

Vienna Acoustics Mozart Grand Loudspeaker

A year-long quest for a great-sounding speaker at a real-world price.

Sallie Reynolds

For nearly a year, I've been on a quest for a true musical speaker capable of holding its own in a growing system. Not in the \$10,000 range, mind you, but down around \$3000 per pair. When I started, I said to myself, "Impossible." But in fact, I've found not one, but three worthy of your notice, the latest being the Mozart Grand, a two-and-a-half-way model¹ from Vienna Acoustics that runs \$2750 the pair.

While waiting for Terry Medalen, the distributor's representative who was coming to help me refine setup, I broke the Mozarts in for a couple of days. They sounded clear right out of the box and I put them where I start out with most speakers—about six feet apart, three feet from the wall, not toed in. I made no effort to tweak their position.

It is always interesting to participate in a setup when the experts are at work. In Terry's competent hands, the Mozarts, in ten minutes, were a foot closer to the wall than I had them, three feet farther apart, and toed in. Final location was 24" from the back wall, nine feet apart (!), and toed in sharply. All the while, I sat in the listening chair, saying, "Yes, better," "No," "Uh?" (I try never to pretend to hear something I don't, though sometimes you want to hear something so badly you think you do—or do you?) We were using a duet between soprano and double-bass, which makes a good test for phase and soundstage [Rob Wasserman's *Duets*, MCAD; don't get the German reissue]. Jennifer Warnes is the singer; the song is "The Ballad of the Runaway Horse." The voice was coming

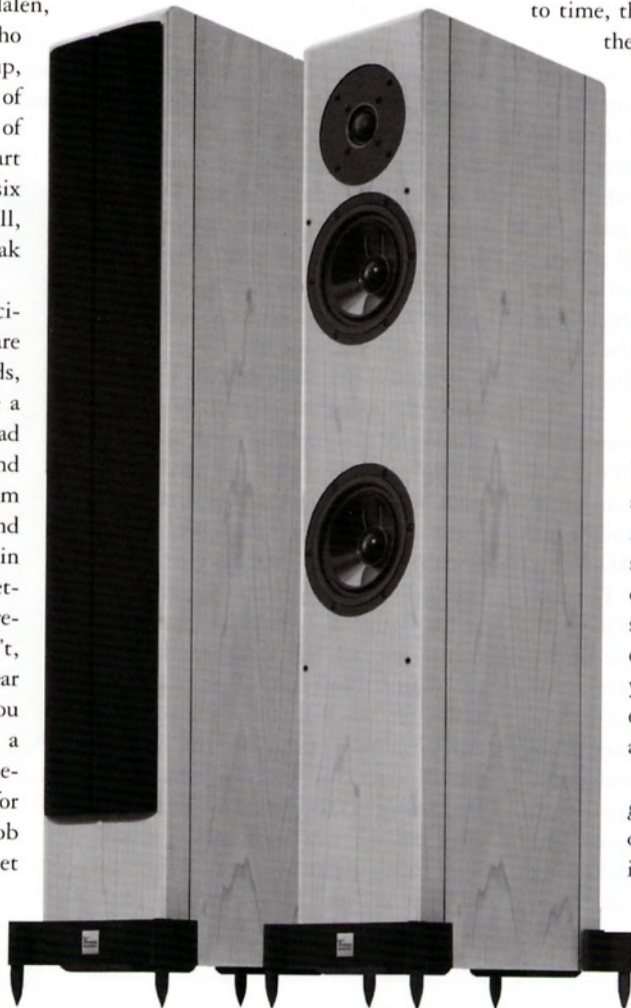
from the left. Terry swung the left speaker in about two inches—and most unobtrusively, Warnes *leapt* into center stage.

Next we went for tonal balance and other goodies with Sanctuary's *Sanctuary: Contemplative Improvisations for Organ, Cello, and Bass Clarinet* [XXI]. On Cut 3, the organ rides deep beneath the breath of the clarinet—oh, yes, this CD has far more going for it than just set-up testing.

That was fun. Most of us are guilty of thinking, from time to time, that the tweekers are a bit over

the top—after all, how much difference can an inch make? Well, a lot, actually, if you know what you are doing or have infinite patience and are not afraid to experiment. (This is my way of urging you to play with your speakers.) A good speaker will sound basically good almost anywhere. It will be clear and extended and have its specific tonal characteristics, top to bottom. You might be satisfied with it as is, but proper placement is nearly always an audible and exciting improvement, and on some speakers, it's necessary for developing both proper soundstaging—how the musicians are laid out in front of you—and imaging—where each instrument is set and the air and "light" around it.

The Mozart is a very, very good speaker, and it has one quality I've never heard before in this price range. It reproduces the recording space—any recording space—in a way that will make the hair rise on the back of your neck. In



¹ The Mozart Grand features two mid/bass drivers and one tweeter, where one mid/bass driver handles low frequencies only, while the other extends all the way up into the midrange. In this way you enjoy the purity of a single midrange driver, but the power (and surface area) of dual bass drivers.

Saudades [Water Lily], the small jazz group is in a large cathedral. The two mikes are crossed above them about 7 feet up and 10 feet out. On these speakers, you hear the walls; you hear the stone of those walls (stone makes a reverberant space that sounds quite different from that of a wooden room—deeper, hollower, sharper in the

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lows, sometimes slightly flatter in highs) and the arching height. And yet the players are there in front of you, undiminished by this would-be daunting space.

On *The Essential Leonard Cohen* [Sony], you hear studio space. And you hear different studio spaces, some large, some small, a few positively claustrophobic—an airless feel that's uncomfortable. This characteristic, by the bye, isn't just a high-end brag point. It makes a difference in the overall perception of "reality," just as hearing the moisture in the mouth of a singer can take you to a jazz club, and its lack keep you just that last inch away from suspension of disbelief.

The Mozart's highs are extended, clear, crisp. On Sneakin' Out's *Train Wreck* [no label],² the high percussion of the bells and xylophone ring and tingle and decay into sweetness. Mandolin strings twang, sing, and quiver. The bass hums and growls. The walls of the bakery, where it was recorded, are flimsy and close (I won't say flour-coated—you might not think it was a joke.) On the Mercury CD of Kodály's *Háry János* Suite, the violins have that faint raspy, rosy sound real violins do, from about 15 feet away, at the onset of a note. The cimbalom, that hammered-string instrument from Eastern Europe, rings and sings and reverberates magically.

The transients of notes are so well reproduced by the Mozart that you get a satisfying sense of "speed." And each sound is delineated in its full range from onset to decay, yet all feed seamlessly into the musical fabric. This reproduction of the continuity of music plus the individual character of each note is devilishly hard


to describe, but it is, when you come down to it, what music does—create the whole, its parts, and the sum of its parts, all in the same breath.

As an ancillary quality, the Mozart's midrange has remarkable depth and transparency. Even in heavy orchestral works, the individual instrumental groups are correctly placed and make their contribution within the fabric of sound. The lows are powerful (though making them fully so requires a subwoofer), with the Mozart's purity emphasizing the tonal quality of organ pedal notes, something you hear seldom, even live.

What's left? Some details. You will need the metal bases and spike feet, beautifully designed not to be obtrusive and to do the isolation job. And you'll want the grille cloths. Yes, you will. Vienna Acoustics' designer, Peter Gansterer, decided that, since he had to have grilles, they'd better do something. So he designed them with aluminum frames, with a lovely V-shaped "diffuser" to control dispersion. If you take the grilles off, you'll listen awhile and then put them back on because the speakers sound better that way. And what about the "bungs" (VA calls them "BCUs") to close off the rear-firing ports? Didn't need them; didn't use them. But to get to those celestial golden streets, you'll need a good subwoofer. The Mozarts are

so deep and rich without a sub you'll be tempted to let it go, but don't.

Finally, the three speakers of crowning glory at the \$3000 price range that are guaranteed to hold their own in much higher circles: Spondor S8e, Dynaudio Focus 220, and now the Vienna Acoustics Mozart Grand. Try to listen to them all. The Spondor's highs are the sweetest, its overall balance is nearly perfect, and its ease of setup makes a spectacular monitor for reviewing. The Focus has power in the lows that the Mozart and Spondor get only with a subwoofer.

But the Mozart has a soundstage and midrange magic that brought tears to my eyes. For sheer listening pleasure, it is the best of the three. Indeed, with a good subwoofer, you won't find much better sound anywhere. Only different. And usually much *much* more expensive. 

SPECIFICATIONS

Type: 2.5-way floor-standing loudspeaker
 Driver complement: Two mid/bass drivers; one tweeter
 Frequency response: 32Hz–22kHz
 Sensitivity: 90dB
 Recommended amplifier power: 30–200W
 Impedance: 4 ohms
 Dimensions: 8.5" x 38.25" x 13.5"
 (with spike assembly)
 Weight: Approx. 57 lbs.

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Musical Fidelity C5 CD player, KW500 and X-150 integrated amplifiers; Prima Luna Three preamp and Five amp; REL Q-108 subwoofer; Nordost Blue Heaven cables; Monster Cable HS3500 powerline conditioner

DISTRIBUTOR INFORMATION

SUMIKO, INC.
 2431 Fifth Street
 Berkeley, California 94710
 (510) 843-4500
 sumikoaudio.net
 vienna-acoustics.com
 Price: \$2750 (in Maple, Cherry, or Gloss Piano Black); \$3000 (in Rosewood)

² This CD is apparently out of print. Too bad. Every track is wonderful. The group's Web site, www.sneakinout.com, does not list it, except in "History," though it advertises a new recording, which is probably worth checking out. The performers on *Train Wreck* are: Mike Cheddar, bass; Dave Daluka from Denmark, mandolin (fabulous); D. Louis-Henson Blankenship, percussion (also fabulous). On the Web site, they are listed as: David Gerow (mandolin); Don Henson (percussion); Mike "Cheddar" Schmitt (bass). Same guys, different names.