

Positive Feedback ISSUE 69
September/October 2013

LARSEN
Model 8 Loudspeakers

as reviewed by Larry Cox

The Larsen Model 8 is a two and a half way speaker with three tweeters, two pointed toward the ceiling; two bass drivers, one facing forward, inward and slightly upward. It is a speaker designed to be placed against the front wall—and distinctly designed not to be brought out into the room. Five drivers in one speaker, ten per stereo pair? A 55 pound speaker that goes to 23Hz? Complex, fragmented, too lightweight maybe. Trouble, yes? The design and execution here screams for trouble and poor sound and flies in the face of much of what is held holy amongst various audiophile dogma.

And yet, my experience goes differently.

Most speakers are designed to work in the abstract, to work in a room without boundaries, reflections and room interaction, see anechoic chambers. It is sensible that a speaker designer would want his drivers to perform perfectly and a good way to test that would be to remove the speaker's interaction with the room, only then do you know if the drivers are performing as designed, right? What then, happens when that same optimized speaker is placed in a room, with boundaries, reflections and room interaction? You'd expect that interested audiophiles would commence dealing with the room interactions.

It's an audiophile assumption that where you place the speaker is how most designers deal with these issues, e.g. out in the room, away from side walls, etc. Of course, that's a legitimate way to address those issues, but you of course have your speakers out in the middle of the room surrendering real estate to a speaker design. There are, of course, exceptions like Amphion with their guided/controlled dispersion, but you get my drift. And, as audiophiles seek better performance a whole range of ancillaries are cropping up.

Hmm, has there been a call recently to deal with the most important factor sound in a system, like the room? ASC, GIK, tube traps, bass traps, electronic room correction? The industry has these ready to take up space in your room. Or, you could try out something like the Larsen Model 8 speaker, the current top of the line from Larsen. The Larsen's are undoubtedly "complex." I'll assert, however, that they are also sophisticated, meaning that they work seamlessly, elegantly and with regard to your room, they work simply, too.

The Larsen's performance is based on work begun in the 1950s by Stig Carlsson, a Swede who was amongst the first to implement "psycho acoustics" in commercially available speakers. Carlsson and Larsen have long histories in speaker design and working together producing speakers. John Larsen, an electrical engineer, for the eponymously named brand, designed speakers for over thirty years, with sixteen of those spent with Stig

Carlsson. By agreement John Larsen took over the production plant, technology and brands created by Carlson upon the latter's death in 1997.

Psycho acoustics seems to be the understanding of how our ear/brain connections process sound, rather than how sound exists in nature or objectively. Designing with psycho acoustics in mind is like designing an alphabet consistent with how our brain would interpret it, rather than creating an alphabet without regard to how it will be used and then requiring the brain to learn how to interpret it. That methodology reminds me of good marketing and sales training where you speak in your client's language so they understand and become interested in what you are saying rather than requiring the "market" to learn how to translate your work—in other words, much simpler.

Down and Dirty

Larsen currently has three models. The Model 4 (\$1995) and the Model 6 (\$3795), both of which are two way speakers with claimed bass response to 28Hz and 26Hz, respectively. The Larsen Model 8 is a two and a half-way that sells for \$6990. Larsen claims bass down to 23Hz with an efficiency of 88dB, which means the Larsen should reach full stride with a lower powered amplifier.

The Model 8 has two seven inch drivers, each in a 23 liter box. One, placed near the floor and front wall to take advantage of reinforcement from those boundaries and low passed at 300Hz for lower bass duties. The second seven inch driver, above the lower cabinet, and high passed faces at an angle into the listening room for upper bass and midrange duties. Next to this seven inch driver is one of the tweeters which is angled into the room again, and partially under a grill to control dispersion. The last two tweeters fire upwards, crossing in above 5kHz, wired out of phase and 10dB down.

Wow, you might say, that sounds like Frankenstein and has a lot of bugs to work out before it's ready for prime time. Good news for you and Larsen. Stig Carlsson, whose designs were the starting point for much of the Larsen speakers, started work on these issues in the 1950s. I've been following Carlsson work since the late 1970s when I first heard his Sonab speakers...

Memory Lane

My mother and three followers know that I'm an ATC fan and have not reviewed other brands for quite awhile. What then had me write about Larsen speakers? A bit of luck and a bit of history, I'll start with the latter and return to the former.

Sometime around 1979 while hunting for clothes, I stumbled into Dimensions in Stereo, an audio store in a mall in Torrance, California—a city known for frugality, not indulgence. I almost kept going, figuring the store was stocked with clock radios and Bose speakers. Dripping with indignation and superiority, I came across now famous brands but then unknown to me. Names like Acoustat, Saras, Oracle and SOTA. This was a really "boutique-y" store for Torrance and had some really great gear and sound.

My pursuit at that point and recently has not been "the absolute sound" but the ability to enjoy reproduced music without constantly being reminded it's a stereo I'm listening to. I've owned nine pairs of speakers, four preamps, five or six amplifiers and innumerable accessories over twenty-five years. Obviously, being able to forget about gear has been elusive for me.

The Acoustats were a revelation due to the precision of their presentation, but the ONE PLACE to sit in a listening room for good timbre, sound stage and frequency response killed my interest. I could appreciate the amazing performance of the Acoustats, if not their user friendliness, but the Acoustat's and the other speakers in house were way out of my price range. The sales guys were young and pretty cool to a snotty and poor college student, and took the time to introduce me to the Carlsson designed Sonabs mentioned above, I think they were the OA-116, which were still out of my price range, but closer.

Sonab's nomenclature describes the speaker, in the OA-116's case that meant one (1) woofer, one (1) midrange and six (6) tweeters. The design sounds like a disaster, but you should have seen the little buggers; they looked even worse to my eyes. They were about 2 feet tall and looked like ottomans that'd run away from their sofa. Totally goofy... total losers I thought. Why else would the sales guys spend way more time describing the speakers before playing them, right?

Totally wrong. They sounded great. Deep bass, excellent timbre and a competent treble. What was astonishing, however, was the imaging. These smart guys put on a large orchestral piece and that orchestra showed up on the wall between them in a life size image. AWESOME! Except that my little brain presented a bunch of unanswerable problems:

1) I'd bought a bunch of speakers and receivers only to return them. They'd sound good in the store and like a turd at home; 2) they were two or three times my price range (\$300?); 3) They were designed by a Swede, only Americans design good speakers; 4) I'd never heard of Sonab; and 4) Consumer Reports made no mention of them. Item 4) is pretty pathetic, I know, but that's where my mind was. So, despite being very impressed, I walked out and instead bought a pair of Consumer Reports' highly praised EPI 100s, which I kept for another twelve years.

So that's the history, oh, and I'm informed that the Sonabs don't sound exactly like the Larsens on test here, but... it's a good lineage. And, on to luck or lucky timing

I've started to assemble a surround system. Neither I, nor my wife wants speaker wires running through our living room nor speaker on the walls and there's no good way to mount the speakers in the wall, so I needed a unique solution. This reminded me of the Sonabs. Sonabs remain remarkably popular on eBay thirty years after their production. I'd been on eBay ready to buy a pair as an experiment. A nice pair came up, but bidding expired when I was in the mountains, so I missed out on that pair.

I decided to hold off on purchasing speakers and go back to pasture when I got an email from the Daves (David Robinson and Dave Clark) asking if I'd be interested in writing about Larsen speakers. I'd already said no to myself, deleted the email when something tickled my brain. I went back to the email and read the importer's description of the speaker. When I read "ortho acoustics" Sonab, Stig Carlsson and fond memories popped up and I retracted my no.

When Michael Vamos, Sales Manager for Larsen's importer Audio Skies' brought them into my living room he carried them like a bag of groceries. At 37" x 11" x 13" (HWD) they are relatively small speakers with surprising performance.

They arrived the day before my wife left for an extended stay in Germany, so our house was buzzing with activity. Set up was easy, I placed them next to my rack and hooked them up to my Parasound 1205A amplifier (an eBay find) and let 'em start the break in. I put on Bedrich Smetana's Ma Vlast and went about helping pack. I've had the CD for a while, but never had the patience to listen past the first track.

Sometime in the middle of the second track my wife and I sat down, looking at each other, surprised at how great the sound was. Here the nearly \$7000 speakers were sounding excellent with my \$400 eBay purchase and \$30 speaker cables. Treble extension was deftly handled with excellent touch. Bass extension, too, was remarkable. I'm not sure if I got 23 Hz of bass from the Model 8s, but wow, the speakers were full sounding.

The Model 8s were treated to better electronics, including the excellent GamuT Di150 integrated (\$11,690) amplifier and a 30+ watt amplifier from JWM (\$1995) as delivered, an iteration of which was recently praised by Lynn Olsen in these pages. Both of these amplifiers easily exceeded the performance of the Parasound, but at no point did the Larsen's fail to sound splendid. For a period I also had GamuT's excellent CD 3 player (\$8390), and that certainly upped the performance level of my Twisted Pear Audio Buffalo 32 DAC, though I preferred the superior quality of vinyl recordings I have to the paucity of my exemplary digital recordings. The GamuT gear is of exceptional build quality, very easy on the eye and ear. I settled on the JWM amplifier in combination with my E.A.R. 864 preamp, the GamuT CD 3 and my analog setup for my comments here.

Throughout my time I tried speaker cables and interconnects from Kimber model TC12 (\$1130) and Kimber Select KS3033 (\$3400) as well as GamuT's Wormhole speaker cables (\$1798 for 2 meters) and their XLR signal cable (\$540 for two meters), as well as a pair of interconnects from John Larsen that are not commercially available. The Model 8s distinguished the characters of each of these. The more expensive Kimber speaker cables were cleaner and clearer, but with a slight loss of body and warmth. The GamuT wormhole speaker cables were models of precision, but reduced the body or weight of the music. I liked the body of less costly Kimber speaker cables here combined with my Kubala-Sosna Expression interconnects cables best.

From here on I'll try the less is more hoping to capture more. This is a speaker whose full character is hard to describe. Unfailingly musical with good frequency extension and able imaging it's an easy recommendation. And yet there will be audiophiles with nits to pick. To my mind these nits are mere quibbles.

The Larsen's free you from the magic seat and the head vice required by Acoustats. There aren't good seats to listen from so much as lots of great areas in a listening room to hear the Larsens. The Larsens are very successful, in my mind, in removing the room from the listening experience. As I write, I wonder what it might have been like to place them in another room, but work demands only allowed for so much comparison during my review. I expect the Larsen's exceptional ability to deal with room issues would have them sound quite similar in another room.

A friend with Thiel 2.2's liked the speakers a lot, saying he could easily live with the Larsens for the long term, finding them sweet, warm and musical. A reviewer who is keen on NOLA speakers liked them as well. It's noteworthy to find agreement among audiophiles with such different taste. The Model 8, I think, is a speaker for music lovers but may not ring the bell for died in the wool audiophiles hunting for acoustic tricks that don't exist in live music.

What audiophiles seem to listen for and write about does not sound much like the live music I hear. Super high-end audio speakers present an ultra precise rendering of music unlike what I hear in my listening seat. Transients are magnified, decays last longer than live music and images are amazingly precisely located with image sizes that may match those of real instruments, which sounds like an accomplishment, but not like real music.

Next time you hear live music, close your eyes. How precisely is that guitar located? (Insert another acoustic instrument of your choice.) Now open your eyes, now how precisely is that acoustic instrument located? I believe we imagine imaging more specifically than it exists as an acoustic experience in live music. It's the combination of ear and eyes that let us "focus" imaging (note they're both visual descriptors) of live music precisely. Über-systems that are so vogue these days present imaging and musical outlines way more precisely in my experience than exist in live music.

Don't misinterpret what I'm saying, the Larsens provide a clear localization, it's just not the razor edged image that so many covet and carp about. I should note noting that my room presents problems. One side wall is essentially "open," providing a very delayed, if not non-existent first reflection from that side. Very good speakers (Gamut L5, ATC 100ASL and my 20-2ASL) still provide good timbre in this room, but without equidistant parallel side walls imaging requires a nearfield listening position. The Larsens did not require a nearfield listening position to work around my room issue. I found that there were many sitting positions that worked really well, preferring overall listening at the apex of an equilateral triangle. The best position for me, however was with the speakers about fourteen feet apart with me sitting about sixteen feet away from the speakers. They also sounded fine only seven or eight feet apart, with the listening position commensurately closer.

The Larsens achieve an open presentation without requiring the slightly tipped up treble conceit of many other speakers. I assert, after wracking my brain to describe the Larsens, that their less precisely focused sound is more like live music than the holodeck sound of some audiophile champions.

The Larsens' imaging only suffers in comparison to speakers with an exaggerated image projection, with the Larsens being the actual winner for me. I wonder if many audiophiles however, will miss the pinpoint imaging. Before you were an audiophile, did you ever think about how precisely located a performer was? I certainly didn't. As I walked around my listening room, testing out the Larsen's performance the locations of performers and the timbre of their performance retained their localizations. How many audiophile speakers rely on an on-axis listening position to sound their best? Sit in the one seat, ala Acoustat, and you're great. With the Larsen's you needn't and are rewarded with a freedom to hear really good sound without being buckled into that one seat.

My listening room, read living room, is not set up for multiple sets of speakers and systems. Because of that, from time to time, I had my flat screen about three feet out into my room and the Larsens up against the front wall. You'd think images would collapse, timbre would alter and I'd be denied a musical experience, but that wasn't how it went down in my room. While the Larsens sounded better with the flat screen on the same plane, they performed really well behind the screen. I expect this has a lot to do with the two up facing tweeters.

I started with the Larsen's imaging because that is the part of their presentation that will be the most controversial. What gets the Larsens going for me is their realistic rendering of timbre. While it's possible to have more detail in the presentation of timbre, what much more costly speakers provide doesn't exceed the Larsen 8's way with timbre. They were always convincing, more so with better electronics and sources most anywhere you'd want to sit in a listening room.

In my testing process, I poke around for a week or so to see what character I can discern from the speakers, like bad sound from good recordings, what frequency response, what styles of music sound good, bad? This testing allowed me to release worries about the Larsen's performance. Timbre was consistent from bass to treble without thinning during regular playback or more extreme dynamic transients. I sensed no fattening or thinning of Louis Armstrong's voice on my 45 RPM of St James' Infirmary, no loss in the blatty spike or burrrrupt of his trumpet, nor the growl of the bass, even as I moved around the room. While it's possible to find a seat where timbre shifts, any reasonable seat sounded terrific. Personal favorites like Pink Martini, Doris Day's Day by Night, Duke Ellington's Indigos were treats.

This is not the case of a speaker that is all midrange and no treble. The ringing in Smetana's Ma Vlast was ever so sweet, extended and powerful, no powder-puff sound here. IT was on the second track of Ma Vlat that the tinkle of treble captured my interest. The treble, a little like Kubala-Sosna cabling, doesn't announce itself until there is treble

extension and then, Bang or Clang, as the case may be, and the Larsens announce they do treble extension well.

Whether the Model 8 reaches to 23Hz or not, I cannot say. What I do know is that at times I was unsure whether my two 15" subwoofers were playing with the Larsens or not. This was largely true with movies as well. For those without a subwoofer that goes deep, you have no idea how much more bass there is in movies, so for the Larsens to allow that question speaks to very good bass performance. While I found bass convincing, it was not, however bass that you could bounce a quarter off of, but when is really deep bass that taut? I think audiophiles often want a clarity of sound that mother nature and acoustic instruments don't deliver.

Some may argue that the Larsen's bass isn't all it could be, and I'd be willing to let those who want washboard abs on the same body that's booty-licious have their Frankenstein music. I found myself enjoying sound more than testing it. How often are you testing out the sound of an orchestra live? Uh... never? Instead, you're likely engrossed in the sound, the interplay of instruments, the development of melody or counterpoint. I found myself ticking off, not pieces of the performance, but experiences. I often found myself several tracks further into a recording with my mind conjuring up "mental vacations" elicited by the music.

Nits to pick? Well, some of what I've praised may be a nit for some listeners. The Larsens may not sound as resolving as the current culture of speaker designers are offering. You may not be impressed by their timing, but often products with impressive timing end up tiring me, I'm not sure about you. And, you might be used to hearing a speaker remind you about how extraordinary it is, but isn't that off the point of presenting an extraordinary musical experience? And, perhaps the Larsens err on the side of polite, but I'll take that.

The Larsens will probably not be for listeners who want CGI sound, with razor sharp images and hyper detailed sound. I understand that pursuit and it's not mine. Though my ATC speakers could sound that way, my system is not set up for that and I think that makes it easier to just listen to music rather than needing to analyze whether I'm getting "everything" whatever that is.

It's been getting harder and harder to write about gear lately because I've largely gotten what I wanted. This leads me to wonder about thirty years ago when I passed up Sonab speakers for EPI 100s. I enjoyed the EPIs for more than a decade, but I wonder if choosing them led to me becoming an audiophile craving gear. Perhaps if I'd stretched for the Sonabs I'd have become a music lover who forgot about his stereo? The Larsen Model 8 speakers are very special performers with good timbre, a surprisingly extended frequency response and realistic imaging without requiring a large foot print hogging the middle of your listening room. The Larsen Model 8 speakers provide music lovers an opportunity to forget about gear and just enjoy music, highly recommended. Larry Cox

Model 8

Retail: \$6999

Larsen

www.larsenhifi.com/en/index.htm

Audio Skies

www.audioskies.com

POSITIVE FEEDBACK ONLINE © 2013 - HOME