

Pearl Acoustics Sibelius

SEEN AND HEARD AT BRISTOL IN 2017, PEARL ACOUSTICS WAS A NEW NAME TO PAUL MESSENGER, BUT ITS SINGLE-DRIVER SIBELIUS SPEAKER WAS SOUNDING VERY GOOD INDEED, IN SEVERAL ROOMS



I gather John Bowers (founder of B&W) once commented that the ideal speaker would have just one drive unit, but a second and maybe a third might then be added to cope with the difficult demands of the audio band. I too have long had a soft spot for speaker systems based on solitary full-range drive units, and in my experience one (almost) always has to make significant allowances for such a system's inevitable limitations at the top and bottom of the audio band.

But I've included an '(almost)' in this case to allow for the fact that Pearl Acoustics' *Sibelius* seems to have found a formula that avoids most of the pitfalls. Superficially it actually looks both standard and simple – after all, there's not a lot one can do with a single driver design – but in practice certain innovations do distinguish it from the herd. However, this floorstander doesn't come cheap. Its retail price is a hefty £5,000/pair – not exactly costly compared to the best multi-way speaker systems around, but nevertheless considerably more expensive than the typical budget floorstander.

The most interesting feature is arguably the cabinetwork, which in this case requires serious craftsmanship, as it's actually made from solid French Oak some 33mm thick, rather than some form of veneered composite which is the more usual technique. According to Pearl Acoustics, it takes twelve weeks for a craftsman to hand-build

its enclosures. One side effect of course is that any damage may be easily and invisibly rectified, so the speaker's enclosure should therefore last indefinitely. The solid-wood enclosures inevitably compromise the cosmetics of pair-matching, but the joinery involved achieves a very high standard indeed. The enclosure is quite deliberately very rigid, so any cabinet colorations are well suppressed, albeit occurring at relatively high frequency. The construction forms a folded quarter-wave loading behind the drive unit at low frequencies, and allegedly has no need for internal bracing.

The drive unit is an equally crucial component. It's made by a Mark Fenlon, a British businessman based in Hong Kong, and has a quite small main driver cone, some 95mm in diameter. In fact there are three alternative *Sibelius* models, each based on different versions of Fenton's drivers: our *SG* (silver-grey) review sample had a silver-coloured metal diaphragm; a copper coloured *CG* (copper-gold) provides a purely cosmetic variation, as the two sound (and measure) exactly the same; and a *P* (paper cone) diaphragm version, which measures and sounds rather different, also exists. (Only 5% of the listening panel preferred the *P*, which has a somewhat higher sensitivity, so is probably better suited to those with valve amps; it sounds more like a traditional single driver system, with a significantly harsher timbre.)

The floor-coupling arrangements are somewhat unconventional, consisting of a flat steel plate that simply supports the speaker and extends its footprint without physically fixing the speaker to the plate. This stand also has a thinner vertical extension whose only apparent purpose is to secure the cable.

Measurements

The excellent – albeit somewhat surprising – finding is that the averaged in-room far-field frequency response looks remarkably and creditably similar to what one would expect from a regular two-way speaker. The response might show a little too much variation at high frequencies for its own good, which is probably an inevitable consequence of a driver with a significantly larger diameter than the stereotype tweeter, and which therefore tends to 'beam' at higher frequencies.

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A slight but somewhat exposed peak is visible at 8kHz, prior to an ultimate rolloff above 15kHz. Elsewhere the in-room, far field averaged response is notably even 90Hz-2.6kHz, and although the bottom octave (20-40Hz) isn't really on the agenda, the good frequency balance is pretty well maintained down to 40Hz. There's also a significant dip in the upper presence region, 2.5-7kHz, which should help avoid any tendency towards aggression, but might dull transients.

The absence of a crossover network almost guarantees a simple and straightforward amplifier load, and that did indeed turn out to be the case. The impedance stays comfortably above 6ohms throughout, and the quarter wave line is tuned to 48Hz. The sensitivity rating is a reasonable if unexceptional average value of around 87dB, for a genuine 8ohm Watt.

Sound Quality

Personal behaviour is actually the ultimate guide to sound quality, and I've now been happily listening to the *Sibelius* pair for nearly two months, despite the ready availability of numerous more costly references. Although I can't deny that the enormous multi-driver four-way Tannoys (see review elsewhere in this edition) did have some obvious advantages, with their dramatically superior sensitivity and wider bandwidth, replacing them with a pair of *Sibelius*' didn't seem too traumatic.

The much smaller and considerably simpler *Sibelius* might lose out substantially in terms of bandwidth and sensitivity, but it does have one powerful compensating advantage: simplicity. The absence of any form of crossover network brings a difficult-to-explain element of 'directness' and 'immediacy' that is entirely seductive in its own way.

Simplicity also offers a distinct advantage in terms of imaging. The single full-range drive unit in a narrow-fronted enclosure inevitably has tighter and more precise focus than a large multi-way loudspeaker,

delivering superior lateral positioning and in this case rather better depth perspectives too,

Like I said at the start of this section, personal behaviour is a crucial guide to sound quality. In the *Sibelius*' case I merely brought them in to replace the big Tannoys after they were collected, but have now just left them in place for nearly two months. A certain laziness has played a part, but there's also the fact that the *Sibelius*' sheer simplicity makes them excellent communicators. Sure, bandwidth, frequency balance and dynamic range are all important parameters, exemplified by the Tannoys, but at the end of the day, musical communication is the bottom line, and the core reason why we're listening to music at all.

Although much of the last couple of months has been spent reproducing TV sound, I've also had at least three groups of visitors. These included the arrival and installation of the Rega *Naiad* turntable (see review elsewhere in this issue), which clearly demonstrated its superiority over my reference *RP10* auditioned *via* the *Sibelius* loudspeakers.

Two key factors distinguish the *Sibelius*, and their combination is really what sets this speaker apart from the pack. The first is the abovementioned immediacy that arises from the simplicity of direct coupled operation. Even more important, it also delivers a respectably even and plausibly smooth frequency response, which is unusual in a single-driver system.

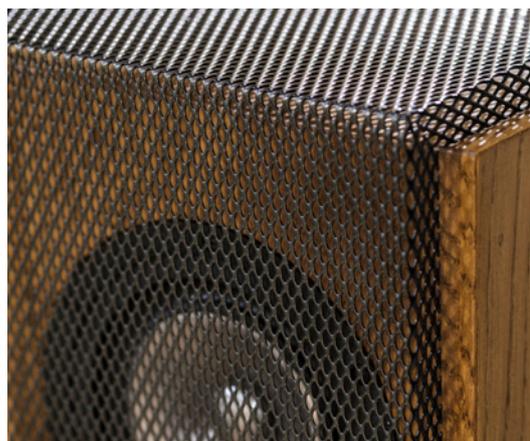
A number of single-driver speakers exist and these nearly always share a similar immediacy to the *Sibelius*. However, in this reviewer's experience all of them hitherto have suffered from serious frequency imbalances, usually involving a degree of excess forwardness in the upper midband, followed by very uneven high frequencies. By contrast the *Sibelius* works very well indeed, holding within remarkably tight limits from 40Hz up to 3kHz, even though it's by no means perfect. There's some loss of output 3-7kHz, plus a peak at 8kHz, but neither is particularly extreme – they just mean that the sound quality could be a little 'tidier'.

Conclusions

Pearl Acoustics' *Sibelius* might appear to be a quite costly prospect at £5,000, but that figure pales into insignificance when one takes its fine performance into account. In short, it has the immediacy and image superiority of a single driver system alongside an unusually flat frequency response, a combination that somehow supplies the best of at least two worlds. One might wish for an extra octave of bass, and a somewhat smoother top end, but the 'perfect' loudspeaker has never existed. The model here is probably unique and well merits a strong Recommendation.

HIFICRITIC
RECOMMENDED

John Bowers' quotation:
"The very best speaker design only needs one drive unit but if you cannot build it with one then use two. If you cannot build it with two then use three. If you need more than three then change your design".



Manufacturer's Specifications

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| Impedance | 7.5ohms |
| Power handling | 40W RMS, 70W peak |
| Efficiency | 87.5dB (1W, 1m) |
| Maximum output | 105dB @ 1m |
| Frequency range | 28Hz-30kHz |
| Size (HxWxD) | 1093x225x295mm |
| Weight | 29kg |
| Price | £5,000 |

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