

# The Audio Beat

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## Avalon Acoustics • Transcendent Loudspeakers

*Beautiful, spacious sound in a beautiful, manageable package.*

by [Dennis Davis](#) | October 13, 2011

Size matters -- and when it comes to speakers, so do good looks. I may be in the minority on this subject, as the common audiophile wisdom is that you go for the best sound that your wallet will support, size and looks be damned. I've certainly met my share of caveman audiophiles over the years who have followed this path. I've seen studio apartments with speakers so large that the sweet spot was in bed. Sometimes these cave dwellers had record and equipment shelving that literally supported dust a quarter inch thick. Call me a dilettante, but when I'm listening to music I need the *entire* experience, both sight and sound, to converge and produce a satisfying whole. That's not to say I'd settle for mediocre sound to get good looks. But why not have great sound in a beautiful package that fits the surroundings?



Warranty: Three years pa

Avalon Acoustics  
2800 Wilderness Place  
Boulder, CO 80301  
(303) 440-0422  
[www.avalonacoustics.com](http://www.avalonacoustics.com)

To complicate matters further, there are the practical considerations of how much speaker a room can support. Whether it's a matter of matching speaker to room size, deciding whether your post-and-beam foundation will support the behemoth that you fancy (let alone hold it's vibrations in check), or fitting the size of your driver complement to the size of your wallet, size is often the primary consideration in a music-lover's choice of speakers. And then there is the ever-present need to fit your pair of veneered or metal boxes into an environment often shared by a loved one whose patience can only be stretched so far.

Modern speaker design began as an effort to fit a musical delivery system into a real-world-sized living space. Horn-loaded speakers worked well during the developmental stages of hi-fi, because listeners were by and large hobbyists who built their systems in garages and basements. When the hobby turned mainstream and moved into living rooms, something had to give. "Bookshelf" speakers took their name from their size; they could be accommodated on a shelf

rather than the entire corner of a room. They made speakers family friendly and at least in theory allowed the stereo system to be integrated into the living space and incorporated into everyday life. After a while our baser instincts took over and box speakers grew to ever-grander proportions, and every self-respecting audiophile pined for a dedicated listening room where physical limitations could be overlooked.

My own listening space is shared with a very understanding wife, but it can only accommodate speakers of a certain size, lest I return home one day to find my speakers at the curb with my other belongings. Electronics are banished to a side room,

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which has a secondary advantage of removing them from listening-room vibrations. Hence my unending quest for the perfect combination: a speaker of relatively moderate size that has an appealing look and extraordinary sound. My search criteria must therefore cull out speakers too large or not sufficiently aesthetically pleasing. For me, something about half the size of a coffin just about fits my requirements. Also at stake is style. One of my favorite speakers, from both a sound and looks standpoint, is the Vivid G1 Giya, but in addition to stretching my budget to buy them, I would also have to completely redecorate my room to match the modernistic look. That's biting off a bit too much.

**B**ut there has been a ready alternative. I've always lusted after the elegant look and sound of Avalon speakers, but until recently the company's models were either overly large for my requirements, or in a few cases not quite grand enough. The new Transcendent, however, is about perfect. It comes in at 41 1/2" tall, a very svelte 10" wide and a modest 14 1/2" deep, and tips the scale at 97 pounds. The Transcendent carries forward the classic and very elegant Avalon look and feel of the much more expensive Time and Indra (and numerous predecessors). Indeed, if you are looking at a photograph of these speakers with grilles in place, only someone very knowledgeable of the Avalon product line could differentiate the three of them.

The Transcendent presents a less massive presence than its more expensive siblings. The reduced dimensions and weight are made possible by the utilization of a two-way design incorporating one concave ceramic-dome tweeter with Neodymium magnets and two 7" Nomex-Kevlar composite cone woofers, which work in tandem, covering the same frequency range. The speaker is vented downward, the bottom opening at the back and three cones raising each speaker off the floor another inch or so.

The grille assemblies are intended to remain in place while listening. They hold felt anti-diffraction masks in physical contact with the face of the loudspeakers and prevent air space from coming between the felt and the speakers, which Avalon feels degrades the sound. I wish more speakers sounded better with grille covers in place. Not only does this provide better protection for the drivers from animals and small children, but it looks better and prevents the covers from being lost in some unknown cubby hole for years on end.

I first heard the Transcendents at the Rocky Mountain Audio Fest in late 2010 and again at the CES the following January. In each of these venues, they were partnered with solid-state amps – Jeff Rowland in the former and Karan Acoustics in the later. I felt the speakers managed to squeeze a lot of the virtues of larger Avalons into a smaller package. The most important of these were amazing soundstaging abilities and balanced tonality that, unlike many top contenders at the shows, did not sound sterile or boxed in. I am not among those who argue that soundstaging is unimportant, because when instruments all mush together, they don't sound like a Mercury or RCA recording in a real concert hall. While it's true that some halls do have inferior sound, I find that in most concert halls I have no problem establishing aural cues as to where the different orchestra sections are placed, and in small ensembles, be they jazz or classical, live acoustic music universally presents itself as a true stage and not a two-dimensional flat "picture" of music. I find little joy in speakers that cannot reproduce this part of the musical experience. I will admit that tonality is and should be the primary criteria by which speakers are judged, and I am constantly amazed when frequent praise is heaped upon some of today's ultra-stout (and sterile-sounding) speakers.

I asked the people at Avalon how the Transcendents might pair with tube electronics, and they assured me that despite the company's reputation for making speakers that require a healthy amount of power, especially of the solid-state variety, the Transcendents would mate well with moderate-power tubes amps, such as my Audio Research Reference 110. Indeed, they were correct. Whereas the Reference 110 may have been inadequate to drive the Time or Indra, it performed like a champ with the Transcendents. The amp held as firm a grip on the bass as the more expensive and powerful Rowland and Karan amps, and its sheer output capability was never called into question.

The manual that came with the speakers included some very specific break-in instructions, including listening at very low volume levels for three to six hours, followed by moderate levels the next six to twenty-four hours, after which moderately increased volume levels can be played. I gave the instructions the benefit of the doubt and broke in the speakers on the long side of the range. I still found that they needed a few days run in before they started to sound their best.

I started serious listening with small-scale classical music and from there moved on to large-scale orchestral music. I played all of my usual suspects -- on LP, Accardo playing Paganini [Deutsche Grammophon 477 6492], various selections from the fabulous Johanna Martzy box set from Coup d' Archet [COUP 16-23], the Sonny Rollins classic *Way Out West* on Analogue Productions 45rpm LP [Contemporary/Analogue Productions S7019], and on CD *Heartworn Highway* [Hacktone VJCD167], Markus Schwartz & Lakou Brooklyns' *Equinox* [Soundkeeper Recordings SR2002], and the *Thin Red Line Soundtrack* [BMG 09026 63382 2]. The speakers displayed nothing short of fabulous soundstaging and the ability to disappear with the best. One of the highlights of last January's CES was hearing "The Boy in the Bubble" from Peter Gabriel's *Scratch My Back* [RealWorld 18003000178] in Philip O'Hanlon's suite with big Vivid Giya speakers and Luxman electronics. The Giyas threw the most magically well-defined image that I've heard from any stereo system, and I left there with his test disc, searching in vain for another system to match what I heard. The Transcendents -- at a fraction of the price of the Giyas -- came as close to equaling this magic as anything else I'd heard, and dollar for dollar no other speaker came close. On large-scale orchestral music, the Avalons managed to take this ability to create a tightly controlled small image and translate it into a coherent soundstage. The

Mercury *Firebird* [Mercury SR 90226] was as organized, deep and wide as I've heard, except with speakers of a much grander size.

Reproduction of instrumental timbre was as good as I've heard from any speaker, including cost-no-object designs. There are speakers that get timbre just about right, but still lean slightly to the lean side -- what some people describe as "accurate." But accurate is as accurate does, and for me an "accurate" speaker that lacks bloom is often missing some timbral sophistication and, moreover, tonal color, sounding wrong to my ears. Without bloom, instruments and vocals lose much of their beauty and naturalness. Avalon speakers in general get tonal color right, offering just the right amount of bloom to make music sound natural. The sound of Karl Suske's violin in any of Beethoven's late quartets on Eterna [Eterna 827 221, 827 222, 827 454 and 827 481], Ben Webster's mellifluous saxophone on *Gerry Mulligan Meets Ben Webster* [Verve/Original Recording Group/Verve V6 8534] or *Getz/Gilberto* on LIM CD [K2HD 036] or 45rpm LP [Analogue Productions/Verve V6 8545] have never sounded so sweet.

**L**ike my Kharma Ceramique Reference 3.2s, which include the company's Enigma filter and wiring upgrade (\$21,000/pair), the Transcendents performed as good a vanishing act as most Avalons, and certainly better

than most other speakers, including many that are more expensive. Avalon speakers have always impressed me as not calling attention to themselves; they cast a strong matrix of images and then disappear into it. And unlike some of the larger and more persnickety Avalons, the Transcendents were not overly sensitive to placement. They pretty much disappeared where I first set them, but their tonal balance and soundstaging improved dramatically with further adjustment. No matter -- the disappearing act was relatively effortless.

However, it was with rock that I heard something truly unexpected. Once the speakers were fully broken in, the first recordings I put on the turntable were some of my rock favorites. I noticed immediately how much more realistic the height of the images was than with other speakers in this price category -- and specifically how the Transcendents excelled in this regard compared to my Kharma 3.2s. I couldn't resist queuing up old favorites, such as the Who's *Who's Next* [Track 2408 102], an early pressing with "MG12888" in the dead wax, and some plum-label UK Zeppelin. These LPs displayed a life-size image -- something that, again, so many other speakers of similar size cannot accomplish. In this one respect, the Transcendents put the Kharms, which are very accomplished speakers in their own right, to shame.

From what I'd heard at shows with solid-state amps, I knew the Transcendents could deliver more bass than one should expect from a speaker of this size, and the match with tubes did not diminish this. There was bass down to 30Hz -- Avalon claims the speaker goes to 26Hz -- in my room. Credit those double 7" midrange/bass drivers. Sure, for another \$20,000 or more, I could get even more bass and perhaps even more realistic imaging, but not a speaker that fits comfortably into my 16' by 13' room. On CDs with clean, fast transients and solid bass lines, such as the previously mentioned *Equinox*, or just flat-out thunderous

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bass, such as the *Thin Red Line Soundtrack*, the amount and speed of the bass made it hard to believe that I was listening to speakers tethered to a tube amp.

The obvious competition for these speakers will be the Wilson Sophia 3 and Magico V2, which have similar dimensions, though different driver complements. Both of these speakers cost thousands more than the Transcendents, however. There are quite a few other speakers of similar size and with similar driver complements for a fraction of the price, but these are generally less substantial than the Transcendents -- both physically and sonically. Regarding the Magicos, while some reviewers have embraced them as the second coming, under show conditions they have sounded a bit sterile for my tastes, and I prefer the Transcendent's bloom and imaging magic. The Wilson Sophia 3 is certainly a worthy contender, but once again the Transcendent's collection of virtues tips the scale for me. In fact, I find that the Avalon speakers come closer to the qualities of the much more expensive Wilson Sasha W/P than the Sophia 3 -- again, heard under show conditions.

**O**f all audio components, speakers are the ones least likely to bring consensus among audiophiles as to their virtues. So there is no assurance that your tastes will coincide with mine. However, for me, the Avalon Transcendents fill the audio bill perfectly, and I've left my dollar bills with Avalon in exchange for these speakers. They may stay in my home until I win the lottery, buy a bigger house and have the room for a really large-scale speaker system. Until then, the Transcendents will continue to make me one very happy listener. 😊

#### Associated Equipment

Analog: VPI TNT-6 turntable with rim drive and SDS speed controller, VPI 12.7 tonearm, Lyra Skala cartridges, Koetsu Coral cartridge, Audio Research Reference Phono 2 phono stage.

Digital: Audio Research Reference CD7 CD player.

Preamplifier: Audio Research Reference 5.

Power amplifier: Audio Research Reference 110.

Loudspeakers: Kharma Ceramique Reference 3.2 with Enigma filter and wiring upgrade.

Interconnects: Nordost Valhalla.

Speaker cables: Nordost Frey.

Power conditioners: Quantum QBase 8 and QX4.

Power cords: Nordost Valhalla.

Equipment rack, platforms and accessories: Billy Bags equipment rack modified with a 4" maple platform, Ultra isolators, Stillpoints Component Stands, Furutec GTX D-Rhodium AC outlet.