imaging to paint a truthful representation of the orchestra without resort to hyper-realism. So the music is allowed to wash over rather than pelt you. Although DGG has been known to abuse the multi-miking process, here, in a festival recording, considerable restraint was shown to the benefit of the music.

The key in this performance is the interchange between the violinist (Perlman) and the violist (Zukerman), both of whom stand out from the orchestra and provide the interesting, and invigorating, musical back and forth. This is particularly noticeable beginning about 3:05 into the first movement. There is absolutely no doubt that you are hearing a violin and a viola instead of two violins, and not simply because the violin is playing higher notes. The timbre of the instruments is markedly different with the viola (slightly to the right) having the richer, more resonant sound, while the violin (slightly to the left) is sweeter and lilting. Interestingly, you can hear that the violin is lower vertically than the viola. This is because Perlman plays seated, while Zukerman plays standing. This is not something you would hear in the absence of an extraordinary loudspeaker, but is something you would detect both visually and audibly at a live performance, particularly if you were seated in the first few rows. The *Symphonia Concertante* is a beautiful piece of music combining the intimacy of chamber music and the grand sweep of orchestral music. As an aside, the Carmels bear no responsibility for the slightly glassy high frequencies of this very early digital recording.

These are but a few of the scores of albums I listened to over the three months I had the Carmels in my listening room. The overriding characteristic of these exceptional loudspeakers is their sheer musicality. With the right recordings, the speakers disappear, and what you are presented with is a pure musical performance. You simply

forget about the speakers altogether. This is in large measure attributable to their neutrality and top to bottom coherence. I can't help but think that their stellar imaging is the result of the optimization of the crossover in both the frequency and time domains. There was no smearing of transients and the textural detail was impressive. The speakers also scaled quite well. Although I never listened at headbanger levels, I do enjoy turning the volume up, and I never heard any issues with dynamic compression.

Conclusion

I am gobsmacked by the YG Acoustics Carmels. Having attended nearly every audio trade show over the past four years, I can honestly say that I know of no other similarly sized loudspeaker at anywhere near the price that can hold a candle to them. While the Carmels do not reproduce the last octave of bass, the bass they do produce is deep, quick and extraordinarily articulate, which for the vast majority of recordings is infinitely more important. Don't worry: you can shake the floor with these loudspeakers if you feel the need. The midrange, as evidenced by the reproduction of both male and female vocals, is exemplary. It is silky smooth, with astonishing microdynamics, and no midrange bump. The soundstage is laser sharp – when the recording is capable of delivering the goods. They are uncompromisingly neutral; if you want additional warmth you will need to resort to tubes. The high frequency extension is limitless, without the slightest hardness or harshness. Listening for hours at a time induces no listener fatigue. And their clarity exceeds that of my Magnepan 1.7s. The Carmels push all my buttons. If you have a small to medium size listening room, you simply must hear these musically engaging loudspeakers. You won't soon forget the experience. If you're lucky, you'll go home with a pair.

- *Frank Berryman*

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Associated Equipment

Analog Source: VPI Scout; Dynavector 20X2; Musical Surroundings Phenomena II
Digital Sources: Meridian G08; Mac Mini; dCS Debussy; Wadia 121; Halide Design Bridge and DAC HD; Audirvana
Preamplifiers: Meridian G02; Meridian G68ADV
Power Amplifiers: Krell Evolution 302e; Meridian 557
Loudspeakers: Magnepan 1.7; Meridian DSP5500
Analog Cables: Kimber KS1016 and KS1116
Digital Cables: Kimber D60; Meridian Digital Link; Wireworld Starlight USB
Speaker Cables: Kimber KS6063 and KS9033
Power Cables: Kimber PK10G and PK14G
Accessories: GIK acoustic treatments; dedicated 20 amp circuit; Audience aR2p power conditioner