



FLAT AND FABULOUS

VIENNA ACOUSTICS' SCHÖNBERG SERIES SPEAKERS
PAIR PERFECTLY WITH TODAY'S FLAT-PANEL TVS. DO
THEY SOUND AS NICE AS THEY LOOK?

BY BRENT BUTTERWORTH PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN PHILLIP

L oudspeakers have some catching up to do. In the last five years, our TVs have slimmed down enough to assume a prime position on the wall. Most speakers, sadly, remain on the floor, where they consume valuable space and trip your treasured guests. That is why speakers are slimming down faster than NBC weatherman Al Roker, shedding their bulky enclosures and boring black finishes with the hope that they will earn a place on the wall next to your plasma TV.

One of the most noteworthy plasma-friendly speakers comes from Vienna Acoustics, a respected maker of high-end music and home theater speakers. The company's new Schönberg series includes three speakers, all crafted from the same aluminum extrusion, and all measuring just 3.5 inches deep. The tiny Berg and the midsized Webern mount on a wall or sit on stands. The line tops out with the towering Schönberg; it stands on the floor or attaches to a wall.

You can use these speakers

for surround sound or plain stereo. Use any of them for the left and right speakers in a stereo system, then add the Webern or Berg as center or side/rear speakers to create a home theater system.

Before I proceed, I must compliment Vienna Acoustics on its industrial design. Schönberg, in particular, is the nicest-looking speaker I have seen in 14 years as an electronics journalist. No photograph can do these speakers justice. They belong in the Museum of Modern Art next to the Philippe Starck juicer.

The company supplies a black grille with each speaker. Throw it away. In my opinion, the grille spoils the look and is unnecessary. Because the tweeter (the fragile, high-frequency driver) is covered with its own metal grille, and the woofers (the larger, low-frequency drivers) are sturdy, these speakers will stand up to all but the most destructive toddler, even without the grilles.

Good looks are sometimes the enemy of good sound, though. Slim enclo-





The Schönberg series speakers feature woofers (left) with transparent polypropylene cones, which give you a peek at the speakers' inner workings.

speakers often lack the internal volume necessary for good bass reproduction. And while the side-by-side placement of the speaker drivers in the Schönberg series appears stylish, it presents a problem. Almost all speakers position their tweeter above their woofer. Aesthetically logical as this arrangement is, it is also acoustically beneficial because it allows the sound to spread evenly across the room. Place the tweeter to the side, and the sound is less consistent from wall to wall, but more consistent from floor to ceiling.

DESCRIPTION

Wall-mount or freestanding speakers, for stereo or surround sound.

DIMENSIONS

Schönberg: 41.3 x 10.5 x 3.5 inches (h/w/d).
Webern: 19.7 x 10.5 x 3.5 inches (h/w/d).
Berg: 8.3 x 10.5 x 3.5 inches (h/w/d).

CONNECTIONS

Metal banana jacks. Adapters included for bare wire, spade lugs and pin connectors.

COMPONENTS

6-inch woofer, 1-inch silk-dome tweeter (two woofers in Schönberg and Webern).

PRICE/CONTACT

PRICE: Schönberg, \$2,000/pair; Webern, \$795 each; Berg, \$495 each. Wall-mounting brackets: \$75 each for Webern, \$50 for Berg; price is to be determined for Schönberg; Webern/Berg table stand: \$50 each.
CONTACT: (510) 843-4500
www.viennaacoustics.com

ing. Thus, as you move about the room, the sound can change, but it differs little as you stand up and sit down. I do not know what activities you prefer in your living room, but in mine, I routinely walk around or scoot across a couch, and seldom climb ladders or do jumping jacks. Therefore, the side-by-side placement of woofer and tweeter in the Schönberg series concerns me.

I realize while unpacking these speakers that they will seldom see duty in an acoustically treated home theater. They will most often reside alongside plasma TVs in real living spaces, which may have wood, marble or tile floors and sparsely decorated walls, all of which reflect sound. Thus, I choose to listen in my lounge, a large room with a wood floor, wood ceiling and wood paneling.

My choice of listening environment is prescient: The Schönberg towers sing in this room, which would prove too reverberant for most speakers. The towers produce a startlingly lifelike stereo image. Instruments seem to materialize in the air between the speakers. The tonality is natural—voices sound clear with little coloration, and treble-heavy

instruments like cymbals and acoustic guitars ring out.

The effects of Schönberg's tweeter placement initially prove problematic—the sound changes subtly but noticeably as I move my head side to side—but with help from Kevin Wolff of Sumiko (Vienna's U.S. importer), I overcome the problem. Schönberg is not particularly difficult to set up, but the side-mounted tweeter changes the rules. Normally, it matters little how far away you sit from your speakers, but with Schönberg, distance is more critical. Any distance you choose is fine, but your dealer must fine-tune the speaker positioning to sound best at your preferred distance.

My worries about Schönberg's bass response prove unfounded; I feel more power from drums and bass guitar than I have ever felt from a speaker this slim. The bass is more than sufficient for most music, and adequate to rattle objects in my room. However, make sure your dealer places Schönberg against the wall, otherwise the bass reproduction may become uneven.

The smaller Webern is simpler to set up. The sound no longer changes as I move about the room, no matter what the listening distance, because the Webern's tweeter sits between and to the side of its two woofers rather than directly alongside one of them. The bass will not provoke you to dance, but it proves suffi-

cient for light music, chick flicks and most TV shows. Otherwise, Webern shares Schönberg's best traits: crisp treble, natural midrange and good stereo imaging. A pair of Weberns would perfectly complement any plasma TV, and you could add a third as a center speaker.

I finish with the baby Berg, mounting one on each side of my 15-inch wide-screen LCD TV. Berg reveals the same character as its family members. However, since Berg mounts horizontally or vertically, I choose to mount it with the tweeter above the woofer, a position that makes the listening distance less critical and, in my opinion, makes Berg sound better. You can see Berg mounted this way on www.hedmag.com. One caveat: Berg produces little bass, so pair it with a subwoofer. (Vienna had just introduced one at press time.)

All three speakers are sure to delight plasma TV owners—and even those who just want a fantastic-looking speaker that sounds great, too. For in-depth technical measurements and data, visit www.hedmag.com. **HEB**

