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AUGUST 2005



# ARS AURES

## Mini Sensorial

**Reviewer:** Ken Micallef

**Digital Source:** McCormack UDP1, Accustic Arts Multi Format Player, *Linn Unidisk 1.1* [on loan]

**Analog Source:** Kuzma Stabi/Kuzma Stogi turntable/arm combo, Sumiko Blue Point cart

**Preamp:** Shindo Allegro

**Amp:** Art Audio Concerto [on loan], Onix SP3 Melody, *Shindo Montrachet* [on loan]

**Speakers:** *Ars Aures Mini Sensorial* [in for review], DeVore Super 8s

**Cables:** Auditorium A23 speaker cables, Crystal Cable Micro Speak interconnects

**Stands:** Salamander rack, 2" Mapleshade platforms (8" x 15" x 2"), Blue Circle custom amp stand

**Powerline conditioning:** JPS Labs Kaptovator, Shunyata Black Mamba and Anaconda Vx Powersnakes, *PS Audio UPC200* [in for review]

**Accessories:** Mapleshade Surefoot and Heavyfoot brass points and IsoBlocks; (8) RPG ProFoam damping panels/ceiling treatment, Mapleshade Ionoclast for static cling, HALO-O Tube Dampers

**Room size:** 24' x 12' with 10-13' sloped ceiling, short-wall setup

**Retail Price:** \$9,400/pr; \$10,700 with optional beech side panels; \$1,000/pr Ars Aures stands

At this year's Primedia Home Entertainment Show in New York, 6moons publisher Srajan Ebaen and I quickly came to the same conclusion. Walking the crowded hallways of the Hilton (independently, of course - I couldn't even find our fearless leader for a while), we both fell in love with the Landes Imports room where a combination of Yamaha hard-disc server, Art Audio amplification and Italian-made Ars Aures Audio speakers created a highly lucid, transparent, dynamic and beautiful sound. I took an instant shine to the handsome Ars Aures Audio stand mount Mini Sensorials while unbeknownst to me, Srajan was already in deep lust for the company's Midi Sensorial floorstanders.

To quote Srajan, "this room had it all: Dynamics and full-range splendor demonstrated via the Wilhelm Tell Overture; a unique combination of ethereal float and

well-grounded heft; and an overall mien that can only be described as ravishing, elegant and sensual." He followed up by naming the room his "favorite sound of the show."

Surely the most beautiful if unusual looking speaker to ever grace my listening space, the Mini Sensorial is finished in a superb high-gloss lacquer that easily matches that of the finest Italian automobiles. Apparently many layers of a rather secret application process are involved in the finish (see the Q&A below with Ars Aures founder Giuseppe Nizzola regarding speaker construction and finish). Once you've seen the Mini Sensorial, you'll quickly understand that if the process involved in any speaker's finish is really a highly guarded secret, *this* is one that deserves it. I squeezed importer Lee Landesberg's arm who revealed the



following information about the Mini Sensorial's appearance:



"I've discussed the process of building the speaker with Mr. Giuseppe Nizzola, the president and founder of Ars Aures. The process of painting is a well-kept secret. The speakers are sanded by hand. The sealer is produced by hand and not off the shelf. The varnish is the same, similar to the process used by Stradivarius. Intermediate preparation involves 15 different stages. The final coat that produces the mirror finish is a specially prepared compound mixed at the factory. The last coat is a specially mixed clear coat to give the speaker its glossy character. Once finished with clear coat, it is hand-polished after which the gloss is removed. Then it is finished with a special clear compound that is buffed until the shine is reestablished. The process is complex and lengthy. It's what they are committed to producing regardless of model. The standard finishes are Piano Black, Diamond Black, Aubergine, Jewel Green, Champagne Red, Ferrari, Silver, Mocha - but the highly skilled artisans at Ars Aures will create *any* custom finish the customer desires, including perfect matching of existing furniture or fabric."

Ars Aures Audio produces three speaker lines: Musical Note, Sensorial and F1. Lineup with finish and pricing is as follows: Musical Note - Do stand mount (high gloss, \$5,750; solid wood, \$6,600; marble, \$11,500); Mi floor stander (\$9,600); Fa floorstander (high gloss, \$14,000) and Sol floorstander (high gloss \$25,500). The Sensorial line includes the Sensorial (\$17,000), Midi Sensorial



(\$19,000) and the Mini Sensorial (\$9,400, high gloss; with optional beech side panels, \$10,700). Ars Aures Audio's entry-level speaker is the floorstanding F1 (veneer and chrome front \$5,100; metallic chrome \$5,100; solid wood \$5,600; and high gloss \$5,600). The Do is pictured below.



Measuring roughly 9"(W) by 12"(D) by 18"(H), the Mini Sensorial is striking not only for its finish but for its highly unusual flared cabinet design. Here is where opinions tend to diverge. I found this Darth Vader-meets-Alien appearance a real turn on but you might see it as simply a case of Italian design run amok. Its drivers -- a Scanspeak 9900 Revelator tweeter and two 4.5" Seas P11 mid/woofers -- are arranged in a D'Appolito configuration with a first order crossover and a rear-firing 2½" port. Sensitivity is 89dB with claimed response of 60-30,000Hz and a minimum 4.5-ohm impedance.

Lee Landesberg delivered the Mini Sensorials complete with an Art Audio Concerto amp (40wpc) and the Ars Aures Audio speaker stands (wood pedestals). Made of wood (duh) with a similar high-gloss finish as the speakers, the stands extend the dramatic contours of the Mini Sensorials to the floor, radically sweeping downward like an Edith Head gown from the 1940s. The stand's two back legs come to a simple squared-off point while a wooden crossbar near the bottom of the hind legs holds two adjustable metal spikes allowing for a better degree of stability, resonance control and vibration drainage. The footprint of the stand measures 17" x 10½" square.



Positioning the speakers on the stands was an absolute pain. The Mini Sensorials are outfitted with four heavy-duty cone-point feet and four small gold-plated coins that sit under the feet. First, you have to guesstimate (or I suppose you could measure) where to place the coins on the stand's top plate (which at 9¾" x 7¼" is just small enough to be too small). Then without stabbing your hands with the Mini's cone-point feet (as I did several times), you place the speaker's feet into the coin's small dimples, hopefully without missing and scratching the stand's high-gloss finish. You may have to repeat this maneuver several times if the speakers don't sing in your usual speaker location. Luckily, in my small room most every speaker works in the same sweet spot, roughly five feet from the front wall and three feet from the side walls, with the listening spot eight feet in front of the speakers. I never became

entirely comfortable with the Ars Aures Audio stands, believing them to not be strong or stable enough to adequately hold (or balance) these unwieldy, oddly shaped 48-pound speakers. The Mini Sensorials never did fall off the stands but I was always worried that a small bump or trip on my part might send them reeling.



As I have recently sold my BAT VK75, Joe Fratus' loan of the Art Audio Concerto was a welcome surprise. I also used the Onix SP3 Melody integrated tube amp and a Shindo Montrachet (40wpc, on loan from *In Living Stereo*), all to good

effect. The Mini Sensorials are very sensitive to and revealing of upstream components. They brought out the character and flavor of each piece -- as well as my sources -- with ease. The Ars Aures pair Lee delivered were the same speakers I heard at HE2005. Only minimal break-in was required to get them up and running.



And run they did! Everything Srajan opined and more greeted me with practically every disc I played through the Mini Sensorials. Well, almost. You can forget about Metallica, Zeppelin, Linkin Park, Dr. Dre, Snoop Dogg, Blackalicious or any kind of mammoth rock tonnage, drum & bass or heavy-footed electronic music. These speakers ain't gonna do it. Just wouldn't be prudent. I tried to listen to HipHop and the bass emanating from the li'l 4.5" woofers simply sounded like a baseball bat hitting a ball of cotton. While the Minis lacked deep extension in the nether regions, the bass they did present was appropriately warm, tonally accurate and well balanced with the speaker's superior midrange and outstanding treble performance. As long as you don't plan on Megadeth bass bombs, the Mini Sensorials are very holistic performers. Their level of bass performance was solid given the tiny mid/woofers; and I was

continually taken by the speaker's performance as a whole. Given their overriding traits as diaphanous, clear, fast, airy, beautiful sounding and very immediate (and dynamic and with a soundstage of stupendous depth and layering), the Mini's bass performance was substantial but, with the amps I had on hand, not as well articulated as the rest of the speaker's range. Jazz trio recordings like pianist Enrico Pieranunzi's *Improvised Forms for Trio* [Challenge SA CHR 75032] showed how potent their bass performance can be as the Minis were laying down strong upright notes that were fat and completely tempting if not as carved out in deep space as the rest of the instruments. The Minis allowed recordings, amps and sources to be heard for what they were, with very little editorializing due to the speakers' exceptional transparency and soundstaging gifts.

One more thing. Rated at 89dB and with the 40 watts or so that I had to throw at them, the Minis sounded better the louder I played them. At softer volume levels, the speakers lacked a little oomph and definition. They sounded asleep 'til I gave them the juice. Then they just sounded better and better as I kicked up the throttle.

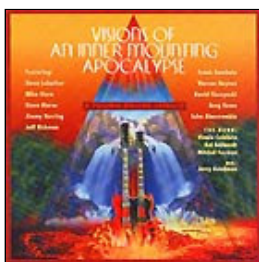
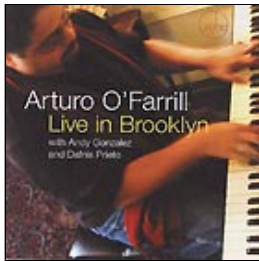
Once I understood the Minis, I used mostly acoustic recordings for evaluation: Latin pianist Arturo O'Farrill's *Live In Brooklyn* [Zoho ZM 200507], Brazilian singer Celso Fonseca's *Rive Gauche Rio* [Six Degrees 657036], and a couple of non-acoustic discs - Radiohead's *OK Computer* [Capitol CDP 7243 8 55029] and *Visions of An Inner Mounting Apocalypse* [Tone Center TC 40402], a tribute to the Mahavishnu Orchestra with some of LA and NYC's finest fusion heads.

The Fonseca disc sounded exceptional. The Minis made the most of its creamy vocals, intimate acoustic guitars and subtle electronic percussion. Fonseca's voice was so palatable and immediate, I felt I could have an





intimate



conversation with him. Excellent decay and an airy presentation dominated the recording as delivered by the Minis. With the live O'Farrill disc, the Minis presented its more active club space equally well, especially on the pianist's brief solo section in "Walking Batterie Woman" where the Minis delineated the piano's full spectrum top to bottom with exceptional ease and flow. And Dafinis Prieto's drums entered with plenty of slam and power. Cymbal articulation was especially highlighted, a constant with the Minis: *upper frequencies glisten no matter the disc*. The ballsier rock fusion of the *Visions* disc didn't work quite as well, the hotter electric guitars sounding a bit synthetic and the soundstage suffering some in the lateral domain. Ditto for *OK Computer*, which sounded even more synthetic. Still, both of these particular discs were portrayed with good dynamics if also the stunted staging inherent in the artificial production and the Minis' general lack of low bass extension.

Switching to the Shindo Montrachet only highlighted the soundstaging prowess of the Minis. The Montrachet presents a much more detailed and complex soundstage than the Concerto and the Minis illustrated this fact with every disc. The Montrachet also has better bass extension. It's a real growler but the Minis didn't fully reveal it. They just don't have the driver cone area to make the most of these kinds of differences in bass presentation.

Switching to my new DeVore Super 8s, there were no major surprises. Though much more full-bodied, with deeper bass, more overall slam and a bit more natural presentation, the Minis presented a different picture in terms of extended and revealing treble and upper midrange, greater pinpoint imaging and a more finely wrought, deeper if narrower soundstage. The Minis' stands placed them slightly above ear level, increasing their sense of air and etherealness. Switching, I missed the imaging of the small monitors but welcomed the grunt, power and more full-range capabilities of the DeVores. Still, the Mini Sensorials are very special speakers that do certain things I have never heard in a stand-mount speaker before.



What is harder to judge than the Mini Sensorials' excellent sound is their price. Are they really worth \$10,000/pr - even if you are a fanatic for exceptionally finished speakers that qualify as fine Art Deco furniture? Having never had a pair of \$10,000 speakers in my room (or anything close to them), I was hard pressed to




evaluate the Minis from a purely cost/quality standpoint. As well, the old adage of diminishing returns (which seems more of a truism in audio than anywhere else) kicks in. Certainly the Mini finish exceeds that of my \$4000 DeVore Super 8s but I cannot say that the Minis' performance betters that of the DeVores times two. The two speakers present totally different styles of sound. The DeVores deliver studio monitor accuracy and accompanying bass extension that can handle any kind of music. The Mini Sensorial is, to my ears, designed with very definite goals in mind -- the aforementioned transparency, soundstaging accuracy and upper register sweetness -- that it achieves wonderfully. Jazz, classical, Brazilian, Latin and even some indie rock worked well with the Minis' super sweet and immediate midrange, extended treble and outstanding casting of images. Every recording held delights that the Minis were intent on exploring and revealing.

If you are a consumer for whom elegant sonics and sophisticated cosmetics are high priorities, then the Ars Aures Audio Mini


Sensorials should absolutely be on your must-hear list. These are very easy-to-listen-to appealing speakers with brilliant and extended treble frequencies, utterly focused midrange qualities, equally fine soundstage depth performance and no-brainers with all forms of acoustic music. I just think they are named incorrectly. *Mini* Sensorial? With their gleaming upper frequencies and other gifts, these are truly maximum sensuality speakers all the way around. *Maxi* Sensorials is more like it!




Who is Ars Aures?




Giuseppe Nizzola founded Ars Aures in 1997. Our project manager, Maurizio Salvo, assisted by Giuseppe Nizzola, performs all of the technical design in-house. At the initial stage we invested over one million dollars in R&D with the assistance of the University of Palermo's Audio Engineering Department. Ars Aures is based in Castelvetrano in the province of Trapani/Sicily. This area is known for its history - Greek temples are nearby in the old remnants of Selinunte. And of course, we are known for our olive oil and some excellent wines.



What are the design goals of the different Ars Aures speaker lines?




The Musical Note line has a more traditional styling. The Sensorial line and the Sol floor stander (\$25,500) use the same D'Appolito configuration. The large Sensorial uses the same mid drivers and tweeter as the Sol. The Midi and Mini Sensorial use the same tweeter but a smaller mid/bass driver. The Musical Note is not as clinically accurate as the Sensorial. The Mi (\$9,600), a new floorstander in the Musical Note line, uses the same midrange drivers and tweeter as the Sol. It is ported and has no additional woofer. The Mis go down 10Hz lower than the Mini Sensorials so the consumer has to balance what type of sound he is looking for at a given price. All of our drivers are chosen after many listening tests to decide if they meet our strict standards and make for the best combination. In the Mini Sensorial and the entire Sensorial line, we've chosen Seas, Scanspeak and Focal drivers. We also produce the entry-level F1 line.




The Ars Aures website shows a system consisting of KR Audio Kronzilla 1610 monoblocks, Kronzilla KR P1 preamp and Marantz SA1 SACD player. Is this the Ars Aures reference system?




Yes, but starting in July, we'll be switching to Art Audio amps and preamps.



What is the role of the Biesse Rover 24 computerized cutting machine, also shown online?



The Biesse Rover 24 delivers precision cuttings for all of our cabinets, including the housings and other internal parts. All assembly and finishing is done by our craftsmen.




What are currently the bestselling Ars Aures speakers worldwide?




The Do and Mini Sensorial.



How does the Italian high-end buyer differ from his U.S. brethren?



The American buyer is more knowledgeable in choosing a speaker for the total experience with an emphasis on the sound while the Italian buyer is more interested in the cosmetics.



Tell me about the Mini Sensorial's internal construction. Are the drivers enclosed in separate housings? What kind of wiring is used internally? How thick are the cabinets and what type of MDF is used?

Ars Aures Audio speakers employ high-density woods and MDF of the highest density, with variable



thickness cabinet panels ranging from 1¼" to 3¾" to eliminate unwanted vibration that might produce noise. Even our various marble speakers -- made upon request -- are individually tuned due to the different resonant frequencies of different types of marble to obtain maximum neutrality. The internal distribution of volumes and shapes is studied to minimize and eliminate standing waves inside the cabinet. For the same reason, our cabinets have no sharp angles to avoid diffractions.

The cabinet of the Mini Sensorial is asymmetrical and the tweeter and woofer have their own housing. The wire's gauge is between 2-8 mm and a twisted Kimber design. The thickness of the cabinet is .79 to 2.36 inches and the material is MDF. The tweeter housing is plastic, the woofer housing MDF. The Kimber cable is top-level, specially recommended to us by Ray Kimber. The varying degrees of cabinet thickness are dictated to eliminate adverse resonances. The front panel baffle is 2.36 inches thick as are the sides. The top and the bottom panels are 1.57 inches. The cabinet is built from laminated staves to vary dimensions from top to bottom and side to side. Much research went into the Mini's irregular shape. It gives better control to the internal airflow. As with all our speakers, the Mini Sensorial crossover is matched to the speaker after the driver's computer simulation behavior and concomitant crossover and a lot of listening tell us if it's the right combination. An Italian company, COIN Italia who are around the corner, make our speaker terminals,



Why wooden stands? Most manufacturers recommend metal stands to give the speaker a firm, non-resonant base. Wooden stands would seem to vibrate more and muddy the speaker's delivery.



The wooden Mini stands were designed to optimize the performance of the speakers. The shape is designed to release the speaker's vibrations to the rear through the metal feet. Of course, the ultimate choice is up to the customer as to whether to choose our stands or not.

*Ken Micallef*

#### Landes Imports comments:

I want to thank Ken Micallef for his wonderful review of the Mini-Sensorials. His comments were spot on when he described the transparency, soundstage accuracy in complex passages and the upper register sweetness of these speakers. The designers at Ars Aures put a lot of time into recreating an accurate, three-dimensional, live performance soundstage. The comments on our stands were well taken and the factory is in the process of producing a fail-safe, totally stable model for immediate release. Again, thank you for your kind comments.

Regards,

Lee Landesberg  
Landes Imports



Manufacturer's [website](#)  
US distributor's [website](#)

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