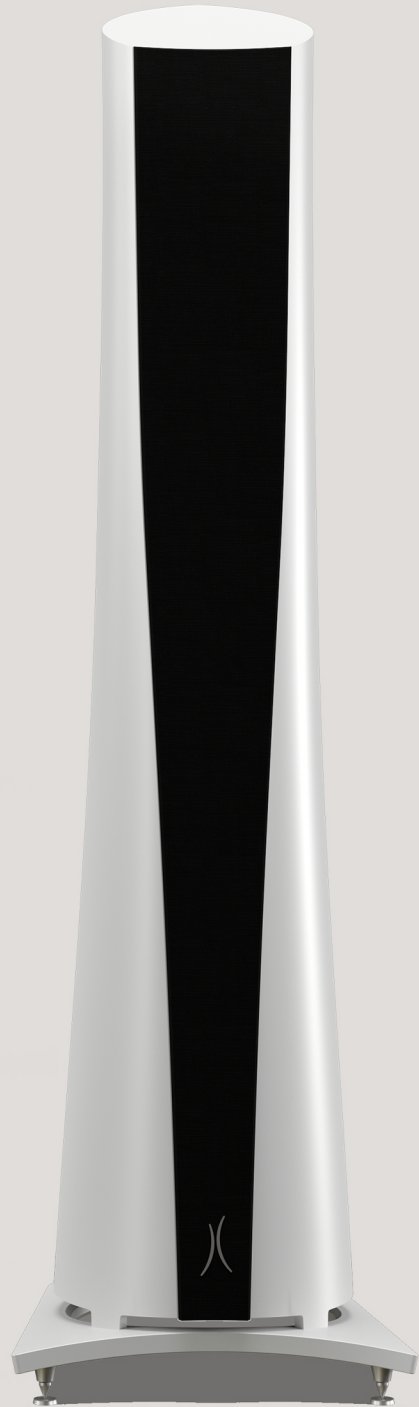


the absolute sound



Equipment Report



Estelon Aura Speaker

Elegance Meets Excellence

Alan Taffel

Estelon speakers have always been among the most beautiful in high-end audio. They're all smooth surfaces and curves, tapering at the waist. Looking at them, you couldn't be faulted for assuming their shape was the predominant design parameter, with sonic considerations coming in a distant second. But, in fact, Estelon speakers are prime exemplars of form following function.

Those edgeless enclosures? They eliminate parallel surfaces, minimizing internal standing waves. The sexy waist? That's explained by designer Alfred Vassilkov's predilection for virtual point-source driver configurations, where midranges flank (or are placed above) tweeters and woofers flank (or are placed below) other drivers.

That puts the tweeter near the center. Combine that with a front baffle that hews to the width of drivers to reduce diffraction, and you have the distinctive Estelon shape. And the ultra-smooth surfaces that grace that sensuous shape? They're a byproduct of speakers made of highly dense, acoustically dead marble and other stone materials.

But while Estelon's products have always been alluring, one thing they haven't been is svelte. Their standard arrangement means that the front—or in some cases, side—baffle must, at its broadest point, be at least as wide as the largest driver, the woofer. But for many rooms and decors, a sleeker speaker would be a better fit. This is what drove Vassilkov to attempt a new more compact speaker.

But how did he get around the big-woofer problem without sacrificing bass power and extension? His clever answer was to place a hardy 10" woofer on the *bottom* of the speaker, firing downward. This not only allowed him to slim down the front panel—which now only had to be as wide as the midrange—but also enlisted the floor as a means of reinforcing bass frequencies.

Compactness was but one of three goals Vassilkov had for the new Aura. The second goal was to build a speaker that would be compatible with as many rooms and amplifiers as possible. The downward-firing woofer aided in this effort, since it didn't rely on a backwall for bass reinforcement. In a break with Estelon tradition, he also switched from the use of ports to a sealed enclosure. This aided the cause

of placement versatility, but sealed designs are typically of lower efficiency. However, Vassilkov somehow managed to deliver a reasonably easy-to-drive 89dB sensitivity.

The third goal was to make the new speaker more affordable than a typical Estelon. Before the Aura, Estelons started at \$32,000/pair, with prices climbing to (gulp) \$269,000. The Auras start at \$19,900/pair. That's not chump change, certainly, but it does put the new speaker in a different price class than other Estelons. Those other models have garnered nothing but rave reviews in TAS and elsewhere. The challenge, then, was to reduce the price without losing what makes Estelon speakers so special.

Many other designers would solve this riddle by turning to trickle-down technology and design choices. Vassilkov considers this approach anathema. Aside from a few techniques on which he will not bend, like the curved cabinet, he makes every design choice specific to the speaker in question. For instance, he selects drivers individually for each speaker, based on the model's overall goals, system context, and characteristics. In the case of the Aura, to save cost he chose not to use the custom drivers found in higher-model Estelons. Rather, the drivers are sourced from respected manufacturers like Scan-Speak, Satori, and Faital.

Yet the biggest cost challenge was unquestionably the enclosure. Until now, all Estelon speakers were made of a marble-based composite. But that's one of the things that pushes up their price. For the Aura, Vassilkov need-

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Specs & Pricing

Type: 3-way sealed floorstanding dynamic speaker

Impedance: 4 ohms

Drivers: 10" woofer, (2) 5" midrange, 1" tweeter

Frequency response: 35Hz–25kHz

Minimum power: 30 watts

Dimensions: 15.1" x 53.7" x 14.4"

Weight: 75 lbs. each

Price: \$19,900 per pair (slightly more for special finishes)

estelon.com

Associated Equipment

Analog source:

Lyra Etna cartridge, Goldmund Studietto turntable, Graham 2.2 tonearm

Digital source: Bryston BCD-3 CD player

Electronics:

CH Precision I1 integrated amplifier (phonostage, DAC, streamer, linestage, power amplifier),

Goldmund Telos 800

Speaker: Wilson Audio Sasha V

Cables: Empirical Design

Room treatment: ASC Tube Traps

Footers: Goldmund Cones

ed something that was less costly in its raw form, and less expensive and time-consuming to manufacture. The solution was thermo-formed sheets of artificial stone. Think of them as a modern-day Corian. The sheets are CNC-machined to size, then bonded together with a special glue made of a similar material. This makes for invisible, smooth seams and reduced reflections.

At first, Estelon found it difficult to paint the new cabinet material in a variety of colors. In fact, turning the old dictum about the Model T Ford on its head, the Aura was initially available in any color you wanted—so long as it was white. Eventually, the company overcame this hurdle, and the Aura is now available in a spectrum of striking colors to match its lithe model-esque appearance.

Listening

My first listening session with the Aura took place prior to any set-up tweaking or break in. Yet, two virtues struck me immediately. The first was the Aura's imaging, which is spacious, with exceptionally well-defined instruments and vocals. The Auras come across like 2-ways, performing a complete disappearing act. I suppose this shouldn't be surprising, since the front baffle actually *is* two-way, with only a pair of mids and a tweeter firing forward. Further, the MTM (midrange-tweeter-midrange) driver arrangement enables the Aura to act as a point source in the mid-to-upper frequency range, and point-source speakers are known for their imaging capabilities.

The second thing that struck me about the Aura's un-optimized sound was the bass. I admit that I had my doubts about the

down-firing woofer scheme. In the past, I've had speakers with that arrangement, and they failed to deliver natural-sounding bass. I also wondered how much low-end power Estelon could achieve from such a compact cabinet. But even at this early listening stage, the 10" driver was producing deep forceful bass that frankly stunned me.

All this was a very good omen. But before any more serious evaluation could take place, there'd need to be a more rigorous setup. Prior to the Auras, I've had three speakers (both sealed and ported) in my new room. They were all professionally set up by their manufacturers, and all three ended up in roughly the same spot. The Auras did not.

I put this down to its unique bottom-located woofer. Whatever the reason, the Estelons didn't care to be as close to the front wall as usual. The woofer, as noted, puts out gobs of bass, and if the speaker is too close to that wall, the low end will overwhelm and dominate the tonal balance. The manual suggests that the Aura be positioned no less than 18" from the front wall, and this guidance should be taken seriously. In most rooms, this won't be a problem, but if you really need to place your speaker near the front wall, the Auras may not be your best choice.

Other than that sole proviso, the Estelons are, as intended, a breeze to place. They can, for instance, be quite far apart, as they were in my room. Further, they are quite revealing of positional changes, so they let you know when you've gone too far

one way or the other. When you get it right, they "lock in" and there's no doubt you've achieved aural optimization.

What that brings, in addition to doubling down on the aforementioned imaging prowess, is a delightfully wide soundstage that extends beyond the speaker's sides. Vassilkov told me he had hoped the Aura, despite its small stature, would produce a big sound. That it does. On "True Love Ways" from the Buddy Holly CD *From the Master Tapes*, I felt like I had a front-row seat to a full orchestra, with Buddy himself crooning away just beyond my toes.

With proper positioning, bass also improves. Along with power, there's more information about the instrument's character. However, the Aura's bass, though full, isn't as hard-hitting—meaning it lacks some of the crispness of the initial attack—as that of, say, the Wilson Sasha V. However, its soulful timbre and surprising force make it highly satisfying within its operating range.

That last caveat is worth a little further commentary. Strictly speaking, the Aura is not a full-range speaker. Though it's rated down to 35Hz, I found that spec a little optimistic. Down to about 50Hz, all is good—very good, in fact. The down-firing woofer does a stellar job with typical rock bass lines. Take the Cure's "Lullaby (Extended Mix)." The electric bass is everything you could want: full, powerful, and reasonably taut.

However, Billie Eilish is another story. On many of her tracks, she likes to sneak in a subterranean bass line played by a low synth. The Aura will

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have nothing to do with bass this low. Indeed, it will audibly object to being fed such a diet. On “Xanny,” there was so much cavitation I had to immediately shut down the system for fear of destroying the speakers!

This doesn’t mean the Aura has poor bass. To reiterate, the bass is exemplary within its prescribed envelope. But that envelope has limitations. If you like what the Auras do—and you will—but want a full-range speaker setup, you’re going to need a subwoofer.

As it happens, Vassilkov confided in me at the Munich show that he is working on a new speaker called the Aura Sub. The name says it all. The Aura Sub will be a subwoofer specifically designed to complement the Aura, creating a full-range combo. This, it seems to me, will be the ideal Aura setup, either initially or as an upgrade path. The sub is expected to be available in the first half of 2025.

Besides imaging and bass, the Aura checks a lot of other audiophile boxes. One of those is unrestrained dynamics. But the speaker’s most alluring characteristic is its tonal quality. To put it simply, the Aura is lush. Not in a way that obfuscates detail; indeed, resolution is one of its greatest strengths. Rather, listening to the Aura is like sinking into a favorite chair of well-worn leather. The experience is rich, inviting, and relaxing in a way that

leaves you open to whatever charms the music you’re playing may hold.

For example, on the Notting Hillbillies’ “Your Own Sweet Way,” I found it remarkable how distinctly rendered the images were through the Auras. This despite being 10 feet apart in my room. Further, the bass line was satisfyingly full, though (as previously noted) leading edges were slightly soft.

I heard much the same on the raucous “Los” by Rammstein, a track which has become my new favorite bass test. The Aura is perfect when it comes to low-end power, and that virtue came through on the track’s prodigious bass line and kick drum. And

though that kick drum is low, it was well within the Aura’s scope.

Conclusion

With a talented designer like Alfred Vassilkov, it’s perhaps no wonder that the Aura achieves all its goals. The speaker is remarkably compact yet manages to deliver tremendous bass. It hits a much more accessible price point than the average Estelon, yet it doesn’t sacrifice either the form factor or the performance for which the company is known. Indeed, with its lush timbres, spell-binding imaging, and wealth of detail, the Aura is as great a joy to listen to as it is to behold.