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Loudspeaker Focus

Apertura Enigma MkII

Superb!

Jim Hannon

Few loudspeakers I could actually afford to buy have really captivated me over the decades. Ruling out the Zelaton Stage I recently reviewed but, regrettably, cannot afford, some of the contenders were the bigger Wilsons (like the WAMMS I heard at the late David Wilson's house), the larger Magicos (including the big horn flagship model), the huge MBLs, the equally large Sound Labs, etc. More affordable ones that I *have* owned included the Quad ESLs (57s and 63s), various Magneplans, and used Infinity Betas and RS1Bs, among others.

One pricey speaker that I *did* purchase after hearing it at another reviewer's NYC apartment years ago was the Goldmund Dialogue. Its performance won me over with its remarkable coherence, musicality, soundstaging, and transparency. Unfortunately, my used pair was damaged in shipment—both cabinets were cracked, and all the driver magnets were shorn off the cones. I was crestfallen (and regretted not having used a local dealer)! However, I recently heard that the designer of the Dialogues had engineered a new speaker for his own company that outperformed previous iterations of the Goldmunds. It sported a large ribbon tweeter flanked on top-and-bottom by two woven-cone drivers. Would it be better than the Dialogue? I was eager to find out.

The Enigma MkII is the flagship loudspeaker of the French manufacturer Apertura, a nearly 40-year-old company. Engineered by Christian Y'von, with mechanical design by Eric Poyer, it is an attractive floorstander with two custom-made, eight-inch cone drivers separated by a ribbon tweeter (22cm) with an aluminum/polymer sandwich diaphragm for improved damping and linearity. The mid/woofers use woven polypropylene cones, a new type of composite material, that is light but stiff and has good damping properties. (Additional technical information may be found at apertura-audio.com)

Upon first hearing it on some solo piano music, the Enigma MkII reminded me of the Goldmund Dialogue, but it was faster and cleaner on the leading edges of transients and more transparent and coherent overall. The ribbon tweeter melded seamlessly with the two "isotactic matrix" cone drivers—quite an engineering feat! What I really liked was that the ribbon tweeter did not call attention to itself, yet added some top-end air, speed, and fine detail. It let the music bloom with amazing clarity and without a hint of stridency.

This superlative driver integration was readily apparent on female vocals, such as Yamina on *How Deep Is The Ocean* [Opus 3]. Her voice was reproduced with outstanding clarity, balance, pres-



ence, and naturalness, and without any edge or excess sibilance. You'd think she was performing before you in this live recording, as her voice floated between the speakers. The other instruments in the sextet were also reproduced with outstanding timbral accuracy—lots of fine details emerging to draw you into the performance.

As much as I like the Enigma MkII, it doesn't go as deep as some large references. Ad-

mittedly, I only noticed this on the pipe organ pedal tones of *Cantate Domino* [Proprius]; however, the Enigma's ability to reproduce the ambience of the hall was of reference quality, and the bass that it did reproduce was clear, solid, controlled, and coherent with the rest of the speaker's range—better than the bass of any other two-way in my experience, and likely to be satisfying to most listeners. You don't get bass boom or

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Specs & Pricing

Type: Two-way floorstanding speaker system

Driver complement: One 0.59" x 5.7" ribbon tweeter, two full-cone 8.66" mid/woofers

Load: Hybrid bass-reflex/acoustic line

Frequency response: 30Hz–30kHz ±3dB

Sensitivity: 95dB (2.83v/1m)

Impedance: 4 ohms

Dimensions: 15.9" x 53" x 17.4"

Weight: 167.55 lbs.

Price: \$29,975

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Associated Equipment

United Home Audio UHA-Phase 12 tape deck; Conrad Johnson ART150 amplifier; Conrad-Johnson TEA1 phono preamplifier; Modwright-Oppo BDP-105 digital player; Mytek Brooklyn DAC; MFA Venusian (Frankland modified) and BAT VK-33SE preamplifiers; Magnepan 3.7i and Quad ESL-57 (PK modified) loudspeakers; Silver Circle Audio TCHAIK6 power conditioner; Shunyata Research Alpha Digital power cable; Nordost Tyr2 cables and power cords; AudioQuest Niagara interconnects and Metro speaker cables; Critical Mass Systems amplifier stands, etc.

one-note bass, either. Bass fiddle is rendered superbly on jazz recordings, like *The Real McCoy* [Blue Note] and *The Soul of Ben Webster* [Analogue Productions/Verve], with lots of articulation and control.

The Enigma MkII's performance on demanding solo piano works is superb. On an SACD of Wilhelm Kemp playing the *Spasalizio* from Franz Liszt's *Années de pèlerinage* [Pentatone], the piano's low end had outstanding clarity, articulation, control, and weight. There was none of the midbass muddiness or thickness that many other speakers exhibit in this range. The treble had lots of air and

extension, too, without any brightness. Focus was precise and interdriver coherence was first-rate. As the pianist moved across keyboard, the piano sounded as if it were cut from one cloth.

The Enigma MkII can also explode dynamically without losing its composure, and it stops on a dime, with no overhang. On power orchestral music like the Netherlands Philharmonic's recording of Mahler's Symphony No.5, the cymbal crashes were so explosive they almost knocked me out of my seat, but without any of the overbearing brightness that can interfere with one's enjoyment of the music.

The speaker remained uncolored and controlled throughout its range. I particularly liked its deep, expansive soundstage, coupled with its startling transparency and dynamic swings, on Reference Recording's Beethoven's Ninth.

This superlative performance is a result of the Enigma MkII's amazing crossover, custom drivers, and cabinet design. For every loudspeaker, a custom crossover is tailored to each set of matched drivers, maximizing performance and coherence, while also maintaining proper phase. Its steep slopes remove out-of-band driver artifacts, so there is no discontinuity between the drivers, which is quite a feat as the two woofers have to mate with a large ribbon tweeter. Nobody does it better! (It's no wonder several high-end loudspeakers have utilized Mr. Y'von's crossover-design services for their flagship loudspeakers.)

The Enigma MkII's elegant, asymmetrically curved cabinets are made of multiple thin layers of HDF bonded together under extreme pressure, resulting in a stiff structure that effectively dissipates energy. Lapped construction at the joints and internal bracing also help create a cabinet that is extremely low in coloration. Double thickness top and bottom plates add to the rigidity and low-energy storage of the cabinet, effectively reducing intermodulation distortion, smearing, and one-note low frequencies.

The Enigma MkII employs a single ground-path from the speaker cabinet's center of gravity to the floor. This is highly effective and, Mr. Y'von adds, the proper way to ground a speaker. The three outrigger supports on the base are *not* used for grounding, but merely to help balance the speaker, so it remains unwavering and erect.

The Enigma MkII excels at reproducing the sound of a full symphony orchestra. They go down deep enough that I didn't feel the need to add the REL G-1 subwoofer on the SACD of Tchaikovsky's *Francesca da Rimini* [Pentatone]. String bass provided a solid foundation and was articulate and controlled. Massed strings were detailed and had bite, but not enough to hurt my ears, as is the case on many other speakers. Indeed, the strings were not only reproduced with plenty of detail, but also with air, body, and extension. The leading edges of transients were clear and fast without any blurring, which made percussive and brass instruments thrilling and, very often, startling. I was taken by this speaker's overall balance and coherence on *Serenade for Strings* on the same SACD. Massed strings were rich and seductive, yet fine details—like the bowing of the massed strings and the transients of the delicate pizzicato—emerged clearly, which made the music far more engaging. I could envision the performers arrayed across a wide and deep stage. It was very much like attending a live concert!

The Enigma MkII also excelled at reproducing jazz, from quartets to big band. The soundstaging and focus were first class on the IsoMike recording of *Joe McQueen and Friends: Ten at 86*. Everything was very precise and natural, due in part to the Enigma MkII's ability to reproduce the natural timbre of instruments from sax to bass to piano. Drums were clean and crisp, as in real life, and the trumpet had bite without edge. The players sounded as if they were in the room. I was riveted by the bass solo of Evan Coombs and the drums of Clayton Furch. I also appreciated the mastery of recording engineers Ray Kimber (yes, *that* Ray Kimber) and Graemme Brown, in what is an excellent recording.

Apertura Enigma MkII **Loudspeaker Focus**

With the Enigma MkII, you feel viscerally the frenetic intensity of McCoy Tyner and his supergroup of Joe Henderson, Ron Carter, and Elvin Jones on *The Real McCoy* [Blue Note]. I thought I was in a jazz club! Here, too, the leading edges of transients on all the instruments in the quartet benefitted from a lack of smearing or blurring, adding to the excitement of the performance. It was thrilling to follow each line clearly and distinctly. On a more mellow album like Coleman Hawkins' *Wrapped Tight* [Impulse], I was able to relax into the music. The sound of Hawk's tenor sax was seductive and ethereal—floating between the speakers. All of the instruments in the sextet were pre-

cisely arrayed across a broad, deep soundstage, and the bass fiddle was tuneful, articulate, and extended.

Lastly, the Enigma MkII has a way with vocals that puts the singer in the room on good recordings. Fine details like consonants, breathing, and articulation emerged clearly from Johnny Hartmann's terrific voice on the album *The Voice That Is* [Impulse]. His velvety baritone floated on a cushion of air between the speakers, and I found myself floating away from the listening room, mesmerized by his vocals.

Did I mention that the Apertura Enigma MkII can also rock? On a classic rock album like *Are You Experienced?* [Analogue Productions/Reprise]

from The Jimi Hendrix Experience, the sound was thrilling and holographic. On "Fire," the clarity and impact of the drums propelled the music forward and reminded me why the late Mitch Mitchell was one of my favorite rock drummers. Noel Redding's bass was tuneful, extended, undistorted, and a nice complement to Hendrix's soaring guitar. It caused me to break out some of my other old rock favorites from Hendrix, Cream, the Doors, and Led Zeppelin, among others. The ability of the Enigma MkII to explode dynamically without distortion heightened the listening experience.

The Apertura Enigma MkII represents an outstanding value and is easily competitive with speakers costing far more. While it doesn't surpass the performance of the awe-inspiring Zellaton Stage, it comes surprisingly close in many sonic attributes. Its imaging, clarity, and coherence are first-rate, and its high sensitivity (95dB) makes it easy to drive. What it lacks in air and extension on the deepest pedal tones, it more than makes up for in low-end coherence with the rest of its range. To surpass its excellent performance, you'll have to spend a lot more, and may have to sacrifice some consistency, soundstaging, focus, control, and efficiency. If you are in the market for a superb loudspeaker under \$50k, you owe it to yourself to audition the Apertura Enigma MkII. You will very likely surprise yourself—and save a bundle in the process. Very highly recommended! **tas**



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