

UHF

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MAGAZINE

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YOUR LAST LOUDSPEAKER? Choose from the Audes Orpheus and the Reference 3A Episode, right here on our cover

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LISTENING ROOM

REFERENCE 3A EPISODE

The brand is not exactly unknown to us, since for over a dozen years the speakers in our Omega reference system have been Reference 3A Suprema II's. Originally Swiss, with French roots, Reference 3A was founded by Daniel Dehay, but was purchased over a decade ago by Canada's Divergent Technologies, which continues to draw

from the deep well left by Dehay. We have had several occasions to review the company's creations since, mostly with enthusiasm.

One of the really good ones, — though by no means the only one — was the Royal Virtuoso (*UHF* No. 70). This oversized two-way speaker with the Corian sides was, essentially, just like the top part of our Supremas. It is no longer made, but the Episode is a reboot of the Royal Virtuoso, now a floorstanding speaker, with a third driver. The tiny gold tweeter is actually a muRata super tweeter. By coincidence, we are using a freestanding muRata pair on our Supremas.

Though Reference 3A is now a Canadian company, several aspects of the original designs can be found in the Episodes. First, look at the woofer diaphragm. We hesitate to call it a "cone," because its shape is not at all that of the usual truncated cone. This one has a shape that Reference 3A calls "hyper elliptical," and it is of course made from woven carbon fibre.

The front is dramatically tilted, partly to keep the wavefronts from the drivers in step, and partly to minimize the standing waves that are a problem with rectangular enclosures. The crossover is reduced to the strict

minimum, essentially Mundorf silver capacitors there to protect the two tweeters from low-frequency energy.

Other materials include Bybee Quantum Purifiers (Google it and be amazed!), AVM (Anti Vibration Magic) fluid, and Van den Hul cabling. The four binding posts, which are nameless but seem to work well mechanically, are mounted on a massive aluminum plate. Grilles are included, and if you need to use them, well...then you do.

We decided to make this an all-analog session, as we sometimes do, and so we pulled out some familiar and less familiar recordings of different genres, though the first and last are of music we always use in loudspeaker evaluations.

The first is the long-discontinued *Center Stage* from Wilson Audio, whose *Olympic Fanfare* (composed for the 84 Summer Games in L.A.) has some rolling drum work that seems to give many a speaker serious trouble. We also used it to determine whether we would be happy with the initial placement of the Episodes: a little ahead of where our Supremas sound best. We had placed them just enough ahead that the centre of the woofer was just where the front of our Suprema's woofer had been. A first listen convinced us that no adjustment was going to be necessary.

Thus reassured, we played the *Fanfare* again, notepads in hand.

The overall sound was well-balanced, and indeed was not unlike that of our own speakers. "You recognize the family sound," said Albert. "There's the same flavor, the same midrange richness, the same definition in the brass and the woodwinds, the same articulation." He thought that the central image was fuller as well.

But what about those rolling tympani? On poorly-damped speakers they become an undefined mass of sound, quite unlike the sound of a real percussion instrument. The Episodes kept them in check, which is quite an achievement for any tuned reflex speaker. But of course they couldn't match the tremendous impact of our own speakers'



push-pull subwoofers, which come into play below 50 Hz. There lay the difference. “With the reference I could feel the impact in my bones, my chest, my legs,” said Steve. “Other than that, the brass is a little brighter, and more brash, and the 3-D effect isn’t as striking.”

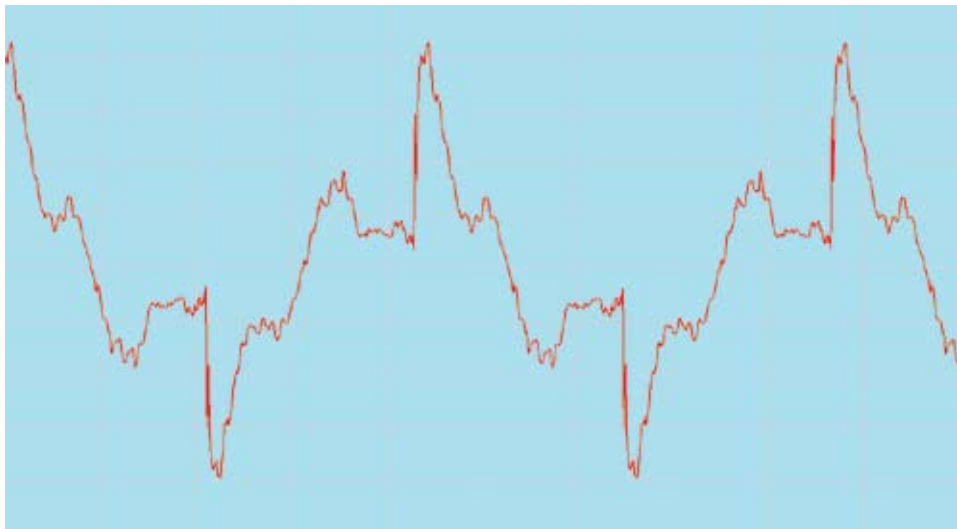
We had a second wind band piece in the lineup, the medley from *A Chorus Line* from Frederick Fennell’s *Beachcomber* double album (Reference Recordings RR-62). Keith O. Johnson put a lot into its grooves, and listening to it is a thrilling experience...if, of course, the playback equipment, from phono cartridge to speaker, is up to the task.

Once again there were important differences in performance between our reference and the Episodes, but the Episodes handled this difficult music so deftly that we spent little time concentrating on any shortcomings. The lively energy of the music came through, and it was easy to conclude that liveliness is the defining characteristic of these speakers, as it is for other Reference 3A’s. We were by now convinced that the engineers had done what was necessary to keep the cabinet rigid, because transients were quick and sharp, the rhythm unstoppable.

Steve, who had expressed reservations with the first recording, was coming around. “The sound stage is not as wide and flowing,” he said. “The Supremas fill every square centimetre with music. But the more I listen, the less difference I hear.”

We continued with Israeli singer Esther Ofarim, singing the French traditional song *Rataplan*, from her original album of some years back (ATR 001). This is not *quite* a natural recording, but it’s always impressive, with Esther’s voice clear and powerful, with the accompanying orchestra filling the broad space. You want dynamics? She’s got them!

The Episodes reproduced this difficult recording amazingly well. Indeed, the words (based on an old legend of a king who covets a nobleman’s wife) were actually even clearer than with our own speakers, though this feat was accomplished without adding extra brightness. There was a little less throat sound in Esther’s voice, but both Steve and Albert noticed the great transparency of the



sound. All three of us were pleased with the way this session was unfolding.

We had a second female voice, recorded rather more naturally, that of Jennifer Warnes singing Leonard Cohen’s *Famous Blue Raincoat*, this from the 45 rpm multidisc re-release. Properly played, this song — reinvented by Warnes and Cohen for a female singer, is a constantly renewable emotional experience. We were quite sure the Episodes wouldn’t let us down, and they didn’t.

This is an intimate recording, without the challenge of extremes, in either bandwidth or dynamics. Rather, its impact depends on the subtle emotions of Jennifer Warnes’ performance, and of course the poetry of Leonard Cohen. The overall sound was perhaps a little less intimate, but the voice remained gorgeous and expressive. Albert preferred the rich sound of the saxophone with our reference speakers, but he praised the Episodes for, once again,

their effortless transparency. Steve agreed. “Her voice is singing *with* the instruments, not just next to them.”

Our next selection was the title tune from a nearly forgotten LP from José Feliciano, *Angela* (Private Stock PS 2010). Feliciano, you may or may not recall, was known in the 70’s for his free-form version of *Light My Fire*.

This can be a difficult song to reproduce, but the Episodes did the job nearly perfectly. “There’s an odd introduction to the song,” said Albert. “You can really here those little bells right at the beginning.” We could also hear the woody resonance of the guitar, not just Feliciano’s finger on the strings.

By this time comparisons were getting difficult to make, because we were so caught up in the rhythm and texture of the guitar, the violins, the percussion, and Feliciano’s unique voice. It worked wonderfully well. “Colors in nature are always harmonious,” said Steve, “and this is very much a harmonious presentation.”

We had one recording left, one we always use to end loudspeaker reviews.

Secret of the Andes is an exceptional jazz album (originally on the Nautilus label, later re-released as a JVC xrcd), but the title piece is notable for an extended sequence featuring a large variety of Central American instruments, and especially percussion instruments. Most speakers we review do at least adequately on this piece, but that’s only because we try to avoid reviewing obvious duds. The sequence is a trap. The drums are wood, metal or stretched skin, and a poorly-

SUMMING IT UP...

Brand/model: Reference 3A Episode

Price: C\$5500 or US\$5500 in standard finishes, slightly more for some finishes

Size (HWD): 117 x 27 x 37 cm

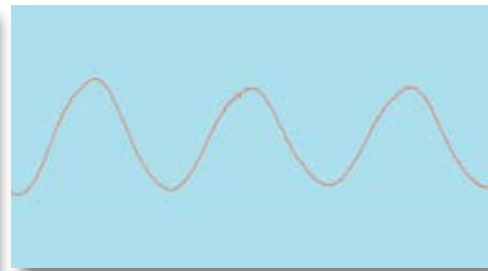
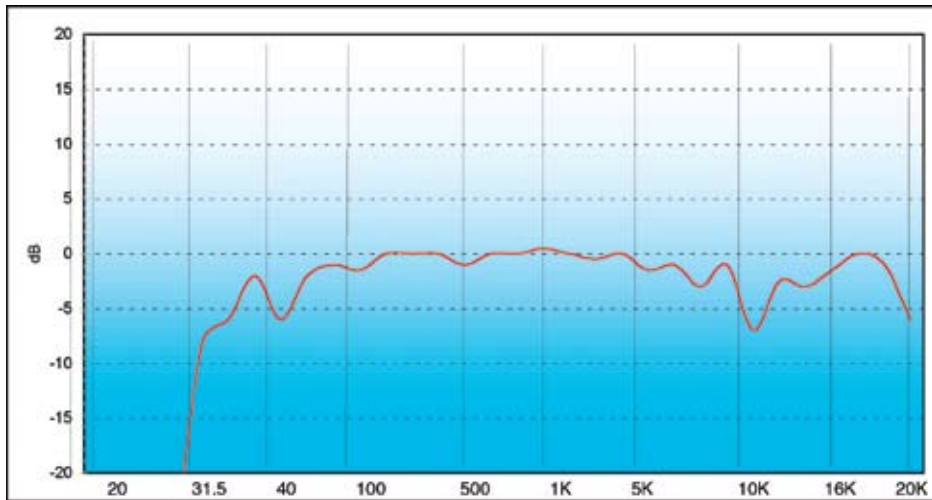
Sensitivity: 91 dB

Impedance: 8 ohms

Most liked: Nearly perfect balance, quick liveliness

Least liked: One more octave wouldn’t be unwelcome

Verdict: Promises a lot, delivers



damped loudspeaker cabinet will cover their distinctive timbres with their own homogenous resonance, making them all sound the same.

Of course the Episodes got through this sequence well. The little Andean harp that opens and closes the piece was particularly well articulated. The drums seemed lighter than with our larger Supremas, but the difference was apparent for only a few seconds, and it was then easy to accept their sound as being right.

The more conventional jazz portion was very good too, with Victor Feldman's lively piano particularly enjoyable.

The cymbals were a model of finesse. "I think I heard the contribution of those super tweeters," said Steve. "These really are the younger brothers of our reference speakers."

Once we had (reluctantly) finished with the listening, we set up our calibrated microphone a metre in front of the main tweeter. The 100 Hz square wave, shown on the previous page, confirmed the quickness of the speakers, though it showed some phase problems related to the tilt of the cabinet front (the drivers are set up to meld together at a greater distance, not at one metre).

Frequency response, measured by

averaging third-of-octave warble tones, is shown above left. Save for that unexpected sag at 10 kHz, it is very good. The 40 Hz sag is a room effect, not a shortcoming of the speaker. We were actually pleased to see the bottom-end response drop so sharply, because speakers that try to reproduce low frequencies they can't make sense of color the music horribly. Note the nearly undistorted sound wave above right: it's 32 Hz at full reference level!

The graph doesn't indicate the contribution of the super tweeter, but our microphone wasn't in line with it.

No matter how well a loudspeaker may do certain things, the key to satisfying performance is balance: nothing exaggerated, nothing in excess. On that scale, the Reference 3A Episode succeeds admirably. It is extreme in only one aspect, and that is liveliness. Don't count on us to complain.



CROSSTALK

As you probably know, most of the music lives in the midrange, and these speakers provide a superbly-rich dwelling for it. It almost felt as though a solid, yet transparent, wall of sound were created in front of me. But there was also the depth of a stage and the precise effect of spotlights on each performer.

Did I say the music was lively? It was bursting with joy when called for, and smooth as a lake at sunset during those bittersweet moments. I also experienced an unmistakable sense of balance as I listened to one piece after another. Things were not perfect (they never really are), but I knew they made sense, they held together well, they let me relax and get fully involved with the music.

I knew that these speakers couldn't reproduce the bass foundation as impressively as

our reference speakers, but I found myself accepting that readily, as if the performers were playing in a much larger hall.

Too bad each selection had become so short!

—Albert Simon

Shopping for perfection is always more than a little stressful. Trying to find a bargain at the same time adds to the challenge. Then there's your partner to please, unless pleasing yourself is your only goal.

This speaker can help solve all of those issues. Its playing instantly brought back a clear sonic memory of the UHF reference, its larger and more costly relative. A rich and pure harmonic balance, an enormously broad-in-the-beam sound stage, entirely authentic instrument timbres. And it is seriously better looking. Slim and elegant, it's

very easy on the eyes. Any one of the trio of finishes offered will fit nicely into most every musical pleasure dome.

The Episode moves the Reference 3A family of speakers forward, its tradition maintained.

—Steve Bourke

Sometimes the basic *rightness* of an audio product, but especially a loudspeaker, strikes you to the point where you pay no attention to the technical aspects of its execution. At that moment — I know I'm on well-trod ground here — it's all about the music.

That was also my impression the very first time I heard Daniel Dehay's original 3A speakers nearly two decades ago. Same thing here. Put music into these speakers, and what comes out is a living thing.

—Gerard Rejskind