

Living Voice Auditorium R25A Loudspeaker

by Roy Gregory

Longevity is an increasingly rare commodity when it comes to audio equipment. The lifespan of high-end digital products can be measured in months, while product revisions are seemingly now an annual event – or in some cases necessity, if only to attract renewed press attention or churn the products sitting, stagnant in the retail pipeline. Which is ironic, given that long-term satisfaction should be every customer's goal, as well as representing the best possible return on investment. So what are we to make of Living Voice's Auditorium R25A, a loudspeaker that has remained conceptually and outwardly unchanged for a quarter of a century? Not only has the Auditorium enjoyed uninterrupted production for 25 years, in that time it has spawned the Avatar, IBX, OBX and OBX RW3 derivatives – not replacement models but a carefully calculated range, offering clearly defined steps in performance, yet also outwardly all but indistinguishable, one from another. If ever you wanted proof of concept, then the Auditorium delivers in spades and that concept was established, all those years ago, with the original Auditorium design.

Like any great product, the success of Living Voice's entry-level loudspeaker depends on its balance of virtues. It is big enough to deliver convincing bandwidth yet small enough to be easily accommodated in real world rooms. It offers pleasing proportions and a lack of strong styling cues that combine to create a timeless appearance. But perhaps most critical of all, it is both efficient and an easy load, making it as versatile as it is musically engaging. Combine that easy drive characteristic with a £5,100 price-tag and you've got the lion's share of a seriously high-value amp/speaker pairing. Of course, despite appearances the specifics have remained far from constant, with comings and goings when it comes to suppliers and the availability (or discontinuation) of parts, along with the evolving knowledge gained from developing the various, higher-performance variants all mandating change. In fact, in mechanical terms, I'm not sure that this R25A has anything in common with the original Auditorium save the basic dimensions of the cabinet, the driver topology and the M8 spikes it stands on. The cabinet material has changed, as has the height and construction of the stand. The mid-bass drivers were discontinued by the manufacturer, which meant that Living Voice had to have them re-tooled as a proprietary



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- ▶ unit, taking the opportunity to refine certain aspects of the design. The tweeter has changed to a more recent model while the crossover has undergone a complete revision for the R25A, of which more later...

But the key ingredients remain the same. The combination of 94dB efficiency with a flat 6 Ohm load makes the Auditorium an obvious choice for those who use low-powered, single-ended or push-pull tube amps – whether that’s the sort of low-priced, Chinese or Eastern European-built integrated of which there are so many, or something way more exotic (which is where the higher performance variants come in). What is less obvious is that the easy load and sensitivity are just as useful when it comes to getting the best out of solid-state designs, again be that a high-quality but low-powered integrated or the likes of DNM, the Pass Labs Aleph amps or any number of small, Class A designs. At 215mm wide, 270mm deep and a shade under 1200mm tall, the small footprint, narrow baffle and rear firing reflex port all contribute to room-friendly aesthetics and performance and if the form factor’s not that unusual these days, it certainly was 25-years ago!

For all its domestic virtues and easy matching, where the Auditorium really scores is once you start playing music. The various Auditoria and Avatar models have always had the ability to swell effortlessly and do dynamics with authority. They are qualities that come from having more than enough sensitivity coupled to just enough bass, making dynamic shifts appropriately sudden, with enough weight and impact to impress. The R25A takes that to a whole new level when compared to its predecessors, adding a significant increase in coherence and articulation to the mix. Individually, these are all critical factors, but in concert they feed off each other, magnifying the musical results, creating a whole that way extends the sum of its parts. Being familiar with most of the Auditorium/Avatar variants and their evolution over the years, I’m confident that this latest Auditorium is superior to the previous RW – making this year’s entry level model superior to what was the flagship in this line only a couple of years back. Play the dramatic opening to Mendelssohn’s 2nd Piano Concerto (Lisiecki/Orpheus C.O. on DGG) and the R25As capture not just the explosive dynamic contrasts but also the shape of Lisiecki’s phrasing – and the way it interlocks with the orchestral parts – the contrast between his delicacy

and power, the effortless articulation in his playing, the tonal and expressive range he conjures from the piano. This is a beautifully scaled instrument, full of complex layers and textures, from which notes flow in a tumbling cascade of energy. Lisiecki is arguably the most impressive new pianist to emerge in years. With the Living Voice speakers you hear him: the musical authority and command that belie his years, the beauty and colour in the composition and playing, the close relationship he enjoys with the Orpheus and their mutual respect. In fact, you hear everything except the speakers and the system driving them.

It’s an impressive demonstration of not just how capable and sorted the R25As are, but how their easy load and carefully judged balance succeed in bringing the best out of partnering electronics. Sure-footed and uncluttered, rich and vibrant, they allow music to breathe easily and with an unforced, natural clarity – a quality that also, ironically, makes them incredibly easy to set up. Simply plonk them down and their easy dynamics and enthusiastic response means that they’ll never sound bad, but every time you shift them, even very slightly, you’ll hear exactly what it does to the sound and the sense of musical coherence, right up to the point where you get their positioning, attitude and toe-in just right. At that point you hit a sense of proportion and shape, expressive range and colour, an effortless combination of delicacy and explosive dynamics that allows the music to hang suspended in the room, independent of the speakers and the system, a living, breathing performance. It’s indicative of that happiest of knacks, the ability to bring the best out of the partnering electronics. I achieved the results described with amps as diverse as the Icon Audio Stereo 60 integrated, the Gryphon Diablo 120 and the Rowland 625 S2. You’ll note that the latter amps are both reasonably powerful, solid-state designs but the R25A shows no fear or favour. Instead you get to appreciate the strengths of each amp in turn, the presence and rich colours of the Icon Audio, the drive and energy of the Gryphon, the subtle dynamic shadings and textures of the Rowland, each shaping and contributing to (rather than defining or limiting) the overall coherence of the musical presentation.

The revised, mixed-material cabinet first seen in the previous model certainly plays its part, helping to eliminate the ▶



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means a more complex network, although the improvements to those components that impact the audible band more than make up for that. Cabinet and crossover refinements, particularly to out-of-band performance are the coming thing. Indeed, you only have to look at the Focal Scala Evo if you want to appreciate their scope and importance. But applied to a speaker as conceptually sorted (and relatively affordable) as the Auditorium, the benefits are spectacular.

Of course, Mendelssohn piano may not be your thing, but that same unforced clarity that illuminates the Lisiecki performances brings purpose and intelligibility to other music, whether it's the convoluted evolutions of Coltrane and McCoy Tyner on 'My Favourite Things' or the intimate yet angular exchanges between Ray Brown and The Duke on 'Do Nothin...', the primal grind of the Art Pepper Quintet's 'Las Cuevas De Mario' or the pile-driver impact and dense mix of Steve Earle's 'Copperhead Road'. Whatever the piece, its parts and their pattern are effortlessly preserved. Ring the musical changes and you'll change the sound – from one disc, one performance, one performer to another. Just as the R25A allows the music to breathe and progress at its own pace, so it

► thrummy, one-note resonance that bedevils the mid-bass and musical immediacy of so many low to mid-priced speakers, but the extent of its contribution (or lack of it) has only really become apparent with the total redesign of the crossover. What started as corrective measures to accommodate changes in the design of the tweeter have ended up as a full-scale revision – one that has far-reaching musical consequences. Not only has the crossover point itself been raised, requiring complete re-voicing, but the actual components have all been changed, while considerable effort has gone into taming the out-of-band behaviour of the drive units. That

gives each performer their own voice, each recording its own atmosphere and acoustic.

In fact, speaking of acoustic brings me to one of the few significant trade-offs in the Auditorium's make up. Whilst in musical terms it goes deep enough (and emphatically so), the absence of the deepest bass robs the acoustic space of boundaries and some depth. Lateral spread and separation is excellent, but full range speakers will give you greater dimensionality and a more defined acoustic – at a price. That aside, the R25A covers its tracks without you even noticing. The music it makes is so immediately engaging and ►

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► vivid that any other considerations become secondary. The performances it reproduces are so complete, so convincing in terms of their musical and artistic range and expression that the overall affect is a step-change in the performance of the Auditorium model, a leap in audio and musical performance so significant that it easily out-paces anything I’ve heard at more affordable price levels – and a lot of speakers that cost an awful lot more.

The Auditorium might have started out as a niche product intended to offer an affordable partner for low-powered tube amps, but as it and the market have both evolved, it has moved firmly centre stage. A growing appreciation of the importance of dynamic range and the musical implications of phase and time coherence have allowed it to blossom from a speaker that established the high-sensitivity benchmark into a genuine gateway product – the speaker that marks the starting point for serious, credible, convincing, forget-the-system-and-enjoy-the-music audio performance. This is a product that offers (and frequently delivers on) the promise of high-end reproduction at approachable price levels, not only because it doesn’t cost the earth, but because it doesn’t cost the earth to make it perform. Yes, it needs a decent source, be that analogue or digital, but its modest drive requirements make that more possible too.

Coherent and articulate, dynamic and oozing musical intent, it’s clearly not a question of whether this latest Auditorium is recommendable at the price, but whether it’s sensible or even safe to ignore it. Living Voice’s compact floorstander established the form factor and set the bar 25-years ago. Two-and-a-half decades on and it’s just hoist that bar again – but this time with a considerably broader reach as well as setting it considerably higher. A shade over £5K is a long way from beer budget, but then the Auditorium R25A is so consummately capable and confidently superior that you can forget more affordable alternatives; this baby shows many more ambitious and much more expensive speakers exactly how it should be done as well as unlocking a world of affordable system options – systems that are, in turn capable of remarkably consummate musical performance. Bargains don’t come much more elegantly packaged or musically compelling than this – and make no mistake, the latest Living Voice is a very serious bargain indeed. If you’ve got £5,000 to spend on speakers you need to hear these one. If you’ve got £10,000 to spend on speakers, you still need to hear these – the Auditorium R25A really is that good. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Two-way offset D’Appollito design, rear reflex loaded

Driver Complement: 1× Scanspeak 26mm soft-dome tweeter; 2× Scanspeak built, proprietary LV 170mm paper-cone bass/mid

Bandwidth: 35Hz–22.5kHz ±3dB

Sensitivity: 94dB

Impedance: 6 Ohms, non-reactive

Dimensions (W×H×D): 215 × 1170 × 270mm (incl. plinth)

Weight: 19kg ea.

Price: £5,100 per pair

Manufacturer: Living Voice
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