

Vienna Acoustics Beethoven Baby Grand Loudspeaker

From Austria, a speaker to grow on

Sallie Reynolds

I've recently found a number of moderately priced loudspeakers that qualify as bargains—ones that allow you to grow a system around them, upgrading other components before you reach the speakers' limits. The reference in my small room remains the \$3000 Spendor S8e. In my large room, it's the \$4300 Acoustic Zen Adagio. Both are clean, transparent, musically rich, and balanced across the audible spectrum.

Though rare, such speakers exist at most price points. Last year, I reviewed a sweet pair that cost under \$3000—the Vienna Acoustics Mozarts. They were fine performers, small and pretty, and had some interesting design elements. They fairly shone in a small system that was clean and accurate. Definitely units to grow on.

Now comes Mozart's bigger brother, the Beethoven Baby Grand. While the Mozart is a 2.5-way design, the Baby Grand is a three-way. To my ears, the Baby Grand has much of the same sound I liked in the Mozarts: clarity across the board, the mesmerizing kind that pulls you into diverse recording spaces and opens up the stage; sweet, lovely high frequencies—where high percussion instruments sing, ring, tingle, and finally decay into velvety silence; and a midrange that, even more adeptly than their smaller siblings, untangles complexities, even on thick orchestral tuttis. You can hear instrumental voices astonishingly clearly, and lyrics, even from a chorus, cleanly and vibrantly. Yet the Beethovens avoid that clinical *über*-clarity that unravels music into strands of achingly clear dry voices twisted into a noose.

At \$3500 the Baby Grand competes in a different category from the Mozart. And because it, too, reaches beyond its rank, you'll need a more highly resolving system to bring out its potential. Are they speakers to grow on?

I set the Baby Grands up in my large system and auditioned them using a

number of fine recordings, including one of a fantastic singer who has taken the European concert circuit by storm, Mariza. On *Fado Em Mim* [Times Square Records], her voice is such that you could fall in love with it over a car radio. With extraordinary dynamics and power, she sings *fado*—melancholy Portuguese songs of "fate" and nostalgia for places and loves that exist only in our desires. She phrases lines as heart-achingly as Edith Piaf ever did. Mariza's dynamics, forceful and delicate at the same time, require a system that can handle power and subtlety at once. The Beethovens, along with the Musical Fidelity kW500 amplifier and A5 CD player, sailed through with ease.

On Lou Harrison's *Gamelan Music* [Music Masters Classics], the Baby Grands brought out the various voices of the gamelan "orchestra" with bell-like clarity—the high percussion ringing and fine, the low gongs thundering and reverberant. Harrison's small melodies combine the alien and the familiar, drawing you into a strange journey on a little boat of chords and progressions lying just within reach of our Western ears and expectations. Again, small and large dynamics married well, and the Beethovens unveiled subtle dynamics within the soundfield without breaking the ties between instrumental lines, allowing the full orchestra to shine.

On *The Great Organ at St. Mary's Cathedral* [Reference Recordings], the Beethovens' swelling lows can be felt in your gut, as they should. With the addition of a REL Q108 subwoofer, those lows were room-filling yet did not lose their musicality. And the Beethovens perused the organ's upper ranks, so small and exquisite, as delicately as if turning pages of whisper-thin papyrus. The overall experience was deliciously musical and sweet.

Then I put the Acoustic Zens back in the system, and heard the "wholeness" of



music I had forgotten while lost in the clarity of the Beethovens. I am talking about the feel, the "presence" of a musical event. The Acoustic Zens and the Spendors have it, even though the Spendors lack the Beethovens' pure extension at the frequency extremes, and the fullness of the Adagios sometimes veils the smallest sounds. (This last may be a generic tradeoff

until you hit multi-driver behemoths.)

"Wholeness," or "continuity," means to me that waterfall, that living "breath," of music—a coherent sense of life that breaks up whenever any one element stands out. The refined bits are glorious; they grab you. You listen to a singer's phrasing, the melodic growl of the lowest orchestral instruments that opens Ravel's Piano Concerto for the Left Hand [Chandos], or the rollicking, tender cimbalom on Kodály's *Háry János* Suite [Mercury]. But without the complete wash of sound behind the details, some of us find ourselves outside the music looking in. One listener said, "I'd be happy listening to the Beethovens forever, if I hadn't heard the Acoustic Zen Adagios first."

To test-run both speakers (with and without subwoofer) on this one characteristic, I listened closely to orchestral CDs. On McPhee's *Tabub-Tabuban* [Mercury], a recording that also includes Roger Sessions' *Black Maskers* and works of Virgil Thomson, the Beethovens' specificity made McPhee's Western instrumental recreation of the gamelan more pleasing and comprehensible than did the Adagios' fuller sound. But on Sessions' difficult suite, I needed the rich wash of the whole to avoid feeling discombobulated by his individual, rather frenetic, lines. Thomson

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came through beautifully on both, his lilting melodic phrases a bit richer on the Adagios, a fraction clearer on the Baby Grands (a sweet flute solo in *Symphony on a Hymn Tune* melted my very bones). On the *Háry János*, the Baby Grands were sparkling and completely seductive; the Adagios made it all marginally, almost

indescribably "darker," yet more alive, as you'd hear it in a concert hall (where you may miss some small details within the glorious whole). On both, the low lows were clean and powerful—grandly palpable. I liked the Beethovens with the subwoofer in, but subs don't fill in the "gestalt" of music.

Despite its imperfections, the Vienna Acoustics Beethoven Baby Grand is the best loudspeaker I've heard at this price. And yes, until you're ready to make a big leap forward, one to grow on. **TAS**

Specs & Pricing

SUMIKO

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Type: Three-way floorstanding loudspeaker
Driver complement: Two 6" woofers; one 6" midrange driver, one 1" silk-dome tweeter
Frequency response: 30Hz–22kHz
Sensitivity: 91dB
Impedance: 4 ohms
Recommended Power: 40–250 Watts
Dimensions: 6.7" x 38.9" x 12.9"
Weight: 65 lbs.
Price: \$3500

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Musical Fidelity kW500 integrated amp and A5 CD player; Primare 130 integrated amp; Spondor S8e and Acoustic Zen Adagio loudspeakers; REL Q-108E subwoofer; Nordost Heimdall wiring; Acoustic Zen Hologram II speaker cable, Absolute interconnects, Tsunami II and Gargantua II power cords

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