

UHF

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

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AUDES ORPHEUS

Though it's the first time a speaker from Audes has crossed our threshold, the company is not completely new to us. A large Audes model was featured in our report on CES in 2001 (it's on page 27 of *UHF* No. 61 if you want to look it up). Its prominent ears led us to the natural headline: "Your speaker is ready, Batman." All laughing aside, we said it had more than respectable sound.

So does the Orpheus, the Estonian company's flagship speaker, and certainly its most luxurious.

Audes has decidedly non-hi-fi origins. In the days of the Soviet Union, it made transformers and cable for the Red Army (well, actually the Soviet

defense ministry). Even before the age of perestroika, it had begun designing and building home entertainment systems under the brand name Estonia, eventually changing its name to the present one.

(Audes is a town in the Auvergne region of France, though we doubt that's the reason for the name.)

Audes makes small, relatively inexpensive speakers as well, but the Orpheus is the company's flagship. Check the ash black burl wood sides (the panels are from Italy), and you'll see where some of the money has been spent, but there are lots of luxury touches inside as well: Mundorf capacitors, Cardas binding posts (just one pair, not two), and point-to-point wiring rather than circuit

boards. The tweeter is in a separate vibration-absorbent housing, and so is the crossover.

The cabinet is elaborate, with no parallel surfaces to sustain internal standing waves. It is massive, certainly, but it is also narrow, in order to maintain a strong stereo image. For that reason, the 25 cm woofer has been mounted on the side. The speakers are to be oriented so that the woofers face each other (and woe to anything that gets in between!).

Both the woofer and the midrange drivers are proprietary, though the tweeter is a SEAS Millennium. The midrange driver is very nearly a woofer in its own right, because Audes has placed the crossover point at a low 120 Hz. That places a difficult job on the figurative shoulders of that driver, which needs to handle the five octaves from 120 to 1,900 Hz. They get away with it, as we shall see, and in spectacular fashion too. It offers a major advantage over the usual practice in three-way speakers of having the crossover point right around Middle C. That would mean that, right in the most important part of the music, there would be two dissimilar drivers playing at the same time.

This is a reflex speaker, with two huge ports at the rear. It is, however, possible to plug up the ports with the massive supplied stoppers. Audes says that may be advantageous for use with tube amplifiers.

There are no grilles supplied, except for the cloth covering the woofer. The screws holding in the midrange and tweeter are not really hidden, but they are so unobtrusive you barely notice them.

The speakers are shipped with rubber feet, as you can see in the picture, but you can (and should) substitute the included spike tips. Our speakers had been shipped more than once around the continent, however, and half our spike tips had been lost. Not wanting to handicap them with rubber feet, we placed them on machined Tenderfoot cones instead.

During the break-in period (though they weren't factory new, they had not been fully run-in) we were playing music from a remote computer, funnelled through an Airport Express, a Cyrus

converter and a single-ended tube amplifier. We could tell that the Audes were going to deliver on their promise: they sounded smooth, natural and rich, with an almost chocolatey tone.

In our Omega listening room, however, their character shifted somewhat. When we placed them in the same location as our reference speakers, the sound became cooler and leaner. We tried pushing them back toward the wall, which usually has the effect of firming up the lower range, but side-mounted woofers don't react to room acoustics the way front-mounted drivers do.

What's more, pushing them back created another problem, because then the woofers were firing right into our equipment tables! We pulled the speakers forward again, and we would later try pulling them well out into the room. Though we were using a solid state amplifier (a Moon W-8), we tried plugging the ports, and decided to run the speakers that way. We suggest trying them both ways, whatever your amplifier type.

We had been initially unimpressed by the stereo image, but putting the cones under the speakers solved that problem. Our reference speakers have an excellent image with a strong phantom centre, and with the cones the Audes matched them. Few speakers can.

We put on our first selection, the *Olympic Fanfare* from Wilson Audio's *Center Stage* album. This is a powerful wind band piece, composed for the 1984 Olympics, with a rolling tympani passage that causes problems for most reflex speakers, because they lose control below their own resonant frequency. The resonance of the Audes is very low, however, and control remained very good. With an extra 2 dB of volume (to compensate for the difference in efficiency between speakers), we thoroughly enjoyed the impact of this flamboyant composition. The clarity and the precision of the transients were exemplary.

As we had rather expected, however, the "color" was different. "The high midrange is a little more dominant," said Gerard, "but I don't mean the highs. This sure isn't a shrill speaker." Toby liked the richness of the brass, and praised the added harmonic content.



"With our speakers the cymbals were almost discreet," he said, "but not with these."

Albert had mainly praise, finding himself getting used very quickly to the changed color of the window onto the music.

We continued with a second wind band piece, the *Chorus Line Medley* from Frederick Fennell's *Beachcomber* double LP (RR-62). This famous recording has huge impact, even at frequencies that are felt rather than heard. The single 20 cm woofer couldn't quite match the similarly-sized *dual* push-pull subwoofers of our reference speaker, but there was no less impact, and it was delivered without a hint of strain. At the same time, the lowest part of the spectrum was so clearly defined that we couldn't help being impressed. "I like the edginess in the horns," said Toby. "There's extra energy in the cymbals, but that doesn't bother me much." He found the sound of the tambourine somewhat overbearing, but he also heard some improvement when he moved his chair closer to the speakers. "Working with the room might help some more," he suggested.

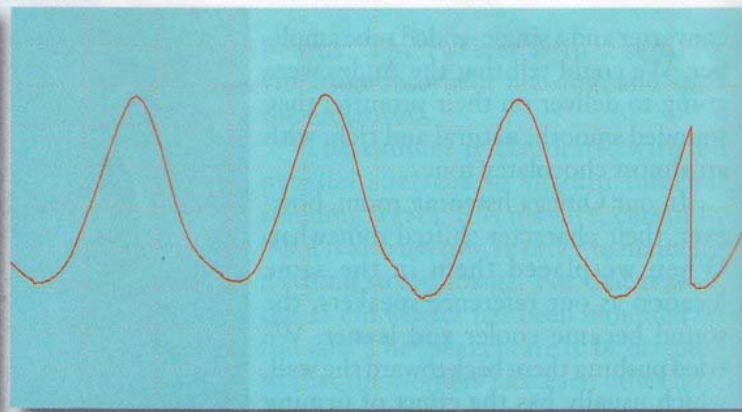
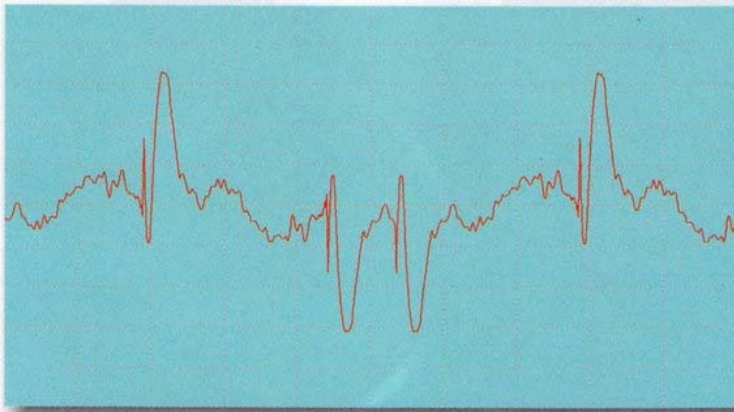
Albert agreed, finding that lowering the volume and sitting closer (to

minimize the contribution by the room's acoustics) could help as well.

But we should add that the shift in color, already noted, brought some clear dividends. The bells and such small percussion instruments as the wood block emerged from the main orchestral structure with startling realism. The big bass drum was terrific too.

We continued with Esther Ofarim's album *Esther* (ATR 001), from which we selected *Rataplan*, a song based on an old French legend. On our reference speakers, her voice had such vivid presence that it seemed surreal, surely as intended by the producer. With the Audes, once again, the color changed, and her voice lost some of its velvety texture, but the piece gained in a number of important ways.

It gained in clarity for one thing. The woodwinds emerged from the background. Esther's French is nearly perfect, and her elocution is flawless, but even so the Audes made it easier for us to follow the text. "Each word is engraved in space," said Albert. Added Toby, "With our speakers I had trouble putting her voice and the orchestra together, but not this time. I'm not sure why, but I like what these speakers do to that song." He



had also noted a little groove “edginess” on first hearing, but found it less bothersome with the Audes.

We switched our Linn turntable to 45 rpm and listened to Jennifer Warnes’ *Famous Blue Raincoat* from the Cisco three-disc re-issue. Albert had reservations about the timbre of the saxophone, but that was the closest any of us had to a complaint.

With this song as with the previous one, the clarity brought out a lot of detail. “I noticed even more of the subtlety of Jennifer’s performance,” said Toby. “She has quite a balancing act. Her voice makes her sound so *nice*, but the sentiment in the song is bitter as well as sweet.”

As with earlier recordings, the speakers brought fine details into sharp definition, letting us hear syllables that Jennifer all but drops (for instance, the last syllable of “just one more Gypsy thief”). “You can actually hear her breathe between syllables,” said Gerard. “I like the resonance of the piano notes too.”

We then put on an almost forgotten recording from the 70’s, José Feliciano’s *Angela* (Private Stock PS 2010), from which we selected the title song. Feliciano’s virtuoso guitar work was clarified by the quickness of the transients. Articulation of both voice and guitar were superb, as was the rhythm. His singing seemed more expressive and emotional. The voice and instrumental effects toward the end of this extended song were fascinating.

Was that enough? “I’m trying to decide whether what I like might actually be an artifact,” said Toby. “There’s more harmonic detail on the guitar strings, but on the word *inside* there’s a

tremendous peak. On the phrase *meant to be*, there isn’t the brassy resonance I heard with our own speakers.”

Albert wondered the same thing. “The guitar strings are *very* clear,” he said, “but you don’t really hear the resonance of the guitar itself. The instruments seem to be floating in space, and the image is stable, but everything gets less natural toward the end. It sounds really interesting, but I’m not sure it’s right. When I’m too impressed by the sound, it gets my suspicions up.”

The final LP in our stack was the one that always ends our loudspeaker sessions, jazz pianist Victor Feldman’s *Secret of the Andes* (on Nautilus, later re-edited as a JVC xrcd). The extended introduction, with its vast array of Central American instruments (most of them struck, but one strummed and another scraped) is a challenge for a loudspeaker, and especially for a large one. The larger the speaker, the more difficult it is to keep its enclosure from shaking to the point where it radiates more sound than the actual drivers. This recording will smoke them out, and that’s why we use it.

Toby had actually never heard this recording before, being new to the magazine as a reviewer, though certainly not as a reader. It left him impressed. “The Andean harp has lovely articulation, with more high harmonics in its sound,” he said. “I enjoyed the flurry of percussion, and the flight of piano notes too.”

We were pleased not only by the accuracy (or at least the plausibility) of instrumental timbres, but also by the agility of the rhythm. “They’re unstoppable!” exclaimed Albert. “It’s downright acrobatic. There’s clarity and speed, and it’s surprising to hear that sort of performance from such a large speaker.”

And so we were done...but in fact we weren’t satisfied. We wondered what would happen if we placed the speakers closer forward, to free them from the rear wall, and — worse — the two large equipment stands that stood between them. We pulled them forward by some 60 cm, placed the aluminum cones under them once again, and looked over our stack of recordings.

Toby asked to hear a recording with full orchestra rather than one of the LPs we had already heard.

“The Fennell recording had a large orchestra,” said Gerard.

“It was a large *wind band*. I want to hear what it does with violins.” He suggested we listen to the Reference Recordings LP of music of Malcolm Arnold (RR-48), which we had heard in the preparation of the article on HRx high-definition, elsewhere in this issue. We put on Arnold’s *Sussex Overture*.

The sound of the London Philharmonic was superb. “The instruments are barely held in check,” said Toby. The brass was especially magnificent, with

SUMMING IT UP...

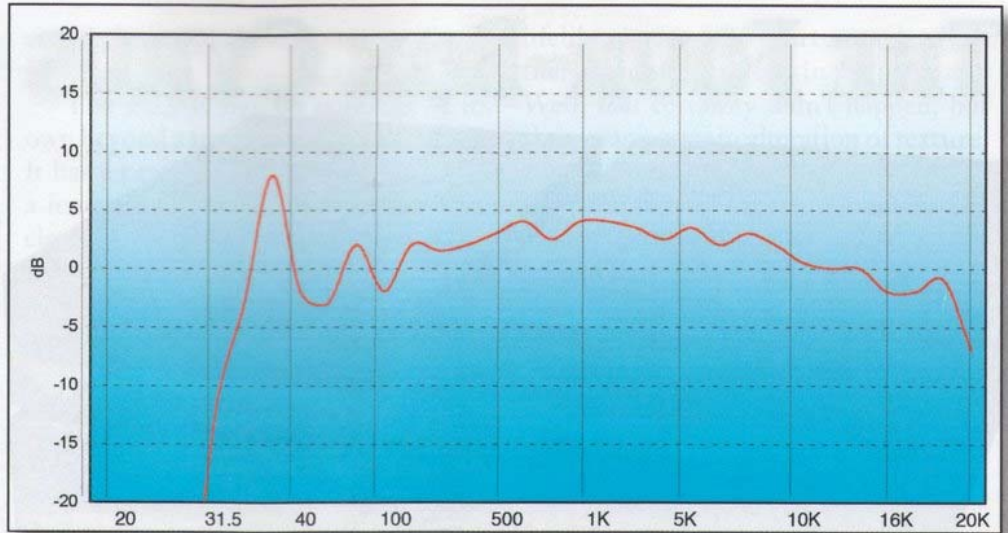
Brand/model: Audes Orpheus
Price: US\$16,000
Size (HWD): 116 x 32 x 56 cm
Sensitivity: 88 dB
Impedance: 6 ohms
Most liked: Astonishingly refined sound, powerful impact, limpid image
Least liked: Difficult to match to some acoustical surroundings
Verdict: The looks say “luxury.” The sound says the same.

very low distortion, and the feeling of depth was impressive as well. Both Toby and Gerard thought that the bottom end was now just right. "I think they like this placement," said Toby.

Albert alone had reservations. "But I don't know *why* I'm not quite satisfied," he said. "Pulled forward like that, they're excellent. The space is broader, the depth improved, but the emphasis on the upper part of the spectrum is still there."

All that remained was our usual series of technical tests, which we hoped would shed light on what we had heard. We set up our calibrated microphone at a distance of one metre in front of the speaker, on axis with the tweeter, and made some readings.

The 100 Hz square wave, shown at left on the previous page, is unusually good, its recognizable shape indicating good crossover design. There is, it is true, a doubling of the vertical parts of the wave, but that is due to the distance between the side-mounted woofer and the midrange driver. It would become less important in a normal listening position.



The frequency response curve, shown above, is very good, with a broad stable plateau covering the range from about 40 Hz to 15 kHz, a more than satisfactory performance. Response drops beyond 18 kHz. The large peak just below 40 Hz is the speaker's fundamental resonance, but it coincides with a room node, and does not indicate an error in the speaker design. Indeed, the trace at right on the previous page is of a 40 Hz sine wave (because it is a warble

tone, the cycle at extreme right is misshapen). The Orpheus does not generate audible noise below its useful range.

We agreed that the Audes Orpheus is capable of outstanding musical performance, and it will be at its best within a first-rate system. It is good-sized, and accurate positioning will be easier in a room of generous dimensions. Properly placed and fed, the Orpheus can be considered one of the world's great loudspeakers.



CROSSTALK

Well, *that* was an afternoon well spent.

Secret of the Andes — just another audiophile test disc, I thought, but oh no, it's good music! As a longtime reader, I know UHF likes to use the complex percussion as a speaker test, but the timing, the energy and invention in the piano part was a revelation with the big Audes speakers. They gave me music when I wasn't expecting it.

They also provided insight into the art of Jennifer Warnes. I've heard *Famous Blue Raincoat* many times and thought I knew it all, but again, no. Warnes uses her sweet voice to express bitterness only *just* held back, and it touched me more subtly than ever.

Was there something the reference did better? Sure, the weight and impact of the lower bass for one thing. On the other hand I preferred the speed and slight warmth of the Orpheus' midrange. Even at this level there are considerable differences among speakers. If you're looking for gear this good, you'll know you've found your speaker when you hear it and can't forget it. Put the Orpheus

on your list and be ready for an audition that stretches on and on...

—Toby Earp

The listening session left me a little unsatisfied, not because I was in any way displeased with what I heard, but on the contrary, because it would have taken much, *much* longer to really savor what these loudspeakers can do.

Beyond the sound they give this artist or that instrument, these loudspeakers ooze refinement. Their sound is complex, as real music is, and it invites closer listening. There may be more to your recordings than you had suspected, and these are the speakers that can let you hear it. I heard them extensively before the review session, while they were being broken in. Countless times, I was off doing something else, and they drew me in from the other room.

Yes, they're acoustically challenging, and they will require serious work to make them sound their best. But the potential rewards are great, because the Audes Orpheus are

reference-quality loudspeakers.

—Gerard Rejskind

These speakers do a ton of things just right. They let me enjoy some aspects of the music I tended to disregard and brought to my attention some elements that I had not suspected such as the personal way in which an artist utters some lyrics. And they're lightning fast too.

So why was I not relaxed during and after the listening tests? You know what I mean. When something sounds so good, your brain eases its intense focus, letting the music flow freely and you can almost feel your features soften. Why did it not happen?

I suspect it had to do with what was missing. And no, I can't be more specific because it wasn't *always* missing. Sometimes what I heard was so good that I noticed only later that something else was absent. I can hear you say "Gee, why can't this guy spell it out?" I know how you feel. On edge, aren't you? That's how I felt too.

—Albert Simon