

EQUIPMENT REVIEW



Avalon Idea loudspeaker

By Alan Sircom

Avalon's new loudspeaker has one drawback that we'll get out of the way quickly; the name. Calling a loudspeaker 'Idea' almost gifts every writer, commentator, blogger and forum denizen a healthy succession of puns. It's almost like painting an archery target on one of the drive units. That being said, if the major drawback is the name, you know you are onto something very good indeed. And also, I'd wager that this could be considered Avalon's Big Idea for the future of high-end, so maybe the name's not that bad after all.

This is the cheapest of the back-swept Avalon models. In fact, now that the NP Evolution 2.0 and Symbol loudspeakers are gone, this is the entry-point in the whole Avalon range. Not that £7,900 is 'cheap', but when you start to factor in speakers like Time and Isis, a loudspeaker that costs less than a family car can seem like the nursery slopes for Avalon.

It's a two-way, three driver loudspeaker, with a pair of 177mm Nomex/Kevlar composite cone bass units coupled to a 25mm ceramic dome tweeter with a neodymium magnet. Aside from cabinet volume and weight, this last is the big external difference between this speaker and the more upmarket models; the others use an inverted Tonagen ceramic dome tweeter, while this one is said to be proprietary, but looks very similar to the Eton model found in the NP Evolution 2.0. This meant a completely different approach in the crossover.

It also allowed a significant redesign of the internal architecture of the classic Avalon cabinet. This has meant the loudspeaker can be smaller, thinner and considerably lighter than previous backswept models. And it's here that I find the biggest operational criticism of the Idea kicks in; the speaker uses the usual rest-on spike-cones found in the bigger Avalons. On more weightier models, the sheer mass of the speaker gives that cone a rigid connection to the floor, because there's no way a cone is going anywhere fast with 1/10th ton of speaker resting on its flat base. At a shade over 27kg per speaker, the Idea is light enough to make those cones a little more mobile. I'd prefer long, screw-in spikes in place, although in fairness the Ideas didn't even wobble in use. It has the usual Avalon arrangement of a vent (not a port) pointing into the floor and a rear mounted Cardas terminal block for a single set of spade-lugged loudspeaker cables.

Avalon conservatively rates the Idea at 88dB sensitivity with a nominal four-ohm impedance, and a power rating between 50-300 watts per channel. But that doesn't mean the speaker is a comfortable load with any ol' amplifier. Like the Transcendent before it, I think this loudspeaker is most comfortable being fed from a solid-state amplifier, one with a bit of meat on its bones. Although I've heard the self-same pair of speakers played with c-j tubes at the Whittlebury Hall National Audio Show, for me, the Devialet D-Premier and the Edge G6 power amp really hit the spot; the Karan and Muse electronics distributed by the importer Audiofreaks would work well here too.

I can't help feeling that Audiofreaks almost scored something of an own goal at the National Audio Show. The Idea sounded good, very good in fact for a small room, but the use of a c-j Classic 60 power amp meant the Ideas were running in low gear. With solid-state amps in place, the Ideas seemed to blossom out. In short, if you are judging your findings based on the NAS system, you have no Idea what this speaker is capable of (you see what I mean about the name... it's an almost irresistible temptation).

What the NAS event did show is how well the Ideas work in smaller rooms. With the exception of the now sadly defunct NP Evolution 2.0 (and to a lesser extent the Transcendent), most Avalon floorstanders have struggled to fit snugly into many UK homes, if I'm really honest about such things. While

many of us have listening rooms large enough to accommodate a loudspeaker that works best with at least a metre between it and the nearest wall, and a good 2.5m between the speakers, these requirements can stump many a city-dweller who may have the funds and the interest, but not the living space to accommodate the demands of an Isis. In fairness, recent Avalons have become increasingly less demanding in their need for space, but that didn't prepare me for the Idea.

This might sound insane to our American counterparts (unless they happen to live in places like Manhattan), but I've seen very high-end systems in listening rooms as small as 10'x12' and 12'x16' is not uncommon in the cities. And it's to these rooms that the Idea brings the concept of high-end down to earth. The Idea is one of the most room-friendly loudspeakers made in the high-end today. While it's not a boundary design, it seems to release so little energy to the rear and sides of the cabinet, you can use it very close to the wall without complaint and as long as you keep clear of the corners and their propensity to bass-boom, it will sound fine. It benefits from a precise and logical set-up, but is untroubled enough by such things to rank low in the obsessive-compulsive stakes. The speaker is also light enough to be moved around in experimentation, without recourse to trolleys or piano moving folk.

I'm a half-willing victim of the sound-byte culture. I often find myself trying to pin down the performance of a product in a single-word highlight or two. And, perhaps it's indicative of the mediocrity of many audio components that this process is relatively easy to do, especially as many

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of the rejects that never make it to *Hi-Fi+*’s pages can be summed up in the extremely dismissive ‘meh!’. The problem with the Idea from a sound-byte perspective is it quickly begins to read like Monty Python’s *Spanish Inquisition* sketch; the Idea’s chief weapons are imaging, detail, dynamics, coherence, presence, articulation and nice red uniforms.

Imaging is the big hitter and the one that you notice first, especially when used in that smaller than average listening room. Normally in such places, you get a foreshortening of imagery, but with the Idea, everything is right-sized. That means if you play something large scale, it comfortably renders the image large. That includes ambience. The Low Anthem’s ‘Smart Flesh’ album is recorded in an icy, abandoned pasta factory with a lot of ‘found’ instruments to preserve the natural ambience, and through the Idea, that ambience is rendered huge in some tracks, almost claustrophobically small in others. Except for the one wall-of-sound clipped and compressed track, the rest are clearly recorded in different rooms, each to provide suitable natural reverb appropriate to the specific track. This is often slightly lost, as is the rationale for recording in such an atypical space for a studio. With the Idea, the ambience is so well-preserved you can almost feel the paint peeling from the walls and the recording space adds to the richness of the recording.

Some of this comes from the angled front baffle, and it’s in a small room where this well-established Avalon trademark really begins

to show why it’s so clever. It seems to help limit baffle-edge diffraction and in the process side-wall reflection problems. Side wall reflections can undermine performance in small rooms because the side walls are so near the speaker they hit the listener’s ear almost at the same time as the direct sound, blurring stereo. Somehow, this effect is reduced with the Avalon cabinet design, and this is something that isn’t quite so obvious when the speakers have a lot of air between the baffle and the side wall.

The Low Anthem’s use of less-than-perfect instruments also highlights the Idea’s first-rate coherence and articulation. We’re used to the sound of most instruments, so our brains accommodate them and that makes for a very forgiving assessment of loudspeakers, but when confronted by non-standard musical instruments, we can quickly become aware of how well (or ill) the loudspeaker is at producing a cogent reproduction of that sound. In some ways, it’s why some audiophile test discs use recordings of garage doors slamming; not simply to determine any apparent stage height, but to render a sound most of us can equate to in daily life and compare directly. Even the mildest unevenness is quick to spot, and the Idea is exceptionally good at limiting this. Tonally spot on, the overall presentation gives a sense of individual musicians working together, and the voices of those instruments, and the singers hanging together beautifully.

Perhaps the one element in loudspeakers that doesn’t get mentioned much is ‘presence’. This loudspeaker has it, in spade-loads. It’s not presence as in it pushes the image into the room (although it does do this, it mostly presents a big, wide and deep soundstage) and it’s not presence as in making the presence region sound good (although it does make vocals sound particularly sweet). It’s something more. It’s that there’s a physical authority to the sounds emanating from the Idea that makes the speakers so easy to get on with. And that’s the big bonus of the Idea. You sit in front of them enjoying your music. A lot. These speakers are musically analytical and yet, you don’t ever find them musically intrusive. They are clean and dynamic, but you never find yourself being drawn to those elements to give your system a workout. You just enjoy your music through these loudspeakers. It’s a very natural and beguiling sound.

This potentially concerned me, because frequently ‘beguiling’ means ‘coloration’, but that really isn’t the case here. These speakers are tonally accurate and they don’t favour any end of the musical spectrum – I moved from Mozart to Pavement in short order and the Idea brought out the tonal majesty of the former and the gritty energy of the other in equal measure. Which puts the loudspeakers in a class of their own.

This leaves me (more specifically, Avalon itself) with something of a conundrum. Where does the Idea end and the Transcendent begin? The Idea essentially continues the ‘Avalon for the rest of us’ concept started in the Transcendent. Aside from the predilection for solid-state, the Idea places



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For the prospective end user, this is a winning situation. If the Transcendent is the ‘Avalon for the rest of us’, the Idea is ‘the best £20,000 speaker you can buy for £8,000’. That it is more room and amp friendly in the process only serves to make it more attractive to a wider audience. And for those who crave a big image in a small room, I can’t think of a better design whatever the cost. The Idea lives up to its slightly odd name, because it’s one of the brightest ideas in high-end loudspeakers this year, and comes extremely highly recommended. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Two-way floorstanding loudspeaker

Drivers: 1x 25mm ceramic dome tweeter
2x 177mm Nomex/Kevlar composite mid/bass units

Sensitivity: 88dB

Nominal Impedance: four ohms

Recommended power rating: 50-300W

Frequency response: 28Hz-22kHz

Dimensions (WxHxD): 21.9x90.2x25.4cm

Weight: 27.21kg per speaker

Price: £7,900 per pair

Manufactured by: Avalon Acoustics

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- ▶ fewer demands on the electronics it sits with. It is more accommodating of the strictures of smaller rooms and is less bothered by perfect speaker positioning. *Ceteris paribus*, the Transcendent brings more to the table; more extension (especially at the bottom end), a more free sounding top end and more outright volume headroom, which combine to make the speaker more dynamic. And, it must be said, not a great deal more. This isn’t a case of the Transcendent being flawed (it’s an excellent speaker that more than justifies its place and price in the audio hierarchy), just that the Idea is so damn good I can see it being a challenge to its bigger brother at times. Put it this way, if someone with the wherewithal to buy either came to audition the Time and heard the Transcendent first, they would still end up buying the Time without question, but if they came wanting to hear the Transcendent and heard the Idea first... well, things aren’t so clear-cut.