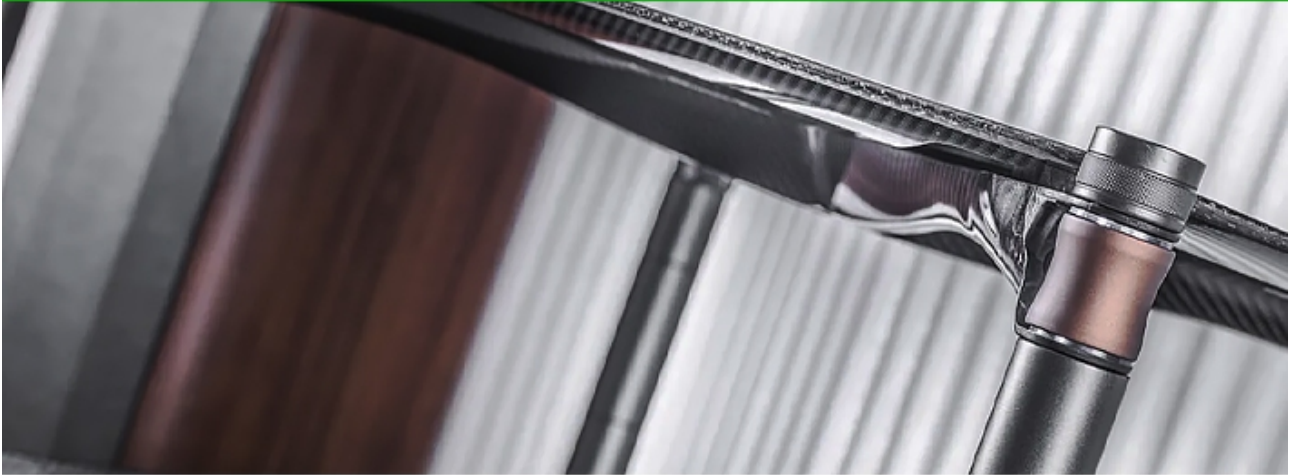


Totally Wired

Music systems for the quality conscious

Bassocontinuo Revolution AEON X Rack Review



A component in it's own right.

Bassocintinuo can tell you why you need a rack convincingly on their own website, but I'm here to tell you why you need a Revolution – or more specifically the new Aeon X rack system which is part of the Revolution range.

We've been on a steep learning curve, immersing ourselves in the detail of the designs, reading the background papers and reports, sitting in on presentations and most importantly listening.

Having made the commitment to a Lyra XL4 rack on the basis of a recommendation, we admitted to some trepidation, but in hindsight, this was needless. The arrival of the first Bassocontinuo products convinced us of the design and engineering quality, and shortly afterward the resultant improvement in sound easily justified the comparatively modest spend*.

*The Lyra rack we have costs about the same as a pair of entry level Sonus faber speakers and given both are hand made in Italy, the comparison seems appropriate.

This led to the investigation of the Ultra Feet. Which for some may be an affordable or practical alternative to a rack and illustrate Bassocontinuo's rigorous approach to the problem of vibration.

But call me impulsive; what I was hearing made me want even more and so when presented with the chance to listen to Bassocontinuo's highest performance model – the Aeon X – there was no way to decline. On a recent Monday morning I loaded the distributor's only unit of this rack into the back of our car and returned to our Waitati home.

So how do you evaluate such a component?

Bassocontinuo routinely exhibit at international hifi shows and populate their racks with frighteningly costly components. Their own website can be a tribute to an aesthetically ideal life with all the best brands. As always we try to do things a little differently and find a way to get to the heart of the design's intentions in the context of systems that are attainable.



Ready for the comparison; Aeon X (NZ\$12,600 as pictured) on the left and the Lyra XL4 (NZ\$3780) on the right with Lumin T2 and NuPrime AMG STA.

Bassocontinuo also publish a matrix of parameters for all their rack systems covering 7 different variables including price, performance load capacity and more. Ranked out of 5, the Aeon X scores 5 for performance, 4 for price. The Lyra by way of comparison is 2 for performance, yet higher for load capacity at 3 and 1 for price – ie luxury entry level in their own words.

We have found a couple of earlier reviews including one for the Lyra XL4 that is our benchmark in this review and another on one of Bassocontinuo's earlier designs. But outside of these and a few forum posts there is remarkably little to go on, yet there are a lot of questions to answer.

A simple system will often give the most pleasure. Just strip away the complications and get down to listening. So the Lumin network player, directly running into a single NuPrime AMG STA power amplifier, with a pair of stand mounted small speakers, in this case my favourite Monitor Audio model, the uniquely talented Studio, provided the raw material. This simplicity means less connections so we could legitimise some KLEI cables, and also makes comparisons between racks much easier to do on a practical level.

For a couple of evenings we just settled down with the system on the Lyra 2.4 rack, Ultra feet inserted, and it would have been easy to stop there. Despite being far from the most costly components we sell, the Lumin/NuPrime/Monitor audio combo has a lot going for it (there are plenty of reviews out there that confirm this), and as a combination ticks all the boxes in terms of transparency, accuracy and outright fun. I've already been convinced by the Lyra 2.4 and the sound was as good as any system we've put together at this level and maybe a bit beyond.

The next step was to reconfigure the new Aeon X rack so that we were comparing like with like. The one we had was set up with three shelves, we only needed two. Here's the first thing to appreciate – no tools are required and it's a simple task to unscrew the 4 solid steel leg sections and remove a shelf. This reveals the absorbent washers and threaded inserts that hold the legs together. Because the washers are compliant, the legs and solid copper inserts that sit between the flanges of the cross brace should not be tightened beyond what is easily done by hand. And this makes disassembly easy. Next revelation – the carbon fibre monocoque cross brace is remarkably light but also scarily strong. Looking closely the finish is very good – you can tell that the unit is hand made. Carbon fibre isn't the easiest to work with but Italian craftsmanship proves adept with this new material. You can also see the judicious application of damping material although the greater part of the assembly is hollow given the extremely low weight. This rack also came with red (level 3) damping pads to support the shelf. I'd surmise that you can choose the most appropriate pads as we do with the Ultra feet taking into account the weight of the components to go on each shelf. The shelves themselves are also carbon fibre with a honeycomb pattern. This is a sandwich of different materials that combine strength, lightness and damping. The shelf just sits lightly on the damping pads, on the cross members of the rack. Because the legs are solid steel, the total weight of the rack is substantial which grants considerable stability. And the feet, rather than going down the conventional path of using spikes, are damping pads of another distinct elastomer that decouples the rack from the floor. The legs are an appreciably wider diameter than in the Lyra and so are significantly heavier.

While we'd been using the Ultra feet in combination with the Lyra 2.4, we made the choice to listen to the Aeon X with the components sitting directly on the shelves – everything we know and have read about carbon fibre and the knowledge that the shelf was already resting on Level 3 damping pads, suggested that in this setting the Ultra feet were not required.

Of course before we got any further someone else claimed ownership of the rack...



Pyewacket is a substantial cat – but the Aeon X shelves can safely support components up to 60Kg so he's well accommodated.

While the Lyra 2.5 legs use spikes that isolate the rack from the damped floor protectors and separate each shelf, the Aeon X is effectively coupled between all the shelves so is more of a single unit. Yet with all the damping inserts the Aeon X rack is compliant and has a surprising amount of flex. This is all part of the design.

So, we have two racks side by side, with two shelves each at a similar height. With just two pieces of electronics it's an easy matter to swop...

One track in and I'm a carbon fibre convert!

As good the value of the Lyra might be in terms of making a worthwhile difference, the Aeon X is genuinely transformative. It's really like listening to a different system. While previously we felt we could hear the signatures of the individual components, everything is now working together as a seamless whole. All the residual artefacts that we'd previously lived with were made apparent by their absence. This needs to be explained...

Our listening experiences will always be affected by many variables – the room acoustic, the actual system, speaker positioning, the incoming power quality, cables and vibration. If you have dealt with any or all of the first five, you will have achieved a lot in terms of improving the transparency, accuracy and enjoyment that recorded music can deliver. To suddenly have the same rigour in design aimed at the physical support and environment that your system works in can yield a substantial improvement.

Now – here's the really interesting thing for us; the improvements we initially were most impressed with happened at low volumes. Which emphasised that the ability to damp out vibration created internally in components is just as important as isolation, and it's self evident that the carbon fibre shelves and damping pads on which they sit have a lot to do with this. This is something we've had prior experience with; The Black Diamond Racing cones were a proven carbon fibre accessory that really did work. The cones were supplemented by various other pieces of carbon fibre ('the pits', 'those things'). But that was literally last century and we've come a long way since then. While working through this process, I have made a point of searching for both reviews and opinion. There is a strong consensus that they really were on to something but they never quite broke out of the accessory market. A single Aeon X shelf is vastly more advanced. With the BDR cones, almost everyone could hear an improvement but but it was sometimes subtle depending on the component. There's no such equivocation with the Aeon X.

Once we started to extend the system with higher sound levels the isolating properties of the Aeon X come to the fore; there's a formidable percussive drive and stability that we've not previously experienced. The harder we pushed the system the more obvious this became; the sound hanging together in a way that we've not heard previously. Every system has a 'red line' in volume but the Aeon X definitely extends this by a good margin.

This is where the gap between the Lyra and Aeon opened up to a gulf. If you like the idea of live sound levels the Aeon X will take you there with explosive dynamics and rock solid bass. For me it's sludge metal, for you it might be the power of a full orchestra – regardless of genre, when you hear your system freed of the constraints rattling around, it all makes perfect sense. The bigger and more powerful your speakers, the more critical vibration control and isolation become. This makes our

experience with the Aeon X all the more impressive as the little stand mount speakers used obviously don't generate as much bass as a fully fledged floor stander. Of course we do have these and it's clear that this is perhaps more the intended destination for the Aeon X, but as we said at the outset, this is a review of the stand's capabilities.

This is what I'm hearing with the the Bassocontinuo racks – the Lyra establishes a benchmark proving that their research based designs do work. The Aeon X shows what happens when you can accurately quantify improvements above that benchmark and have the design and manufacturing capacity to experiment, then turn it all into a well finished, consistently repeatable product.

In our own living room, with the Aeon X, we heard parts of recordings that have never been apparent before in any setting. There was a consistent improvement in qualities such as stereo imaging, the reduction of glare and solidity of bass. As with many changes made in systems, these effects did vary depending of the quality of recording – not surprisingly the best productions gained the most. But as the saying goes a rising tide lifts all boats.

Detail of the bronze finish inserts and elastomer washers that isolate the carbon fibre cross members. >>>>>

What is really striking is that with the intentional use of a system made up of what we could describe as mid-range components, we achieved results that we'd previously not heard when using considerably more costly models that we do know are individually better (again, this is in a setting we we methodically use to compare). The rack is the variable and the results are compelling.



Our own listening makes the following clear; the Bassocintinuo racks are worthwhile audio components in their own right and the contribution they make to the end sound more than justifies the cost.

The Aeon X rack delivered an improvement equal to, and in many cases greater than, what we have previously achieved with more costly components or cables. We operate in a middle ground with brands such as Lumin, Sonus faber and NuPrime who have both entry level components (around the cost of an iPhone or new Galaxy), and high end options. So we are able to make these comparisons and know that you will hear similar results in your own home.

Bespoke design lets you choose what you need

Unlike a single component, a Bassocontinuo rack is effectively bespoke – you choose model, finish and number of shelves. The actual performance is effectively determined by the model and the technology that goes into that particular line. So the end price will be a combination of the quality of the x the number of shelves. This isn't unusual – with any speaker cable, it's the length that dictates the cost and so if you can halve the distance you can double the quality for the same end price.

The Aeon X shelves are generously proportioned – this means we are often able to accommodate two components (this includes almost all NuPrime and many Lumin models) on a single shelf. And there's a lot to be said for simple systems with fewer components. Especially when streaming is improving at such a rate which gives you access to an effectively unlimited range of music at increasingly high quality levels.

That said as long time analogue enthusiasts it can sometimes be hard to combine the best of all worlds on just two shelves. The modularity of the Bassocontinuo racks does mean it's possible to stagger the transition, or accommodate even more components – you can specify up to 5 shelves and vary the height between each to suit. So while more shelves do mean more cost, you also get better performance out of more components.

What about turntables?

While there is a belief out there that turntables benefit most from isolation and that with electronics the improvements made are marginal, our own listening suggests this isn't quite the case; why is this? Because turntables are so prone to vibration issues, the better designs have really concentrated on isolation and damping. And it's also possible that turntable designers effectively 'tune' their models to deliver a specific sound. This is part of the aura of analogue. And with all the variables involved in an analogue system – the turntable setup, cartridge and phono stage choices, I've made a conscious choice to evaluate the Aeon X with a digital system.

And because we've clearly established that the Aeon X makes a simple digital system with two pieces of electronics and no moving parts sound considerably better, it follows that in any analogue system the same will apply to the amplification. I certainly do intend to further investigate the performance of our turntable options with Bassocontinuo and suspect that this will lead to a revaluation of the actual set up of each turntable. It would be likely that we presently compensate for the stand on which I routinely set up and that with a better rack, the reduction of incoming vibration and also absorption of plinth vibration that may well be part of the turntables 'character', leads to a different set-up in terms of tracking force, VTA and damping.

The Aeon X or the Aeon Light?

The audio industry sometimes fosters a belief that weight, size and the inevitably high cost of both are inextricably linked to sound quality; yet in recent times we've found exceptions to the rule. The Aeon X both proves this exception with the eerie lightness of the carbon fibre cross members and shelves, and unlike some of their other models, places less emphasis on capacity to take insanely heavy amplifiers

(for that they have the Golia). Inevitably you'll look at the Bassocontinuo website and see the recent introduction of the Aeon Light which is another option within the Revolution X range that is centred around the Aeon X. So I'll outline the critical differences for you...

The Aeon X is available as of now; the Aeon Light is a lower cost option but this has led to Bassocontinuo overstepping their production capacity and we're unlikely to see any deliveries until well into next year. The variability in exchange rates means we can't be absolutely certain about where the end price will actually fall, whereas for Aeon X, it's set.

The Aeon X has greater load capacity and the shelves are separate from the cross members with separate damping pads. Aeon light is a simplified design with the shelves attaching directly to the vertical legs. The Aeon Light shelves themselves are actually more complex in construction than the Aeon X shelves, and because of this it's probable that this is a contributing factor to the delay in production meeting demand.

On paper there doesn't appear to be a significant difference in performance but I have a feeling that the extra decoupling in Aeon X plus the ability to fine tune the damping to component weight will make a worthwhile audible difference. The Aeon X looks just a bit cooler too. These are all things I hadn't really considered prior to having the Aeon X actually here and working – I really want to just keep this unit now 😊

The longer we listen to the Aeon X, the more we find to like

While there is the immediate hit when you first listen to your system with greatly improved isolation and damping, it's the subtleties that you pick up on over time that really make it worthwhile. You'll often notice these when playing albums and tracks that you haven't listened to for a while; in many cases it can sound like a completely new production and you'll gain new insight and appreciation.



The polished carbon fibre monocoque supports the honeycomb section carbon fibre shelf.

Aesthetics play a part in any choice. The Italian influence with Bassocontinuo is very much part of the package. This is design, not just engineering. You have choices in finish and configuration, and this can be changed in the future to accommodate an evolving system. The finish is excellent as is the durability. Even the packaging and presentation when setting up inspires confidence and pride of

ownership. Aeon X looks great in the pictures but is definitely better in your own room and can be a design statement in itself.

Unlike some components we've listened to, we don't want to go back to the previous set up to check what we were hearing. It was just so obvious and compelling. When changing components it can often be the case you'll improve some aspects but still feel like it's not a complete package. The Aeon X, in our listening, improves on every aspect of the performances we are listening to.

It's likely that the mix of techniques used by Bassocontinuo are responsible for the 'across the board' improvements. The legs are solid steel and massive yet the carbon fibre monocoque cross brace and shelves are extremely light. There's decoupling and damping applied by several methods and inbuilt flexibility yet the structural elements are extremely rigid. So every component is placed in an environment where they are both isolated from incoming vibration yet internally produced vibration such as power supply hum is also dealt with.



Detail of the Aeon X feet – no spikes – just isolation and stability.

When we have dealt with previous isolation products, they tend to concentrate on just one aspect; this can lead to negative impressions such as excessive damping sucking the life out of the sound, or rigid isolation components that shift resonances to tight but more obvious frequencies. This leads to generalisations about what specific material might do to the sound. Bassocontinuo are taking a much more holistic approach and we're hearing the benefits. And while Bassocontinuo do push their measurement and analysis techniques, it's obvious that they do this from the standpoint of being

genuine music enthusiasts. The Aeon X rack is our focus but it's obvious that it benefits from the economies of scale and established design and engineering smarts that Bassocontinuo have amassed over time. This, combined with the modular nature means that, while priced well above storage products, the Aeon X actually represents great value for money in systems where it might equate to the total cost of electronics. We've already ended up at the same point with cables.

Another key point with our Aeon X experience; we (and you) are probably quite happy with the sound and operation of our system as it stands – we're not trying to solve obvious problems but simply to get more of what we enjoy. This is what the Aeon X really delivers. **It simply allows every other part of the system to perform to potential – and up until now we didn't really understand just how much untapped potential existed.**

For a more costly system the Aeon X is a no-brainer. If you've built up a system of carefully chosen and obviously quite special components it makes even more sense – not only will the potential be greater but the increased performance of such components will make the improvements even more obvious. Again, this approach may well be better than changing individual components which individually may cost more than the Aeon X yet not offer the global improvement.

Conclusion

The Aeon X Rack from Bassocontinuo combines state of the art materials and design with a rigorous analytical approach towards supporting, isolation and control of vibration in order to improve the sound quality of any system. We have found the audible improvements made to be well worthwhile and beyond our expectations, allowing our modest system to reach new levels of performance that rival considerably more costly options. The Aeon X goes far beyond the idea of a rack as storage – it's a fully fledged component in it's own right delivering enhanced performance across all audio qualities. By comparing the Aeon X to a similarly configured Lyra 2.5 rack we have been able to fully appreciate and understand the differences in design and hear the end results. Recommended without reservation.

John Ransley – Totally Wired September 2023.

