

## Estelon Aura Loudspeaker with MOON 791 & 761 pre-power amplifiers

When I started this column five years ago, I intended it to feature the kind of components and systems found in real-world listening rooms, such as my living room, where I've set up all the equipment I've been writing about here. It was meant to focus on inexpensive products, which I defined in my first installment (and have reiterated several times since).

Times change. In my April column, I announced that "I've finally decided to write about whatever I deem appropriate, irrespective of price." Why hold back? I figured. After all, there are many people who want a high-end stereo system in their home and are willing to pay for it. For the longest time, I too have been coveting a beautiful-looking, great-sounding stereo system in my living room, however expensive (within reason). I've recently started to build such a system, and in this article, I'll describe how I've gone about this.



I'll admit that when I decided to put cost aside in April, I didn't expect the prices of components covered here to escalate as high as they have. That month, I wrote about the Bowers & Wilkins 705 S3 loudspeaker, which sells for \$3400 per pair (all prices in USD except where noted). May's "System One" column featured the Focal Vestia N°3, a made-in-France floorstander selling for \$3598 per pair. Most audiophiles would consider these speakers to be priced sensibly. The price of the Estonian-made Estelon Aura, the subject of this month's column, makes those speakers seem like bargains. This statuesque, curvaceous stunner sells for \$19,900 per pair. To some, this will seem absurd—this price approaches that of a new Honda Civic. But in the world of high-end hi-fi, where loudspeakers can cost more than a Rolls-Royce Phantom, there's nothing absurd about that price. In fact, compared to some top-tier speakers, the Estelon Aura, for its appearance and sound, may be considered a steal.

## Beautiful start

To my eyes, the Aura is one of the most striking loudspeakers on the market today, irrespective of price. From the time I saw and heard a pair, in May, at High End 2023, I knew I wanted a pair of Auras in my living room. They would make a fantastic basis for my ultimate stereo build. To become better acquainted with the Aura, I requested a pair for review.

Gracing my living room now with their stately presence, the Estelon Auras stop visitors who sight them right in their tracks. Invariably, people first remark on the Auras' appearance and then inquire about their place of origin. Next, everyone wants to know the price. On hearing that the Auras hail from Estonia, people are always surprised, but when learning of their price, only few are taken aback. You just know these towers aren't cheap. Standing nearly 54" tall in silken satin white, a pair of Auras looks luxurious, an appearance the slender, elegant black grilles dramatically enhance. Estelon's product line currently includes eight floorstanding speakers, all sharing similar aesthetics. The Aura is the company's entry-level offering.



The story of Estelon began one Sunday morning in 2010 when Alfred Vassilkov arrived at his family's breakfast table, with an ambition to create the world's best loudspeaker and with a design concept in mind. That evening, Vassilkov and his two daughters, Allisa and Kristiina, resolved to set up a company. Impressively, Vassilkov's flair for design arises from natural aptitude, not training—he is a former research scientist who studied electro-acoustics in Soviet-era St. Petersburg.

When I visited Estelon several years ago, I asked Vassilkov about the city of Tallinn, the Estonian capital, where the company is based and where he lives. I was curious to know what it was like during Soviet times. He gave a solemn look and said that people used to walk around with their heads down. Under Soviet rule, Tallinn was not the vibrant, inspiring place it is now; it was not fertile ground for entrepreneurship, creativity, and innovation as it is today.



For many years prior to launching Estelon, Vassilkov designed speakers for Audes and other companies. During my visit, he showed me some of those pre-Estelon speaker designs. None could be called beautiful—or even attractive. Yet when he came out with the first Estelon loudspeaker, the XA, the hi-fi world applauded it for its shapely design and excellent sound. It was like a bolt from the blue.

## Form and function

Estelon speakers' enclosure design is tightly linked to their acoustic design. Those comely contours were certainly meant to look good, but they also help maximize sound quality. The irregularly shaped cabinets reduce internal standing waves, and the smooth surfaces around the drivers minimize diffraction.

Instead of employing conventional materials like wood or metal for their cabinets, Estelon uses composites. In the case of the Aura, the company claims that their “thermoformed proprietary mineral-filled composite” allows the cabinet to have advanced surface geometry, high density and rigidity, and exceptional acoustic control and resonance damping.



More conventional than the cabinet, but similarly impressive, is the Aura's driver complement. On the upper, wider part of the flat, tapered baffle, a Scan-Speak 1" silk-dome tweeter is interposed between two 5" midrange-woofers. These are SB Acoustics Satori drivers, which have paper-based cones infused with Egyptian papyrus fibers. A downward-firing 10" paper-cone woofer from the Italian brand Faital is cleverly concealed at the base of the sealed enclosure, which is about 12" in diameter.

Another clever aspect of the Aura's cabinet design is a gently arched plinth with an opening that coincides with the woofer. About 15" wide at the front and 14" wide at the rear, this plinth is bolted to four short feet that extend from the base of the enclosure so that a gap is formed, which allows radial dispersion from the woofer. Longish spikes are supplied, which help stabilize the speaker but also, by raising the plinth off the floor, aid dispersion further. It's important to use them.

Estelon claims the Aura has a frequency response of 35Hz to 25kHz, though no deviation figures are given, and a sensitivity of 90dB (2.83V/m), which, if true, is higher than average. A nominal impedance of 4 ohms is specified, with a 2-ohm minimum at 58Hz. That gave me pause. The driving amplifier must be able to supply a fair amount of current at 2 ohms to drive the speaker properly. For a solid-state amplifier, this should not be a problem, but most tube amplifiers work best with loads of 8 ohms or higher and could have difficulty driving loads below 4 ohms. Estelon recommends that amplifier power be rated from 30W to 200W (presumably into 8 ohms; it's not specified). To get a good sense of the Aura's driveability and behavior, I experimented with different amplifiers and source components.

## Setup 1—least expensive and very convenient

For my initial setup, I used QED XT25 speaker cables to connect the Auras to a Marantz 40n integrated amplifier, which is rated at 70Wpc into 8 ohms or 100Wpc into 4 ohms and is stable into 2 ohms. Source components were the feature-rich 40n itself, with its built-in DAC and streaming support through the HEOS operating system; my Pro-Ject Audio System X1 turntable, connected to the 40n's phono input via the X1's stock interconnects; and a Pro-Ject CD Box S3 CD player, whose analog output I connected to the 40n with XLA DNA RCA interconnects. I plugged the components into a Shunyata Research Venom PS8 power distributor, using their stock power cords, and used a Shunyata Venom HC cord to plug the distributor into the wall. The cost of electronics and cables in this setup came to around \$5000 (the 40n itself is \$2499), about one-quarter of the price of the Auras.



I placed the Auras in the usual spots in my living room, about 20" from the front wall and 8' apart, tweeter to tweeter. Right off the bat, the sound was very good: great bass power and tremendous clarity throughout the midrange and highs. Music sprang open from the Auras, dispersing evenly into the room. Very little toe-in was needed.

I began my critical listening with Fleetwood Mac's *Rumours*, on vinyl (Warner Bros. BSK 3010), which I play on almost every system I review. It sounded spectacular. The Auras were able to convey the full bass depth in songs like "Dreams" and "The Chain" and the superb vocal clarity in "Songbird."

At this point, curious to hear what difference a more robust set of cables would make, I substituted the QED XT25 speaker cables for my workhorse Nirvana S-L cables, which I've used for years. I'm not sure whether this was an actual or an imaginary effect—bigger, thicker, darker cables do tend to impart a sense of substance—but the sound now seemed a touch ballsier. Whatever the case, it certainly wasn't worse, so I left the Nirvana cables in for the duration. (That's what you see in the accompanying photo.)

The 40n proved to be a good match. Every album I played was delivered with gratifying sonic substance. Evidently, even with modestly priced ancillary equipment, the Auras excel.

A niggling weakness of this setup arose when I turned the volume very high: the 40n could sound strained. This wasn't surprising, given the limited power output of this amp—it may be enough for most listening, but it will likely fall short when called to produce high volume. I needed to try the Auras with a more powerful amplifier.





## Setup 2—more expensive and quite convenient

To get more power into the Auras, I replaced the 40n with the Kinki Studio EX-M1+ integrated amplifier (\$2998). The company specifies the EX-M1+ at 215Wpc into 8 ohms. According to our measurements, it reached 208Wpc (into 8 ohms) before 1% distortion set in, significantly more power than the 40n's and beyond the Aura's 200Wpc limit. Like the 40n, the EX-M1+ is stable with a 2-ohm load, but unlike the 40n, it has no DAC, streamer, or phono stage. A suite of add-ons, about \$1500 in total, made up for that deficiency: an iFi Audio Zen Phono phono stage, a Denafrips Ares II DAC, and an NAD CS1 streamer, plus the requisite interconnects. Once again, I plugged the stock power cords into the Shunyata PS8.



The powerful EX-M1+ was able to drive the Auras to much higher volume levels with no sign of strain, sounding extremely clean and just as detailed as the 40n did. I also liked how the EX-M1+ looked with the Auras—its bright silver chassis complemented the Auras' white cabinets brilliantly, I thought.

A few things about this setup bothered me, though. With three added components, the system was cumbersome to use and looked cluttered compared to the clean, simple look of the 40n setup. And although the EX-M1+ enabled the Auras to play louder, I didn't feel that it provided an improvement in sound quality over the Marantz 40n. In fact, depending on the music, the Marantz-based setup could sound a little smoother in the highs at moderate and low volume levels. Neither system, I concluded, allowed the Auras to reach their full potential.

### Setup 3—most expensive and still convenient

Around the time I realized that the Kinki Studio setup wasn't floating my boat as well as I had expected, I had a chance to get in the new Simaudio Moon North Collection 791 streaming preamplifier and 761 stereo power amplifier. Initially, I planned to review these components in my reference setup—I probably will at some point—but I knew they'd team up superbly with the Auras.

The 791 and 761 are priced at \$16,000 and \$14,000, respectively, much more than the cost of the components I had been using with the Auras previously. The 791 streaming preamplifier was of particular interest to me. It is a good looking, super-high-quality preamplifier that has a built-in phono stage (moving magnet and moving coil), cutting-edge DAC section, and streamer (via Moon's MiND 2 system). It also has a unique, wonderfully conceived intelligent remote control, featuring a volume knob faced with a touch-sensitive OLED display. The fully featured 791 obviated the need for the added components with the Kinki Studio EX-M1+ setup, decluttering my living room.



The 761 power amplifier, with a rated output of 200Wpc into 8 ohms or 400Wpc into 4 ohms, could drive the Auras easily, I was sure. Unfortunately, the top of my console wouldn't accommodate both the 791 and 761, so I had to place the 761 on the floor, underneath the 791. That's not the worst thing in the world, but it's certainly nicer to have everything off the floor. I put a thick wooden cutting board under the amplifier so that at least it wasn't sitting right on the carpet. I connected the 761 to the 791 with XLO DNA balanced cables and plugged both into the PS8 with stock power cords. Everything else remained the same as before.

I fired up the system—and entered sonic nirvana. Unlike the move from the Marantz 40n to the Kinki Studio EX-M1+, which increased the volume level possible but not the sound quality, moving to the Moon amps yielded noticeable improvement in sound: the 761 power amp had a vice-like grip on the Auras, intensifying the bass at all volume levels. Although Estelon rates the Aura only down to 35Hz—many audiophiles expect the bass to extend to 20Hz or thereabouts—on bass-heavy music, such as “Dreams” and “The Chain” or “Pacing the



Cage," from Bruce Cockburn's 1996 album *The Charity of Night* (CD, True North Records TND 150), the Auras didn't just convey to me satisfying moderate bass, they thrust exhilarating deep bass right at me. I can't imagine anyone feeling the need for a subwoofer with these speakers.



Since the sound of the Auras was so open, I thought it might be wise to tame reflections just a little more than what is already controlled by my living room's current acoustic treatments. I installed a pair of acoustic panels, Tönnen's burgundy, on the front wall behind the speakers, which made the room a touch less reverberant. After this treatment, the Auras' sound was ever-so-slightly clearer, and the images a little more focused.

With the Moon components, when I turned the volume up, there was an effortlessness to the sound that was never expressed by the EX-M1+ even though both amps can deliver over 200Wpc. The Moon also brought increased dynamic range to the sound. The Auras acquired a jump factor that was lacking with the Marantz and Kinki Studio setups, and I found myself playing much of my music louder than I normally do—it was just a joy to immerse myself in that sound. It was fun.

I attribute the increase in the Auras' dynamics mostly to the 761 power amplifier, but I could also tell that the superb transparency and detail of the 791 preamplifier played an important role. The more detail you hear in the music, the more dynamic and alive it sounds. I confirmed that one evening with some friends, skipping through key songs in Lana Del Rey's discography that I streamed from Tidal. As we played each song, we focused on Del Rey's voice and marveled at the level of detail issued from the Auras. We were able to hear the subtlest of vocal inflections and the various studio tricks that are used to enhance the emotive power of the performance. We continued with other songs, and I realized that I had never heard digital playback in my living room sound so detailed, so revealing.

Vinyl sounded good, too, but in view of the step up in sound quality the Moon electronics provided, I suspected that the X1 turntable was probably the weakest link in the system. For the most part, the sound with vinyl was dynamic enough, but at times less so than I would have liked.

Before you get the idea that I'm throwing the X1 under the bus, let me clarify: it's a great turntable for the price. The X1, with Pro-Ject's Pick it DS2 moving-coil cartridge, sells for \$1399 in Canada. In the US, it's priced at \$1299 but comes with a Sumiko Ranier cartridge. It's hard to beat the X1 for price but not impossible; there are other similarly priced good turntables. There are certainly better ones at higher prices. So, while I could be wrong in thinking that the X1 is now a weak link—a more expensive turntable may not improve anything—I think it'd be worth trying to replace it with a higher-end vinyl rig, considering how far I've already gone with this system.



## The next step(s)

"A beautiful, great-sounding stereo starts with beautiful, great-sounding speakers," the title says. Because a system's sound quality is largely determined by the speakers and how they interact with the listening room (given proper amplification), and its visual appeal is largely perceived as that of its most conspicuous element, the speakers.





The Auras have given me that starting point: sonic substance in seductive style. To many listeners, partnering the Auras with the Marantz 40n or a similar integrated amplifier would be a perfectly satisfactory, reasonably priced setup. To me, the Moon components, on account of their amplification quality and wealth of features, are a better complement for the Auras. And now I feel the need to find a turntable that is a better match for the Auras and the Moon, an adventure I plan to write about in the next installment of this column. By the time that's done, I may well find something else to change, so I hope you'll check back and follow me on this, my quest for a beautiful, great-sounding stereo.

*.Doug Schneider*

#### **Associated Equipment**

- Turntable: Pro-Ject Audio Systems X1 with Pick it S2 cartridge and Connect it E cable.
- CD player: Pro-Ject Audio Systems CD Box S3.
- Integrated amplifiers: Marantz 40n, Kinki Studio EX-M1+.
- Preamplifier: Simaudio Moon North Collection 791.
- Amplifier: Simaudio Moon North Collection 761.
- Speaker cables: QED XT25, Nirvana Audio S-L.
- Interconnects: XLO DNA.
- Power cord: Shunyata Research Venom HC.
- Power distributor: Shunyata Research PS8.
- Acoustical treatment: BXI Sound Absorber panels (20), Tönnen Sound panels.



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**Simaudio Moon 791 streaming preamplifier**  
**Doug Schneider (SoundStage! Hi-Fi, December 2023):**

"Whether an analog playback or digital, the 791 asserted no sound, coloration, or character of its own. It simply got out of the way and passed the music signal through, which is exactly what a top-drawer preamplifier is supposed to do."

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