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The Avalon Ascendant Loudspeaker

by Roy Gregory

Read the accompanying interview with Neil Patel and you'll see that he's pretty specific about his aims and ambitions regarding the Ascendant. Well, take one look at the results and it's clear that physically at least, he's hit the mark. Despite its solid proportions and less than sylph-like dimensions, the Ascendant appears far smaller and less domestically intrusive than the simple measurements suggest. The reasons for this are several and related. The rear slope of the cabinet makes them far less visually aggressive, the careful faceting of the front baffle further softening the shape and impact. Then there's the veneer. Avalon Acoustics pride themselves on finishing each and every cabinet in-house with their own, specially selected veneers, but even by their high standards the quality of the surfaces on the review speakers was exceptionally beautiful. And there speaks someone who all too often remains unimpressed by the charms of real wood finishes. No, by any measure, the Ascendants are certainly things of beauty, to the extent that you need to see (and feel) them in the flesh to understand the full effect.

The promised attention to detail is there too. Despite appearances, the Ascendant is a reflex design, the twin ports located in the base of the cabinet and spaced from the floor by the two blocks of wood placed front and back, which also serve to channel the flow of air. Those familiar with

Avalons will utter a sigh of relief when they see the rear mounted terminals and the choice of the superb Cardas binding block to do the job. It's an arrangement that replaces the previously bottom mounted screw terminals that accepted spades and nothing else, as well as being a pain to get at. Discrete? Yes – too damned discrete. The conventional placement on the rear panel is far easier to access while



the Cardas connector is sonically excellent, extremely secure and accepts 4mm plugs at right angles, although spades (Cardas of course) are still the preferred option.

Unchanged, but no less welcome, is the carefully designed grille with its mat of profiled felt that surrounds and separates each driver, and which still improves the sound of the speaker. How is it that no one else seems able to do this? Also unchanged are the sharply pointed and incredibly tough cones that are placed betwixt speaker and floor. It's an approach I heartily approve: You can slide the speakers about in order to get them positioned just right, the three cones ensure

stability, while their slender tips are guaranteed to penetrate any carpet without damaging it. The only downside is the inability to level the speakers precisely, although you can get around that with judicious placement of the cones and in extreme cases, the use of coins or shims. It wasn't necessary in my room, so I can't comment on the sonic effect of such action, but one thing I will say is that you do want these speakers vertical.

Remove the grille and you'll find the drive units in a vertical array, the Titanium dome tweeter above the twin bass-mid drivers. So no fancy arrangements or tricky crossovers with an extra half leg creeping in here or there. This is a straight two-way, the smaller drivers allowing a narrower baffle and better power handling as well as a more even performance at the top of their range. Each is built into a substantial, cast basket and secured with six allen bolts, although interestingly, and in a step typical of Avalon's attention to detail, the signal to each driver is subtly contoured to compensate for their differing physical surroundings and proximity to the floor.

Digging a little deeper beneath the skin you discover a massively constructed and braced cabinet. How massive? Well, the faceting on the front baffle is achieved by contouring of the panel itself, ▶

▶ which gives you a pretty good idea of exactly how thick it is! Pick the speaker up and that'll give you a pretty good idea too. The Ascendant is just about manageable, but considering that there are no massive drive units to add to that weight, your respect for the cabinet increases again. Having said that, the quality of the finish and the vulnerability of the edges and corners make this a definite two-man lift, unless you want to mar the appearance almost immediately. Audiofreaks are almost obsessively careful when transporting or maneuvering Avalons, and having lived with both the Arcus and the even more beautiful Ascendant I can understand why.

So, the Ascendant clearly checks out physically: the sonic picture is a little more complex. The good news is that if anything the musical results are even more impressive than the visual ones. The caveat is that, as with most really cutting edge products, that excellence is a fragile thing and it's all too easy to destroy. Fortunately the Ascendant's demands are pretty clear and as long as you comply you'll not go far wrong. The first is adequate power, the second adequate attention to positioning. Get those two things right and you'll be well on the way.

Don't get the idea that the Ascendant is a power-sponge in the Apogee or SL600 mold. But don't be misled by the "near 90dB" sensitivity either. A brief foray with Tom Evan's 30 Watt S30 version of The Soul (30 real Watts if ever there were) served only to demonstrate how two individually excellent products can drag each other's performance down. Oh sure, it was clean and clear and detailed and open and lots of other things, but it wasn't dynamic and it wasn't music.

Using the Conrad-Johnson Premier 140 or Hovland Radia transformed proceedings. Audiofreaks recommend a sensible minimum of 70 valve Watts and I'd agree, with one proviso. You're looking for quality here, not just quantity, and even more so if you are using solid-state amplification. The Radia is exceptional, as are the Karan, Spectral and Rowland amplifiers, but that's the level of partnering equipment you should be considering if transistors are your thing.



Interestingly, I reckon the Naim NAP300 might be a nice match but I didn't have the Naim amp kicking around and it's not a combination I got to try and I can't see the two products co-existing in too many dealers.

Also interesting is the way the Ascendant reacts to the driving amplification. Use the Radia and the presentation is a model of self-contained ease, transparency and definition. The wide open soundstage is clean and stable, its boundaries and extent clearly defined, the dynamic envelope clearly scaled. In short, everything that you'd expect from the Radia, from its easy pace to its imperturbable calm. Swap to the Premier 140 and it's like listening to a different system, not just a different amplifier. The big tube amp brings a presence and life to the sound, that whilst it lacks the precision and separation of the Hovland, adds a whole level of emphatic emotional communication. Musically speaking we're talking chalk and cheese here, but let's remember that this is a speaker review, which brings us back to the central problem with the Ascendant: the speaker is so self-effacing that pinning down its own character is astonishingly difficult. Now bear in mind that the speaker is one of the system's two transducers, and that traditionally it's the transducers that are responsible for the greatest deviations from accuracy, and you begin to get some idea of the magnitude of Avalon's achievement with the Ascendant. Here's a speaker that leaves less of a fingerprint on musical proceedings than the amplifier driving it!

If we concentrate on common factors, then a picture starts to emerge.

And picture is the right word, for everything that this speaker does ▶

► seems to start from its stereo performance. The Ascendant is capable of throwing one of the most clearly defined soundstages I've enjoyed at home, but what's special about it isn't the scale, the depth or the transparency. What's really impressive is the naturalness of its proportion and perspective. So much so that electronics that enhance soundstage depth, dimensionality or focus are ruthlessly revealed. When does soundstage become too much of a good thing? When you have more than you should have. Conversely, for years, the flat-earth contingent were (and still are) happy to dismiss imaging as purely cosmetic. However, stop and think for a moment about exactly what a system does in terms of reconstructing the precise relationships between instruments within a performance and it should become clear that if you get the spatial equation right then it says something about the temporal, the dynamic and the tonal. Indeed, comparisons between the Ascendant and other speakers clearly show how tonal and dynamic deviations are reflected in the soundstage that they throw.

The correctness of their perspective lends the Ascendant's performance a convincing quality that evades the vast majority of speakers. That easy acceptance and the immediate sense of rightness they bring to proceedings makes long term listening utterly fatigue free. The wonderfully natural mid-band is almost a given with Avalons, but there's still something magical about the sheer access you get with the

Ascendant. The effortless way in which they unravel the most complex instrumental and vocal relationships makes them both rhythmically and emotionally communicative. The wistful intelligence and self deprecating humour of Michael Weston King's album *A Decent Man* is pushed to the fore, the delicacy of the acoustic melodies supported and enhanced rather than buried by the backing. When he protests that he's "a decent man, I do the decent thing",

the telling hesitation before he sings "when



I can... and I can" the subtle shift in the lyric from innocence to self reassurance is unmistakable, setting you up for the denouement... "And if I can't then I'm not blind, I'll be indecent in my mind". The deft shift in sense is matched by the speakers' sleight of hand in their presentation. You can marvel at the subtlety and detail they reveal in the vocal inflexion; you can be astonished by their convincing timbral identity and the utterly natural phrasing; but you're going to have to dig past the music to do it.

Dissect the performance of the Ascendant and it tells you more about what they do right than confirming any perceived shortcomings. You could criticize them for a lack of air, until you appreciate their innate sense of balance and the way that the top-end precisely matches the extension at the bottom, the extremes cradling and supporting the all important midrange. You could point a finger at the dynamic range, and there are speakers that offer wider and certainly more obvious dynamic contrasts. But analyse the musical event and you quickly realise that the Ascendant is more dynamic than it seems. It's just that the dynamics are so natural and unforced, particularly in the way that dynamic shifts shape notes, that they don't draw attention to themselves. Bass, to quote a phrase, is sufficient. There's weight enough to satisfy, but the combination of texture, tonality and the lack of a one-note contribution from the box are what's really important. It's tactile, mobile and propulsive where required. Piano left-hand might lack the last ounce of sonority, the cushion of air beneath the chords, ►

▶ but it's way more natural than anything out of any other speaker this size. I certainly never felt the lack, and the Avalons arrived hot on the heels of the monster KEF combination.

Having had my musical senses assaulted by the recent Chesky SACD of *The Planets* (the most musically gruesome dismemberment I've ever heard committed to disc) I rushed home compelled to seek solace. On the 'table went the Boulton, rapidly followed by the Steinberg/BSO, my personal favourite. Not only did the system sooth my savaged brow, but the way the Avalons handled the Steinberg was a fascinating example of their ethos. They did nothing to disguise the frankly mediocre recording: they did nothing to hide the brilliance of the performance. Boulton was his deft and subtle self, tonally and rhythmically delicate yet precise. But the Steinberg grafted fire to the sinuous grace and power of the complex tempi. Its superiority was manifest, my preference underlined. It was clear not just which performance I preferred but why.

Towards the end of the review period I have to admit that curiosity got the better of me (as well as the convenience of another reason to leave the Ascendants in situ for another few days, despite products and deadlines pressing). A trip to collect the CDS3 from Naim in Salisbury afforded the opportunity to lay my hands on a NAP300: just too good a chance to miss. Listening was fascinating, confirming at once how far the new Naim electronics have come and just how Chameleon like the Avalons are. Long term Naim users (and even some members

of the company) would have been astonished at the integrity of the stereo image produced via the NAP300, while the Ascendant proved equally adept when it came to the rhythmic agility and precision so beloved of Salisbury. But it was individual musical lines that were really teased free of the fabric, bringing purpose and direction to the performance, underlining the shape and phrasing in a piece. The precision tonal intricacy of baroque music was the perfect playground for this unlikely combination.



Indeed, the Avalons revealed the Naim amp in a new light, underlining its newly found universality as well as the speakers' own adaptability.

It's all about balance, and in that respect the Ascendants are the high-wire artists of the hi-fi industry. They don't try to do it all, content to excel in their chosen arena. In this respect they exceed the already impressive Arcus by extending the envelope that bit further in all directions. Their uncanny naturalness depends on their

lack of exaggeration: in turn that excises the aural fingerprint that identifies sound as opposed to music. Neutral is now an overused and value-laden term, but the Avalons remind me why hi-fi writers coined it in the first place. They really do pass the signal without disturbance or favour. But the most important word in that sentence is 'pass'. Sure, they do all the hi-fi stuff, and do it remarkably well, but I've yet to find another speaker that subordinates those abilities so effectively in the service of music. What they pass is the fact of the music, but they do it so completely that you get the sense as the binding medium. When Neil Patel talks about the attractive simplicity of a two-way design, he's safe in the knowledge that he has the Ascendant to back him up. Two-way it might be, but it's a prince for all that.



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Reflex loaded two-way
Drive Units:	1x 25mm titanium dome tweeter 2x 160mm bass-mid drivers
Impedance:	4 ohms (3.6 ohms min.)
Frequency Response:	45Hz to 22Hz (+/- 1.5 db, anechoic)
Recommened Amp Power:	50 to 200 watts
Dimensions (WxHxD):	254x940x330mm
Weight:	32Kg
Price:	£7900

UK Distributor:

Audiofreaks
Tel. (44)(0)20 8948 4153
E-mail. info1@audiofreaks.co.uk
Net. www.audiofreaks.co.uk

Manufacturer:

Avalon Acoustics
Net. www.avalonacoustics.com