



LIVING VOICE AVATAR OBX-R

Looking for an affordable entry-level speaker? Despite appearances, this isn't it. A million speakers look just like it. Few sound anything like it. Or — and this is unfortunate — *cost* like it. Were it otherwise we would be announcing a miracle.

So perhaps it's not a miracle, but finding a speaker like this is an event. We first discovered it at a show in the US, and we came away wondering how they could make a speaker that keeps its package of virtues such a secret. The configuration is quite conventional. What you see is (mostly) what you get: two 15 cm doped paper woofers plus the famous Scanspeak Revelator soft dome tweeter in a rectangular box that doesn't even have rounded corners.

Not that it is entirely conventional. It is different from pretty much all its lookalikes in a number of ways.

Pick one up and you'll see the first way. Most speakers are heavy, with a shell made, typically, of thick MDF, and sometimes even heavier exotic materials. The Avatar's exoskeleton is pressboard, which is much lighter. The idea is that less mass means shorter energy storage. Of course, a cabinet that light requires a lot of bracing, and this one has it.

If you're not careful, picking this speaker up can reveal another difference in a rather painful way. The black bottom part is not actually an integral part of the speaker. It is a hollow frame, with neither top nor bottom, also made of light material. And it can easily drop right onto your foot, because it is held on only by four (supplied) wads of Blu-Tack.

The final difference is that the crossover network is not inside the enclosure, but in a separate external box, which you can see on the page across. The black and red binding posts are the input (Living Voice assumes you will be biwiring), and the other posts are color-matched to the four binding posts at the rear of the speaker. Each speaker has its own crossover box, fitted with large cones. You will, of course, need a second set of high quality speaker cables to go between outboard crossover (the "OBX-R" of the model name), but when you've spent this sort of money for a speaker you can prob-

ably manage the extras too.

The crossover box is rather large (and implicitly pricey), and as you would expect, Living Voice has spent a bundle on better than average parts. Hovland Musicaps can be found on the inside, as can Clarostat non-inductive wirewound resistors. The inductors are made without metal cores. This does have a downside, because an air-core coil requires a lot more wire than a solid core inductor. However air cores don't saturate, which means the crossover can be driven much harder without bizarre things happening.

Because Living Voice was new to us (and to most North Americans), we initially assumed that the company began life making speakers for Mama Bear...neither too big nor too small. Not so. Company founder and designer Kevin Scott actually began with a model called the Air Partner, a horn speaker that could dwarf a Klipschorn. Like the Klipsch, it couldn't find a corner (literally) in very many homes. The Auditorium series followed. Says Scott, "Anyone with broad musical taste will be happier with system that does all things to an 80% standard rather than one that does 80% of things to a 100% standard." Something to ponder.

We asked for our review speakers extra early, so that we could use them in our room at the Montreal show (see our complete report elsewhere in this issue). Our experience at the show revealed one important aspect of this speaker. It is highly sensitive to room placement, and it can easily turn nasty if you're not paying attention. When we first set them up we were highly disappointed at how shrill and constipated it seemed to be. Only after three moves were we finally happy. We weren't surprised to find that these speakers needed the same sort of attention when we set them up in our Alpha room.

But after that, we were in for a wild ride.

As with the other speaker reviewed in this issue, we used a set of favorite LPs, starting with the *Olympic Fanfare* from *Center Stage* (on Wilson Audio, but long discontinued). The first thing we noticed was the great sense of spaciousness. The room walls seemed to have been



pushed back.

We admired the timbre of the brass instruments: the trumpets, and — lower down the scale — the trombones. "They're not as brash as with our reference," said Reine, but I found them a little shrill before." Albert agreed, noting approvingly that the color of the music was more neutral. He especially liked the cymbals, which few speakers can reproduce really well.

But how did the Avatar do at the bottom end? We had selected this recording deliberately, because the rendition of the tympani is particularly excellent. You can hear the baton striking the drum membrane most satisfyingly.

At least you can with our reference speakers, whose push-pull woofers can maintain control down to Richter scale frequencies. Though the Avatar has two woofers, the cabinet has a reflex port at the rear. Ported speakers have reduced control of cone movement below the system's resonant frequency. That gives low-pitched sounds a certain "bloom" that can hide detail. Of course the majority of speakers in all price ranges have the same problem...and it's a problem that

won't show up on many recordings.

The Avatar did outstandingly well with one of our favorite recordings, Walton's *Façade* (Reference Recordings RR-16 or RR-2102CD). The infamous piccolo in the opening tableau, which can take your ears off with the wrong speaker, was still quite sharp, but rather more natural than with our own speakers. The other instruments were also better rendered. The trumpet and the clarinet were especially attractive. The snare drum seemed more distant, but its clarity certainly didn't suffer. Fine details, including the castanets and the reverberation, were startlingly limpid. "The midrange and the highs are more refined than with our reference speaker," said Albert. Reine expressed an initial reservation, wondering whether all of the energy in this remarkable recording was being transmitted. A second listen convinced her that it was.

The Living Voice did spectacularly well on a difficult recording, an audiophile classic, Amanda McBroom singing *Gossamer*. Though it is found on the Sheffield *Amanda Gold* CD, we listened to the original direct-cut LP. Interesting!

But interesting for all the right reasons. McBroom's voice was extraordinarily natural, with even those difficult essences tamed. The words were of course easy to follow. We all commented on the piano as well, because it sounded so...well, *real*. The guitar was easier to follow. The rather subtle percussive effects used behind the voice and piano were considerably clearer. More than that, some previously inaudible instruments emerged from their hiding place.

SUMMING IT UP...

Brand/model: Living Voice Avatar OBX-R

Price: C\$10,975/US\$7295. Surcharge for rosewood: C\$300/US\$200.

Dimensions: 102 cm x 21.5 x 27 cm
Outboard crossover: 42 x 26 x 12 cm

Sensitivity: 94 dB

Impedance: 6 ohms

Most liked: Extraordinary competence with all categories of music

Least liked: Easy to tip over

Verdict: A reference-quality speaker in plainclothes

REFERENCE QUALITY?

We've had a lot of enjoyment from listening to our Alpha reference speakers, which are the long-discontinued 3a MS5's. They are difficult to beat, except in one area: the highs. As our Alpha system has become more sophisticated, we've been wishing the speakers' highs could match.

So what about the Living Voice speaker?

We have a long list of requirements, apart from the obvious one, namely very high performance. Because we have limited space in the Alpha room, the speaker needs a small footprint. It needs to be efficient enough that we can use it to test an entry-level integrated amplifier. And because we use it to review other components, it must have extremely broad frequency range, and lots of headroom even at the extremes.

Does the Avatar qualify? Possibly. We will be spending some more time with it, and we will decide together. We have used our present reference speakers for over a decade. If we want similar service for their replacement, we will need to think long and hard.

"It's all there," said Albert.

The next recording (Rutter's *Requiem*, Reference Recordings RR-57) was a challenge on several fronts. It includes a symphony orchestra that, in the excerpt we chose, the *Requiem Aeternam*, mostly plays softly (not as easy to reproduce as you'd think), two chorales and an organ. The Avatar's rendition was about as close to flawless as one could expect. The emotional tension of this remarkable music was maintained as the singers joined the magnificent solo cello. By the time the crescendo with organ arrived, we had goosebumps. This isn't the sort of thing you want to analyze too closely.

Oh well, perhaps you do. Once again the tone was warm, though we weren't tempted to suppose that an artificial coloration was added to the music. There was of course none of the graininess added to the sound by too many speakers. Depth was excellent. By now we were considering whether this speaker might be the new reference for our Alpha system. "With a reference I'd rather not compromise," said Albert, but if I *have* to compromise, this is the compromise I'd choose."

The Living Voice sounded quite different from our reference on the Chopin *Scherzo No. 2* (RCA RDCE-7), with a richer, warmer sound to Auer's Steinway. The impact of the powerful chords in the opening of each section was not as

overwhelming as with our reference, but we were unanimous in judging them to be more accurate. At the same time, the softer notes from Auer's right hand were more refined, and more lyrical too.

The down side? A high resolution speaker lets you more of what you might prefer not to hear. Because of the excellent separation of the notes, it became rather evident that Auer's playing was not absolutely accurate (it was especially evident to Reine, who has played that scherzo). We weren't surprised, because this was a direct-cut LP, with no splicing-in of retakes possible. "There's something else I can hear," said Gerard. "You know what? They should have called in the Steinway technician before the recording."

We seldom do a speaker review without throwing in *Secret of the Andes*, from either the original Nautilus LP (as in this case) or the xrcd transfer on *Audiophile* (JVC jvcsr-0016-2). This superb jazz piece features not only pianist Victor Feldman and his usual sidemen but also a large kit of instruments from Central America. Because the percussion instruments in particular have such diverse timbres, they easily show up a speaker whose internal resonances make them all sound similar.

Of course the Avatar had no such problem, but it gave us more than we had expected. "I thought it sounded great *before*," said Reine. Albert had written the

word "Wow!" on his notepad. The percussion sequence was not even the most impressive one. Feldman's piano was gorgeous, and so was the electric bass. The kick drum was solid, with plenty of energy. Best of all, the finesse of detail was not accompanied by any blunting of the...well, of anything.

The Avatar, with its slim enclosure, looks like the antithesis of the rock'n'roll speaker. Still, it seemed to have little difficulty with high voltages, so perhaps it could handle rock too. We mean *real* rock, the large-scale multilayered stuff that can rival symphonic music for complexity. Such as the original Pink Floyd *Dark Side of the Moon*.

We first listened to this celebrated 1973 LP with our reference speakers. It was as good as we remembered it. No, it was better. We sure didn't own anything like our present-day reference system 30 years ago. This music was *made* to be heard on the best gear you could imagine then...or now. Could the Living Voice speaker handle it?

Well...yes, but what we hadn't expected was that it came out sounding like a totally different recording.

Where to begin? The highs were exceptional, and the ringing clocks in the transition between *Breathe* and *Time* were astonishing in their effortless clarity. The lows? That very deep percussive "heartbeat" in *Time*, which could vanish entirely with lesser speakers, was very much there. Nothing missing at the extremes, even when we put the pedal to the metal. But...

In fact it was in the *midrange* that the Avatar bested our reference speaker, and there is so much happening in the middle tones that the recording sounded quite unlike the way we had heard it before. In the second half of *Breathe*, there are layers upon layers of sound (hard to believe it was done on a 16-track recorder, albeit with a lot of track bouncing). With the Avatar those layers separate, letting you hear "through" one layer clear through to all the others. We no longer had to strain to make out the distant voices that can be found throughout the disc. They moved to the foreground, or just back of it. The space around the speakers had opened up and made room for much more music.

There were other changes too. The guitars had changed timbre, giving the entire musical structure a different tone, one that was detailed and coherent, but never shrill. Awesome!

How did Living Voice pull off this trick? Would our instruments reveal their secrets?

The Avatar's frequency response, shown in the top photo (measured at 100 dB at 1 meter, on line with the tweeter, using pink noise) is very good. There is a slight rolloff at the top end, and a dip around 1.8 kHz. The roughness below 500 Hz has more to do with the room (our Alpha room in fact). Response begins to drop at 100 Hz, but remains solid down to 38 Hz. You can see the relatively clean 38 Hz signal in the second photo. That's pretty much the response limit. However we were pleased to find that the Avatar did not make rude noises at frequencies below that.

The 100 Hz square wave (in the

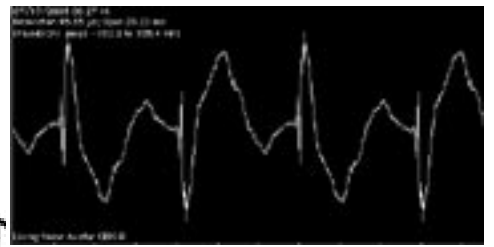
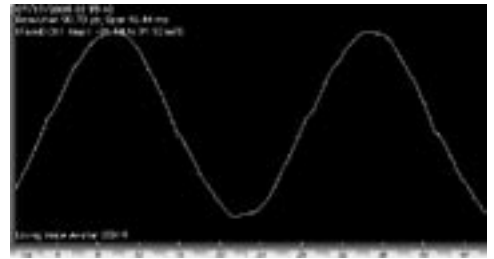
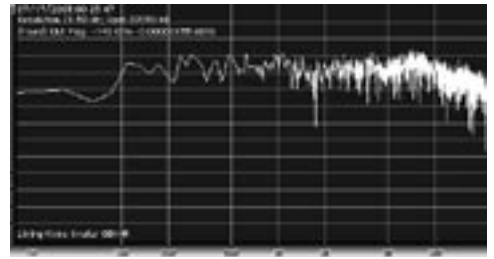
bottom photo) was not bad, though not quite as terrific as we had supposed from the speaker's performance on music. The wave is somewhat misshapen, with a very large dip in the horizontal part, and with a notch in the riser that suggests a small phase error. This is a pretty good square wave all the same.

What conclusions to draw?

We had expected the Avatar to do very well, and it certainly didn't disappoint us. Notwithstanding its unassuming look, it is an extraordinarily competent speaker, and listening to good music through it is nothing less than an experience. No disappointment there.

Yes, but is it a *reference* quality speaker?

Perhaps it is — see the sidebar on the facing page. Regardless of our ultimate decision, we can say that it is of astonishing musical quality. The price may give you pause, but we are confident the music will not.



CROSSTALK

Why is it that, if a speaker sounds especially astonishing, I expect it to use exotic technology? Here's an exception. Living Voice's top model may look like one of those generic speakers built from hobbyist plans, though with a rather better finish, but it doesn't sound anything like that.

Well, it does have *one* exotic detail, namely the outboard crossover, but it's not an unusual feature on a par with electrostatic panels, ionic drivers, Heil tweeters, or even the push-pull woofers in our reference speakers. The first time I saw the Avatars I expected them to sound adequate but boring.

Surprise! This is one of the world's great speakers, and certainly one of the greatest to have such a small physical footprint. It will reproduce nearly anything you can throw at it with grace and respect for musical virtues. And I say "nearly" from elementary caution, not because I've witnessed any exceptions.

True, it requires proper care and feeding. But then I've been told Ferraris won't run on regular gas, either.

—Gerard Rejskind

Some speakers make a strong statement

every time, whereas others are smooth and sweet most of the time. But the best ones simply *disappear*, and seem to leave the music float where *they* used to be — no extremes, no show of force, no extra "polished" sound. You just know that, no matter what piece is playing, it is all there and if you don't think it's good chances are it's the fault of the recording.

Needless to say, very few speakers belong in that category, but the Avatar OBX-R just joined them. The music sounded just right, well balanced and wonderfully rich. It didn't have an explosive impact when the bass thundered, but it had something very special, an uncanny ability to create new musicians. They all played better, clearer, on their new instruments. It seemed as if all cymbals were replaced and new felts installed on all pianos. Singers got over their colds and drums were tightened to a snap.

And every time a piece ended — always too soon, it seemed — I was left with a smile on my face, and I was a step closer to live.

—Albert Simon

Decidedly, it was a terrific day spent listening to great sound. These speakers have

what it takes to satisfy the most demanding audiophile: generous spaciousness, with an impeccable image, revealing a richness of detail, rhythm that can be uplifting or calming, depending on the music, and magnificent dynamics.

But wait, there's more. There's a remarkable midrange, which bridges perfectly the gap between the extreme highs and lows at least as well as our reference speakers can. There are solid lows and highs that are generally pleasant. There are natural voices, clear lyrics, and an exceptional fidelity of reproduction of emotions, moods, inflections, and the sheer virtuosity of the musicians. There are gorgeous counterpoints.

I was delighted by the sound of the brass, by the weight of the tympani, and by the effectiveness of other percussive effects. In one piece with organ, the tutti was powerful and even thrilling.

These speakers don't hide a thing, though, and they don't forgive the smallest errors in musicianship. The highs can become downright unpleasant if the recording job was botched. Musicians and sound engineers be warned!

—Reine Lessard