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AUDIO REVIEWS

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Sonically, the Midi Sensorials remind me of one of the best 'conventional' loudspeakers I've heard yet - Roy Johnson's Green Mountain Audio Continuum 3. This phase/time accuracy is instantly obvious on percussive events. Mundane day-to-day noises such as slamming doors; rustling silverware; the clickety-clack of wooden clogs on concrete; a neighbor's hammering; glasses touched in a toast; a knick-knack displaced by the resident cat to shatter into a million pieces on the tile floor - all these percussive sharp noises have a peculiar life factor that's too often lacking during playback of equivalents (wooden sticks on metal rims; hand claps; foot stomps; body slaps on guitars etc.). When actually reproduced, such noises at first seem startling because the *difference* between what's real and what audiofools have unwittingly consigned themselves to accept as substitute... well, that difference shrinks or gets outright eradicated.



The Midis have that startle factor, albeit differently than the GMAs. Where the latter are nearly ruthless in their precision, all fat and sizzle stripped down to their true bare-boned constituents, the Ars Aures speakers add a silken texture to the same basic recipe. The crossover-less Zus descend from the same genetic tree as the Continuums. The Zus play down their innate speed and dynamic veracity by adding a peculiar tonal *density* that's very addictive once tasted. The Italians play a slightly different variation on that theme. It's hard to describe without sounding like a nutty poet but think elegant and suave. That action generally belongs into the texture/tone drawer yet here it doesn't undermine spunk or PRaT, just doesn't highlight it. How exactly that works isn't quite clear to me. But I certainly heard it in New York during the show. Northern New Mexico now clocked the second sighting.



With the potent go-juice of 160 push/pull valve watts compliments of the WRAD 300 amplifier's eight KT88s, bass weight and extension were very impressive and completely satisfactory if ultimately not as limitless and air-movingly visceral as the Zu Definitions manage so easily. Perhaps due to the ported alignment vs. the sealed bass systems of the Definitions and resident Gallo Reference 3s, the Ars Aures bass feel was slightly on the plump side - a bit rounder, a bit more sonorous and redolent, not quite as highly damped.

Soundstaging wasn't quite as *spooky* as with the Gallos -- their omni tweeter goes where no speakers have gone before -- but just as gargantuan, inviting the listener to get lost in lateral expanse and excellent depth. Where the Gallos are space trippers -- that last word used tongue-in-cheek to hint at the occasionally *eerie* results that go beyond holographic -- the Midi Sensorials paint space in bold colors.

The three Sensorial core qualifiers are thus textural smoothness, dimensional vastness and rhythmic exactitude, in that sequence. Taken together while listening -- naturally, only a reviewer would take them apart -- the end result is very sensuous. For once, there's truth in advertising. *Sensorial* means just what it says.

Where Green Mountain Audio approaches the subject from the recording monitor perspective of ultimate honesty, Ars Aures does it from a music lover's. Speaking in finalities, that makes the Continuum 3 the more completely honest but also comparatively lean. The Midi perhaps forgoes the last smidge of tell-it-as-it-is for a small tell-it-as-it-should-be injection. I say this because that tonal elegance, that textural silk flair traveled from tubes to solid-state and string quartets to Rap. It's something intrinsic to the voicing of the speaker. Talking in people terms, the Midi is not a religious extremist who has vowed to never lie and then attempts awfully hard to be fun company but is never totally at ease. The Midi is a charmer and pleasure seeker who happens to be very truthful but avoids foul language. Admittedly, these are not the usual technical reviewer's terms to characterize a speaker. In this instance, they do seem the most apt, however.



Priced as a statement speaker, the Midi Sensorial delivers statement *quality* bass with impeccable timing and seamless transition but not quantity. Anyone expecting the final word in subterranean synthesizer work will be disappointed. I can't fault a design brief that focuses on top-to-bottom coherence. And that has clearly been achieved. But it's fair to say that for half the money, the Zu Definitions do more and lower bass that's more highly damped. But then, neither do the chaps from Utah look as "designer" nor do they originate from Italy with its sleek cars, stylish shoes and leathers.



Another area where double the expense doesn't work out to more performance is in low-level immediacy. Here the Definitions are boss as well and the horn-loaded Avantgarde Duos even more so. This earlier wake up call is due to higher sensitivities in general and 10dB of acoustical gain from the flared impedance converters called horns in particular. That's my one issue with the Midis then. They're priced like statement speakers and certainly look the part.



But they're also unnecessarily expensive when current competition is considered. If you care for Bösendorfer level lacquers and the inevitable swirl marks that dusting always leaves on 'em; if complete customization of finish options is an important part of your speaker selection process - then you know exactly what you're really paying for here: items that don't make sounds and which you won't actually hear once you close your eyes to melt into the music.

The Midis played louder than I could stand and if they suffered any large-scale dynamic restrictions, I surely never encountered them. Vocals were immediate and rather ravishing, clearly assisted by a treble that's the epitome of good manners and lacks the words forward, hashy, strident and self-conscious in its repertoire.



The Sensorials are full-bodied speakers that don't have you reflect on *airy* like the Gallos but rather, on the plasticity of images and on how large and layered a soundstage they manifest. Aficionados of truly hard-hitting Punk will miss a certain edginess and grittiness these speakers refuse to unleash. But if you're into the Funk Brothers, wait until you hear how well these Italians convey the groove and allow sassy Chaka Khan [*In the Shadows of Motown*] to let 'er rip.

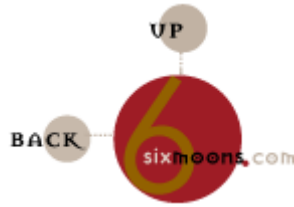
Bass lines have a certain amount of wetness aka body in exchange for ultimate damping and oomph which would be drier and more slammin'. 100 watts of bridged op-amp power tightened up the low-bass transients but the tubes had the upper hand in wallop and apparent displacement. According to Lee Landesberg, the network on the Focal woofers is complex which could explain why the speakers like *power* to make the most of their bass.



Reviewer Rick Jensen of Superior Audio conveyed his impression of what I called the Midi's seductiveness of texture with "swimming in sound rather than listening to it". That's very fitting imagery indeed. While it could smack of deep-triode excesses of bloom, that's patently not the case. Yet this wordsmith's denial of thermionic romance does not undo that peculiar quality. It's there for all to hear. How the designers incorporated this flavor could be the stuff of wild speculation. And it leads to today's conclusion. The Ars Aures Midi Sensorial is quite unique in that it manages to be obviously voiced without taking liberties of tonal balance. It's somewhat forgiving but not at all veiled. The speaker is claimed to measure unusually flat and in that regard, it sounds it, too. But for once, flat frequency response doesn't at all equate to stale, boring or - um, flat. That's a mean trick and nearly excuses the considerable expense attached to it.

Lee Landesberg tells me that Joe Fratus purchased a pair of Midis for his studio, custom lacquered to match a pair of his tube amps. Joe is a stylish cat who values good sound and cosmetics. Not for nothing is his own firm called Art Audio. Joe is the perfect stand-in for the Midi's target customer: men and women of means and class, who enjoy exquisite taste and a desire to experience music in a saturated way that evokes the rich deep colors of Fall in New England right there in their living rooms. If you have the means and appropriately powerful amplifiers, the Ars Aures Midi Sensorials live up to the sensuous nature of music listening. Had this speaker a larynx to utter words, it would be utterly bewildered by notions of analytical dissection. Amazingly, this disconnect doesn't occur at the expense of resolving those details analytical listeners delight in. Rather, it arises in how these details are presented by remaining embedded in a far greater context. As I said earlier, bridging these polar opposites is an uncommon accomplishment and one the Midis delight in showing off each time you ask them to come out and play. "Fascinating" as our favorite Vulcan would have said.

Srajan Ebaen



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