

style wars

Can these two 'designer' standmounting loudspeakers really perform? Noel Keywood auditions Aurum Cantus's Leisure 2SEs and Opera's Callas loudspeakers...

Although the great unwashed may contort themselves with sharp looking but sonically flawed audio equipment, one of the golden rules that hi-fi aficionados hold dear is, 'the better it looks, the worse it sounds'. It's a shame of course, because we're all seeking that elusive combination of high performance and high style...

This is precisely what these two standmounters promise, but past experience suggests that such a combination is about as rare as hens' teeth. I've tested so many loudspeakers whose often contrived appearance either compromises quality or has so taken precedence that quality has become a secondary issue. Only Bang & Olufsen master style so well that hi-fi credibility barely matters. Dedicated hi-fi manufacturers commonly approach this matter from the opposite direction, adding style to substance, to deliver a product with extra visual and tactile appeal, without compromise to sound quality. The

two loudspeakers in this review, UKD's Opera Callas and Aurum Cantus's Leisure 2SEs are firmly founded hi-fi designs, beautifully finished to - hopefully - deliver performance without blatant compromise.

From the box, little seems to separate these loudspeakers. They're much alike in size and weight. Both are solidly built and hefty, and both come packed as a pair in one large carton, from which I dragged them gingerly as always, since small and heavy but slippery cabinets are quick to go their own way, aided by gravity. In both cases the cabinets have a high gloss finish that makes them quick to slide through the hands!

Aurum Cantus mould their MDF cabinets into a complex form that tapers upward to help distribute internal resonances. Our samples had a pearly black lacquer finish with a

blend into most settings.

Opera achieve a similar appearance by using a parallel sided cabinet, whose side panels are machined to have facets to produce a fascia that similarly narrows with height - although this is pure aesthetics, since inside the Callas is pure box! This speaker is made from solid hardwood, giving it a luxuriously deep wood finish free from veneer joints and edges. Opera take advantage of this, using heavily bevelled cabinet edges to give a cabinet with a soft outline that's easy on the eye.

It's a lovely piece of craftsmanship, designed to appeal to anyone with a preference for the traditional. With modern homes using quality wood furniture heavily machined and well finished to approach what was once hand hewn, I'm sure the Callas will be able to find a visually sympathetic home. Not for everyone the more challenging appeal of, say, a KEF XQ1, where technology is on display, form and finish following function.

Although compact, both loudspeakers are a little too large to comfortably fit a shelf. They are standmounters with rear ports that need some breaching space. I used them atop spiked stands placed approximately 12in from a rear wall.

Opera's Callas is a known quantity to me. In early form it had a full bodied sound, easy on the ear - sumptuous, I would say. Bass was on the large side, giving an impression of plentiful power from a small cabinet, but apart from this the Callas was a well worked out design free from obvious flaws. A normal two-way with silk dome tweeter crossing over to 130mm bass/midrange unit, it uses a classic arrangement that works well if quality drive units are employed.

Made in Italy, the Callas seemingly focuses on tradition, the suggestion being it is voiced for classical music, perhaps at the expense of Rock. A well balanced loudspeaker can handle both genres with equal aplomb though and this the Callas has managed in the past. Large terminals on the rear panel have removable links to facilitate bi-wiring. They accept 4mm plugs and



mirror like gloss. Wood finished side panels are available though, for a more traditional appearance, including 'poplar timber', the Chinese manufacturers say (trees with a problem obviously and up as loudspeakers in China) [...my aching sides! - Ed]. With small grilles of black cloth, these loudspeakers looked smart and would

bare wire with equal ease.

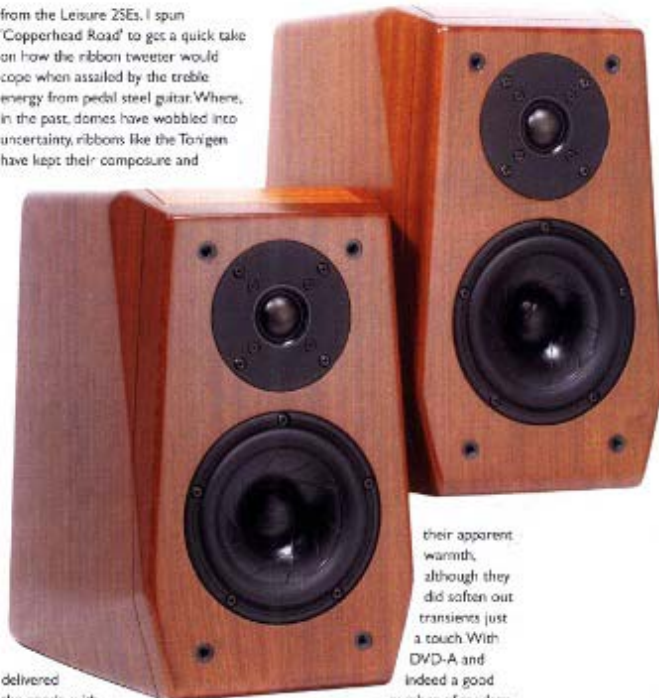
Aurum Cantus is a new name to the UK, coming from Jintang Audio Co., one of China's seemingly endless 'small' OEMs based in the south in a special commercial zone of Shandong (aka Guangdong) near Hong Kong. Jintang are notable for their ribbon tweeter range and this is a distinguishing feature of the 2SE, just like the Callas it is a two-way design with 130mm reflex loaded bass/midrange.

Unlike the Callas however, and unlike most two-ways except Elac's wonderful JET-equipped ribbon 'speakers, this unit crosses over to a rectangular shaped ribbon tweeter, something that's obvious from the photos. The G2 tweeter, as they term it, has a frequency response claimed to run smoothly from 1,700Hz right up to 40kHz - close to the upper limit of 96kHz sample rate digital audio. So whilst the Leisure 2SEs look almost identical to the Opera Callas loudspeakers and seemingly make the same appeal, beneath the surface they are fundamentally quite different...

As the name suggests, ribbon tweeters use a thin, light aluminium ribbon to radiate sound. The audio signal passes through this ribbon, generating a magnetic field that reacts to the field from a fixed magnet, causing the ribbon to vibrate in sympathy with the audio signal. Benefits are light weight and distributed drive. In practice, under measurement a good ribbon tweeter gives a smoother frequency response than conventional dome tweeters and also a more extended one.

The sound is often 'faster' and more incisive than that of normal dome tweeter, yet cleaner and sweeter too. String instruments in particular usually benefit, with extra detail revealing their complex nature

from the Leisure 2SEs. I spun 'Copperhead Road' to get a quick take on how the ribbon tweeter would cope when assailed by the treble energy from pedal steel guitar. Where, in the past, domes have wobbled into uncertainty, ribbons like the Tonigen have kept their composure and



delivered the goods, with vividly fast leading edges of strummed chords, clean as a new Wilkinson Sword!

True to its name - although I'm sure this is unintended - the 2SEs were a little leisurely here - not what I had anticipated. Slightly recessed and warm in balance, they seemed gentle, pleasant but unchallenging. Looking closely at their measured response shows why: a dip at crossover brings in the ribbon tweeter at a relatively low level. Its output rises steadily but the ear is most sensitive to

their apparent warmth, although they did soften out transients just a touch. With DVD-A and indeed a good number of modern

CDs the balance of the Leisure 2SEs is useful in damping things down a little.

'Three O'Clock Blues', with its simple introductory guitar line vibrant with treble energy, demonstrated nicely just how clean and clear the G2 ribbon of this loudspeaker could sound under pressure - always the best way to assess a ribbon by the way. They sing where domes break up. As Clapton and King pick their way through this track the strength and vibrancy of their playing isn't compromised by muddle or

harshness, largely due to the G2 ribbon tweeter.

Jintang haven't made this unit's contribution obvious; it remains quite subtle in

delivery. As you'd expect from any good ribbon this one delivers a rich tapestry of detail and puts it into the context of the surroundings by revealing surrounding ambience, making for a very live sound. The only small reservation I have about the Leisure 2SE is a small degree of cuppiness somewhere in the delivery, emanating from the ribbon or the upper reaches of the bass mid I don't know. This was most apparent with massed orchestral strings, which were a little coloured. It may well have been

"The vibrancy of the playing isn't compromised by muddle or harshness, largely due to the 2SE's ribbon tweeter..."

and rich harmonic structure. Here, dome tweeters become rather approximate in their portrayal. It's a fine point whilst low sample rate digital recordings on CD yield only the blindest description of string instruments in the first place, but still apparent all the same.

SOUND QUALITY

I've known the chiming guitar chords of Steve Earle's 'Even When I'm Blue' to have more visceral presence and a greater feeling of incisiveness than I heard

frequencies below 7kHz, so performance here dominates a subjective impression. It doesn't take long to hear the G2 ribbon is, all the same, giving a beautifully clean sound that's almost gentle in delivery yet beguilingly open and easy on the ear.

Moving from one good 'ol boy to another, Eric Clapton playing 'Key to the Highway' on DVD-A, I heard plectrum strike string forcefully through the Leisure 2SEs [that's DVD-A for you - Ed]. With a recording as insightful as this the speakers lost

due to a cabinet rear-wall return which can a speaker's delivery sound 'boxy'.

Opera's Callas is more immediate sounding than the Leisure 2SEs, forward, open and clear in its portrayal. Now with a less fulsome sound than in the past - if memory serves me correctly - it has stronger forward projection than the Leisure 2SEs and paints an apparently clearer outline. At first acquaintance the Callas comes across as an altogether more neutral and revealing performer of the two loudspeakers, with no sign of the slight cuppiness of the 2SE.

However, working through various classical performances I started to identify a small amount of wiriness to strings, accompanied by lack of deep insight. Going back to the measured performance showed the tweeter has a peak that explains this. It's not a major defect by any means, so much as a characteristic of the delivery. Slightly more insightful generally than the 2SEs, the Callas pushed Clapton and King's vocals out into the room and made their guitar picking more vivid, yet there wasn't the smooth, confident insight of the G2 ribbon, nor its revelation of background acoustic.

With a modern recording like Telarc's SACD of Stravinsky's 'The Firebird Suite', horns and strings had great presence in the room whilst a kettle drum continually shook the floorboards. Here the Callas came over as composed yet forward and challenging - an exciting presentation. It struck much the same balance with Christina Aguilera's 'Can't Hold Us Down'. The weighty bass line was kept nicely in check, sounding fulsome and powerful, but not bloated. The clatter of stick on cymbal was sharply outlined stage centre and had plenty of attack, but there was a burnish to the sound that moved it toward the over-bright - that treble peak again, emphasising the upper harmonics a modern recording can possess.

Faced with this same track, the Leisure 2SE was more bloated than the Callas and a little boomy at the low end. It is difficult for small loudspeakers to handle emphasised bass lines like this without starting to complain. With cleaner treble

more evenly delivered, it had strengths elsewhere though.

From leaving the box to leaving the stand, these speakers stayed neck-and-neck to the finish. They are similar in size and weight. Both are sculpted to look less boxy and have more visual appeal. Opera keep the Callas sounding projective, fast and clean but they can't disguise the tweeter's limitations, highlighted by modern digital programme material. Jinjang keep their Aurum Cantus Leisure 2SE

sounding smooth and sweet, but it has some warmth in its delivery and could sound a little loose in the bass if pushed hard. Neither loudspeaker was without minor blemish. All the same, both manage to combine a commendably tidy performance with a high standard of build and finish, to give an attractive product that sits more easily in the home. An encouraging result - if these two are anything to go by, the style-conscious can have it all.

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

ARUM CANTUS

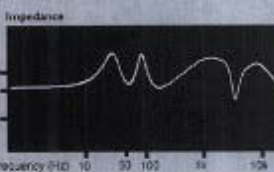
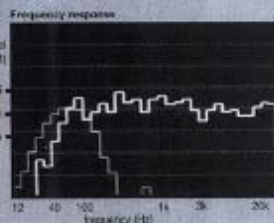
The Leisure's ribbon tweeter gives a smooth enough result and excellent bandwidth, which is encouraging. It appears to be well developed. Better still, the conventional bass/midrange unit that accompanies it integrates well to give a smooth response, free from crossover aberrations. Out from the bass unit is a little up on the tweeter, which will add body to the sound and ensure treble isn't prominent. All the same, the speaker is fundamentally quite accurate, a nice combination.

Bass rolls off below 50Hz, the port being tuned to 53Hz. Bass cut off is quite steep and the port doesn't extend down far, so the Leisure will have quite firm deep bass, but not go really deep. It may sound a bit boomy if placed against a rear wall.

Impedance is very high, measuring 11ohms no less. The bass unit is a proper Schim type, not commonly used nowadays. As a direct result sensitivity was low at 84dB. The Leisure needs a high power amp, but only for voltage

swing, not for power! It isn't too sensible. All the same, the speaker is, electrically, not a difficult load.

A good ribbon tweeter sounds superb and is worth having. The unit on this loudspeaker is well integrated and overall performance is fine in most respects. NK



MEASURED PERFORMANCE

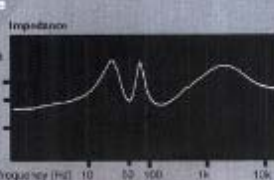
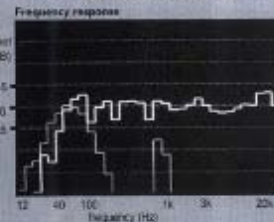
OPERA CALLAS

There's a slight prominence in bass/midrange output from the Callas, just enough to give the speaker an amenable balance, and also one to draw attention away from some peaking in the tweeter that would otherwise be a little obvious. Centred around 14kHz though this peak may for the most part go unnoticed.

The chunky bass unit reaches down to 40Hz (-6dB), output being strong above 50Hz, so in use the Callas will have plenty of bass. The port is narrow tuned to 50Hz, which is likely to give the sound some bounce at this frequency.

A measured sensitivity of 84dB is low, but then impedance is high, measuring 10ohms no less. It is also largely resistive, ignoring the usual bass peak. The Callas is therefore an easy load, but it does need volts for drive, meaning a powerful amplifier of 60W or more.

The Callas is a nicely balanced small loudspeaker that measures well. It is a very easy load but it needs a twist of the volume control. NK



VERDICT

Warm, fulsome and easy going yet revealing, this unusual loudspeaker is an excellent performer at the price.

ARUM CANTUS
LEISURE 2SE £990
Absolute Analogue
☎ +44 (0)20 8459 8113
www.aurumcantus.com

VERDICT

Accurate, well controlled and projective - albeit with a tendency to forthrightness - this is a very capable loudspeaker.

OPERA CALLAS £1,495
UKD
☎ +44 (0)1753 652669
www.sfd.co.uk