

REVIEW
LARSEN 8 speakers in Swedish HiFi & Musik (Mats Meyer-Lie), no. 3, 2013
Translated from Swedish

PURE SIMPLICITY

All right, we'll go through it quickly. Stig Carlsson was an acoustical and unique designer of speakers with breakthrough ideas about sound reproduction, the keyword being sound reflections from room surfaces. Already since the magnificent Kolboxen (name of an early speaker construction) from the 1950's – actively driven by four tweeters, 8 inch midrange drivers and a 10 inch downward facing bass drivers – his speaker designs excelled in taken advantage of the room they played in. Meaning speakers that were made to work in regular living room and not for anechoic sound studios. Does that sound self-evident? It's not. Still today, the majority of today's ultra high-end speakers are designed to work best when they are unaffected by the room they play in.

When traditional speakers are placed in a normal living room they release a bombardment of distorting sound reflexes, that can be somewhat reduced by modern room treatments, but that does not solve the basic problem. Stig turned all that around by starting with the room, and already in the 1950's developed speakers designed from the perspective of a realistic listening situation – namely how the speaker performed in a regular room.

He coined the phrase Ortho-Acoustic for his designs and dedicated his life to methodically examining the interaction between speakers, the room and the listener. Specifically, how early room reflections affects timbre and soundstage. That resulted in a row of speakers through the years and his last constructions were the break through OA-50 series, where OA stands for Ortho-Acoustics. That series started in the early 1980's at the newly opened plant in Skilligaryd, Sweden. First came the unique wall-hung OA-51. Then came the floor model OA-50 and then Stig's own absolute favorite – the reference OA-52. The top model was refined several times until the last version OA-52.3 came in 2002. The series was a two-way construction and it was rumored that Stig planned on making a larger 3-way model. But it stayed in the design stages when he died in 1997.

But now why all this history about Carlson? This was supposed to be about the Larsen 8. Well because one of the co-designers, John Larsen worked in the Skilligaryd plant with Stig for 16 years and the Larsen 8 was created with the speaker designer Anders Erikson in the Stig's acoustic spirit and designed to incorporate how surface reflections interacts with the speaker. Making the speaker play WITH the room, not against it. That's why there's a vertical absorption material behind the driver to minimize the closest wall reflections the same way the horizontal absorption material below the driver minimizes distorting floor reflections.

Different than the two smaller floor standing models, Larsen 4 and Larsen 6, the Larsen 8 not a 2-way design but a 2.5-way design, with double bass drivers and a total of three tweeters. The box consists of two separate

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compartments of 23 liters each, tuned to 26 hertz, each with its separate 7 inch driver – same driver as the OA-52 but also for the Wilson Audio WATT.

The upper driver, placed on a sloping plane, functions as a bass and midrange driver all the way up to the tweeter. The other driver is more of a bass driver and drops off earlier and is placed way down on one side of the speaker. The close proximity to the floor and wall gives the driver an extra acoustic amplification of maximum 3db, but also provides a more even bass tone in the room. The tweeter is cleverly placed so that almost half the membrane is covered to control the spread. In addition the speaker has two upward facing tweeters in opposite phase to provide more timbre but also, as it turns out, a more open and natural stereo image.

First impressions on positioning a pair of Larsen's speakers is always fun. That they're easily placed is just the appetizer and you usually free up a lot of floor space compared to regular floor standing speakers, which needs to stand a ways from the wall. With the Larsen 8 it becomes much easier to furnish your room. But just like conventional speakers, the Larsen's cannot be placed in a corner, even though they might look like they were meant for just that. They are still better at keeping their excellent tonal balance near corners and don't get so swollen and mushy like other speakers. But if you want to fully enjoy the huge wide-screen panorama that these speakers can deliver they should be moved away from the corners.

The widest, but not least deepest, stereo-perspective is therefore best achieved by placing the speakers on the longest wall of a room.

The first impression is always exciting and the Larsen 8 immediately feels right in an unobstructed and obvious way. Also in smaller listening rooms did they deliver perfect tonal balance with firm and deep bass. Talk about acoustic room adaptation! Yes, no doubt about it.

The unclouded grasp of the deeper register is a true ear-opener, which presents well-known recordings in a new light. Yes, even more than the huge soundstage is it their ability to sound pure and free from negative surface reflections that is the obvious cornerstone of the Larsen 8. With certain recordings - especially those done in true stereo – it feels as if the room vanishes and you're left not only with a huge soundstage but also a deep bass as black as night.

It's not often that speakers of relative size sounds so dynamic and muscular in the bass range. The way it delivers bass emphatically and with real weight demands respect and is yet another hint at how well it manages to play with the room.

After listening to these speakers in many different surroundings we keep getting amazed at how good, unobstructed and well balanced they sound. No matter if it was small demo rooms or large conference rooms, they always manage to communicate the music very well and to provide a clear and deep soundstage.

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The deep soundstage is even more obvious with recordings that have true stereo perspective and where the instruments are not just spread out in mono. Great recordings actually replace the wall behind the speakers with a huge and deep soundstage. More conventional recordings sound impressive but do not have the same deep soundstage as excellent recordings do.

It is easy to forget that it's actually two relatively sized 2,5 way speakers that delivers the sound. But we've had other listeners that were clearly impressed by the bass and the purity, but accustomed to traditional forward-facing speakers, who were not quite comfortable with the way Larsen 8 presents the soundstage.

Sure it's a matter of habit, but for my part it reminds me of experiencing a fixed picture. Something that you at first perceive like some obscure object suddenly gains features and becomes a clear image. After you've seen it the right way, it's not possible to see anything else. Maybe not a speaker for everyone, but once you've gotten a taste for Larsen 8's bass coupling and uncluttered purity then many other speakers start to sound trapped and colored. Must be heard! And don't forget to bring you great stereo recordings when you go to audition these speakers.

Equipment used:

Sources: Pioneer DV-989, Audionet-DAC

Pre-amp: Audionet MAP V2

Power amp: Burmester 952 MK 2

Cables: Van der Hul, Supra Sword, Kimber 12-TC (bi-wire)