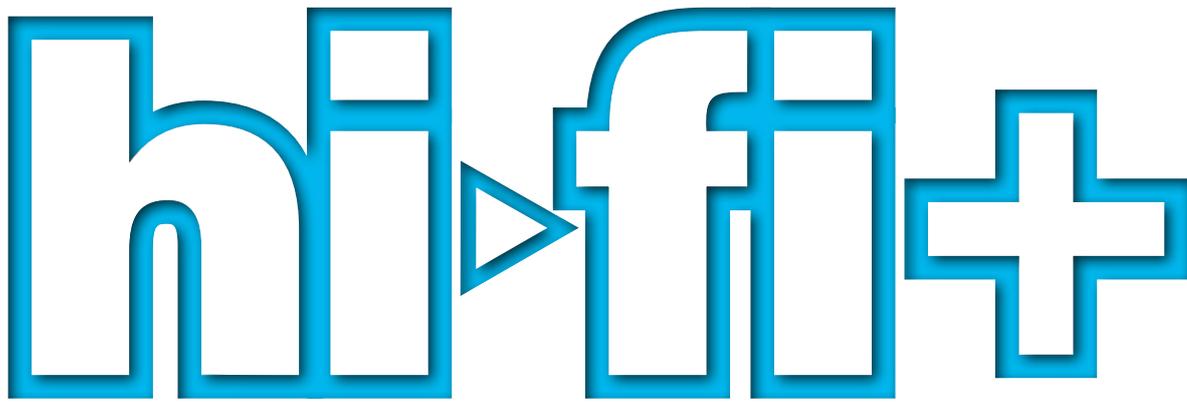


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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

The Avalon Time Loudspeaker

by Roy Gregory

Avalon's has long held a reputation for delivering astonishingly low levels of distortion with commensurate neutrality, but the emergence of the flagship Isis (and the budget NP 2.0) signaled a new mastery of the time domain. The Isis was a stunning achievement, but it was simply too big or too expensive for many UK homes. The new Time, on the other hand, fits right in...

The Time inhabits a cabinet that is a few inches taller but otherwise virtually identical to the company's various Eidolon models. But remove that grille and you'll reveal yet another familiar view, a large diameter diamond tweeter being paired with a 120mm ceramic bowl midrange driver and a pair of the 275mm Nomex/Kevlar bass units, although in this case it's a case of hybrid DNA, the 25mm concave tweeter and twin bass driver configuration being drawn from the Isis, while the bass and mid drivers themselves come from the Eidolon Diamond. The bass drivers are reflex loaded by a downward firing port that is enclosed by the U-shaped plinth with its rear-facing opening – again, an Avalon trademark. The whole configuration that hints at the Time's dynamic potential and bandwidth.

The Time was happy with anything from a good 100 Watts up. Amps used for the review included the Gamut M250i monos, the Bernings and even the Hovland RADIA, whose modest rated output underlined the fact that in this instance it is subtlety and quality that count. Audiofreaks supplied Cardas Clear interconnects and Clear Beyond speaker cables along with the Times and these proved a good match, delivering a coherent and holistic sound, big on acoustic space and presence.

The alacrity with which the Time tells you all about early reflections and asymmetries in the listening room (and its acoustics), coupled to its bass power and resulting ability to excite a room's low frequency resonances, make this a speaker that's easy to set up (in the sense that you clearly hear the benefit – or otherwise – of every shift in position) but also one that will dictate its placement literally to a matter of millimeters, along with most of the things around it.

That set up process is also going to tell you an awful lot about these speakers, simply because it goes straight to the question of low-frequency performance, fluidity and communication – which in turn goes straight to the heart of music itself, everything resting as it does on those lower registers. Yes, the bulk of the usable information is in the mid-band, but it's the bottom end that tells you where it should all

go, when it should get there and whether or not it's right. I've never heard a speaker yet in which that relationship is quite so obviously apparent. Indeed, bigger speakers – like the Isis or Focal Grande EM, that exceed the Time in overall achievement, seem to make this close coupling less obvious; or to put it another way, you can hear that it's not quite right – you just can't necessarily say why. The Time on the other hand, once you start adjusting it, leaves you in doubt at all about both the what and the why of optimum set up. In the process it also demonstrates just what an uncannily natural and evocative performer it can be.

An example: one of my key set up discs is the Analogue Productions re-issue of Duke Ellington and Ray Brown's *This One's For Blanton*. Sparse to the point of asceticism, the upright bass/piano combination is incredibly demanding, both instruments individually presenting any hi-fi system with a stern test, in combination they are ruinously critical. Not only does the system have to deal with the depth, power and independence of the bass, it has to let that instrument breathe, which means dealing with its almost contradictory sense of attack and decay, along with its physical volume and layered harmonics. Then throw in the sheer range and complexity of the piano, the need to reproduce its percussive quality without it becoming harsh or strident and you can begin to see the problem. Add the fact that there's no rhythm section per se, filling in the background and mapping out the steps, that the two instruments operate for so much of the time at opposite ends of the frequency range, and that with so little inherent structure, reproduction of the time domain is absolutely crucial if you are to avoid the whole thing collapsing into meaningless (and frankly, irritating) noise, and this recording's value as an almost instant litmus test for bass alignment, linearity and rhythmic integrity soon becomes apparent.



“And so the odyssey began – and along the way, quite an education as to just why this album has proved so invaluable over the years.”

as small a step as you can manage to finalize things, that's quite a trip, and each step of the way was marked by progressive changes in the integration and projection of the music and instruments.

From its diminished and detached beginnings, Ray Brown's bass grew in stature and physical volume. First you heard the body, gradually growing in front of you, then the strings, their length developing as the speaker zeroed in. This isn't about imaging as such – although that clearly benefits – but the scale and sense of the instrument, the particular and instantly recognizable way it shapes notes and drives energy into the room. Listen to live jazz (or classical music) and you never have any problem hearing what the bass is playing, or the way it's being played. Listen to jazz on most hi-fi systems and the same instrument is often indistinct and barely audible. Here, the Times deliver the poise and shape of Brown's intricate lines with effortless clarity. The contrast between pluck and release, the physical difficulty of some of his runs, are beautifully captured and projected, the notes floating clear of the floor as he picks and places them. Meanwhile, Ellington's piano has fallen into tune. No more cracked upper register or thuddy left hand: as the speakers approach their sweet spot the harmonic complexity and percussive clarity allow Ellington's delicacy and touch to open like a flower, the precisely placed chords blooming in the body of the instrument, anchored by a new authority and sonority that has come to the instrument.

But the emergence of instrumental character is only a part of the story. The really impressive thing is the developing relationship between the instruments – and with the space they occupy. As the positioning locks in, so does the music, the performance drawing you in, the almost telepathic relationship ▶

With the Times, roughly positioned and happily playing away to bed them in, I'd been really rather enjoying the results. But when the time came to go to work and really dial them in I was in for a shock. Sure enough, cueing up track one of the Blanton, the problems with the set up were all too starkly highlighted, Ray Brown's bass sounding small, wooly and muffled – as well as limp and well off the pace. At the same time, Ellington's right hand sounded horribly glassy and exposed – a bit like a poorly tuned pub upright. This was definitely not correct! And so the odyssey began – and along the way, quite an education as to just why this album has proved so invaluable over the years.

Painstaking adjustments, fore and aft (with a little sideways thrown in for good measure) and then again with the cones in place, wrought dramatic changes in the musical integrity and sense of performance*. In comparison, the minimal degree of toe in required to snap the image into focus was simplicity itself. But the educational aspect of the process is all to do with the way the music's presentation changes and evolves. From that unpromising start, a half-centimeter grid movement quickly established a position that was forward and wider, the speaker clearly telling you when you were moving in the right direction – and when you weren't. Final placement ended up about 40mm further apart and 60mm further forward than my original speculative positioning – along with considerable care taken ensuring symmetry relative to rear and side walls and the positioning of the first reflection pads. It might not sound like much, but when you are working in 5mm steps to start with, and

*Just to put this in perspective, the final position on the cones was around 20mm further forward than without – and with this speaker that's a BIG difference.

▶ between these two master musicians reflected in the way they pass the initiative back and forth. Suddenly you are listening to instruments and people, in space, to what the musicians are doing and saying – their conversation on a note-by-note, phrase-by-phrase basis. The speakers, the driving system – they’ve effectively disappeared, leaving just the music. Yes – it is a small and undemanding recording (at least in terms of absolute dynamics and scale) but the two instruments involved are far from easy to reproduce, placing deeply conflicting leading-edge and timing demands on a loudspeaker, while the stark simplicity exposes any shortcomings in timing or tonality with ruthless efficiency. I’ve heard two speakers do a better job than the Time with this disc: the Isis and the Focal Grande. One costs three times as much and the other needs at least three times the power. And I’m not sure that either gets quite as deeply into the groove as the Time...

It’s all about chemistry, that strange fusion reaction that turns noise into music and musicians into a band. Let’s talk about bass of a different kind and a bit of Elvis – Costello that is, *Live At The El Mocambo* and in his pomp on the *My Aim Is True* tour: Set closer ‘Pump It Up’ depends on the deep, deep, driving patterns played by Pete Thomas’s bass, and even given the space of a slow build up and Elvis toying with the crowd, the propulsive energy in the playing is both present and correct. Even under the combined assault of keyboards, drums and guitar, you never lose track of the track, and the track never loses its sense of purpose and direction. Switch back from this murky live recording to the de luxe Edition re-issue of the album and it’s a case of “Wow!” The comparison tells you just what a great job the speaker did of sorting out the densely packed and dirty bottom-end of the live disc, it also tells you just what an awesomely driven and energetic recording the original is, the re-mastered CD finally capturing the sheer life and intensity of the analogue original. But playing the live disc also reveals two other things about the Time: it has that ability to reach out and include the listener in the soundfield of the recording, making for a much more immersive and involving listening experience. Ohhh... and it likes to play loud. In fact, it positively invites it. Whereas older Avalon models would certainly play loud, it was hard to escape the feeling that they did so with a slight frown of disapproval. The Aspect tore up that particular set of rules – the Time stomps on the shreds; “enthusiastic” barely covers the willingness with which it embraces the more energetic musical offerings... and no – we’re not talking Bach here.

One night – long, long ago – and in a club – far, far away – I saw, heard and felt the power of Steve Earle in overdrive. Recorded for a BBC live session the tape has finally seen a CD release – and playing it on the Times carries me right back to the overheated, sweaty, smoky fug of the Town and Country, effortlessly capturing the excitement, the sticky floor underfoot, of a band (and an audience) that knows it’s on a roll. From Earle’s nasal drawl, rough round the edges from too much abuse and too many loud nights, to the sheer enthusiasm of a band feeding on crowd frenzy, the Avalons put you there – right in the middle of the whole, heaving, hyper event. You see, it’s not just about the bass (although that’s critical to the whole question) but the way the low frequencies are integrated with the rest of the range – and the overall coherence that results.

In this respect it is just like a Symphony Orchestra; it is not enough for all the bass instruments to play at once – that’s just loud. Real impact and drama comes from them all playing at exactly the same moment and just the right moment as defined by the rest of the instruments. That way a massive, monumental work like Shostokovich’s 11th Symphony (from the fabulous new Vasily Petrenko cycle on Naxos) can build tension and drama, contrast



“It has the ability to reach out and include the listener in the soundfield of the recording, making for a much more immersive and involving experience.”

light and shade by the measured application of instrumental force, the long, reflective passages of the first movement never meandering but building with wonderful inevitability towards the shattering crescendo. It’s a masterfully controlled and directed performance, with the Times retaining and delivering every last ounce of that musical intent, right up to the sonorous chimes of the cataclysmic finale.

It is this connected quality, the directness with which they present the musical event that makes the Time such a special speaker. The way it delivers musical energy, the immediacy and suddenness of instrumental transients has something of the best horns about it, but coupled to the uncannily even and extended bandwidth, the tonal and spatial honesty that’s always been an Avalon hallmark. It certainly invests the speaker with the ability to excite, but it also opens the palette of intimacy and delicacy too. Back to the Blanton, let’s appreciate the deftness with which Ellington balances and weights his playing to build off of or in support of Brown’s bass. Shawn Colvin’s ‘Shotgun Down The Avalanche’ has all its familiar intimacy and ▶



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Three-way loudspeaker

Driver Complement:

1x 25mm concave diamond tweeter

1x 120 ceramic bowl midrange

2x 275mm Kevlar/Nomex bass drivers

Bandwidth: 20Hz – 20kHz ±3dB

Sensitivity: 89dB

Impedance: 4 Ohms

Dimensions (WxHxD): 30 x 117 x 48cm

Weight: 75kg

Finishes: Quilted Cherry, Curly Maple and Figured Walnut Optional wood finish (at extra cost): Birdseye Maple, Walnut Cluster Burl, Myrtle Cluster Burl

Price: £47,995/pair (standard finish)

Manufacturer: Avalon Acoustics

URL: www.avalonacoustics.com

Distributed by: Audiofreaks UK

URL: www.audiofreaks.co.uk

Tel: +44(0)20 8948 4153

▶ “she is here” immediacy, but it also has a more solid, rooted quality than I’m used to, a bigger sound without losing any of that fragile detail and intricacy.

Which sums up the Time’s achievement quite nicely. It manages to present its musical information in the right place and at the right time, irrespective of pitch or power required. This temporal accuracy is no coincidence (it’s not called the Time for nothing) and the result is an almost preternatural quality that makes recordings astonishingly accessible and engaging. This inner balance, built from the heart of the performance outwards, extends across enough of the range to produce remarkably convincing results, almost irrespective of recording quality. They dredge the music, whole and intact, from the murk of the worst discs you own, while the best will be simply breathtaking. The Time can’t match the really big speakers I’ve already mentioned, or a speaker like the GamuT S9, for sheer scale or ultimate loudness, but it does more than enough in this regard that most of us will never feel the lack (either quantitatively or qualitatively). It doesn’t float the massed basses of a well recorded orchestra, or establish the acoustic space quite as well as the Isis, but it gets awfully close and brings its own special qualities to the party instead. It’s easier to accommodate and much easier to drive, which means that more listeners are going to actually realize more of its performance potential out there in the real world. Musically forgiving it also brings the best from partnering equipment. Don’t think that makes it unfussy; you’ll still need stellar equipment to extract all of the performance this speaker is capable of, but the range of options that embraces is now wider than ever before.

Which brings us, finally, to a parting shot. We’ve just enjoyed a purple patch when it comes to advances in speaker performance. Not so much when it comes to technology, you’ll note, which has merely evolved or been refined, with new materials rather than revolutionary new approaches, but more what we do with it. It has resulted in new levels of musical coherence, less

intrusive transducers and greater access to recordings. It has also started to realign the focus of audio attention, away from front-end heavy approaches to a more system-orientated understanding, built back from the speaker. The Avalon Time represents the pinnacle of that progress, embodying the musically communicative sensibilities that have finally, significantly advanced the state of the art in loudspeakers – and doing it in a manageable and deliverable package.

What the Time stands for is more music for more people. Undeniably expensive it may be, but it is still cheap at the price, simply because musical performance like this was almost unattainable at any price before it arrived. By mixing a distinctly real world practicality with superb musical performance, the Time establishes a significant new benchmark for competitors (and customers) to aim for. Of course, some will already be closer than others, but pole position has to rest with all those Eidolon owners out there: you’ve got the system; you’ve got the space; all you need now is the cash. +