



Vivid Audio Oval V1.5 Loudspeakers

Created on Wednesday, 15 January 2014 Written by Hans Wetzel

I head up SoundStage! Ultra's sister site SoundStage! Access, which is the SoundStage! Network's site for affordable hi-fi gear. In my time writing for Access, I've come across enough overachieving components that I now evaluate considerably more expensive products with cautious ears and eyes. For example, my Hegel Music Systems H300 integrated amplifier-DAC (\$5500 USD) measures exemplarily well, and sounds it. My reference loudspeakers, KEF's R900 (\$4999.98/pair), are equally impressive, and despite their having shared time in my system with Cabasse's Pacific 3 earlier this year, they were never outperformed by the pricey (\$16,000/pair) French monoliths. Then, in two substantial wooden crates, the Vivid Audio Oval V1.5s showed up . . .



Description

Vivid Audio's Oval V1.5 (\$7700/pair) is made in South Africa and looks . . . well, avant-garde -- like a creature from one of the Alien films. The cabinet, in the shape of an elongated teardrop, drips down to form an integral stand with a flared base. The Oval V1.5 measures 44.5"H x 10"W x 9.5"D, weighs 50 pounds, and sits on five high-quality, stainless-steel footers. Hidden under at the rear of the speaker's base are four five-way binding posts placed only an inch or two above the floor. Their height and close spacing make using cables terminated with spades possible but awkward. Banana plugs are strongly suggested here; Vivid includes banana jumper cables to permit use of single-cable runs.

The two-way Oval V1.5 has a D26 1" aluminum tweeter and a C125 6.2" aluminum midrange-woofer. Both drivers were entirely designed by Vivid's Laurence Dickie, formerly of Bowers & Wilkins, and who pioneered B&W's famed Nautilus loudspeaker. In fact, the tweeter is the same as that used in Vivid's Giya G1 speaker (\$65,000/pair). Let that sink in a minute. The D26 is not derived from, inspired by, or very similar to the company's flagship tweeter -- it is Vivid's flagship tweeter. It even makes use of the same tapered tube loading used in the Giya G1, whereby the tweeter is mounted at the end of an exponentially tapered tube that absorbs the tweeter's rear-directed output, which would otherwise degrade its sound. Vivid's tapered-tube loading precludes the use of a traditional disc magnet. Instead, Vivid uses a radial magnet, which also has the side benefit of increasing the tweeter's sensitivity to 96dB/W/m.

Vivid makes its drivers of aluminum alloy instead of titanium because they sound better when driven hard. While beryllium, which is used in competing high-end designs, offers clearly superior measured performance, Laurence Dickie says that beryllium simply doesn't sound as good as aluminum when worked to Vivid's specs, which he honed by means of finite-element analysis.

Despite looking like the usual dome, Vivid's D26 tweeter is their own patented catenary design, which in this application means that a ring of carbon fiber underpins the supremely delicate diaphragm. The catenary geometry pushes the dome's first breakup mode far beyond the frequency at which a traditional aluminum dome begins to break up. This allows the dome to continue to operate pistonically to well above 20kHz -- a minimum requirement for Vivid. In fact, the tweeter plays out to 39kHz at ± 2 dB. It hands off to the midrange-woofer at 3kHz, which is 500Hz lower than in any other Vivid speaker -- the V1.5 lacks the benefit of Vivid's D50 2" aluminum midrange driver, which is used in all other Vivid models. I was concerned that 3kHz might be a big ask for a 6.2" driver, but Dickie explained that the C125's action is pistonic up to 6kHz. Hooked up to the Linkwitz-Riley fourth-order crossover Vivid uses in all its designs, the midrange-woofer's output would be 24dB down before the cone began to flex.

The C125's diaphragm is identical to that of the C125S driver used in the far more expensive Giya models -- only its magnet system is different, as the Giyas' excursion requirements are greatly reduced. The C125 is mounted on a series of O-rings to isolate it from cabinet vibrations, while the 12-strut, die-cast aluminum chassis holding the driver together leaves more than 90% of its backside exposed, to minimize restriction of the rearward energy produced by the driver.

The Oval V1.5's sensitivity is specified as 89dB/W/m and its nominal impedance as 8 ohms, though I suspect the latter is closer to 4 ohms in the bass. The claimed frequency response on axis is 42Hz-39kHz, ± 2 dB, with harmonic distortion of less than 0.5% throughout that range. The -6dB points are 40Hz and 42kHz.

But that cabinet . . . In a sea of right-angled competitors, Vivid speakers stand apart. I at first mistakenly assumed that something so idiosyncratically shaped was an exercise in function following form -- that Vivid had mainly wanted to make a speaker that was visually arresting, then haphazardly tossed in a few drivers to make half-decent sound. But the V1.5's curved cabinet, gravity-cast of mineral-fiber-resin and made in-house by Vivid, earned its wild shape purely on acoustic grounds. The curves greatly reduce the diffraction problems that plague traditional box speakers, and the enclosure's internal volume of 22 liters is a good deal more than is found in most two-ways. There's a single port at the bottom of the front panel, offset

by the waveguide cupping the tweeter at the top. Grilles are included, though I didn't use them. The craftsmanship and quality of the surfaces were lovely -- my review samples were finished in an optional Oyster high-gloss automotive paint. While I wouldn't call the Oval V1.5 beautiful, it's certainly unique.

I partnered these Jetsons-esque speakers with Hegel's phenomenal H300 integrated-DAC, as well as Wadia's futuristic Intuition 01 power-DAC. Cables were Nordost Frey 2 and Dynamique Audio's flagship models, including the substantial, all-silver Celestial speaker cables. Also vying for attention in my listening room were three more pairs of speakers: my reference KEF R900s, Cabasse's Pacific 3s, and, most pertinent here, Sonus Faber's new two-way, the stand-mounted Olympica Is.

Vivid sound

I recall the first time I saw a high-definition television. Back when most of the top TVs were still CRT-based and had curved glass screens, the promise of high-resolution television was manifest. I watched some nature footage in 1080i, and it was a revelation -- as if I were looking out a window and could almost touch what was on the other side. Despite owning KEF's terrific R900 speakers, and spending time with Cabasse's alluring Pacific 3s, I hadn't yet had the audio version of that sort of "holy shit" experience in my listening room.



The Vivid Oval V1.5 was astonishingly good -- the kind of good that takes seconds, rather than days or weeks, to differentiate itself from the sounds of mere pretenders.

I suppose the best word for the V1.5's sound is fast. It had such vicious pace and ease, was so light on its aluminum feet, that it easily outclassed every other speaker I've spent time with in my listening room. "Tamarack Pines," from George Winston's *Forest* (16-bit/44.1kHz ALAC, Windham Hill), showcases the pianist's delicate playing. In the last 90 seconds Winston flits about the high notes at the far right end of his instrument's keyboard, all the while experimenting with the pedals. The sharp vigor with which he strikes the keys, the decay of those strokes -- through the Oval V1.5, each was an instance of supreme acuity and liteness. So, too, the artistry of violinist Sarah Chang in the *Allegro non molto* of *Summer*, from Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons*, with the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra (16/44.1 ALAC, EMI Classics). Chang attacks the strings with verve, but I heard neither "bite" nor "smoothness" in the Vivid's reproduction of her instrument. It remained steadfastly neutral in a way I had never heard before. Any bias I may have had against the Vivids based on their appearance vanished.

The imaging was first rate. The V1.5s were able to place a voice on a soundstage with aplomb. Even when the volume ramped up and the Vivids were challenged dynamically, central images remained stable, unembellished, and, above all, effortless. Mark Lanegan's performance of "The Lonely Night," from Moby's *Innocents* (16/44.1 ALAC, Mute), is recorded with extreme intimacy -- "close-miked" is an understatement. Lanegan's guttural, Tom Waits-like voice, in all its delicate, creaking glory, came through with stunning definition, but it never sounded etched or hyperdefined, or obfuscated in any way. The Blue Man Group's "Rods and Cones," from their first album, *Audio* (16/44.1 ALAC, Virgin), offers a variety of percussive sounds in a way that only the azure trio from Kansas could muster. I could pick out their instruments with ease as they sounded off across the stage laid out before me. The Vivid was articulate in a way I haven't experienced with any other loudspeaker. And while such clarity was outstanding, it was never forward or aggressive. The V1.5 just seemed to refrain from imposing itself on the music.

Vivid Audio V1.5 trio

Which leads me to the Oval V1.5s' best quality -- their soundstaging. We always read about the "cabinet colorations" of big speakers, and how bookshelf models image particularly well, but I hadn't fully appreciated the significance of these truisms until the V1.5s took up residence here and proceeded to highlight the shortcomings of more traditional cabinets. My KEF R900s, for instance, have big MDF enclosures in the usual boxy shape. By dint of their sheer size, they have a hard time sonically "disappearing" from my room. While they do cast a large and, likely, slightly embellished soundstage, I always get the sense that they're somehow obscuring part of the music. I hear something similar with Cabasse's Pacific 3s. But the Vivids not only managed the "disappearing" act for which the best small speakers are renowned, they did so completely. With every type of music I played, I got the firm impression that the Vivids could portray a stereo image with near perfection, both from side to side and from front to back.

"Company Car," from David Arnold's score for the James Bond film *Tomorrow Never Dies* (16/44.1 ALAC, A&M), is a sharp track, with plenty of brass, percussion, and the series' classic guitar riff (by Monty Norman) for good measure. Despite its being a 16/44.1 recording, I felt I could practically "see" the entire soundstage in which the score was being

performed, such was the sound's clarity. A xylophone sounded softly from the left rear of the stage, the guitar farther forward, and horns from the center through to the right. The V1.5s' funky appearance reaps audible benefits, and they're not subtle. To fully appreciate their abilities, listen to them with live or orchestral recordings -- the "you are there" sensation is downright eerie.

Lastly, resolving ability. The Oval V1.5 was the most transparent-sounding speaker I've had in my living room. I grade my KEF R900s at 90+% in just about every parameter, and would not have thought they could be so clearly outperformed. But recording after recording made it abundantly clear that the Vivids could yield greater microdynamic detail, sound more organic than that of the already excellent KEFs, and possess a tonal purity that my references couldn't quite match. The resolution the Vivids were able to muster when partnered with my Hegel H300 bettered almost everything I've heard at the audio shows I've attended, including the Consumer Electronics Show -- and that's with a system costing only \$13,200, or just over the price of a pair of Magico S1s, the only other two-way I know of that can compete with the Vivids. That's absurd.

Shortcomings? A two-way will never be able to scream the way a more complicated design will, so you can't expect the V1.5s to fully energize with sound a big room. They never protested at the volumes I threw their way, but considering that I live in a city apartment, I should also mention that my neighbors never once yelled at me to shut the hell up. It's easy to pick out the D26 tweeter as the star of the V1.5's show -- it's the same tweeter that Vivid uses in their flagship Giya G1, and it's asked to extend only 500Hz lower than in that model. But the C125 midrange-woofer has the thankless task of trying to keep up, while covering the entire range from 3kHz down to 42Hz. It did so remarkably well, but didn't demonstrate quite the composure of the D26 while doing so. While the bass extension was reasonable -- I never felt shortchanged in terms of the Oval V1.5's reach (for its size) or weight in the nether regions -- it didn't have the acuity or wicked speed of the speaker's midrange, and emphatically not of its treble. For that, you must move up to the Oval B1 (\$15,000/pair), which has not only a dedicated 2" midrange driver, but also additional, and opposed, 6.2" midrange-woofers. But at half the price, I think it's safe to say that the Oval V1.5 offers an extremely generous proportion of the B1's performance.

Vivid comparisons

I also had in for review Sonus Faber's new Olympica I speakers, and at \$6500/pair, plus \$1200/pair for their matching stands (which I also had), they are exactly the price of the Vivid Oval V1.5s. However, the two speakers could not be more different in appearance: Classic Italian style meets Vivid future-chic. The handmade Olympica I is shaped like a lyre and crafted from furniture-grade wood. Stitched leather shrouds the front and top baffles, while copious amounts of aluminum are used in the slotted, resistive rear port and bespoke binding posts.

The Olympica I has a slightly smaller bass driver and a markedly smaller cabinet than the Oval V1.5. These facts revealed themselves with bass-heavy material -- the Sonus Fabers don't have quite the Vivid's impact or slam. Moreover, the Olympica, from top to bottom, doesn't offer the Vivid's transparency, speed, or resolution, even if it does sound quite smooth and neutral. In no way is the Olympica I a mediocre speaker; the Vivid is simply better, and, purely on sonic merits, the Vivid is the one to have. However, the Olympica looks stunning

enough that I'd be ecstatic to gaze at for the next ten years. Can't say the same of the Oval V1.5.

When the Vivids first arrived, I also had in Cabasse's Pacific 3 (\$16,000/pair). At more than twice the Vivid's price, the Cabasse should offer better overall sound and build quality. But while those beautifully polished beasts could play far louder while offering almost full-range sound, I can't say they were better speakers. Indeed, their sound was more colored, sounding both darker and tonally warmer than the Vivid. Their bass response was also slightly embellished. These characteristics make the Cabasse an inviting, ballsy speaker to hear, to say nothing of its unique appearance. But it wasn't as honest as the Vivid, and it didn't reveal quite as much detail.

The inevitable conclusion

Vivid Audio's Oval V1.5 is not new -- it's been on sale for over seven years now. It's not stunning to look at in the traditional sense. And it doesn't carry the expected price tag of a cost-no-object loudspeaker. But it's a world-class two-way loudspeaker, with obscene speed and transparency, and an ability to resolve the finest recorded details, that would be laudable even at twice the price. To find these qualities for well under \$10,000/pair is a most pleasant surprise. If there is a better demonstration of high-end engineering successfully trickled down to an affordable product, I'm unaware of it.

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Associated Equipment

Speakers -- Cabasse Pacific 3, KEF R900, Sonus Faber Olympica I
Integrated amplifiers -- Hegel Music Systems H300, Wadia Digital Intuition 01
Sources -- Apple MacBook Pro running Songbird and iTunes, Benchmark Media Systems DAC2 HGC, Hegel Music Systems H300
Speaker cables -- Dynamique Audio Caparo, Dynamique Audio Celestial, Nordost Frey 2
Interconnects -- Dynamique Audio Shadow
USB cables -- DH Labs Silversonic, Nordost Blue Heaven
Power cables -- Dynamique Audio Infinite, Nordost Frey 2
Vivid Audio Oval V1.5 Loudspeakers
Price: \$7700 USD per pair.
Warranty: Five years parts and labor.

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