

The Cutting Edge

Estelon X Diamond Mk II Loudspeaker

Absolutely Fabulous

Jonathan Valin

Let's face it. Most of us on the reviewing side of this business don't get to keep the stuff we write about long enough to get attached to it. There are exceptions, of course. But, generally, gear, even great gear, comes and goes within a matter of weeks or months, after which we move on to the next new thing that has caught our ears. Estelon's X Diamond loudspeaker is an exception.

My memory of hearing the original X remains as fresh and vivid today as it was almost ten years ago, when I first heard the speaker in my listening room and began forming my impressions of its build- and sound-quality. Part of the reason for the persistence of this memory is because the X was so fundamentally different than (and sonically superior to) virtually every other direct-radiating dynamic floor-stander that I'd reviewed up until that time.

To begin with, it was made (and still is) in Tallinn, Estonia. As I wrote in my February 2013 TAS review, world-class loudspeakers were not the first things that came to mind when I thought of Tallinn, Estonia. (In fact, prior to the arrival of the Estelons, there *was* no first thing that came to mind when I thought of Tallinn, Estonia.) However, as the X Diamond taught me and as recent high-end-audio history has continued to prove, brilliant and innovative audio engineering isn't confined to Great Britain, Europe, Scandinavia, the Pacific Rim, or the good old U.S. of A. The folks in Russia, China, and Eastern Europe are just as well trained, imaginative, and gifted as the usual suspects—and have just as deep a devotion to the sound of music.

Alfred Vassilkov, the guiding force behind Estelon, is living proof. Highly educated (he graduated with honors in Electro Acoustics from Saint Petersburg University), he was already a multiple-award-winning engineer when I met him at the turn of the 2010s. A soft-spoken, mannerly, sweet-natured man, he was, nonetheless, dead serious about creating the highest-fidelity products possible and, as it turned out, intellectually, experientially, and artistically equipped to do so. "Think of him," I wrote back in 2013, "as the Alon Wolf (also an émigré) of Estonia."



Just as surprising as where it came from and who designed it was what the X Diamond was made of. At that time, I'd never before heard a loudspeaker with what amounted to a stone (well, a slurry of granite and acrylic) enclosure, molded, both inside and out, in a rounded, quasi-hourglass shape ("quasi" because the bottom of the hourglass is larger in circumference than the top), with no external or internal parallel walls and extensive, cast-in stiffening spars to break up resonance nodes and standing waves.

It is rather late in the day to explain, once again, why enclosures are so important to the sound of loudspeakers. To put it succinctly, cabinets

have a sound of their own, which reinforces, exaggerates, or outright degrades that of the drivers and crossovers they house, either by internal resonance, ringing, or overdamping, or, just as importantly, by external reflection, diffraction, frequency-dependent time-and-phase delays (so-called "step response" issues), or (particularly in the case of speakers that use a ported woofer) what might be called room-induced megaphonics, i.e., bass boom. (Woofers in sealed enclosures have their own set of distortions, chief among which is the leaning down of timbre in the bass and lower mids, which also reduces dynamic impact.)

When you add these enclosure issues to the colorations

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inherent in any set of drivers, you come face-to-face with what, IMO, is the key problem with loudspeaker designs (or, at least, with direct-radiating-loudspeaker designs): They are, for the most part, engineered on paper and tested by number to perform well in anechoic or quasi-anechoic chambers; only they aren't called upon to perform on paper or in anechoic chambers. In life, they have to make music in real-world listening rooms. The result is that the factor which is most important to their sound—their inevitable and often massive interactions with the reflective/absorptive spaces in which they reside—is almost always an engineering afterthought (or a design issue addressed via complex, outboard, DSP Band-Aids).

Which brings me to what is, perhaps, the chief reason why the Estelon X Diamond has remained so memorable. Alfred Vassilkov spent five years developing a speaker that could, first and foremost, live and work at its best in a real-world listening room. His brilliant solution to the interaction quandary was, as noted, a unique enclosure: that gorgeous, quasi-hour-glass-shaped cabinet made of high-mass, highly damped, and immensely stiff marble, molded to present the drivers mounted on it with no parallel internal or external surfaces. By supplying a narrow, rounded baffle for the tweeter (located in the middle of the speaker, at the “waist” of the hourglass) and progressively larger radiuses for the midrange (located above the tweeter) and the woofer (located below), Vassilkov achieved the same ideal dispersion for each driver and the same uniform phase response at the listening seat, much (though, of course, not completely) like the phase response of an (also rounded) MBL Radialstrahler.

Vassilkov's unique enclosure/room solution came to me as a sonic surprise and an intellectual shock. For one thing, up until then (and very seldom since), I hadn't heard a large, ported speaker that *didn't* boom in the midbass (and take a nosedive in the lowest octaves). But the X Diamond didn't. Indeed, the X had the clearest, flattest-sounding bass response I'd ever heard from a speaker with a port (or, frankly, from a speaker without one).

What made this exceptional bass response doubly surprising was the fact that Vassilkov was using Accuton ceramic woofers (and Accuton midranges and tweeters) in the X. Though famously high in resolution and neutrality (at least when played at low-to-moderate levels), early-gen ceramic drivers had tended, on the basis of my experience, to thin out tone color, compress bass dynamics, and ring unpleasantly in the treble, particularly at louder volumes. (Moreover, they could literally destroy themselves if you played your music too loudly—or if you inadvertently touched their diaphragms with a fingertip.)

Though he was perfectly aware of the “downsides” of ceramic and diamond-coated-ceramic cones, Vassilkov believed that the Accutons' high linearity and low distortion outweighed their demerits. By using only the latest and best offerings in Accuton's line, painstakingly matching those drivers in pairs, mounting them in an enclosure scientifically designed not to exacerbate their problems by “singing along” or by introducing phase/dispersion/diffraction issues, ventilating their moving elements to assure resonance-free response, and using elegant, electrically simple second-order crossovers, he sought to eliminate the ceramic ringing/compression problem. And, mostly, he succeeded.

Indeed, back in 2012–2013, the Estelon X Diamond was the most perfectly phase-coherent all-cone loudspeaker I'd heard in my home. Not only did it defy expectations by sounding like one seamless thing from bottom bass (and its bass went *very* deep into the 20–30Hz range—and did so with superb definition, grip, and clarity) to top treble (Accuton's sometimes aggravatingly bright diamond tweeter was absolutely no sore thumb here); it was also the first multiway cone speaker I'd heard that completely disappeared as a sound source, replacing its presence with the presence of the room or venue in which the recording was made. Like Maggies or MBLs, the Estelon X Diamond simply carved out a different ambient space within the ambience of my listening room and vanished within it. That space expanded as the miking of the source dictated. But whether the stage was narrow or wide, shallow or deep, stunted or sky-high, the X Diamonds just didn't seem to be “projecting” it (or any parts of it) from boxes or drivers. Minus the MBLs' incomparable three-dimensionality and rich, lifelike density of tone color, the Xes were, in their room-filling “disappearing act,” the closest things to 101 X-tremes I'd heard from a cone-speaker-in-a-box.

Of course, I've talked about the sterling “disappearing act” of floorstanding dynamic loudspeakers before (most recently *in re* Børresen 05s). But the Estelon X Diamond was and remains different in this regard. To better explain the difference, I'm going to quote further from my own, decade-old review: “With large multiway cone

speakers—even great ones—you occasionally get the sense that a particular note or pitch (particularly in the treble) is ‘coming from’ a driver or (especially in the bass) from a box. Warren Gehl of Audio Research calls this the ‘aperture effect.’ What it amounts to is the downside of a quasi-point-source transducer in an enclosure.

“In real life, instruments are indeed point sources, but they radiate their sound from that ‘point’ (at different intensities) spherically throughout 360°. With stereo systems, deep bass frequencies are dispersed more or less spherically, but frequencies higher up are not. In the midrange and the treble, cones do not behave like ‘pulsating spheres’; rather, the sounds they produce expand into the listening room in hemispherical or quasi-hemispherical rays. Because they are ‘ray-like’ there are times when little irregularities in frequency or phase response or the effects of enclosure diffraction, dispersion, reflection, or distortion let you trace those rays back to their source—to that ‘point’ in space from which they originate (the driver or the box).

“Every time your ear traces a note or a group of notes back to the loudspeaker, however briefly, the illusion that the presentation is a ‘free-standing’ one, occurring in a space that is qualitatively different than the space of your listening room, is spoiled. If it happens often enough, you begin to lose focus on the music (or I do). Whether because of its highly engineered, artfully sculpted, exceptionally ‘invisible’ enclosure, its ultra-smooth blend of highly neutral and linear drivers, or a combination of

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both, the X Diamond does not break the spell of listening to music seemingly played in a different space and time than the here and now of your room. It is an amazing feat of engineering prowess that makes for wondrous stereo.”

So...the perfect loudspeaker, right?

Well, that depended on what kind of listener you were.

Though capable of astonishing feats of resolution, exceptional neutrality, very quick and lifelike transient response, the best bass I'd heard from a speaker with a ported enclosure, and that magical disappearing act I've never forgotten, the X Diamond was not an inherently warm transducer. It was, in fact, slightly lean in tonal balance—closer in sound to the way a Chiaroscuro line drawing looks than to the voluptuousness of an oil painting. If rich, dense timbre and huge midbass slam were your things, if hearing music played back ultra-loud was also a priority, if, in short, you were a musicality-first listener, then the original X Diamond would have checked some, but not all, of your boxes.

However...that was then.

Comes now the X Diamond Mk II. And it is really something.

To all of the original's ground-breaking virtues—and this is why I've spent so much time rehashing what I wrote a decade ago—it adds the very things that the first X Diamond was missing (or, at least, deficient in). The result is a speaker that stands shoulder-to-shoulder with the best floorstanding dynamics I've heard (which would be the Magico M Pro, M6, and M3). Indeed, in some ways the X Diamond Mk II may outdo those phenomenal Magicos. Which is saying a mouthful (maybe even a sacrilege).

What has changed?

Three things, mainly. First, the tweeter in the X Diamond Mk II is new—Accuton's latest 25mm diamond model, with a

bandwidth that now extends to 60kHz. (The woofer in this three-way design is an 11" ceramic-sandwich dome, the mid/woofer a 7" ceramic-diaphragm cone.) Second, the crossover has been newly redesigned, and is now decked out with the latest and greatest parts, like Mundorf Supreme resistors and Mundorf SilverGold Oil film capacitors. Third, all the internal wiring has been replaced with Kubla-Sosna's top-line offering.

The result of these improvements is quite a bit more audible than you (or I) might have anticipated. Indeed, when it comes to tonality, it is absolutely “character-changing.” To be honest, I'm not sure which of Alfred's modifications is most responsible for the transformation, but what was a speaker that, for all its considerable (and highly memorable) virtues, had a slightly lean tonal balance has

been turned into a naturally rich, vividly full-bodied, exceptionally beautiful-sounding transducer, without any loss of speed or resolution (in fact, with gains in both), without any change in the original's standard-setting coherence and vanishing act, and most importantly, without any reduction (on the best sources) in absolute-sound-like realism, which has increased to the point that (for cones-in-a-box speakers) only the very best Magicos compete with it more or less equally.

Though they are so intimately interrelated, so holistically presented, that they are hard to separate out in the listening, I'm going to try to discuss resolution, dynamics, imaging, and timbre individually. Just be aware that, unless you're deliberately paying attention to one or the other of them, you're not going to hear these things as if they were independent entities. But, for the sake of argument, let's pretend that they are independent, and let's start with what the Xes can tell you about details that you didn't hear in recordings (or didn't hear as clearly) through other great loudspeakers.

I'm going to begin with a 15ips reel-to-reel tape of *Chet Baker Sings* [Pacific/Puget Sound Studios], played back via Metaxas & Sins remarkable Tourbillon deck (which will, in time, receive a screaming rave of its own). This superb mono album was taped in two sessions, the first at Capitol Studios in Hollywood and the second at the Forum in L.A. The first session (comprising tracks 1–6) was completed on February 15, 1954; the second (tracks 7–14) on July 30, 1956.



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It stands to reason that two recordings made in different places at a sizeable distance in time from one another are not going to sound exactly alike. Even if the artists haven't changed, the mic setups vis-à-vis the performers and the acoustics have, and you'll hear this difference as an alteration of timbre and imaging. And so I did—through another very fine, very high-resolution, direct-radiating loudspeaker. However, it took the Estelon X Diamond Mk II to tell me conclusively that the mics had not only been set up a bit differently in a different venue; they'd also been swapped out.

Strictly speaking, this discovery wasn't solely a matter of higher resolution of recording detail; it was also higher resolution of tone color, staging, dynamics, and frequency response. In session one, Chet's voice and trumpet were up-close in perspective (he typically sang, in a quasi-whisper, right on top of the mic), a bit more chesty in the midband, leaner and more closed-in on top, and simply beautiful-sounding overall. This is a sonic profile that I associate with RCA's great 44-BX ribbon microphone. (And it is clear from the album-cover photograph that the recording engineer was, in fact, using a 44-BX suspended on a boom close by Chet's mouth at session number one.)

In the second session, not only does the perspective change a bit (it's not quite as up-close on the instrumentals, though still very close on the vocals); the timbre of Chet's voice, trumpet,

and rhythm section also change. No longer as warm and rich, Chet's tenor is suddenly lighter in balance (not at all dark or chesty), slightly more sibilant, airier and more extended on top, more detailed in the midrange, and less romantically colored overall. With a guy who was famous for his cool, clear, dispassionate, near-vibrato-less vocals (and trumpet playing), the second session sounded just a bit closer to what Baker reputedly sounded like in life (albeit less hi-fi lovely).

Though I was able to hear some of these spatial and timbral differences through my other direct-radiating reference speaker, it was the Estelon X Diamond Mk II that revealed them fully and

revealed the reasons for them. Two years down the road, the engineer had not only switched to a different recording venue; he'd also switched from the RCA ribbon to a German condenser mic. Indeed, the kind of open, airy, uncolored (save for a touch of excess sibilance), fuller-range, more detailed (particularly harmonically) sound on session two is the signature of a Neumann U-47. It was the X Diamond Mk II that told me this, where my other reference did not. (For those of you who remain skeptical, I managed to confirm what the Estelons revealed by doing a bit of research.)

This is resolution of a *very* high order—resolution not just allied to the clarification

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of transient-related details (as is usually the case), but to the higher-fidelity reproduction of timbre, dynamics, and perspective. This is, to use my lingo, a more “complete” presentation (in all sonic regards). And this is what you get with the Estelon X Diamond Mk II.

Let us turn now to dynamics and imaging. The British label Chasing the Dragon is famous for making direct-to-disc LPs, often using a Decca-tree setup and vintage microphones (sometimes the same tube-powered U-47s, M-48s, M-49s, and M-50s that Decca itself used in its heyday). Of course, D2D LPs are recorded directly to lacquer, but as a backup CTD’s head honcho Mike Valentine also

simultaneously records to analog tape at 30ips via an Ampex ATR 102 with half-inch heads. These mastertapes are subsequently duped at 15ips for commercial release and also converted to 24/192 digital. (Valentine prefers the sound of digital copies that start life as reel-to-reel analog tapes.)

The Dragon recording I want to discuss is the 15ips tape version of English jazz singer (and BBC celebrity) Clare Teal’s *A Tribute to Ella Fitzgerald* [Chasing the Dragon]. Accompanied by the Syd Lawrence Orchestra (a 16-piece big band conducted by Chris Dean), Teal and Co. were recorded at the late George Martin’s Air Studios in Hampstead, London, En-

gland, in 2017. Though Teal was separated off from the band by four acoustic screens (to minimize bleed-through on her mic), both the vocals and the accompaniment were performed live in real time and, as noted, recorded analog in two sessions on a single day. I’m not sure what mix of microphones Valentine used for the “orchestra”—from the studio photos it appears to be a Decca-tree setup in front with additional mics to the sides of the band and several helper mics scattered in their midst to cover the trombones on the right and saxophones on the left and the other instrumentalists in between. However, I do know what mic Teal used. It was—guess what?—a vintage Neumann U-47. (Well, if it was good enough for Frank, Chet, and Ella herself....) From what I’ve read, aside from a bit of warm-sounding reverb supplied by an old-fashioned EMT plate unit and some real-time gain-riding via a classic 56-channel/24-track Calrec mixing desk, there was no doctoring of the sound.

Teal and her band’s performances on this recording of chestnuts (“I’ve Got You Under My Skin,” “Begin the Beguine,” “That Old Black Magic,” “Anything Goes”) proved to be surprisingly good. No, Teal isn’t Ella, but she is a lot better than competent, with a clear, bell-like voice and a wry, thoughtful, engaging delivery.

Of course, the real reason to buy this tape or D2D LP isn’t just the playlist or the performers; it’s the sound, which is phenome-

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nally good. So good, in fact, that I've played this tape back repeatedly, just to re-hear something that I rarely hear on a stereo system: a fair simulacrum of the size and sheer acoustical power of a big band going full-tilt. On the ensemble instrumental breaks from *A Tribute to Ella Fitzgerald*, it's as if a solid wall of sonic energy suddenly materializes at the back of the stage. (If you've ever heard a big band in a club, you'll know what I'm talking about.) And yet within this incredibly densely packed block of sound, the color, articulation, and location of individual instruments are preserved with magical distinctness and clarity.

The only other time I was this impressed by a big-band recording played back through a direct-radiating loudspeaker was when I listened through the Raidho D-5s to Count Basie's band backing up the Chairman of the Board on *Sinatra At The Sands* [Reprise/MoFi]. But even the Raidhos didn't generate the you-

are-there perspective, realistic timbre, and *evenly* distributed (top to bottom) dynamic weight that the Estelon X Diamond IIs did on big orchestral choruses.

As was the case with my discussion of resolution, creating the illusion of lifelike dynamic range and impact is not, strictly speaking, simply a matter of nailing differences in intensity. It is just as intimately tied to the realistic presentation of pitch and timbre

at varying volumes, to the way the three-dimensional imaging of instruments changes with changes in level, and to the preservation of individual parts within a massive, highly energized whole. In my experience, some speakers will prioritize the sound of those parts, others the sound and scope of the whole. The Estelon X Diamond Mk II delivers parts and wholes equally, simultaneously, and completely, as you experience

Specs & Pricing

Type: Three-way, passive, bass-reflex loudspeaker

Drivers: Woofer: 280mm (11-inch) Accuton ceramic-sandwich dome; mid/woofer: 173mm (7-inch) Accuton ceramic membrane; tweeter: 25mm (1-inch) Accuton diamond inverted dome

Internal wiring: Kubala-Sosna

Frequency response: 22Hz–60kHz

Power handling: 200W

Nominal impedance: 6 ohms (min. 3.5 ohms at 50Hz)

Sensitivity: 88dB/2.83V

Minimal amplifier power: 20W

Dimensions: 450mm (17.5") x 1370mm (54") x 640mm (25")

Weight: 86 kg (190 lbs.) per piece

Price: \$83,000

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JV's Reference System

Loudspeakers: MBL 101 X-treme, Estelon X Diamond Mk II, Magico M3, Børresen Acoustics 05, Voxativ 9.87, Avantgarde Zero 1, MartinLogan CLX, Magnepan 1.7 and 30.7

Subwoofers: JL Audio Gotham (pair), Magico QSub 15 (pair)

Linestage preamps: Soulution 725,

Aavik C-380, MBL 6010 D, Constellation Audio Altair II, Siltech SAGA System C1, Air Tight ATE-2001 Reference

Phonostage preamps: Soulution 755, Goldmund PH3.8 NEXTGEN, Walker Proscenium V, Constellation Audio Perseus, DS Audio Grand Master, EMM Labs DS-EQ1

Power amplifiers: Soulution 711, MBL 9008 A, Aavik M-380, Constellation Audio Hercules II Stereo, Air Tight 3211, Air Tight ATM-2001, Zanden Audio Systems Model 9600, Siltech SAGA System V1/P1, Odyssey Audio Stratos, Voxativ Integrated 805

Analog sources: Clearaudio Master Innovation, Acoustic Signature Invictus Jr./T-9000, Walker Audio Proscenium Black Diamond Mk V, TW Acoustic Black Knight/TW Raven 10.5, AMG Viella 12

Open-reel tape decks: United Home Audio Ultimate 4 OPS, Metaxas & Sins Tourbillon T-RX

Phono cartridges: DS Audio Grandmaster, DS Audio Master1, Clearaudio Goldfinger Statement, Air Tight Opus 1, Ortofon MC Anna, Ortofon MC A90

Digital sources: MSB Reference DAC, Soulution 760, Berkeley Alpha DAC 2

Cable and interconnects: CrystalConnect Art Series da Vinci, Crystal Cable Ultimate Dream, Synergistic Research Galileo SRX, Ansuz Acoustics Diamond

Power cords: CrystalConnect Art Se-

ries da Vinci, Crystal Cable Ultimate Dream, Synergistic Research Galileo SRX, Ansuz Acoustics Diamond

Power conditioner: AudioQuest Niagara 5000 (two), Synergistic Research Galileo SRX, Ansuz Acoustics DTC, Technical Brain

Support systems: Critical Mass Systems MAXXUM and QXK equipment racks and amp stands

Room treatments: Stein Music H2 Harmonizer system, Synergistic Research UEF Acoustic Panels/Atmosphere XL4/UEF Acoustic Dot system, Synergistic Research ART system, Shakti Hallographs (6), Zanden Acoustic panels, A/V Room Services Metu acoustic panels and traps, ASC Tube Traps

Accessories: CAD GC-1 and GC-3 Ground Control, DS Audio ION-001, SteinMusic Pi Carbon Signature record mat, Symposium Isis and Ultra equipment platforms, Symposium Rollerblocks and Fat Padz, Walker Prologue Reference equipment and amp stands, Walker Valid Points and Resonance Control discs, Clearaudio Double Matrix Professional Sonic record cleaner, Synergistic Research RED Quantum fuses, HiFi-Tuning silver/gold fuses

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them in life. Outside of the MBL 101 X-tremes (and a visit to a nightclub), it is not an effect that I've often heard on a stereo system—and never more memorably through a direct-radiator than here.

Let's move on to timbre (even though sensationally natural tone color has also been part and parcel of my discussion of the X Diamond II's resolution, dynamic range, and imaging). Just to make the playing field more level, let's dial down the volume and the musical complexity, and consider the sound of Joan Baez's voice and guitar on a 15ips tape of her eponymous first album *Joan Baez* [Vanguard/Puget Sound Studios].

I doubt whether many of you (certainly many of you from my generation) *haven't* heard this famous recording, which is one of the pinnacles of the late Fifties/early Sixties folk revival. It was recorded in Manhattan Towers Hotel ballroom—which Baez has called a seedy dump of a place—on four days in the summer of 1960, when Baez was all of 19 years old. Vanguard used three microphones to record her—the left and right for stereo, the central mic for mono. (There was also a fourth mic for Fred Hellerman's guitar accompaniment on six songs.) I wish I could tell you what kind of mics were used to pick up Baez's vocals and guitar, but in spite of repeated queries I've been unable to find out. The best I can do is make an educated guess, which would be either RCA 44-BXs (at least, on the first three cuts) or Neumann U-47s or Schoeps M-221B/26s. Because of the difference in timbre and perspective starting with the fourth cut (“House of the Rising Sun”), it is likely that the mics (whatever they were) were re-situated at a greater distance (or height) from Joan at some point during the four-day recording sessions. The sound doesn't change enough to make me think that there was also a change in the type of microphone being used (as was the case in the Chet Baker recording), but the presentation does become less warm, full-bodied, and close-up.

Even with this slight change in perspective and tone color, this is an extraordinarily beautiful-sounding album. The choice of songs, beginning with what would become one of Baez's hallmarks, “Silver Dagger,” is uniformly and unforgettably wonderful. Once heard, though in all likelihood it will be listened to a lot more than once, it is the kind of album and the kind of music that stay with you for the rest of your life.

It's not just the playlist of Appalachian, English, and Scots ballads that is so indelibly memorable; it is also Baez's voice and delivery. The unspoken (and sometimes spoken) rule among the folk-singing crowd of the Fifties was that singers should serve the songs, rather than standing apart from (or above) them because of their own talent or arrangement. From the start, even before the start, Baez was something of an exception to the rule, which (with Dylan) gradually became the new rule. Even when she was a barefoot kid singing at hootenannies on MacDougal Street, she sang with such passion and power that she could and often did drown out other singers (to their annoyance).

While there is nothing “showy” about the arrangements on *Joan Baez*—which are meticulously spare and simple (Baez even had some compunction about including Fred Hellerman on the recording, for fear that, because of his reputation with The Weavers and as an expert sideman, he would make the album

seem too “commercial”)—Baez's soprano remains a uniquely pure, powerful, and hauntingly expressive instrument. Though almost all of these classic ballads had been recorded many times before, it is *Joan Baez* we think of when we hear or think of them again.

Though the 15ips dub of the production master and Kostas Metaxas' sensationally lifelike-sounding Tourbillon tape deck are undoubtedly playing their parts in the presentation, I have to say that (the 101 X-tremes and certain Magicos aside) I've never heard Baez's youthful voice sound better (more musical, more authentic, more realistic, more completely “there”) than it does through the Estelon X Diamond Mk IIs. The slight harshness that can sharpen her upper octaves to an edge when she is singing all-out (a harshness that is far more marked on later pressings of Vanguard LPs than it is on the mastertape I listened to through several loudspeakers) is, if not tamed completely, certainly toned down to the point where it is no longer close to piercing (and this without any loss of her native power). Hearing her through the Estelons was like hearing her as she was then, as *I* was then—before Kennedy, before Vietnam, before King, before Watergate, before Reaganomics, before the Twin Towers, before Too Big To Fail, before COVID, before You Know Whom. This is the magic of recorded music—which at its best obliterates the passage of time and brings back what is gone, and brings back the *you* that is gone, too. Listening to her sound so youthfully strong and hopeful and gifted and

sincere reminded me of what an effect she (and soon after, Dylan and The Beatles) had on my life. Her strength and independence, her sincerity and proud unconventionality, her humanity were among the key threads that led to me to hippiedom (and, alas, the drugs and disappointment that followed that ill-fated excursion). She is not just part of my musical past; she is part of my lived past and the future that was spun, for better and worse, from it. These things wouldn't have come to mind absent this recording—and the Estelons.

I think my assessment of the X Diamond Mk IIs is clear. This is not just one of the great floorstanding, direct-radiating loudspeakers; it is one of the greatest floorstanding, direct-radiating loudspeakers. Its relatively modest size (four-and-a-half-feet tall, a foot-and-a-half wide) and beautiful (and beautifully functional) shape make it ideal for modestly-sized-to-larger rooms (though Estelon's bigger—and just as beautiful and innovative—transducers may better suit truly large spaces). Obviously, I recommend it. Indeed, I can't recommend it highly enough. Which is why Alfred Vassilkov's Estelon X Diamond Mk II is the 2021 winner of *The Absolute Sound's* foremost honor, the Overall Product of the Year Award.

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