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OCTOBER 2006
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Vienna Acoustics

Schönberg Speaker System

And now," said Dr. Freud, "we will do a little free association, ja? If I say *Vienna*, do you say . . . sausage? Waltz? Sacher torte?"

If you said "Acoustics" instead, take a bow. Vienna Acoustics, a manufacturer of some 2 decades standing, does in fact make speakers in Vienna, where their offerings include a family of singular loudspeakers named for the "second Viennese school" of 20th-century composers: Schönberg, Berg, and Webern, who are revered and reviled by classical-music fans in about equal measure. (My final composition teacher was a late Schönberg student, so you can guess my vote.)

SETUP

Purely as sculpture, the Schönberg front speakers are simply stunning, though you might prefer the brushed-aluminum finish to the sexy piano-black seen here, a new option that mates with gloss-black flat-panel TVs. The Berg speakers we used as surrounds, and the Webern center speaker, are

basically subsections of the Schönberg (he was in fact older and, at least briefly, a teacher of both). All three designs are spectacularly finished, and all can be wall-hung or stand/floor-mounted.

I placed the Viennese trio in my habitual locations. The mirror-image Schönbergs flanked my 50-inch DLP with tweeters on the inside. They're designed to be on or very near a wall, and after some experimentation, ended up about 6 inches from mine. The Webern center sat on a stand just below the screen, and the Bergs went on high shelves astride the listening position, tweeters rearward and angled in to reflect substantially off the rear wall.

Our system's woofage came not from the swoopy aluminum Vienna Acoustics Subson subwoofer that mates with this system, but from a 10-inch REL R-305 suggested as a big bass-per-buck option (the British REL shares Vienna's U.S. distributor). This small cube employs an unusual sealed-box bass-loading technique, and an equally exotic speaker-level input —

a "Speakon" jack familiar to Euro-savvy pro-audio types.

This input is active along with the sub's conventional LFE line-level input, as are independent level controls for each. REL and Vienna recommend using both — essentially making simultaneous speaker- and line-level connections. Musically, this worked very well, though it eliminates the ability to adjust overall subwoofer level on-the-fly via your preamp's remote — a convenience I missed.

MUSIC PERFORMANCE

Heard solo, full-range, and unsub-woofed, the Schönbergs drew my ear to a very well-defined midrange. An excellent piano-trio SACD of the David Hazeltine-George Mraz trio on Chesky Records delivered an impressive range of colors, textures, and subtly shaded chord voicings from the piano, all without any of the "congested" or muddled piano sound you can hear even from some otherwise excellent box speakers. (I'm guessing that the Schönbergs' unusual cabinet construction and shape help, by reducing or eliminating box resonances many conventional enclosures struggle to tame.)

Overall balance was distinctly on the "relaxed" side of the bright/dull axis. The

The Short Form

Snapshot

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- ⚡ Stunning "architectural" appearance, superb craftsmanship.
- ⚡ Smooth, balanced sound with superb midrange detail.
- ⚡ Fine, small sub blends beautifully.

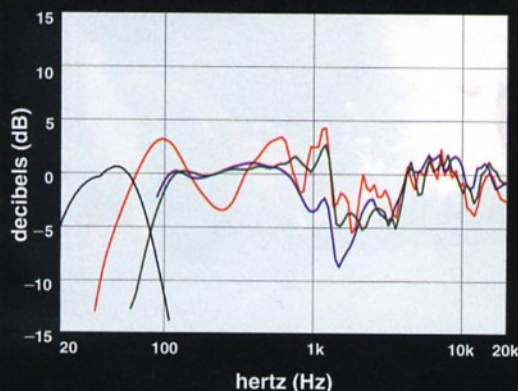
Minus

- ⚡ Slightly warm treble balance may not be a great match for very "dead" rooms.
- ⚡ Bigger rooms or cinema-level playback may demand a bigger sub.

Price \$6,099 (AS TESTED)

Test Bench

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The Vienna Acoustics' unusual driver arrangements deliver frequency response that varies widely by horizontal angle, meaning that listeners tend to get different sound based on position. The REL sub had uniform output from 32 to 62 Hz, averaging 102 dB SPL; max output was 107 dB at 62 Hz with 10% distortion. But it lacks dynamic capability, delivering just 84 dB at 25 Hz with more than 20% distortion. — Tom Nousaine

L/R 53 Hz to 20 kHz ± 5.6 dB Surround 90 Hz to 20 kHz ± 4.0 dB
Center 85 Hz to 20 kHz ± 5.4 dB Subwoofer 23 Hz to 71 Hz ± 1.8 dB

Viennas produced extended, detailed treble—the Chesky disc's superbly recorded brush and cymbal work and snare and piano transients sounded eminently open and natural—but these and other such musical elements were less prominent than via many, and possibly most, "high-end" speakers. As a result, things like the brassy, cymbal-bell elements of the drummer's brushy doings were not always quite as obvious or attention-getting.

I was pleasantly surprised by the Schönbergs' ability to deliver at least some genuine bass. In my studio, the 40-80 Hz octave, though steadily rolling off, was still fairly well-served, even to the very lowest notes of the upright bass (fundamental about 41 Hz)—as long as they remained close to the wall, where they enjoyed some low-end reinforcement. They were delightfully listenable: a bit warm in the high treble, perhaps, and just a touch enhanced in the vocal mids as well, lending well-recorded voices a subtle, seductive warmth and proximity. Adding in the REL sub didn't change the overall balance a bit—when the music stayed above 60 Hz or so, I couldn't easily tell if it was on or off, which is high praise indeed. With the sub on, no hint of emphasis, bloat, or boom marred the bass-melding region of 50-150 Hz, but low-frequency weight, and extension down to substantially beyond 35 Hz, magically appeared, adding another layer of realism and listening transport. This is a highly musical, light-fingered subwoofer.

The system had plenty of dynamic

punch, too. Natalie Merchant's *Live in Concert* CD sounded very believable at near-concert levels; even the most exposed piano-and-voice sequences revealed no hints of limited dynamics or strain, whether in stereo or Pro Logic II surround. A favorite disc of the Berg Violin Concerto (I couldn't resist) also sounded wonderfully lifelike, with warm, woody string sound and great clarity drawing my ear irresistibly into the web of that composer's ingenuous (and ingenious) counterpoint.

MOVIE PERFORMANCE

The center-channel Webern shares the Schönberg components, but with a horizontal array in a smaller, sealed enclosure. They sound very similar, yet on certain spoken voices, particularly male, I heard a slight shift in tone color when comparing the Webern alone to the Schönbergs in mono, and even to a single Schönberg: Some lower male voices were slightly but noticeably richer, thicker, or "chestier." Otherwise, the timbral match of center to fronts was quite good, and the Webern evidenced surprisingly little off-axis tonal change. The Bergs served admirably as surrounds, using the angled-back placement I usually employ for this sort of rear speaker: They were dynamically very capable, and made a solid tonal match.

On the stellar soundtrack from *Walk the Line*, the Vienna ensemble was quite impressive. The opening moments of this biopic demand a lot from a sound system, but the Viennas delivered all the big-space

ambience, high-volume punch, musical balance, and sonic heft I could desire; the sequence sounded great, with the clapping, stomping, and cheering fully integrated into a single, believable spatial whole. Throughout my movie listening, I found the Vienna system's slightly warm balance welcome more often than otherwise, nicely taming the faintly bright mixes I still encounter on many DVDs.

I did consider that the R-305 sub didn't have quite enough nuts for fully cinematic-level playback; at my "reference" my level (perhaps 2 dB below a THX-calibrated cinema), the REL became just a shade loose and "blatty" on the scene's stomp-along—not hugely surprising for a compact 10-inch sub pushed that hard. Lowering my level by 3 dB—which is still louder than many of us dial in for movies, even in high-end home theaters—cleared it up nicely; raising it back quickly exacerbated it. But otherwise, the R-305 was exemplary—clean, punchy, solid, and defined.

BOTTOM LINE

This is a very musical, highly transparent system. The Schönbergs' deft touch of warmth moves their sound subtly across from what an audiophile might call "analytical" (ironic in a speaker from the birthplace of analysis!) even while they remain powerfully transparent and detailed. With the very capable Webern and Berg, and the musically outstanding, compact REL sub in support, the result is an on-wall-able system that combines high-end sonics and *Architectural Digest* visuals. **S&V**

Key Features

- :: Schönberg (\$2,500/pair) 1-in dome tweeter; (2) 6-in cone mid/woofers; 41 $\frac{1}{4}$ -in high; 30 lb
- :: Webern center (\$795) 1-in dome tweeter; (2) 6-in mid/woofer; 19 $\frac{3}{4}$ -in wide; 16 $\frac{1}{2}$ lb
- :: Berg surround (\$1,000/pair) 1-in dome tweeter; 6-in cone mid/woofers (2 $\frac{1}{2}$ -way); sealed enclosure; 8 $\frac{1}{4}$ -in high; 11 lb
- :: REL R-305 active subwoofer (\$1,595) 10-in driver; 300-watt RMS amplifier; 12 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 14 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 13 $\frac{1}{2}$ in; 41 lb
- :: Finish: gloss black or aluminum
- :: Price as tested (with stands): \$6,099

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