

Aurum Cantus Leisure 2 SE Speaker System



Ron Nagle

LISTEN UP! This is what I have been trying to tell you, the entry level price for good speakers and tube electronics is coming down like confetti at a ticker tape parade. Like I told you before, "It's a no-brainer, Bunky!" And now, at last, I may be able to afford to participate in my favorite hobby. And, how is that so, you might ask?

Well, it's the Chinese Connection. Okay, so this is not exactly the hottest news flash, but the hundreds of millions of Yuan the world's most populous country has sunk into upgrading their manufacturing facilities are becoming evident in a handful of products made to a higher standard of quality.

One entrepreneur and design consultant told me that on one of his visits to China, he watched a team of Italian engineers install a \$1-million, computer-controlled, wood veneer-making machine in a Chinese speaker manufacturing facility. Quoting said entrepreneur: "They ship raw logs in at one end of the factory and finished speakers come out the other end." The basic economy of the whole country is moving from an

agrarian base to manufacturing, a fact which is pretty well-known.

And so it goes that a speaker made in Shandong Province, China, can evolve into something so good that it can compete with just about any other high-end loudspeakers in the world-class marketplace. Somewhere along the line, the Chinese must have learned the difficult and exotic art of designing and marketing a quality speaker for the American market. And in so doing, they seem to have also learned to build first-rate manufacturing facilities and to use cutting-edge methods and materials, not to mention the talents of speaker design consultants such as Joseph D'Appolito and Phil Jones.

The Box

The Aurum Cantus Leisure 2 SE (Special Edition) is a two-way design utilizing the OEM G-2 Aurum Cantus aluminum ribbon tweeter and a 5.2-inch mid-woofer with a high-performance composite cone made of carbon fiber and Kevlar. The tweeter is rated out to 40 kHz and the low end is spec'ed as being 3 dB down at 55 Hz, the cross over is said to be at 2500 Hz, and sensitivity is given as 87-dB SPL for 1 watt at 1 meter. The speakers are made as a matched pair; my sample pair both had the same serial number, K00123. The front baffle is slanted backward to help in aligning the signal arrival of the two drivers. The matching gloss black leather and lacquer stands had a height of 24 inches, and listening position proved not critical. Tapering upward from a 9-inch wide and 11-inch deep base to a 6 3/8-inch wide top, the non-parallel sides of these 25-lb. enclosures seemed to my knuckles to be unusually dense and inert. My sample was a two-tone design, with gorgeous Brazilian Rosewood veneer and black piano lacquer over MDF. The port is in the rear panel which is lacquered black and has very nice, heavy-duty, gold-plated binding posts mounted on a thick aluminum badge plate. The appearance, the fit, and the finish all are luxurious and scream quality! I was very interested to find out that this speaker and the better-known Red Rose Rosebud 2, which retails for \$3,500, are both made in the same Jin Lang Audio Co. factory in China. They share many things in common: The Aurum Cantus-sourced aluminum ribbon tweeter and a very similar mid-woofer, both use a ported enclosure of the same volume, and according to Red Rose, both drivers are "unavailable elsewhere."

Prefacing your Predilections

This speaker won't fit as comfortably into everyone's system as it did into mine; ideally, I suppose, you ought to value some of the same things I do. But my job as a reviewer must be to allow you to understand and thereby match this speaker to your listening preferences. And that means telling you about my reference system. For starters, I have it set up on the short end of my rectangular living room, and their small size makes speaker placement much easier. Obviously, this two-way speaker is not full range; the lowest octaves of the musical spectrum are not strongly reproduced. Utilizing a test

CD and a Radio Shack meter at my listening position, I measured a 40-Hz signal as being 7 dB lower than at the midband 1-kHz reference point. Now, that's still useable output but the 80 to 125 Hz range was up by 5 or 6 dB, so the system is not flat. This sort of response is intended, I believe, and mimics the bass response of my old British Chartwell LS 3/5A mini-monitors, which I still remember with great fondness. When I listened to a Frank Sinatra cut, *What's New*, from his album *Only the Lonely* (Capitol/Alliance-48471), I found the reproduction lacked just a bit of the cut's characteristic chest resonance to warm the sound of Frank's voice. As you might suspect, this is one of the response tradeoffs that speaker designers have to make to get the impression of low bass out of a small box. I should quickly note that this characteristic is not noticeable when listening to female vocalists.

Ranking second on my list of tradeoffs is an increasing tendency of the tweeter to beam as you get into higher frequencies. But this happens well above the vital midrange and far beyond the area of the human voice. This will not be a problem if you're like me and sit pretty well on the central horizontal axis of the speakers. In some situations, you may need to toe-in the speakers a bit.

The last and smallest nit I wish to pick concerns the efficiency of the mid-woofer driver. Like many dynamic units, it appears to need a good dose of power from a healthy amplifier to get it playing properly. This will not be a problem if you use a good amp with the system, and I do think that overall the designer of the Aurum Cantus has done a good job integrating these two drivers.

Are You Compatible?

For me, this speaker fits very comfortably within my requirements. I am not an audiophile who demands lots of bass since my musical reference is and always has been the sound of a human voice. There may be those who could tell you when an oboe is off-pitch, but that's not me (thank goodness). I am a confirmed electrostatic speaker advocate; give me the openness and air, the effortless speed, the liquid ease which allows micro dynamics to breathe and me to believe. Paint the stage before me both wide and high, and with so many layers of depth, that I might step into it and dwell therein. Nothing else compares, nothing else is so seamless (save maybe a ribbon).

But consider this speaker. Like other small two-way speakers, they have the elusive ability to disappear, but not before they open the door upon a vista of sound. When I pushed up the volume well past my usual comfort level, the character of the ribbon never hardened or became strident. This driver has one quality I value greatly; it gets out of the way of the performance, it allows an intake of breath or an inflection of emotion to come through.

As a short experiment, I tried an American Acoustic Development (AAD) 8-inch powered subwoofer I had purchased for bass reinforcement in a home theater system. This didn't work out very well, and most of the time it seemed to me that I had just muddied up the

**The speaker's ribbon
simply gets out of the way
of the performance.**

lowest part of the midrange and the bass. I now believe that it would be a very difficult task to accurately match a subwoofer to this speaker.

Additionally, I tried the Aurum Cantus speakers with three different power amplifiers. The first was my highly modified Hafler 500 Mos-Fet power pumper, which was not bad but the combo had a fine grainy haze that overlaid most of performances. The nature of that "haze" became evident when I switched to the Krell KAV 300iL integrated amplifier which painted a convincing midrange image, combining detail and speed, and highlighting exactly what these ribbons do best, all of this overlaid upon a darker background. With the Krell, the bass became taut and was better controlled, plus the

NOTES

Aurum Cantus Leisure 2 SE Speaker, \$1,499.00 per pair. Kellsie Audio and Video Designs, 106 Hitching Post Lane, Yorktown Heights, NY 10598; phone 914/455-2138; e-mail info@kellsieavdesign.com; website www.kellsieavdesign.com;

Associated Equipment

Home Theater System

Hitachi TV, Coda Continuum 4-3-2 four-channel power amp for FL, C, and FR speakers, two Marantz MA800 mono block amps for LR and RR speakers, Sony SDP-EP9ES digital surround pre-amp, Infinity Prelude Composition speakers for all three front channels, QPS rear speakers, Sunfire MK2 LFE True subwoofer, and Echo Busters room panels.

Stereo Reference System

Cambridge Audio Disc magic 1 compact disc transport Cambridge 700 Iso magic D/A converter, Art D1/o up sampling A/D and D/A converter, Marantz DV800 Universal CD player, Audio Research Classic 60 tube power amplifier for main speakers, Hafler 500 Mos-Fet power amplifier, Krell KAV 300iL integrated amp, Gradient crossover, Audio Research SP-9 MK-3 hybrid tube/Mos-Fet preamp, Quad ESL-63 speakers rebuild and modified with dedicated Gradient woofers, Onix Grandmaster speaker cables to Quad panels, Esoteric Ultrathin cables to woofers, and AAD E-8 150-watt, self-powered woofer.

Accessories

Isolatrol 20-amp a.c. line conditioner with one-amp conditioner between an isolation transformer and digital components; ferrite beads on all interconnects and line cords; Room Tunes corner and ceiling panels; Argent Roomlens, Gryphon diffusion panels, interconnect cables from Monster (various). Nordost Red Dawn, Audio Research Litzline, Audiobahn half-meter digital, and Wireworld Eclipse-2, Wireworld 10-gauge a.c. power cord, Radio Shack SPL meter; Rives Audio Test CD, and a comfortable chair

two drivers seemed a closer match than they had been using the Hafler.

But in the end my trusty Audio Research Classic 60, a tube/Mos-Fet hybrid, won the top prize. I know some audiophiles would not agree with my preferences. After all, you would have to trade off the speed and bass control of a Krell to get the delicacy and subtle harmonic warmth of the CL60 treble and midrange, but this is where the human voice comes alive. Size does matter; you will find it very easy to adjust bass vs. treble balance as I did by moving the speaker's position relative to the rear wall.

Using my patented "Scale of Good Things," I have saved this speaker's best for last, namely *imaging!* This is an absolute requirement for me. The Aurum Cantus speakers have the ability to project a convincing soundscape, one both that is both wide and deep, and one that seems to defy room boundaries and the diminutive size of the system. I dimmed the lights and began a new existence in a time when the music was live, magically dissolving the walls around me so that I was transported into the performance. At such moments, I require little else.

Final Note

Now as it happens, every once in a while I find something that is really notable but relatively unknown. It might be very unique or practical and useful, or provide genuine value. It is with great personal satisfaction that I can let you in on it, because then I have done my job as reviewer. This is one of those times; this is a very fine \$1,499 speaker that could easily sell at twice that price. Henceforth, I will keep one eye focused on the Pacific Rim and the other in this bailiwick. Here is just one example of the many wonderful things out there that those two big commercial-conglomerate audio magazines will never find out about.

As you might have guessed by now, I purchased these speakers. As a matter of fact they were such a perfect fit into my system and preferences, that I mailed out my check before I finished writing this report. I hope that your musical taste runs roughly parallel to mine. If that be anywhere near the case, then I believe that the three of you will live happily ever after, and that you ought call the distributor post haste and arrange an audition.

P.S. I would like to acknowledge the input of friend and colleague Senior Editor Russ Novack and his Golden Ears.

