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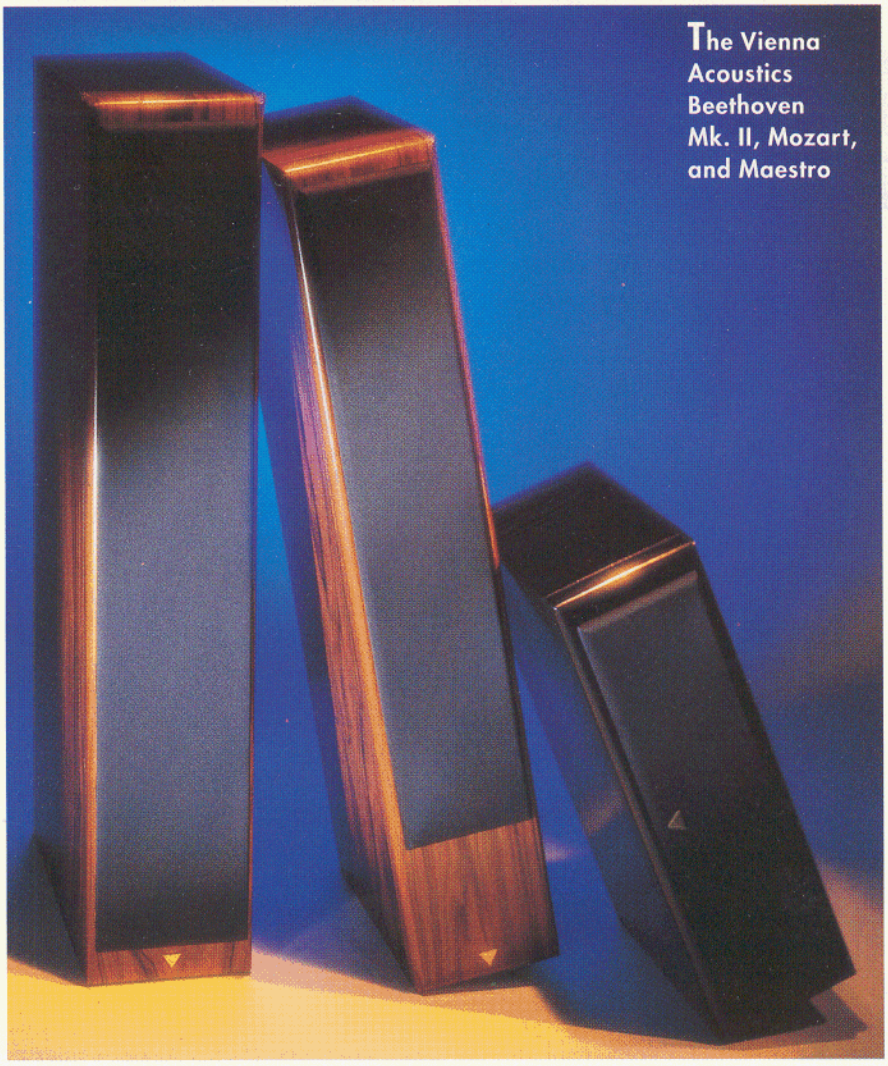
VIENNA ACOUSTICS BEETHOVEN MK. II, MOZART, AND MAESTRO SPEAKERS

Choosing a speaker is like choosing a partner for a love affair: You can never find perfection, merely maximize delight. And the choice isn't easy, because speakers have more individual character than anything else in your audio system and have the greatest influence on its overall sound character. The selection is further complicated by the fact that there are thousands to choose from (*Audio*'s most recent Annual Equipment Directory lists more than 3,000 models).



The Vienna Acoustics Beethoven Mk. II, Mozart, and Maestro

Luckily, some companies' speakers really do stand out from the rest. Take Vienna Acoustics, whose speakers offer exceptional bass and dynamic range for their size, embody a musically convincing mix of design trade-offs, deliver excellent soundstaging, and are equally good for stereo and home theater listening. What's more, these speakers are unusually small and quite stylish. For this review, I auditioned two pairs of floor-standing systems from Vienna Acoustics, its largest, the Beethoven Mk. II ($3,990 per pair), and the smaller Mozart ($2,500 per pair). I also tried the Maestro center-channel speaker ($995).

The Beethoven Mk. II, Vienna Acoustics' flagship, is relatively compact for a floor-standing speaker: Although it's 40 inches high, it's only 7½ inches wide and 14½ inches deep. Even so, it weighs 54 pounds, perhaps because its cabinet has five internal braces. This extensive bracing, and the quality of the cabinet, keep the enclosure's walls exceptionally inert during loud passages. The finish is very attractive; the Beethoven looks even better in real life than it does in photographs.

The Beethoven II's two 7-inch woofers operate in a quasi-Butterworth, bass-reflex enclosure. Its other drivers are a pair of 5½-inch midranges and a 1⅛-inch tweeter. The three-way crossover, a Bessel-filter design with 9- and 12-dB/octave slopes, uses such high-quality components as air-core coils and noninductive metal-film resistors. The midranges are said to cross over to the woofer at a relatively low 110 Hz and to the tweeter at 3 kHz, so they can cover most of the human vocal range seamlessly. The Beethoven's rated frequency range is 30 Hz to 22 kHz, its rated sensitivity is 91 dB, and its nominal impedance is 4 ohms.

The reason Peter Gansterer, Vienna Acoustics' chief designer, gave the Beethoven II a pair of smallish woofers rather than one large woofer was to keep the front baffle narrow, for good imaging, while still providing bass down to about 35 Hz in most listening rooms. (Such low bass response is far rarer in the real world than most speaker specifications imply.) The woofer cones are made of a medium-weight, silicone-based polymer called XPP, which the company says is stiffer and better damped than polypro-pylene. The individually cast cones are further stiffened by spider-web-shaped molded ribs, said to make them even stiffer than metal cones. The midrange cones are also of XPP, but Gansterer left off the spider-web ribbing to make them less stiff, for speed and delicacy. The tweeter is the highly regarded ScanSpeak D29. It has a silk dome, which some audiophiles believe produces a smoother and sweeter treble than metal or plastic tweeter domes.

THESE SPEAKERSSOUND SWEET,BUT THERE'S NO LACK OF HIGH-FREQUENCY DETAIL OR "AIR."

The Mozart, which shares many features with the Beethoven II, is 37 inches high, 6¾ inches wide, and 11⅝ inches deep and weighs 44 pounds. It has two 5½-inch XPP woofers (in separate enclosures of different sizes) and a ScanSpeak D29 1⅛-inch tweeter. Like the Beethoven II, the Mozart is a quasi-Butterworth bass-reflex system, and it has a Bessel crossover with 9- and 12-dB/octave slopes. Frequency range is rated at 35

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Photo: Michael Groen

Hz to 22 kHz, sensitivity at 90 dB, and nominal impedance at 6 ohms.

Each speaker's midrange and treble blended exceptionally well; I heard no discontinuities, response peaks, or harshness. These systems sounded slightly warm, and their upper-octave balance was sweeter than the high-frequency energy balance some other manufacturers define as "flat." (Even so, no one will criticize these speakers for a lack of high-frequency detail or "air.") That sweetness worked very well with many CDs, laserdiscs, and DVDs that had a bit too much upper-midrange energy. The Vienna Acoustics speakers produced a more musically natural balance with them, yet there was still enough high-frequency detail to keep LPs and more natural digital recordings from sounding soft.

THE VIENNA SPEAKERS SING IN VIRTUALLY THE SAME VOICE, WHICH IS EXCELLENT FOR HOME THEATER.

The Beethovens and Mozarts proved particularly good in reproducing the tonal differences of different models of guitars, violins, and pianos, and they reproduced all the character of brass and woodwinds. They did a lovely job of reproducing solo voices and choruses without favoring one gender over the other and could handle all types of music well, from the grittiest blues to the most delicate soprano arias.

I was struck by the unusually good job these did of maintaining instrumental timbres over a very wide dynamic range. The Beethoven II performed better in this regard. Don't let its size fool you, for this is one speaker that lets you glory in Mahler's excesses at full tilt without compressing the sound or losing detail.

The Beethoven's bass was unusually deep and powerful for a speaker its size, as long as I spiked it to the floor and followed the manufacturer's placement instructions. It does need an amplifier that provides a lot of control and bass power, however, and I found it to be sensitive to cables. (It worked better with the Wire World Atlantis II and the Kimber KS 3033 than it did with my MIT and Alpha-Core Goertz cables.) Amplifier and cable interactions are a fact of life with almost all speakers, but the Beethoven II required more attention in this area than most.

The Mozart did not have the deep bass extension and dynamic range of the Beethoven II, but the differences were smaller than I'd expected and mattered only on recordings having true deep bass or extreme musical dynamics. The Mozart was less sensitive than the Beethoven to room placement and to amplifier and cable interactions—but then, the price of deep bass response is often greater difficulty with room interactions and cables.

The Beethoven II produced a very wide, deep, and stable three-dimensional soundstage over a broad listening area. Definition was unusually good, with no blurring or smearing. This speaker spread the instruments evenly and provided exceptional center fill. Its superior dynamics also ensured that the soundstage and imaging did not change when volume did, even when played at loud orchestral levels. These qualities came through clearly on grand opera, large 19th- and 20th-century orchestral pieces, and big-band jazz. They also showed up on several rock recordings that happen to deliver an actual soundstage rather than random, console-mixed effects.

The Mozart's soundstage was also very good. However, this speaker didn't quite match the Beethoven II's outstanding detail in really loud passages or its precision in reproducing complex choral and orchestral passages.

The Beethoven II and Mozart were at their best when driven by high-quality, high-powered solid-state amplifiers. With several medium-powered tube amplifiers, the sound was warm and the bass lacked proper tightness and definition, though this was less noticeable with Audio Research's VT200 tube amp. The Vienna speakers performed very well with moderately priced but powerful solid-state amplifiers, such as the Adcom GFA5802 and GFA5500 and the Classé Audio CA-400. The solid-state Krell KSA-300S provided even more bass control and definition, as, to a lesser extent, did the Pass Laboratories Aleph 1.2.

MANY SPEAKERS CAN PLAY LOUD, BUT FEW CAN PLAY LOUD, FAST, AND ACCURATELY.

After stereo music listening, I put the Vienna Acoustics speakers into a home theater system, using the Beethoven IIs for the main channels and the Mozarts for the surrounds. For the center channel, I used the Maestro, a shielded speaker that has the same driver complement as the Mozart but is much smaller.

I was very impressed by this combination. The Viennas could handle the dynamics of the most demanding Dolby Digital (AC-3) or DTS soundtracks, and the sound field was large and stable. Dynamics and transient definition were very good, even when I drove the Viennas to levels best suited to reproducing World War II.

The speakers had virtually the same overall sound, or "voice," making them an excellent choice for use together in a home theater system. The timbre and dynamics of the Beethoven II and the Maestro were much better matched than those of many competing speakers whose makers specifically claim good matching. The Beethoven II had enough deep bass power and definition to match an outstanding subwoofer like the REL Stentor II (which I reviewed in the April 1997 issue) and to deal with Dolby Digital and DTS soundtracks. The Mozarts did surprisingly well as surround speakers, projecting a broad sound field despite having just one tweeter apiece. For really good home theater, you need full-range surround speakers like the Mozarts, with response to well below 40 Hz and excellent dynamics throughout their frequency range. Using main and surround speakers that can reproduce deep bass well makes the sound far more exciting and natural than using smaller speakers that force you to funnel every channel's deep bass through a common subwoofer.

I greatly appreciated the Vienna speakers' superior dynamic performance. Many speakers can play loud, but few can play loud, fast, and accurately. You can hear far more soundtrack detail with speakers whose timbre and definition don't change when the level does. I was impressed with how well the Vienna Acoustics setup did relative to the Polk Audio Signature Reference Theater setup I compared it to. (I reviewed the SRT system in the September 1996 issue.) I was also struck by how well the Viennas reproduced different types of music and how well they blended into different listening rooms.

In the price ranges where the Vienna Beethoven Mk. II and Mozart compete, there are no world beaters. Instead of searching vainly for perfection, you must listen at length to find which speakers' design trade-offs are ones you can accept. I think you'll find that, although the Viennas may not sound exciting or different at first listening, they do sound right—and should sound increasingly right over time. A