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Ars Aures Midi Sensorial

Soul That Comes With The Music

Review By Rick Jensen



Once in a great while one will encounter a product that immediately identifies itself as something different, and better yet, something special. On many counts, the Ars Aures Midi Sensorial speaker is one of those products. Striking in appearance, looking a bit unlike any other speaker, yet not a design that screams that the aliens have landed, the Midi makes a strong initial impression. While the dead-on frontal view is not unusual — a tall, narrow speaker like many that one sees today — both the electric Ferrari blue high-gloss cabinet and the side profile, which sweeps in a graceful arc that widens at the top, are unique. They may not be to every taste, as they do not shrink into the background, but they are quite beautiful. As we shall see, the sound is even more of a pleasant surprise than the looks.

The pair that I auditioned was the same pair that **HE 2005 show attendees saw in New York** and the various show reports that have already appeared attest to the very positive visual and sonic impact made by the Midis. (For a list of some of the show reports, refer to the company's website. Granted, show reports are mere quick reactions in unfamiliar spaces, and there are many great components that do not sound good at shows, but it is rare to find a component that sounds great at a show and lousy in a good home setup. Naturally I was quite happy to be able to have a chance to review the Midis in my home.

I should note that Ars Aures speakers have just begun to be imported into this country. Ars Aures makes speakers large and small in three major ranges, with

prices from around \$5,000 to \$25,000 or so. For information on where to audition the speakers please refer to the Landes Audio contact data at the end of this review.

Technical Details

The Midi Sensorials are based on a few straightforward and simple design principles, the execution of which will determine the success of the speaker. And — counterintuitive as this may seem for a speaker whose cost approaches \$20,000 — there is recognition of one or two limitations necessary (chiefly in regard to deepest bass) to get the most out of the speaker.

The first design target, according to the chief designers, Giuseppe Nizzola and Maurizio Salvo, is to have a floorstanding speaker of moderate size whose band pass woofer will have great dynamic range, and effective response to about 30Hz. Second, the measure of the transparency of the Midi was the smaller brother, the Mini Sensorial. To achieve that, the designer not unreasonably wanted to ensure that the woofer does not reach too far into the midrange.

The solution to the above targets was to use a fast 11 inch woofer in a reflex configuration whose principal response region was set to be between 30Hz and 80Hz. The woofer is supplemented by a pair of 4.5-inch midrange/woofer drivers in a D'Appolito configuration that crosses over to a 1-inch tweeter. Ars Aures used a first-order 6dB/octave crossover — this is an article of both science and faith with the designers as well as with the importer — and claim to have spent a year tuning the crossover (Indeed, the designers whose mother tongue, it must be noted, is not English, offered the following comment: "first order = music; others = Hi-Fi.")

The drivers are sourced from leading manufacturers, individually measured, and hand-selected; all the cabinetry is hand-built at the factory (more on that separately). For those who may be curious, the woofer is from Focal, the two woofer/midranges are from Seas, and the tweeter is a ScanSpeak. The internal wiring uses Kimber Select throughout and all passive parts are similarly measured and then auditioned as part of the product.

The cabinets are worth special mention. In addition to their futuristic shape — it might not appeal to everyone, but the speakers are surprisingly good-looking and adapt to many rooms — and the incredible finish, which is worthy of a Ferrari or a Steinway, the cabinets are first computer-milled and then finished almost entirely by hand in order to achieve the lowest possible resonance along with their trademark gloss. The thickness of the cabinet varies throughout, from 1.25 up to 3.73 inches, to reduce any resonance peaks while the curved design minimizes parallel surfaces and thus dispersing the sound waves. Certainly, these are approaches used by other manufacturers to try to achieve low cabinet resonance. Ars Aures does not choose to use great mass to avoid resonance problems like some other high-end makers; while the speakers are not light at 50 kg (110 lbs.) each, they are not massive like, say, Wilsons. However, as will be seen, they achieve a similar sense of quiet, which is the major objective.

Getting back to the finish, Ars Aures stays mum on the particulars of the process and the materials used to achieve the level of gloss and detail in the cabinets. In my house, we are fortunate to have a Steinway piano in the living room, and one would be hard-pressed to choose the workmanship of the piano versus that of the speaker merely by looking at the woodworking. For those who wish to integrate the speakers into their Architectural Digest-worthy salons, Ars Aures will match color samples and produce the Midis in custom colors.

Finally, each speaker undergoes a minimum of 70 hours of testing at the factory before being sent out. In short, the entire Ars Aures manufacturing process combines some simple goals, a bit of high-tech equipment and a degree of customization that one will see only in the most ambitious products of the high end.

Listening

I tested the Midis both in my usual small listening room (16'x11') and then — for much longer than my wife normally would want — in our larger living room (25'x15', with open arches into adjoining rooms). As one might expect, they sounded different in each spot, but it was clearly a speaker that adapts well to the smaller space even while they are quite at home in a space that allow them to stretch out a bit. In addition, I used them with a variety of different equipment: both LP and CD, tube and solid-state, and different cable setups, and the Midis were satisfying all around. I should mention up front that they have the signal quality of being very revealing of the shortcomings of both the recordings and the upstream components, while being a joy to listen to at all times. Very often, speakers we call "revealing" tend to be unforgiving of lesser mortals. The Midis somehow manage to be transparent and forgiving at the same time: they let you see the flaws or the differences in components or recording quality but generally do not let it get in the way of the music.

If I were to put my finger on the one quality that makes the Midis so special, it is a palpable, almost SET-like immediacy in all ranges, but particularly from the midrange on up. And that immediacy comes without one having to pay the price of an excess of "bloom" or a lack of extension at either end. Here I might even diverge from the above-cited comments I have read and heard that have focused on the terrific bass. Yes, the bass is quite good, particularly in the texture and the tonality. But the upper ranges impart a sound that is almost a part of you — you have the feeling that you are swimming in the sound rather than listening to it; it is not separate from you but rather a medium in which you exist. That sounds terribly fatuous, but the unusual and unusually seductive sound of the Midis prompt that kind of description. There is a seamlessness to the sound that I have rarely heard before.

I hesitate to cite record after record and disk after disk for their great sound through the Midis. Frankly, everything sounded the best I have ever heard it in my house I was not alone in this reaction: during my listening period, we had lots of visitors coming through the house for some celebrations. My wife and son, numerous friends and relatives, and sundry other stragglers all agreed that nothing had ever sounded so good in our house. For some, they had never heard any reproduced music sound so good.

I will nonetheless mention a few of my favorite recordings that struck me most. Eva Cassidy's song "Fields of Gold" on her Songbird LP dropped the jaws of everyone who heard it; the you-are-there feel of her voice was almost too real to believe. All of "Café Blue" was a joy — with the quiet backgrounds of "Ode to Billie Joe" and the incredibly detailed bass textures of "Too Rich for my Blood" being first among equals. "Lady Writer", from Dire Straits' second album *Communiqué* made us all wonder how Mark Knopfler could get so much out of an electric guitar without using a pick. Mozart's Clarinet Concerto showed many of its possible moods in the three different versions I tried — with my favorite still being the Richard Stoltzman LP. The fact that that LP sounds so good via the Midis is testament to that revealing-but-forgiving nature mentioned above. The LP is one of the Red Seal RCAs and is both a little noisy and lacking in the lows and highs. You do notice the deficiencies, but the Midis let Stoltzman's quirky and impassioned interpretation shine through all the same.

As one thinks about the usual characteristics that define a good speaker, the Midis seem to excel on almost all counts. They image spectacularly — the lateral image extends at times well beyond the edge of the speakers, and yet they do not overdo the imaging and slap you in the face with pinpoint placement. Depth is natural, not too far in front and not well behind the plane of the drivers.

The Midis do create a sense of space and ease. I suspect that has something to do with the very quiet background out of which the sound emerges, and that in turn with the design of the cabinets, which seem to be pretty low in resonance (cf. technical details). Every instrument has room to breathe, and articulation of each sound in an orchestra is outstanding. Unlike some speakers that articulate to a fare-thee-well, and seem to have you focus on twenty different sounds rather than one unified piece of music, the Midis do give you a melting pot to go with the mosaic. I have no idea why they do that so well, beyond the combination of the silent backgrounds and the seamless articulation of some very transparent drivers, but it's a pleasure to listen to.

The bass deserves a special comment, first because it is so good but second because I am not completely sure about it. Many have said that audiophiles are bass-phobic, because too much bass excites room resonances and muddies up the rest of the sound, thus depriving the audiophile of his razor-sharp articulation. I don't know if that is true, but I do wonder if I am a little guilty of it from time to time. There is little doubt that the Midis are not the speaker for the bassphobe — the bass is big, and full, round and nuanced, and goes down fairly low (claimed to 30Hz). The deepest organ notes in a large room might require a bigger bass driver, but the Midis will suffice in spades for almost everything else (Personally, I will put on a recording with that kind of deep-bass information once or twice a year, but others' mileage may vary). And all this depth and power come with a fine sense of timbre; I was constantly surprised to hear real notes within the bass beats I had heard on many recordings many times before. The pull of a bow across a string is rendered with great delicacy and definition — you can "see" or feel the hairs against the string.

Still, it is a big and powerful bass sound, and I have heard so many speakers that have leaner, "tight" bass that I wondered if this was "right". I chalk this up to habit,

and to the fact that I had been listening to some small monitors for a few months. At the end of the day, the bass is more satisfying than with any speaker I have had in my home, and it is so well integrated with the rest of the sonic spectrum that I must conclude that it is very good. And as noted earlier, the bass has greatly impressed other listeners. Finally, the bass sounded terrific both in my smaller listening room and also as it shook the rafters from my living room.

Conclusion

This is a special product. The quality of the finish and of the individual components is unexcelled. As noted earlier, the Midis are almost a work of art, in appearance as well as for the sound. Finally, there is the sound itself, where a sort of truthfulness that is very rare is the hallmark of every note that emerges from the speakers. I have heard and really liked many terrific speakers. Each of these had a different approach to getting at the musical truth; and each would have its own characteristic sound. The Midis are no exception in this regard. Still, there is a special honesty about the sound, one that combines the seductive immediacy of a horn with the rigor, stability of image and articulation of the highest-tech designs. It's quite a package. Everyone should have the opportunity to listen to the Midis, just for the pleasure of it, or maybe to know what you might be missing. It might just be that last ounce or two of passion and soul that comes with the music being part of you. In sum, I cannot tell anyone how to spend \$19,000 — but if you have the money to spend, you would be well advised to listen to these speakers before you sign the check.

Specifications

Type: floorstander bass reflex with band pass woofer

Components: one bandpass Focal 11-inch woofer , two Seas 4.5-inch woofer/mids, one ScanSpeak 1-inch Revelator tweeter

Frequency Response: 30Hz to 30kHz (+-3dB)

Nominal Impedance: 4 Ohm (3.5 min)

Sensitivity: 89dB/W/m

Crossover: 6 dB/octave, Litz coils

Recommended Power: 50 W (tubes) 100 W (solid state)

Dimensions: 120 x 25 x 50 (HxWxD in cm)

Finish: HDF high gloss (choice of colors), high gloss laterals

Net Weight: 50 Kg each