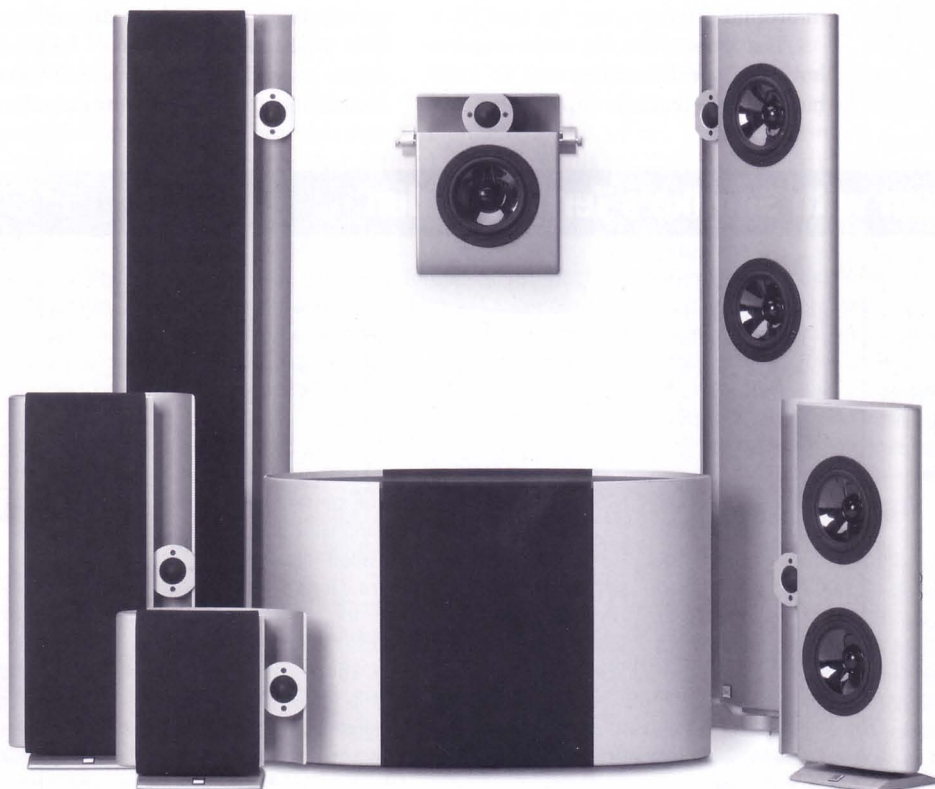


Vienna Acoustics' Schönberg Series Home-Theater Speaker System



But none—and I mean *none*—has combined the elegantly sculpted look of the Schönberg Series with a sound that requires no apologies.

For readers unfamiliar with Vienna Acoustics, this—yes, Viennese—loudspeaker manufacturer strongly identifies with the unparalleled musical heritage of its home city. The company's product line reads like a *Who's Who* of classical music: Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Strauss, and Mahler are among the Vienna models housed in beautifully built and finished wood enclosures, while the new Schönberg Series reviewed here represents the Second Viennese School and consists of three models: the floorstanding Schönbergs (\$2500/pair), mid-sized Weberns (\$795/each), and tiny Bergs (\$500/each). (A

The Vienna Acoustics Schönberg Series is an important, possibly breakthrough, home-theater speaker system. For one thing, and most importantly, it sounds terrific—extremely well-balanced across the frequency spectrum, very clear, and highly detailed in an easy, as opposed to hyper-exaggerated, way. When properly set up (see sidebar for tips), the system is capable of producing one of the most convincing multidimensional soundscapes I've heard. On their own, these may sound like excellent but not particularly unusual virtues, the stuff we expect from better speakers. What marks the Viennas as special is the package this sound emerges from. Designed to mate with

flat-panel video displays, and thus to be placed against or on the wall, each model in the Schönberg Series is just 3.5" deep and elegantly shaped in an

powered subwoofer called the Subson should be available by press time.)

Of course, one can mix and match these models depending on room size,

No "lifestyle" loudspeaker has combined the elegantly sculpted look of the Vienna Acoustics with a sound that requires no apologies.

elongated ellipsoid. My experience with most "lifestyle" speakers—and the size and contemporary look of the Schönberg Series leaves little doubt that this is their genre—has been mixed. Some sound very good, while others, despite their convenience and visual pizzazz, are ordinary, at best.

décor, and budget. For evaluation purposes Sumiko (the U.S. distributor) provided me with a pair of Schönbergs (with supplied, adjustable, spiked stands) for the main speakers, a stand-mounted Berg for the center-channel, and a pair of stand-mounted—actually, two kitchen stools were recruited

AUDIO REVIEW

polypropylene hybrid material that combines stiffness with high internal damping. Each Schönberg Series model also shares the same tweeter: a newly designed, hand-coated 1" silk-dome built on three neodymium magnets, each center-drilled to guide the rear sound wave into a damped chamber to control the buildup of internal pressure that causes tweeters to compress. All drivers are designed by Vienna Acoustics and built to its specifications.

In addition to its aesthetic appeal, the Schönberg Series' bead-blasted, transparently anodized enclosures are lightweight, thin-walled, and rigid, allowing for resonance control, while their curved shapes have no parallel sides and, therefore, reduce the buildup of internal standing waves. In pursuit of further reductions in resonance, Vienna's chief designer Peter Gansterer discovered the importance of a joined, two-piece cabinet (as opposed to a single, molded one). Medium-density fiberboard and "intervening layers of damping material" join each machined front and rear panel.


Based purely on the brief description above—thin aluminum cabinets, highly controlled resonances, etc.—some of you may be thinking that the sound of these speakers would be dry, cold, analytical. But that is simply not the case. Instead, after spending weeks listening to all manner of music—and I'm talking a heck of a range, from the acoustic jazz recordings from the '20s and '30s found on the *Ken Burns Jazz* compilation box [Columbia/Legacy] to Lucinda Williams' latest, *World Without Tears* [Lost Highway], to

Glenn Gould's *Bach: The 6 French Suites* [Sony], to the White Stripes' *Elephant* [V2/Third Man], to *Grateful Dead: The Golden Road (1965-1973)* [Rhino]—I found the Schönbergs to be consistently easy, open, and, above all, and I mean this in the best sense of the word, neutral. Whatever sound was on the recording seemed to present itself through the speakers. This doesn't mean that the Schönberg is "perfect" or has no character of its own, but that its character is very chameleon-like. For instance, on Lucinda Williams' "Fruits of My Labor," the bass seemed to gradually roll off starting around 40Hz (interestingly, exactly where the speaker is spec'd to); and yet, there was a directness to the sound that suggested little in the way of electro-mechanical interference.

These speakers do a nice "disappearing" act, though they do lack some of the warmth heard from most wood-enclosed designs, and, *sans* subwoofer, the widest dynamic peaks and (of course) deepest bass. The silk-dome tweeter is lovely, producing ethereal, extended highs with excellent definition and smoothness. Vocal clarity and articulation are major strengths, and important no matter what music you like to listen to.

With subwoofer, and in a properly tuned (see sidebar) 5.1-channel rig, you'll experience a fully realized soundfield that appears, with movies such as *Memento* and *U-571*, to be coming from a continuous zone—side to side, front to back, and from all points in between. In the *Marriage of Figaro* rehearsal scene in *Amadeus*, you'll think that your room has been transformed into an empty Baroque theater, as you listen in on a hushed conversation between the Emperor and his court musicians, while every bit of air in the room is charged with the sound of a ballet troupe's leather shoes on the wooden stage. Though small, the Vienna system displays an amazing ease with dynamic extremes, as sessions with *U-571*, *Moulin Rouge*, and *Gladiator* showed.

Although there are bigger, more dramatic-sounding home-theater sys-

tems on the market, the Vienna Acoustics Schönberg Series is one of the most refined, engaging, and utterly convincing I've heard. The fact that it's lovely to look at and can—and *should*—be mounted on a wall, simply sweetens the deal. 

SPECIFICATIONS

Schönberg

Driver complement: (2) 6" bass/midrange; 1" silk-dome tweeter
Frequency response: 40Hz–25kHz
Sensitivity: 91dB
Impedance: 4 ohms
Recommended amplifier power: 30–200 watts
Dimensions: 10.5" x 41.3" x 3.5"
Weight: 30 lbs.

Webern

Driver complement: (2) 6" bass/midrange; 1" silk-dome tweeter
Frequency response: 60Hz–25kHz
Sensitivity: 91dB
Impedance: 4 ohms
Recommended amplifier power: 30–200 watts
Dimensions: 10.5" x 19.7" x 3.5"
Weight: 16.5 lbs.

Berg

Driver complement: 6" bass/midrange; 1" silk-dome tweeter
Frequency response: 70Hz–25kHz
Sensitivity: 89dB
Impedance: 4 ohms
Recommended amplifier power: 30–180 watts
Dimensions: 10.5" x 8.3" x 3.5"
Weight: 11 lbs.

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Primare SP31.7 A/V Controller and AV30.5 five-channel amp; Balanced Audio Technology VK-D5 CD player; Arcam DV88 DVD/CD player; Runco PlasmaWall PL-50cx plasma video display; Cardas Quadlink interconnects; Cardas Golden Reference speaker cable (L/C/R); Cardas Twinlink speaker cable (surrounds); Canare component video cable; Finite Elemente "Spider" equipment rack; Sound Anchors center channel stand; ASC Tube Traps; Richard Gray Power Company 400S and 600S line treatment

DISTRIBUTOR INFORMATION

SUMIKO

2431 5th Street
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(510) 843-4500
www.sumikoaudio.net
Prices: Schönberg: \$2500/pair; Webern:
\$795/each; Berg: \$500/each



THUMBS UP:

Attractive and small

Can be placed close to or mounted on a wall

Neutral, dynamic, articulate sound

Good value

THUMBS DOWN:

Near-wall placement can also be a limitation

Best in small and medium rooms



for the task!—Weberns for surrounds. For permanent installations, adjustable wall-mounting brackets are optional. Because Vienna's Subsonic is not yet available, Sumiko supplied one of REL's new Q-108E subwoofers (\$749) for bass duty. (I'll cover the REL in a future issue, but let me say that this experience—my first with a REL sub—was ear-opening as well as eye-popping, as this diminutive cube not only went down to 20Hz in my room, but did so with excellent defini-

tion as well as surprising levels of sheer power. It played an important part in the overall excellence of the sound. I should also note that, as REL subs are meant to be used as bass-augmentation devices, the Vienna system was driven full-range, and not, as is commonly the case in home theaters, crossed over. The sub was set to kick in around 40Hz.)

The Schönberg is a two-and-a-half-way speaker using two 6" mid/bass drivers, each occupying its own

internal acoustic space. These chambers exit via a pair of side-firing ports that are tuned to different frequencies (the drivers also crossover at different frequencies, with one acting solely as a woofer and the other covering the bass and midrange). The Webern uses the same pair of drivers operating in parallel in a sealed enclosure, and the Berg uses a single one of these drivers, also in a sealed cabinet. Vienna's mid/bass driver uses the company's XPP cone technology, a visually transparent

Tweaking the System with Sumiko's Terry Medalen

Most of us set the time delays and amplitude levels of the individual channels in a home-theater system by the book. We first measure the distance of the individual speakers and subwoofer from the listening position, and assign to each a number that our receiver or controller uses to automatically set the delay. Then, trusty Radio Shack SPL (sound pressure level) meter in hand, we adjust the output level of each speaker to be uniform from all six (or more) channels. While this is a good way to begin, it's rather like scrupulously following a recipe without bothering to taste the dish while cooking. Sure, we'll end up with an approximation of what the dish should be, but without employing our senses we'll never achieve the balance of flavors that can turn a good dish into a great one. Well, the same thing applies to our home-theater systems, as was demonstrated by the Sumiko boys during our session with the Vienna Acoustics system.

Terry Medalen gets special kudos here. As a teacher of film at the college level, a passionate devotee of the art of film sound, and a regular visitor to the Saul Zaentz studios in Berkeley, California, not far from Sumiko's offices, Terry has a wide range of experience with cinema sound. And his lesson was, for this writer, a revelation.

Although Terry never once employed an SPL meter, I would recommend that, until you're super-confident with the procedure I'm about to describe, you do first your setup "by the book," and then "season to taste."

The film Terry used to tweak the system was *U-571*, about a group of submariners on a secret mission during World War II. Terry focused on a several-minute segment starting with a scene in the Captain's cabin. In it, Matthew McConaughey, the junior officer, is speaking with the Lieutenant Commander (Bill Paxton). The dialogue centers on bravery and the ultimate sacrifice of war, and as Paxton's speech becomes more serious the sound designers ratchet up the tension by increasing the sounds of the ship moaning and creaking. McConaughey leaves the Captain's quarters, closing a drape that serves as the door, and walks slowly and thoughtfully down a hallway, where he observes a sailor writing a letter with a fountain pen. From there the action shifts outdoors where the ship is seen pitching full-force into a massive onslaught of waves. After a moment, the action moves back inside the hull, where, despite the ship's pitching, a group of officers is trying to eat a meal. Plates and utensils slide back and forth across the table, and there are two moments where utensils fall, clinking, to the floor.

Generally, I'm not wowed by such sounds, and tend to think of moments like these as interesting but forgettable effects. The thing I like about Terry's approach is that he tuned the system so that the end result, and all the little stops along the way, made a significant impact on the aesthetic experience of this and every film played over the system.

We listened to this sequence time and again, sometimes with the picture and sometimes without. We started by making minute changes to the gain of the center channel (and we adjusted the delay of only the center and surround speakers). Set a dB or two high, the voices seem pushed into the room and detached from the on-screen environment. Our impression of the subject of conversation was diminished, too, and the critical speech seemed of less importance, as if it was little more than words being read from a script. Set too low, the voices get lost within the background sounds of the moving ship. Ideally, the voices should seem set within the cabin, yet integrate with the action in a way where we find ourselves almost physically drawn toward the screen. Minor changes to the time delay yield similar results, and a careful back and forth is required to get this right (having a few friends around to do this with helps), and it doesn't hurt to check again after tuning the rear channels. Also, pay attention when McConaughey passes the sailor writing the letter. When the center channel is right, the sound of pen on paper is distinctly audible, and clearly that of a fountain pen.

As to the surrounds, the outdoor scene with the massive waves should do two things: One, roll from the front to the back of the room; and, two, do so with a sense of continuousness between the front and surround channels. In other words, although the sound should distinctly travel the depth of your room, the wave should never break in two but remain one constantly rolling sheet of water. This is a good test for your subwoofer level too, because a properly set sub (assuming it goes down that low), will dive *with* the waves, and yet should never sound like a thing apart.

Finally, a lot can be learned from the next scene's sliding and falling cutlery. First, when the center channel is properly set, the cutlery and other tabletop items should sound like they're moving seamlessly back and forth across all three front channels. Then, when utensils fall to the floor—and one of them lands in the left surround speaker—the effect should be a subtle continuation of sound from the front speakers, not an obvious clang coming from nowhere. **WG**