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Vandersteen Audio • Model Seven Mk II Loudspeakers

"... thoughtful, carefully executed and resolutely resistant to fashion."

by [Roy Gregory](#) | August 9, 2015

here are few loudspeaker companies that have existed pretty much since the dawn of time - at least in high-fidelity-stereo terms. Darwinian logic and their very survival suggest that along the way these makers have learnt a thing or two, and probably a few of the same hard lessons, even if they haven't arrived at the same solutions. One of these companies is Vandersteen, and another is Wilson Audio. Given that both produce angular, box speakers with beveled edges loaded with moving-coil drivers, the contrast between the two couldn't be more stark. Where Vandersteen is quiet, almost self-effacing, Wilson is prominent, vociferous and a standard bearer for high-end audio, omnipresent and influential across global markets.

Price: \$62,000 per pair.
Warranty: Five years parts and



labor.

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A central pillar in the Wilson doctrine states that of all the elements in an audio system, the speakers have the hardest job -- and by inference deserve the most help. Not only do they have to deal with the rooms in which they're used, but they have to suffer the indignities imposed by the driving system, or so goes the logic. Well, with all the considerable respect due to Dave Wilson, I can't help feeling that he has it slightly wrong: not the argument you understand, but the extent of the problem. If anything, I think he's underselling the challenge -- partly because, as a speaker designer, he already accepts the difficulty of designing loudspeakers, period.

Let's just think about that for a moment. When it comes to maintaining the sense and structure of a signal, it's the transducers in systems that have by far the hardest time. They take the signal in one form and attempt to convert it, unaltered, into another. That's hard enough for a record or CD player, but at least they are confronted with a single basic process, carried out by one integrated mechanism. At the other end of the chain, things get rather more complex, with most full-range speakers involving a crossover that divides the signal into at least three parts and then reproduces it through multiple different drivers -- all without audible joins, losses or discontinuities. Now throw in Dave Wilson's point -- that it's impossible to predict with any accuracy the acoustic environment in which those mechanical devices are going to have to operate -- and you can begin to appreciate the true scale of the problem.

Richard Vandersteen's designs are thoughtful, carefully executed and resolutely resistant to fashion. Things really started with the legendary Model 2, a design with a legitimate claim to being one of the most successful hi-fi products ever, having been in continuous production since 1977 and with over 100,000 pairs sold. It also established the initial template from which each and every subsequent Vandersteen design has evolved in a single, unbroken line. Along with the equally iconic KEF Model 105, it was one of the first speakers to employ a stepped baffle to achieve proper time alignment, minimal baffle area to reduce diffraction effects and separate enclosures to minimize intermodulation distortion -- core thinking in every subsequent Vandersteen design. Mind you, those features were hidden from view behind an elegant space-frame grille that (long before the gruesome *WAF* term had reared its misogynistic head) achieved a remarkable level of domestic and aesthetic integration, themes that have been likewise carried forward by subsequent designs. Even less apparent are an overriding concern with wide bandwidth coupled to time and phase coherence, mandating low-order crossovers and pistonic (or as nearly pistonic as possible) driver motion across the range.

Those technical parameters are not unusual, and it's possible to point to many a speaker brand that flies those particular flags. However, what is unusual are the sizes of Vandersteen loudspeakers (they are generally smaller than the competition) and the almost obsessive pursuit of those goals through in-house thinking and solutions. This is a company that stubbornly ploughs its own groove, refusing to jump on the latest audio bandwagons, grab new, fashionable driver or cabinet materials, or chase the ever-escalating price points imposed by global markets. Even a brief look at the range will highlight just how different this brand is, and where better to start than the current 2Ce Signature II, a speaker with a -3dB point at 29Hz, a cabinet that stands less than 40" tall and a price of \$2560 per pair. Or how about the Quatro Wood CT, with its -2dB point at 24Hz, its narrow and elegantly tapered cabinet standing 43" tall and an asking price of \$13,900 per pair? Then there's the flagship Model Seven Mk II, the subject of this review: -2dB at 22Hz, 42 1/2" tall and \$62,000 per pair.

I think I can see a pattern emerging here. Look at the same three speakers from a slightly different standpoint and the pattern becomes clearer still. The convoluted product nomenclature tells its own story, but so do the system topologies. The 2Ce Signature II employs three drivers in a classic three-way passive design. The Quatro Wood CT underpins that with an integral subwoofer consisting of an actively driven 8" driver and a 250-watt amplifier. The Model Seven Mk II ups the ante with 400 watts and a 12" driver.

Meanwhile, efficiency, an already unfashionably low 86dB in the 2Ce Signature II, stays around the same in the Quatro Wood CT and drops even further (down to 83.5dB!) in the Model Seven Mk II.

These numbers, especially the efficiency and near-identical size of such differently priced models, are unusual to say the least -- but they also reflect Richard Vandersteen's overriding concern with the realities of the world in which his speakers will be used. Why has the Model 2 been so incredibly successful? In no small part the answer lies in its ability to deliver serious bass and the musical authority that goes with it from an enclosure that most people are able to afford and are prepared to accommodate. That's a lesson that clearly hasn't been lost on their designer, resulting in a range of speakers that doesn't just work, but works in real rooms -- a whole range of different but equally real rooms. That might seem like an odd claim, especially given the low efficiency of these systems. After all, there's more to making an effective *and* domestically acceptable loudspeaker than a small cabinet. The system necessary to drive it comes into the equation too.

As I've already noted, the Model Seven Mk II is remarkably compact -- compact for a flagship model costing \$62,000 and compact for a speaker that is genuinely full range. Standing just 14" wide, it presents a narrow face to the listener, an impression further reinforced by the deep beveling of the side panels and only slightly offset by the 20" depth. Yet despite those bijoux dimensions, each Model Seven Mk II weighs in at 170 pounds. They might look like an easy one-man lift, but they're anything but. That impressive weight is down to the substantial cabinet, constructed from constrained-layer slabs in which a damping layer is sandwiched between selected MDF material before being pressure-bonded between carbon-fiber layers and built into a tapered and heavily braced multi-box enclosure. Throw in the sandwich cone, push-pull 12" driver (305mm) and the 400-watt, power-factor-corrected, high-current amplifier that goes with it and suddenly it's not so hard to understand why the Model Seven Mk IIs seem positively rooted to the floor.

The subwoofer is a sealed box, the driver firing downward and venting through long slots positioned at the bottom of each side panel, the remaining drivers occupying the top third of the baffle and hidden behind a carefully sculpted and integrated grille that's intended to be left in place, deep felt wadding integral to the frame taking care of any diffraction issues. Wags might suggest that's no bad thing as, compared to some of the fancier drivers out there, the ones populating the Model Seven Mk II's upper reaches look rather, well, hand-built. That's because they are. The 1" (25mm) dome tweeter, 4 1/2" (110mm) midrange and 7" (180mm) upper-bass cones are all built in-house, the product of a decade of painstaking

development. Each driver diaphragm is constructed from a carbon-fiber/balsa sandwich, the design unique and patented. Cut a section through one of the cones and you'd find the unidirectional carbon skins, carefully orientated and bonded to a balsa core that tapers toward the outer rim, creating a triangulated structure that adds rigidity and resists flex rather like a roof truss. The result is a remarkable stiffness-to-weight ratio as well as break-up modes that occur well beyond the driver's working range -- and *actual* break-up modes that are much smaller in magnitude compared to those found in metal or ceramic cones. Baskets are substantial cast items and are securely mounted on the carefully sculpted and rebated baffle surface, molded from the same epoxy material as the cabinet's base. The tweeter's response extends out to a -2dB point at 40kHz, rivaling the performance of exotic ceramics and beryllium, and is augmented by a rear-firing aluminum/ceramic-domed 3/4" (19mm) unit that adds extra air and dimensionality to an already impressive soundstage.

Just as its upper drivers are rather more exotic than they at first appear, there's more to the bottom end of the Model Seven Mk IIs than meets the casual eye. Considerable effort has gone into developing the driver and the amp that go with it, resulting in a system with considerable speed, control and genuine transparency, but a major contribution to that performance lies in the system topology and the way it interfaces with the driving amplifier. Part-active speakers with powered bass are far from new -- but nobody implements them in quite the way that Vandersteen does. When you receive a pair of Model Seven Mk IIs, you get a small pair of boxes equipped with a short "tail," terminated in either an XLR or RCA connector (unless you buy a pair of Vandersteen M7-HPA amplifiers, in which case they are built in). These are first-order, high-pass filters that you place between your preamp and power amp. They are internally adjustable via a bank of DIP switches to precisely match the input impedance of the system's power amp(s) and they serve to roll off the low bass, giving the amplifier a significantly less-demanding signal to deal with.

What price Mk II status?

The Vandersteen Model Seven reviewed here carries a Mk II designation, indicating small but significant changes to the speaker as well as an equally significant hike in price. The good news is that owners of original Model Sevens can have their speakers updated to current spec. The bad news is that it will cost \$10,000 plus one-way shipping. So what do you get for your money, given that the two speakers look almost identical from the outside?

The changes involve modifications to the baffle area and relative acoustic positions of the tweeter and midrange units, smoothing the transition between them. In addition, the voice-coil leads on the massive subwoofer driver are now woven into the spiders, a change that increases the linear excursion and power handling available as well as increasing the control exerted by the internal power amp. Unfortunately the upgrade involves replacing the entire driver, which is both expensive and no small task. Along with the modifications to the baffle, it's a time-consuming and costly exercise. However, it is worthwhile. As Richard Vandersteen says, "If I'm going to charge a valued customer \$10,000 for an upgrade, I want to be sure he's going to hear the difference that money made." Well, he can be confident of that. Anybody who is familiar with the original version and then hears the Mk II is left in no doubt as to the latter's clear superiority.

Not surprising, those benefits are heard most obviously at the frequency extremes in the shape of bass that has more authority, transparency and texture, a top end with more air and dimensionality. But the real musical gain is in the midband. The greater transparency and more natural presentation at frequency extremes are major contributing factors to the Seven Mk II's addictive musical presence and palpability. These are comparatively small mechanical differences that have a significant musical impact, once again demonstrating that if you get it right, then there's no need to apply the law of diminishing returns to audio upgrades.

-Roy Gregory

Once the amplifier passes the signal to the speakers, the active drive applies an inverse gain to the subwoofer, restoring the overall balance. But that's not all it does. This is a true *integrated* system, in which the amplifier and driver were developed and work in tandem. The driver itself uses a flared sandwich cone in which two aluminum skins are bonded together with a proprietary foam material. This is then connected to a dual-voice-coil, push-pull motor system that enhances control, while the amplifier, specifically tailored to the demands of its narrow-bandwidth task, incorporates feed-forward correction of remaining driver anomalies as well as an eleven-band equalizer to adjust its output to the room's characteristics. The result of all this effort is a highly sophisticated, highly tunable bottom end.

Why go to all that bother? Because doing so frees up the dynamic response and headroom of the main amp, leaving the purpose-built low-frequency system to keep up with the rest of the range -- a challenge it's perfectly tuned to achieve. In turn, that allows this compact enclosure (and the system driving it) to not just produce a sense of dimensionality and scale that belies the size of the speakers, but also imbues the system with serious expressive range, allowing music to breathe, floating bass notes above the floor rather than tying them to it, allowing them to integrate with and properly underpin a midrange that's livelier and more responsive than you thought your amp could be.

Which brings us to what might be the one fly in the ointment -- the low efficiency of this and other Vandersteen speakers. At 83.5dB, this is the lowest-sensitivity loudspeaker system I've had in the house for quite some time -- possibly since I waved goodbye to my Apogeess! But while that low efficiency is a necessary byproduct of Vandersteen's desire to keep its enclosures small, once again a closer look reveals that it is deceptive. The Model Seven Mk II is rated as a 4-ohm load -- making matters worse you might well think -- except that it never drops below 4 ohms and any increase above that figure is gradual, with no sharp rises, creating a resistive characteristic devoid of sudden corners that also encourages the amp by increasing its available power.

If that sounds unusual that's because it is. Vandersteen has gone to great lengths to minimize the impact and sonic thumbprint of the crossover, adopting first-order slopes throughout (to maintain time, phase and an even amplitude response) and applying impedance compensation to keep its characteristic flat. The carefully selected capacitors are hand matched to the individual drivers, inductors are hand wound and the shooting match is battery biased (as are the separate high-pass filters), an approach that aids transparency, transient response and rhythmic agility -- and no, that's not just

regurgitating the marketing spiel. A few years back I reviewed the Gryphon Cantata, a speaker that also featured a battery-biased crossover -- with a switch. The difference between switching the battery on and off wasn't subtle, but more importantly, battery power made a significant musical contribution, with a more tactile, immediate and involving sound.

So, although the basic impedance and efficiency figures might make the Model Seven Mk II look like a power-hungry sponge, in reality it's actually a remarkably easy load that really thrives on (and encourages) an amplifier's power delivery. How easy? I used two amplifiers for the review. The Karan KA-M900 monoblocks, typically load-tolerant, high-current solid-state designs that nevertheless possess remarkable textural and rhythmic subtlety, were drafted in in case my resident Berning Quadrature Zs proved inadequate to the task. As it happens, I needn't have worried and the Karans became an interesting alternative rather than an essential requirement, the Quadrature Zs proving well up to the job. Yes -- that's right, the Bernings are OTL designs, yet they still managed to drive the Vandersteens to astonishing levels. Okay, they're not exactly your average OTLs, with 225 watts and a surprising load tolerance (they actually *increase* their output to 275 watts into a 4-ohm load), but like other speakers with low-loss crossovers and seriously solid and well-controlled cabinets (the various Wilson Benesch designs come to mind) the Model Seven Mk IIs do a great job of sounding livelier and more sensitive than the numbers suggest.

Setting up the Model Seven Mk IIs is a slightly tedious but also completely systematic process: if you follow the instructions, you will get the results. The first step is to adjust the high-pass filters to match the input impedance of your amps. There is a detailed and carefully explained process to achieve this (although it would normally be done by the dealer), necessary as even published specs for amplifiers are all too often at variance with reality. It is so critical to proper performance that Vandersteen want to be certain. The simple procedure involves a test signal and a multimeter that allow you to check and adjust the setting of the DIP switches to match your amp, or trim them if you change amplifiers (as you'll see, I had plenty of practice, although you only need to perform the ritual once for each channel of each amp -- just to be sure).

The next step is to wire the speakers up, with biwiring highly recommended. I ran two sets of identical speaker cables to ensure that cabling wasn't a limiting factor. On a practical note you'll need to check that your cables use spades and that they don't exceed 9/16" (14mm) width or they won't fit on the speaker's terminals. The speakers also require an

IEC power cord for their subwoofer sections. Vandersteen supply basic kettle leads, but anybody spending this sort of money on speakers will likely want to at least try something more exotic -- which is where you'll run into trouble. The IEC input is wedged right alongside the heatsink on the electronics panel, meaning that the round-bodied IEC connectors so beloved by audiophile-cable manufacturers simply won't fit. You'll need leads with low-profile plugs, or you'll need to change them. I fitted slimline connectors to a pair of Nordost Frey 2 power cords for the purpose (I'm not masochistic enough to try that with Odin or even Valhalla 2) and I was glad I did. Doing the comparison with the standard leads demonstrated better integration, more transparency, better pitch definition, more texture and quicker transient response from the Nordost leads, resulting in significantly better rhythmic articulation and phrasing, a more clearly defined soundstage and a more planted and stable image. Dynamics were wider ranging and dynamic contrasts more emphatic. This was not a small change, although having discussed the issue in advance, I'm not sure that Vandersteen would accept my findings. For me, the notion that it's only the bass below 100Hz so it can't possibly matter is a little like your contractor saying, "It's only the foundation so it can't possibly matter." Either way, it was not a benefit I wanted to give up (and it's definitely one any Model Seven Mk II user should investigate), so the Frey 2 stayed put while I used Nordost cables. I used a pair of NRG 4s with the AudioQuest loom.

Next step is to position the speakers and install the three cones per cabinet. These are serious cones and they are supplied with serious sleeved lock nuts that allow you really precise adjustment of the speaker's attitude and then to lock it solidly in place. Once you've gotten the speakers vertical and level you can adjust the bass alignment, and once again there is a prescribed approach for this, using discrete test tones on a supplied disc in conjunction with an SPL meter. We started with the speakers in my "normal" positions and used the tones and SPL meter to adjust their initial position. They ended up slightly forward of the norm, but the tones allowed us to clearly "see" the effect of moving them backward and forward, balancing their bottom end against the nodes in the room. Having done that, the equalizer was then used to reduce unwanted peaks and the position and output level fine-tuned to even out the response. Just as with any other subwoofer, it's a fool's errand to try and drive up any deep dips and the Model Seven Mk II's pots actually offer more cut than boost.

Once you've gotten the bass dialed in, it's time to check toe-in and rake angle. Vandersteen supply a fantastic tool for this, a precision laser jig that fixes to the baffle in place of the

grille. Once again, the process is painstaking and repetitive, making adjustments and then listening before making more adjustments, but the effort and patience are well worthwhile. It will take a practiced installer around half a day to really dial in the Model Seven Mk IIs, but once he has finished you know that the speakers are spot on and that they'll stay that way -- a world away from the months' long, "nudge here, nudge there" saga that attends the installation and optimization of some speakers. In an audio world that is swamped in intangibles, such certainty is as welcome as it is unusual. But what I found really surprising was that changing amps to the Karans or cables to the full AudioQuest loom, the only adjustment required was the tiniest nudge on the bass-level control. Otherwise the speakers stayed exactly as originally setup for the entire review period.

The Model Seven Mk II review coincided with a particularly hectic period in my reviewing schedule, meaning that I got to use the speakers with an unusually wide range of partnering equipment. As well as the cables and amps already mentioned, they also served speaker duties with Simaudio Moon electronics (the 810LP phono stage, 740P line stage and 760A power amp), various Audio Research pieces, including the Reference 5 SE and Reference 10 line stages and Reference 150 power amp. Finally, they were also on the end of the system used for both a comprehensive set of listening tests with various racks and support components and a direct comparison between no fewer than six different single-box CD players.

I'm not going to add all those components to the associated equipment listing, but they do serve to demonstrate just how revealing the Model Seven Mk II is of partnering equipment and how

happy it is to flit, chameleon-like, from one system to the next, one source component to another. It was particularly interesting listening to the CD players, where the differences were both dramatic and musically significant, leaving listeners in no doubt as to the individual character, strengths and weaknesses of the different machines. That's a clear indication as to just how uncolored and uncluttered the Model Seven Mk IIs sound -- and how little of their own self they overwrite onto the signal. This was a theme I found myself returning to, time and again throughout the review period, as changes made elsewhere in the system were clearly revealed by the speakers, just as artistic differences between alternative performances of the same work were effortlessly laid bare. It's a theme I'll be



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returning to later in this review as well, but for the moment let's just note that the Model Seven Mk IIs are as revealing musically as they are sonically -- and believe me when I say that ain't always so.

But before I tackle the overall musical attributes of this loudspeaker, let's take a look at two facets of this design that should be its greatest strengths yet are perceived by some to indicate critical weakness -- size and price. These days, it's quite possible to get speakers that are way bigger than this one for Model Seven Mk II money. It's equally possible to get speakers that are roughly the same size and still cost more but come from much "noisier" companies. There are even a few with far smaller cabinets that approach the Seven Mk II's asking price. Each of these situations presents its own twist on the enigma that is perceived value, but all of them come out of roughly the same argument: with so many people charging so much more for their speakers, the Vandersteens can't be state-of-the-art performers because they don't cost enough. Then (ironically) there's the simple physical reaction that it's not a lot of speaker for your money. It's a flagship design that doesn't cost a flagship price and isn't flagship sized -- at least by the prevailing norms. At first glance, it looks like the Model Seven Mk II can't win: too small, too cheap, not expensive enough, not big enough. But that conclusion would be a serious mistake as well as the first step to missing out on one of the high end's genuine bargains --especially if you live in the US.

I've already covered Richard Vandersteen's desire to keep his speakers small, the technology he has employed to achieve that goal and the very real benefits that accrue in terms of versatility and deliverable performance. I guess you are either going to get that or not, which is fair enough: some people just have to have a Harley engine in a motorbike or a V8 in a car, otherwise they can't take it seriously. But what isn't obvious (unless you live outside the US) is that contrary to current practice, Vandersteen doesn't seek global pricing parity. Indeed, the company is unapologetic about offering its products to its domestic market at prices that overseas distributors won't be able to match. The arguments here are irrelevant; the simple fact is that US citizens can buy the Model Seven Mk II at a significantly lower price than much of the equivalent competition, for no other reason than the pricing strategies adopted by different companies. It's an indication of just how messed up the market and audiophile perceptions really are that in some quarters that undermines the Model Seven Mk II's appeal, its lower price naturally assumed to indicate lower quality. Fine -- I suggest you come to Europe where you can pay nearly 30% more for the very same thing if you find that reassuring!

The other issue with the *How can a speaker this small offer genuine flagship*

performance? perception is easily dealt with. Just use your ears. In this case, "performance" is a euphemism for bandwidth, so simply pick the biggest, baddest disc in your collection and let it rip -- just close your eyes for the full effect, 'cos you 'll suffer a serious reality check when you open them again. When you want level, bandwidth and sheer musical density, look no further than modern movie soundtracks. Two of my current favorites are *The Thin Red Line* (Hans Zimmer, a serial offender when it comes to OTT OSTs [RCA 09026-63382-2]) and Steven Price's remarkably intense yet atmospheric score for *Gravity* [Silva Screen SILCD1441]. With track three from *The Thin Red Line*, "Journey to the Line," the Vandersteens coped effortlessly with the gradually increasing density and level, peaking out well the wrong side of 100dB at the listening seat on a track with serious low bass. Move on to track six, "Air," and you have the two biggest drums you've ever heard, being hit really hard. The Model Seven Mk IIs did an amazing job of preserving the scale, the strike, the volume and pitch of these monster drums, reproducing the air and their distinct vibrational character, keeping each separate and perfectly timing their strikes, on and off the beat. The only single-box speakers I've had in-house that have done a better job on these tracks are the enormous Focal Grande Utopia EMs and the Marten Coltrane Series 2s, both significantly larger and much more expensive than the Seven Mk IIs.

But the music that really impressed me through the Vandersteens was *Gravity*, especially track 15, "Shenzou." This starts with a bang and just takes off from there, building in layers and intensity, literally carrying the listener along. With the Karan amplifiers, the Model Seven Mk IIs proved disarmingly able to deliver sustained 106dB average levels (with 110dB peaks) at the listening seat -- a truly awe-inspiring performance, not least because the sound was so clean and devoid of glare or strain that it really didn't sound that loud. By the time you hit these levels with most speaker systems, the drivers are giving up, the system is suffering thermal compression, the box is joining in and distortion levels (the things that do make it sound loud) are becoming seriously intrusive. So, if you don't think the Model Seven Mk IIs get big, just shut your eyes and glory in their sheer scale -- and if you don't think they go loud, take an SPL meter with you when you listen. These speakers will do big, they will do loud, they definitely swing dynamics and they can reproduce them with a serious snap if necessary. Just don't get carried away: the first warning of distress is going to be cracking coming from the drivers as they bottom, and you really don't want them to do that. As I said, the speakers *will* hit 106dB average levels, but that doesn't make it sensible to do so -- either for them or you. Get the beers in and try to impress your buddies with sustained SPLs and you could well be looking at an earache and a bill for

some seriously expensive replacement drivers. As always, just because you could definitely doesn't mean you should. Instead, save the Model Seven Mk II's dynamic alacrity for those musical moments that demand it and bring performances to life -- because that's what it's for.

As impressive as these synthetically reinforced musical extravaganzas are, there is a serious point to the results achieved. Swap to well-recorded acoustic material, be it small group jazz or some full orchestral war-horse, and that remarkable combination of low-frequency power, transparency and finesse is just as apparent, not so much in the trouser-flapping department as in the dimensionality of the soundstage and the images that populate it. Playing the Chesky repressing of the Barbirolli/RPO Sibelius Second Symphony LP [Chesky Records CR3] -- possibly the best thing they've ever done -- the Vandersteens render the familiar Walthamstow acoustic with all its breadth, depth and height, the orchestra placed naturally within it, each instrumental grouping beautifully separated. But there's more to this than just an impressively natural perspective. This symphony presents the orchestra and conductor with a range of musical challenges: broad dynamic swings and sharp contrasts in musical density and instrumental tonality are worked together in a disparate, almost piecemeal fashion. The result is deeply impressionistic with a massive emotional range, but get those interlocking phrases or tempi wrong and the whole thing becomes disjointed and loses its magisterial sense of direction, momentum and inevitability. What this recording demonstrates is not just the stability and clarity of the musical foundation delivered by the Model Seven Mk IIs, from the perfect sense of power and progress, the carefully graded intensity instilled by Barbirolli's masterful direction, to the way it floats the muted timpani roll and the extended pizzicato bass passage that opens the second movement, with its beautifully undulating pitch, pace and level, but also the utterly seamless integration of not just the low frequencies but the entire musical range.

With brief interjections from every instrument in the orchestra suddenly popping up all over, it's a piece that requires a speaker that's as spatially, tonally and dynamically coherent as the conductor's vision. Otherwise, what made it onto the tape won't make it into your room. In so many ways, getting the bass right is the absolute precursor to getting the rest of the range right -- but you still have to do that too, and the holistic quality of the Model Seven Mk IIs' delivery, their natural sense of pace, space and perspective, the subtlety of their instrumental colors, tonal and dynamic shading, speak volumes about the quality of those carbon/balsa drivers and the benefits of the consistent diaphragm material

used across the majority of the speakers' range. Combine that with the ability to deliver sudden shifts in level and musical density and you have a speaker that can genuinely encompass the emotional range of orchestral performance -- even something as sweeping and majestic as Barbirolli's inspired reading of the Sibelius Second's combined third and fourth movements.

But the qualities that deliver large-scale works with such impressive musical grace and power are, if anything, even more impressive when things get smaller and more intimate. Patricia Barber's live double album *A Fortnight In Paris* [Classic Records/Blue Note JP5007] is a perfect case in point. Play "Blue Prelude" and the gentle ebb and flow of the conversation between the piano and upright bass that underpin the vocal are perfectly balanced and weighted. Both instruments are solid, their relative scale, character and the nature of the energy -- one percussive, the other plucked -- all a natural part of the musical whole. Barber's vocals are focused, expressive and nuanced, a palpable presence in the tangible acoustic space, the audience arrayed around the listener, in front of the stage. When things pick up for "Witchcraft," the tempo has a fluid, unobstructive ease and grace, the system stepping aside and breathing life into the performance.

Most components (and speakers in particular) have something that they do, something that reflects the special capabilities of their technology or the special concerns of their designer. For the Model Seven Mk IIs that quality is best summed up as *palpability*. The way in which the speakers manage to combine spatial and temporal accuracy with astonishing neutrality and the absence of intrusive artifacts or colorations imbues them with a remarkably natural sense of scale, proportion and perspective. The way in which they weave together tonal and textural clues with temporal and spatial cues, their ability to respond to sudden dynamic shifts or changes in musical density -- small to big or big to small -- their ability to capture a rhythmic pause or hesitation and the accent that it imparts, all combine to create a sense of human presence and intimacy that is at once beguilingly natural and in no way forced or obvious. Instead, the natural proportions and perspective, the space occupied by and in-between performers, the subtle microdynamic textures and shadings that reflect a player's performance, the way they work their voice or instrument, all these things slot effortlessly into the fabric of the recording, simply adding to the impression of real people playing real instruments.

More than anything else it is this holistic presentation, the ability of this speaker to seamlessly combine *all* of the aspects of the recording that it reproduces into a single credible presence that sets it so far apart from the crowd, living, breathing proof that it's

not about how much information you can (re)produce but how you use it that matters. Although the Vandersteens are no slouches when it comes to resolution or crisp leading edges, there's nothing obvious or etched about the pictures they paint. *A place for everything and everything in its place* doesn't do them justice. The musical vista presented by the Model Seven Mk IIs is so coherent and integrated that there is only the one single entity and you really can't see (or hear) the joins. It allows you to relax and enjoy the music -- and it encourages you to listen fatigue free for hours on end.

What don't the Model Seven Mk IIs do? Well, although they do big, they don't sound big -- at least not bigger than they should. There are definitely speakers that move more air and do it in a far more awe-inspiringly impressive fashion -- there really is no substitute for sheer size if you can accommodate (and pay) for it. In keeping with their compact dimensions, it means that these aren't the tools to blow your non-audiophile neighbors' socks off. Likewise, their very coherence means that they thrive on a coherent and, above all, stable approach to system setup and cabling. If you just love to meddle, then the Vandersteens will clearly display the fruits of your labors, but you'll be selling them short when it comes to really hearing what they can do. As such, they fit into a new school of capable, relatively affordable, but genuinely high-end products (alongside the latest and in many ways conceptually similar designs from Wilson Benesch) that make a virtue out of being less than obvious. The Model Seven Mk IIs might not have the smack-you-in-the-face qualities that typify so many flagship products, or the price tag that gets pinned to them, but this is a flagship product in every sense of the word, not least its musical performance. If you want hyped dynamics or hyper resolution, super transparency or mega scale, there are plenty of products that will deliver one or more of those qualities -- and charge you handsomely for the pleasure -- but there are very few speakers that can sound as seductively natural and musically lucid as the Model Seven Mk IIs, and even fewer that achieve that performance so consistently in so many different systems and situations.

I've spent a long time stressing just how little of itself this speaker adds to the recording. Just as that reveals short cuts or bad practice in the system upstream, so it allows you to lean the final character of the system in one way or another, depending on taste. The Karan amps brought dynamic heft and weight to proceedings, the AudioQuest cables also adding a weight and slightly rounded warmth to the system. Together they delivered a more obvious sense of scale and power at the expense of some agility, focus and transparency. The Berning/Nordost combination was quicker and more nimble, but also lacked some of the Karan/AudioQuest's sheer substance. The Simaudio Moon electronics paired with the

Nordost cables offered astonishing stability, an inky-black background and real intimacy. The Audio Research /AudioQuest pairing did acoustic space and orchestral bombast in a way that few systems can match. Yet none of these combinations robbed the speakers of their natural sense of perspective or proportion, and while they each offered their own view of events, the events themselves still defined the character and sense of the performance. What this underlines yet again is just how astonishingly tractable and versatile the Model Seven Mk IIs are.

For all the time that the Vandersteen speakers spent and for all the different systems I've used them with, one anecdote really sticks in my mind. Listening to all those different CD players, I was asked to describe and demonstrate the difference between two of them. We were listening to Ella singing the Cole Porter songbook at the time [DCC GZS(2)-1079/1], and I found myself suggesting that perhaps the listener should think about Ella's body language. Body language? On a stereo system? But with these speakers it's an observation that makes perfect sense. They integrate information so intimately, be it tonal or textural, spatial or expressive, about the size of the singer or her distance from the microphone, that it's not just easy, it becomes totally natural to consider the singer's body and how it's moving as part of the performance -- assuming that the source is delivering the information. In this case that source was Neodio's amazing Origine -- and that's exactly what it does. In this case the speakers being the Model Seven Mk IIs, that's just what *they* delivered, cutting right to the expressive core of the performance (both the musical performance and the relative performance of the two players). This uncanny ability to capture and project the spatial and physical presence behind the sound is what I described earlier as *palpability*. It's an almost physical bridge to the willing suspension of disbelief, a quality that actively encourages you to forget the system, forget the room and lose yourself in the music.

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In many ways the Vandersteen Model Seven Mk II is exactly what it appears to be -- a large speaker writ small. What makes it genuinely special is that it is also a small speaker writ large.

is that it is also a small speaker writ large. It has all the traditional small-speaker virtues, but couples them to an extended bandwidth and a bottom end that's so seamlessly integrated and beautifully executed that it creates a single whole that's full of subtlety and

nuance, life and intimacy, yet still has the ability to make you jump, shock you with scale and pummel you with power. It combines natural proportions and perspectives with an almost complete absence of edge or glare, making it easy to miss just how loud it'll play, yet at the same time cranking the level isn't necessary to generate a sense of life and musical energy. These speakers *will* play small and they *will* play quiet, but just when you least expect it they show you just how willing they are to do the other end of things too. When it comes to re-creating the sense of that original musical event, the one captured by the recording, the Model Seven Mk IIs are nothing short of an expressive tour de force.

But perhaps what's most impressive of all is that they're not just designed to deliver phenomenal musical performance; they're also designed to do it in an astonishingly wide range of circumstances, systems and room sizes, while the exacting approach to setup and the tools provided to aid that process mean that here's a package that delivers most of its potential performance for most owners most of the time -- and in high-end audio that's a rare thing indeed.

A genuine flagship performer, regardless of size and price, the Vandersteen Model Seven Mk II takes holistic design to another level. This is a case of performance following form following function. There are bigger speakers and there are louder speakers; there are more attractive and certainly more physically imposing speakers; there are a lot of speakers that cost a lot more than the Model Seven Mk IIs -- all of which makes the Vandersteen an easy speaker to underestimate. Do so at your peril. It's your wallet as well as your ears that might well suffer.☺

Associated Equipment

Analog: VPI Classic Direct turntable with JWM 12.7 tonearm; Kuzma Stabi M turntable with 4Point tonearm; Langer No.7 turntable with Audio Origami PU7, Jelco 750D and Rega RB1000 tonearms; Allnic Puritas, Kuzma CAR-50, Lyra Etna, Dorian, and Dorian Mono cartridges; Stillpoints Ultra LP Isolator record weight; Connoisseur 4.2 PLE phono stage.

Digital: Aesthetix Romulus and Romulus Signature CD players, Audio Research Reference 9 CD player, Neodio Origine and NR22 CD players, ; Wadia S7i and 861 GNCS CD players; dCS Paganini transport, DAC and uClock; CEC TL-3N CD transport.

Preamp: Audio Research Reference 5 SE and Reference 10, Connoisseur 4.2, Simaudio Moon 740P line stages.

Power amps: Berning Quadrature Z and Karan Acoustics KA-M900 monoblocks, Simaudio Moon 760A stereo amp.

Cables: Complete looms of Nordost Odin or AudioQuest Wild from AC socket to speaker terminals. Power distribution was via Quantum QB8s, with a mix of Quantum Qx2 and Qx4 power purifiers and Qv2 AC harmonizers.

Supports: Harmonic Resolution Systems RXR or Hutter Racktime racks. These are used with Nordost SortKone equipment couplers throughout. Cables are elevated on HECC Panda Feet.

Acoustic treatment: As well as the broadband absorption placed behind the listening seat, I employ a combination of RPG Skyline and LeadingEdge D Panel and Flat Panel microperforated acoustic devices.

Accessories: Essential accessories include the SmarTractor protractor, a USB microscope and Aesthetix cartridge demagnetizer, a precision spirit level and laser, a really long tape measure and plenty of masking tape. I also make extensive use of the Furutech anti-static and demagnetizing devices and the VPI Typhoon record-cleaning machine. The Dr Feikert PlatterSpeed app has to be the best ever case of digital aiding analog.