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VIENNA ACOUSTICS BEETHOVEN BABY GRAND SYMPHONY EDITION

High-Value Hi-Fi

by Ron Doering Jul 09th, 2013



It all started with trains. Toy trains that is. Toodling around the Christmas tree way back in 1970. Instead of the “proudly made in the USA” Lionel trains that some of my friends had, giant things which were seemingly large and powerful enough for the smaller children in the neighborhood to ride on, my little choo-choo could fit in the palm of your hand and was foreign- made. As small as it was it impressed me even as a five year old. The engine, modeled after a pre-war German steam type, was delicately and accurately detailed. The colors were varied and authentic, as were the tiny inscriptions that would appear in a full size train as serial numbers and warning placards. Mechanically, it ran with the precision of a sewing machine and the accompanying directions sheets and brochures had an exotic flavor, punctuated by umlauts, and funny looking symbols like Ø. It was a small kit, only an engine, three cars, maybe eight feet of track, but as I found out much later this was quite a dear Christmas present— read “expensive.”

That train set was made in what used to be called West Germany by the Märklin Company. I still have the set and will probably give it to my grandkids once I'm through playing with it. This was my first experience with what seems to be a Germanic flair for injecting something special into even very ordinary things. My train was a little gem in its astonishing level of craftsmanship and, to an American, exoticism in the sheer "European-ness" of the packaging and design. The same could be said about the Volkswagen Beetle, which in the 1960s and 1970s seemed to occupy the driveways of every third house in my town. Yes, it was like any other car in having four wheels and seats, but beyond that the "Bug" was a design unmatched in every other respect. Somehow it was more than cheap transportation. The Beetle made a statement; it pulled at the heartstrings and went down its own path.

The "A" students in geography will rightly note that Vienna, the home of Vienna Acoustics, is in Austria and not Germany. Fair enough. Nonetheless the qualities that I alluded to above—practicality, superb design, unexcelled fit and finish, distinctiveness—surely were incorporated in the Vienna Acoustics Beethoven Baby Grand Symphony Edition (BBG-SE from here on) loudspeaker reviewed here.

For loudspeakers it's not an easy thing to be truly distinctive, especially at this price point. I could accurately (if not faithfully) summarize the BBG-SE as a compact, three-way, bass-reflex floorstander, which would also describe hundreds of other loudspeakers. But this would be like categorizing a Mercedes E350 as a mid-sized V-6 sedan. While to a certain extent this is true, as you and I know that's not nearly the whole enchilada. To understand what makes the BBG-SE distinctive is to know that at the design helm is one laser-focused Peter Gansterer, head honcho at VA, who could probably go by the nickname "Dr. No" for all the off-the-shelf drivers he approves of. Grand total: none.

Instead, Gansterer designs his own drivers and has them manufactured to his specifications, which include proprietary materials and construction methods, all very much on display on the BBG-SE. Interestingly, although VA works with some pretty famous and well-respected manufacturers including Eton, SEAS, and especially ScanSpeak, just a quick look at the patented clear polymer "Spidercone" XPP bass and X3P midrange drivers tells us that this is not merely a case of a tweak here or a modification there, as one might expect from other loudspeaker manufacturers that claim to use bespoke parts. In demanding such a major redesign Gansterer basically said: "Your technology is not good enough—do it this way." When you think about it, this is equivalent to telling Maria Sharapova that her serve is all wrong. I hear tell that Dynaudio, for one, didn't want to hear this and has refused such a build-to-spec arrangement. Even the quite average-looking silk-dome tweeter is well beyond the ordinary. It's an all-new design developed for the coincident driver of VA's \$10k Beethoven Imperial Grand, which just debuted at the Consumer Electronics Show.

Gansterer and company can focus on the dynamic portions of their speakers because they have their cabinets built and finished (to VA's specs, of course) by people who do this sort of thing for a living. Unfortunately that is all I can tell you as the identity of the custom joinery shop is on a need-to-know basis and I merely *wanted* to know. What I do know is that the result is spectacular; my cherry-finished samples were paradigms of the cabinet-maker's art. It's nice to see that while other high-end speaker manufacturers have invested in the use of non-wood construction and finishing methods, Vienna Acoustics has continued to champion the more traditional approach. Other finishes are piano-black or, for a \$450 up-charge, piano-white or rosewood.

Vienna Acoustics is no fan of bi-wiring or bi-amping and so discourages such practices by providing a single pair of binding posts, which are extremely robust, beautifully machined, and milled from a silver-and-gold alloy.

They are also positioned where they should be—surface-mounted and widely spaced—and adults are expected to use this loudspeaker, so be warned that there is no plastic shielding of any kind. VA does concede that sometimes those dear little woofers and tweeters need a little protection and so provides what at first blush appear to be dead-ordinary, removable, cloth-over-frame-type grilles. On further inspection the frames are lovely examples of precision metal work, formed from delicately machined extruded aluminum. I found them to be quite sonically transparent.

Where and how a loudspeaker meets the floor is so crucial that it is hard for me to understand how little attention some manufacturers give to this detail. My cynical view is that this may be a result of potentially high cost coupled with the physical location of the end product, e.g. the floor, to which few audiophiles pay close attention. Spikes are certainly in vogue but they are commonly the too-small 1/4" variety set directly into the base plate of the cabinet. I find these really hard to adjust, and if the cabinet has a narrow dimension, making it tippy, the necessarily smaller footprint made by this footing makes things even less stable. So I feel that VA personally answered my prayers with its approach in using hefty metal brackets which cantilever four quite large (and heavy—watch out!) spikes outward. Not only does this add much appreciated stability to the cabinet, but the spikes can be easily turned and adjusted for level from above.

Listening

Unpacking, assembling, and positioning the BBG-SEs was a no-brainer as VA's supremely fit Kevin Wolff did it all for me. And when he was done, I had him move some furniture. Will he do the same for you? One can only ask. And lest you think I crawled off to take a nap while all this was going on I did make the coffee and, of course, observed and asked questions. Kevin ended up arranging the speakers about two-and-a-half feet from the front wall (actually a built-in cabinet and shelves) measured from the back of the speakers, slightly toed-in, and ever so slightly tilted back. The size of my room dictates a cozy listening geometry, which in this case was an eight-foot equilateral triangle with the listening chair at the apex.

According to Kevin the speakers had been around the block a few times and so it is no surprise that my initial sonic impressions changed not a bit during the auditioning period. In sum this was a highly detailed, convincingly three-dimensional presentation. Images were stable across the soundstage with a hint of vertical information, which is rarely achieved in my experience. Bass was satisfyingly extended but noticeably not as powerful as that of my resident Snell E/IIs. On further investigation, employing test tones and hand-held SPL meter, I found that the BBG-SE had a slightly tipped up response curve, rising gradually over 13dB from 32Hz to peak at 1kHz where it pretty much flattened as far out as I could measure (10kHz).

Call me crazy but I had high hopes that the BBG-SEs and my other Austrian in residence, the Ayon Orion II, star of my last review, would somehow be a match made in Vienna Waltz heaven. Alas, while this was not a complete disaster, I felt that the tilted-up response was exaggerated somewhat by the Ayon. All that is good about the speaker was still there, it just sounded thinner. If you like a little more meat with your sonic potatoes the thing is to give the BBG-SE current, which in this case was much more readily provided by the solid state NAD—and I have no reason to doubt that these speakers would benefit greatly from even bigger dollops of juice than I was able to provide. The 250 watts suggested by Vienna Acoustics as an outer limit strikes me as a not unreasonable target—just make sure these are quality watts. With a properly matched amplifier the BBG-SEs are quick, throw a wide and well-delineated soundstage, and are detailed as all get-out. Yes those fancy drivers do make a difference.

If you dabble in computer audio, go to HDtracks right now and download the Grateful Dead's *American Beauty* and Bill Evans' *Waltz for Debby*, both now available in 96/24. But be warned, this can take a while. It's worth it, though, because you get all the information, detail, and psycho-acoustic cues of good vinyl playback but without the analog noise floor. High-resolution speakers like the BBG-SEs just revel in this stuff.

The Dead's "Friend of the Devil" opens with a staggered entry of instruments—acoustic guitars (Jerry, then Bob), bass, after a few measures mandolin (courtesy of Dave Grisman) and, finally, drums. Through the BBG-SEs every instrument was full of character, remaining an identifiable voice throughout the track in both position within the soundstage and sonic signature. These are real instruments played by living, breathing people, so no note, let alone phrase, is played the same way twice. Through a lesser system this is a pleasantly hummable thing to listen to, but it's akin to viewing the Eiffel Tower or the Empire State Building from many miles away. Walk right up next to these structures and you now begin to see finer design details and hints of how the buildings were actually constructed. This is what listening to music is like through a system with high resolving power.

Waltz for Debby was recorded live at the Village Vanguard in the Mad Men era when people not only drank and smoked too much, but also evidently weren't going to let a rare musical genius playing live before them get in the way of their own blathering. Yes, this is the one with clinking glasses, waiters being called, jokes being told, conversations carrying on from the table nearest the stage. Non-audiophile friends shake their heads. "You paid how much for that?"

But the point is people have been purchasing this album for over 50 years for the simple reason that a summer night in 1961 at a New York nightclub was captured forever. When viewed that way, the boors at the table chatting about the banalities of the time are as important a feature as Scott LaFaro's lovely, lyrical bass or Paul Motian's exquisite brush work. In this way the BBG-SEs performed a little bit of the magic that some of us are only too happy to shell out great wads of dough to get. On one particular evening, sitting on the couch, I was transported back to a time before I was born, to a place I'd never actually been, to experience one of the all-time-great jazz trios' delicate interpretation of Gershwin's "I Loves You Porgy." The obnoxious table near the band didn't bother me at all.

Finally, a further word on bass may be called for given my observations above. Smart bass is very difficult to achieve and so is usually expensive. Stupid bass is easier and cheaper, which is why you hear so much of it. But if the objective is to launch a series of sound waves with precise timing and in perfect coordination with other very different drivers launching much shorter waves at much higher frequencies, then we suddenly find ourselves in pretty rarefied territory. The Vienna Acoustics Beethoven Baby Grands do smart bass—fast, tight, tuneful, and well integrated. I never had cause for complaint, and, yes, the low E pedal at the close of the "Uranus" movement from *The Planets* [London] was wall-shakingly powerful; more important the note was pitch-perfect, not merely an approximation. While my reference speakers do have flatter response down to the nether regions, the trade-offs employed to achieve this—less focused imaging and a certain dark character overall—are either acceptable to the listener, or not.

Conclusion

Putting it all together—performance, build- and parts-quality, progressive and sophisticated design, fit and finish, the fact that it is European-made by workers getting European-style wages and benefits, and its sheer beauty—the Beethoven Baby Grand Symphony Edition loudspeaker offers a lot for its frankly not unreasonable asking price. Indeed (yes, I'm writing this with a straight face) this is one of the highest-value audio components I've yet encountered. *Gut gemacht!*

SPECS & PRICING

Driver complement: Two 6" woofers, one 6" midrange, one 1.1" hand-coated silk-dome tweeter

Loading: Bass-reflex

Frequency response: 30Hz–22kHz

Sensitivity: 91dB

Impedance: 4 ohms nominal

Dimensions: 8.5" x 40" x 14.75"

Weight: 60 lbs. each

Price: \$5000 a pair (cherry wood or piano black), \$5500 (rosewood or piano white)

ASSOCIATED COMPONENTS

NAD C325BEE and Ayon Orion II integrated amplifiers; Kenwood KT-8300 AM-FM tuner; Rotel RDD-980 CD disc drive; Meridian 203 DAC; Dell Inspiron 530 PC running Windows Vista, J River Media Center 15; Hegel HD2 USB DAC; Thorens TD309 turntable; Dual CS 5000 turntable (78s Only); TP 92 tonearm; AudioTechnica AT-95B cartridge; Ortofon OMB 78 cartridge; Bellari VP129 phonostage; Snell E/ II loudspeakers; Kimber Kable PBJ interconnects; Kimber Kable KWIK-12 loudspeaker cable; Staples 5 meter USB cable; Have Canare DigiFlex Gold coaxial digital cable

