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SA Equipment

Ars Aures Midi Sensorial Mk. II Speakers
Truth and beauty in an ever-changing world.
Review By Rick Jensen

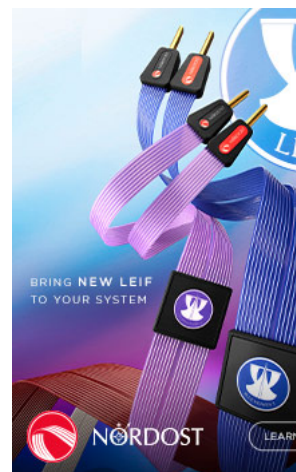
The weather is changing. That is not the beginning of the usual high-end review. I know that. But it is the beginning of this one. First, I should state that this review concerns, if you have read the title, the Ars Aures Midi Sensorial Mk II speakers. The name in itself is a mouthful. You can also be spared the trouble of skipping to the end, assuming you care, to find out that this speaker system is quite remarkable. It is in a class by itself, by which I mean not that it is better than everything else out there. There is no way that I am qualified to make such a representation. Rather, the Midis are both very, very good and they are an exception to the high-end norm.

So yes, the weather seems to be changing pretty noticeably, at least in New York. From what I understand, New York is not alone. But in our area, 100-year storms seem to be annual events. Insurers are retooling their models to account for climate change. Sandy has reinforced impressions that were already half-formed or more. I do not intend for this to be a political discussion (though I won't shirk from that) but am rather making some simple empirical observations from a small but growing body of data. We've got some interesting weather coming our way and the trend seems to be on the ascent.

To step back, this story starts with a summer rain. 48 hours before Irene (tropical storm - 2011), we had a flash storm in New York that brought over two inches of rain in less than 30 minutes to our neighborhood. While I live on a hill, there are buildings above ours on that hill. The storm runoff from this "pre-Irene" poured into our garden and seeped a little bit into our bottom floor, where the audio system resides. We were away, but a good friend checked on it for us. One of the speakers, on the floor (more later) and closer to the walls, was surrounded by an inch of water. The other was not touched. He moved the speakers and mopped up.

I came home because Irene was on the way. Set the alarm because she arrived at midnight. About 1:30 AM the rains came. The walls, perhaps already saturated, released water into the lower floor. I had moved the entire system, as well as rugs, tables, chairs, and computer equipment, to the next room, farther from the fluvial plain. All night, I Shop-Vac'ed the floor and soaked up water with towels and blankets to prevent further damage. Eight hours of work, and they paid off.

So Irene didn't hurt us. However, the *earlier* storm flooded the lower floor. (There has been more since.) And my old speakers were damaged.



Those were the Midis Mk I that I had reviewed for [Enjoy the Music.com](http://www.enjoythemusic.com) in September 2005. The Midis were and are constructed of a beautiful wood veneer over approx 30-60mm M/HDF. I learned later that if MDF or HDF takes on water, it expands. That is what happened to the Midis. They expanded internally and split open the veneer. You might be interested to know that I did not find this out until two or three days after Irene, because I had thought the Midis were safe. Only upon really looking at them closely did I see that there were cracks in the beautiful outer cabinet.

Fortunately, I had good insurance that paid to replace the speakers. (If you are reading this, make sure you have good insurance and that it will pay the replacement cost of your components.) While one was damaged, insurance will pay for the pair (think of earrings, or candelabras, or table service for eight).

So... I ordered a new pair of Midis. All during the time between my audition and purchase of the original Midis and the arrival of the Mk IIs, Ars Aures had made many changes to the Midis. They eventually warranted a designation as a new edition of the speaker. Ars Aures do not draw much attention to themselves, and they are never going to be the sort of manufacturer to declare that the revision of their product has now rendered all previous versions and pretenders null and void.

Before I go further, I wish to add one word about Ars Aures, since I am writing from the United States. They do not have a US distributor right now, and so you can stop reading if you wish. Ars Aures are well-represented in many other countries, certainly throughout Europe, and so can be relatively easily procured there. In the US, though, you will need to import them yourself. That is too bad, but it may change in the near future. Nonetheless, as Ars Aures' customer base is largely in Europe, this review may still be of interest.

Physical Description

The Midis look exactly as they did before, which is to say a bit different but still beautiful. As I said in the original review, these speakers do not retreat from view. They will not fade into the background, largely due to the unusual shape and the gorgeous finish of the wood. The design is the brainchild of the founder and chief engineer, Giuseppe Nizzola; the execution is the product of many skilled artisans in a modern factory in Sicily.

While the size of the Midis is not far from the norm at 120 x 25 x 50 cm, and while the profile is commendably narrow, the speakers *viewed from the side* have a dramatic curve from the overhanging top edge through the "waist" and to the floor.

My new Midis are done in a "mocha" chocolate finish. You can quite literally choose whatever finish you want and Ars Aures will match it as closely as can be done. Bear in mind that every pair of Midis is hand-made and pretty much made to order. Even if you do not ask for a custom color, there are still well over a dozen standard finishes from which to choose, from white to black with incandescent colors all through the spectrum.

That is the outside, and both my wife and I find it attractive. The inside, however, is more important, and one can see the care in the construction of the Midis -- quite the norm for Ars Aures.

The cabinets are well braced, the walls are not parallel, and the speaker has a solidity and integrity that is clear to anyone who tries to move them around. They are spec'd at 60kg, but they feel much heavier to me, and I am not unaccustomed to lifting more than 60kg. It may be due to the fact that large-ish speakers are just somewhat unwieldy. So while many of us may be able to move more weight in the gym, to carefully move speakers about is not as easy.



My Midis, under construction...



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The Midis are relatively tolerant of setup. They sound good almost wherever you place them. But Ars Aures advises that you mark the floor, and continue to move them until the sound is completely satisfactory. I wound up placing them fairly wide, 230 cm apart, about 120 cm from the back wall, with about 15 degrees of toe-in.

The Midis, unusual again among high-end speakers, do not come with spikes or with pre-drilled holes. Ars Aures recommends that they be placed on marble risers (buy your marble of choice at your local supplier) for the best sound. I cannot say why this is optimal, accustomed as I am to placing my speakers on spikes. And I do not wish to drill holes into the cabinet, although that would not be that complicated at all in view of the construction.

I used both a marble base and, while waiting for the marble, some composite bases made by Gramma, who manufacture sound isolation for professional applications. I know that Benedetto Cassarà, the exceedingly warm and gracious chief of marketing for Ars Aures, will be disappointed, but I could not discern an advantage to the marble over the Gramma bases. That said, the marble would complement the "aura" of the Midis better than the more quotidian look of the Gramma bases (they are not beautiful but they work and are quite sturdy). I can say with both experience and confidence that any base beats no base by a mile. Here we can cite two major reasons: (a) the ample bass of the Midis is tightened and focused and reflections in the lower octaves are better controlled, and (b) the bases keep you from getting the water damage that befell my first pair.

In any case, setup is not that involved -- you can be up and running in 15 minutes. The Midis have new and improved binding posts that accommodated any and all of the connectors that I have (principally large spade). The posts are about three feet off the floor, so be prepared for the wire to have to rise to that height.

And listening is not that hard, either. I heard almost no break-in period, so to speak. I tend to be skeptical of break-in in general, as most of the time I am unable to separate my own "getting used to" the component from some theoretical and subtle change in the component itself. (Though as an aside, I would note that the terrific Wyred 4 Sound DAC-II that has made all my digital music quite pleasurable to listen to did have a break-in during which it went from great to even better.)

Design

I will focus here on what has changed from the original version. As before, the Midi Sensorial is a three-way system, with an 11" woofer, two 4.5" midranges in D'Appolito configuration, and a 1" tweeter. Crossovers are first-order to attempt to achieve both phase coherency and the smoothest blending between drivers. The cabinet varies in thickness throughout and as noted, Ars Aures try to avoid parallel surfaces and the attendant resonances.

So, what is new?

Next, the crossovers, made entirely by hand, have been re-engineered with new components to carefully match both the slope and speed of the actual transition between drivers. All crossover components were "ultraselected" to achieve the tightest possible tolerances and the most consistent performance. Crossover signal paths have been shortened to reduce signal loss.

As an aside, the revamping of the Midis was in part a result of the five-year development of the new Ars Aures flagship speaker, the Estasi (read: ecstasy), and the Midis benefit from that effort. Cabinet joints have 20% greater rigidity, resulting in a reduction in cabinet resonance.

The Midis also have totally new binding posts, developed expressly for Ars Aures by Deep Audio, an Italian company, who partner with a university-based R&D department. The binding posts are formed of a special bronze-copper alloy (along with other metals), which is akin to a similar alloy used in particular parts of some high performance race car engines.

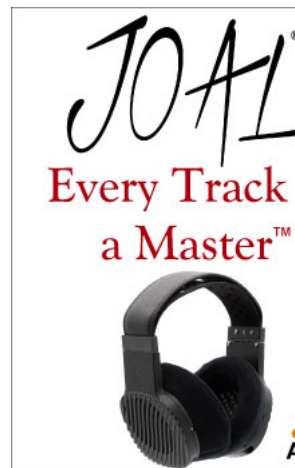
The midrange drivers, made by SEAS, have been revised to Ars Aures specifications with a new gluing process and a new basket alloy to improve the blending of the sound at the crossover points. Benedetto advises that the current drivers, which are rounded squares, will be revised to be circular in the near future.

Remarkably, even with all of the above changes and more, the speakers are almost physically indistinguishable from the earlier version. But the sound - that is another matter entirely.

Finally, the Midis do not present major problems to the amplifier. I have used them with a number of amplifiers, and they sound good with all, whether tube or solid-state. They certainly do like tubes and are easily driven by tube amps of modest power. I used them as I have the previous edition with the Music Reference RM-9 Mk II (125 wpc) and the RM-9 didn't have to work hard at all.

Music

As I said earlier, the Midis sounded very good right from the start. What I had always appreciated about the sound of the Midis was the continuity and coherence. There was nothing flashy - the Midis are not speakers to stun you with the deepest bass (though they go very deep) or the most transparent crystalline highs. But they always sounded just right, allowed the music through, and got out of the way.



The Mk IIs are all this and more. While they are clearly made of the same stuff as the earlier version, they improve on it in many areas without losing any of the magic. On almost every record one can hear greater transparency, tighter bass, greater definition in space, better microdynamics, and a little more speed. In addition, I have not yet found a piece of music that disappointed me on the Midis. That might be a criticism: I have some bad recordings, and I know the bad parts but don't pay them much mind with the Mk IIs. Rather than ruthlessly highlighting the negatives, the Midis always yield enough overall balance that I can listen to the music and not the flawed recording.

Early on, I pulled out *Last Time Around* (Atco LP) for the first time in maybe 20 years. I had been reading Neil Young's very interesting memoir, *Waging Heavy Peace*, and had Buffalo Springfield on my mind. The LP is almost 45 years old and has some wear from wayward roommates. In spite of that, "On the Way Home" had some shimmer and definition that were quite unexpected. I also did not hear the exaggerated midbass I thought was coming.

I know *Comes a Time* (Reprise LP) as well as I know any record, but there was new life and new articulation to the guitars strumming separately and together. And maybe I was looking extra hard, but Young and Nicolette Larson were highlighted simultaneously (cf. "Four Strong Winds", without Young obscuring her vocal).

For every review, I listen to "You'd Be So Nice to Come Home To", from Art Pepper's *Meets the Rhythm Section* (Acoustic Sounds LP). It's a terrific recording and a great tune, very well played, and it always makes me feel good. My notes here said "best ever" and I thought that the top end came close to the gorgeous highs of the Adam Audio Column Mk IIIs that I reviewed in November of 2011. The improved top end, combined with the coherence, fluidity, and the deep bass of the Midis, makes for great music.

I will cite just a couple of more examples under the clichéd rubric of "everything sounded new to me". Wilco's "Impossible Germany" from *Sky Blue Sky* (Nonesuch CD) impressed with the easy articulation of internal space within the soundstage and the music itself. The long and beautiful instrumental close to the song defied any description, beyond perhaps "soulful".

Finally, having just seen Mike Scott and Steve Wickham of the Waterboys twice here in New York, I had their music on my mind. Jennifer Warnes' tamer but still impassioned interpretation of "The Whole of the Moon" from *The Hunter* (Private Music CD) showcased all the strengths of the Midis: ease and continuity, impressive and well-controlled bass, transparency and detail in the upper ranges that are always at the service of the music. It's a recording I know and like well, that I have nonetheless thought a tad cool. But the new Midis (with some help from the W4S DAC) removed layer of gloss and opened the song up.

In sum

At the risk of sounding fatuous, I have to say that detailing the sound of the Midis seems to do a disservice to the speakers. Of course, describing the sound is what this review is about; any high-end component deserves to be held up to the light and examined carefully, especially when the cost equals that of a small car. The Midis, while they excel in many areas, as well they should, resist such an analysis. The experience of music via the Midis is one of immediacy, emotion, and total absorption. Standing outside that experience in order to note the characteristics is somehow antithetical to what they are attempting, with great success, to give to the listener. The Midi Sensorials continue to be a speaker that does everything superbly, indeed better than ever, but they are something more. They deserve to be heard by anyone seeking a great loudspeaker, regardless of price.

So yes, the weather isn't what it used to be. Among all the problems caused by the extreme weather we have been experiencing, the damage to a pair of high-end speakers is far down the list. The fortunate outcome for me is that it introduced me to the new Midis, and I find it hard to envision ever wanting for more.

Specifications

Type: Floorstander bass reflex with bandpass 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: 6dB/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: 60 Kg each

Price: €17,500 (approx. \$22,750)

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