

Super Sound Everywhere

THE GERMAN PHYSIKS UNLIMITED MK II

By Jeff Dorgay



If you've never had the chance to experience the German Physiks speakers, they are fantastic – for a number of reasons, but perhaps the one they are most noted for is their unique, omnidirectional DDD driver. This driver uses the same carbon fiber material as the one used in their top of the range, \$300,000 speaker system. The new speaker, the Unlimited MKII, offers virtually the same experience as their larger models, with this speaker optimized for smaller spaces, and it does so at a much lower price of \$13,500 per pair.

Those loving the seamless sound of an ESL, but not terribly fond of the single person sweet spot that they provide, will appreciate the wide dispersion characteristics of the Unlimited. Much like the current MartinLogan ESL hybrid speakers, the DDD driver in the Unlimited goes from about 200Hz to beyond audibility. Lacking a crossover network in the critical vocal range makes for a transparency that few speakers achieve. Mated to a downward-firing 8 inch woofer in a cabinet with a footprint of only 9.5 x 9.5 inches, placing the Unlimited is much more flexible than with most speakers.

Weighing only 63.7 lbs (28.9kg) each, the Unlimiteds are easily set up with one person, and their 88db/1 watt sensitivity makes them easy to drive with the amplifiers at my disposal.



The GP website says, "Free yourself from the tyranny of the sweet spot," and they couldn't be more right. While these speakers do benefit from about 20 minutes of optimizing the bass driver in the room, those with no speaker setup skills will still be able to achieve excellent results. I've never used a pair of speakers that were this easy to place in my three listening rooms.

Thanks to the ultra wide dispersion and built in time alignment of these speakers, you won't need to bother with rake angles and the downward firing woofer eliminates toe in as well.

The DDD driver breaks in relatively quickly at moderate to high volume. Slightly stiff in the upper mids for the first 20 or 30 hours, the Unlimiteds get right down to business. I suggest 100 hours of play with the speakers loosely placed and then concentrate on placement for the smoothest bass response in your room. In room two (13 x 15 feet), this ended up being about two feet from the side and rear wall. This will vary in your room, depending on the reflectivity of the surfaces present, so feel free to experiment.

Steady playback of a bass heavy track will set you right in no time at all, and because these speakers are manageable, you won't need any help to get it done. Once optimized for the best bass response, an ideal distance between the rear and side walls with each speaker will help imaging somewhat. Fortunately, these speakers are much more tolerant of room acoustics than any panel speaker I've used, but I suggest

those inclined to get the optimum results to experiment with some light diffusion.

Placing a GIK RPG diffusor just behind and just to the side of the Unlimiteds (in the smaller room) provides an even wider, more dramatic stereo image. But, *unlike* your favorite panel or cone speaker, don't go mad with the room treatments. Placing absorbing panels behind and at the first wall reflection points will kill the spaciousness of these speakers. The fact that they are designed to work with the reflective surfaces in your room makes them incredibly flexible.

A wide range of amplifiers were used, all with good effect, from the 40 watt per channel PrimaLuna ProLogue up to the Burmester 911 mk.3. My 25 watt per channel 845 SET amplifiers were a nice match, but I wouldn't suggest using much less than 25 watts per channel. The Unlimiteds are very resolving, so their only limitation will be the electronics and cable you supply.

The German Physiks Unlimiteds redefine the audiophile phrase, "the speakers disappear in the room." Spend about 10-20 minutes optimizing the placement and you will forget you even have speakers in the room. Very cool.

Further listening

The resolving nature of these speakers continues to impress everyone that hears them and their chameleon – like character should charm solid state and valve amplifiers lovers equally. They provide

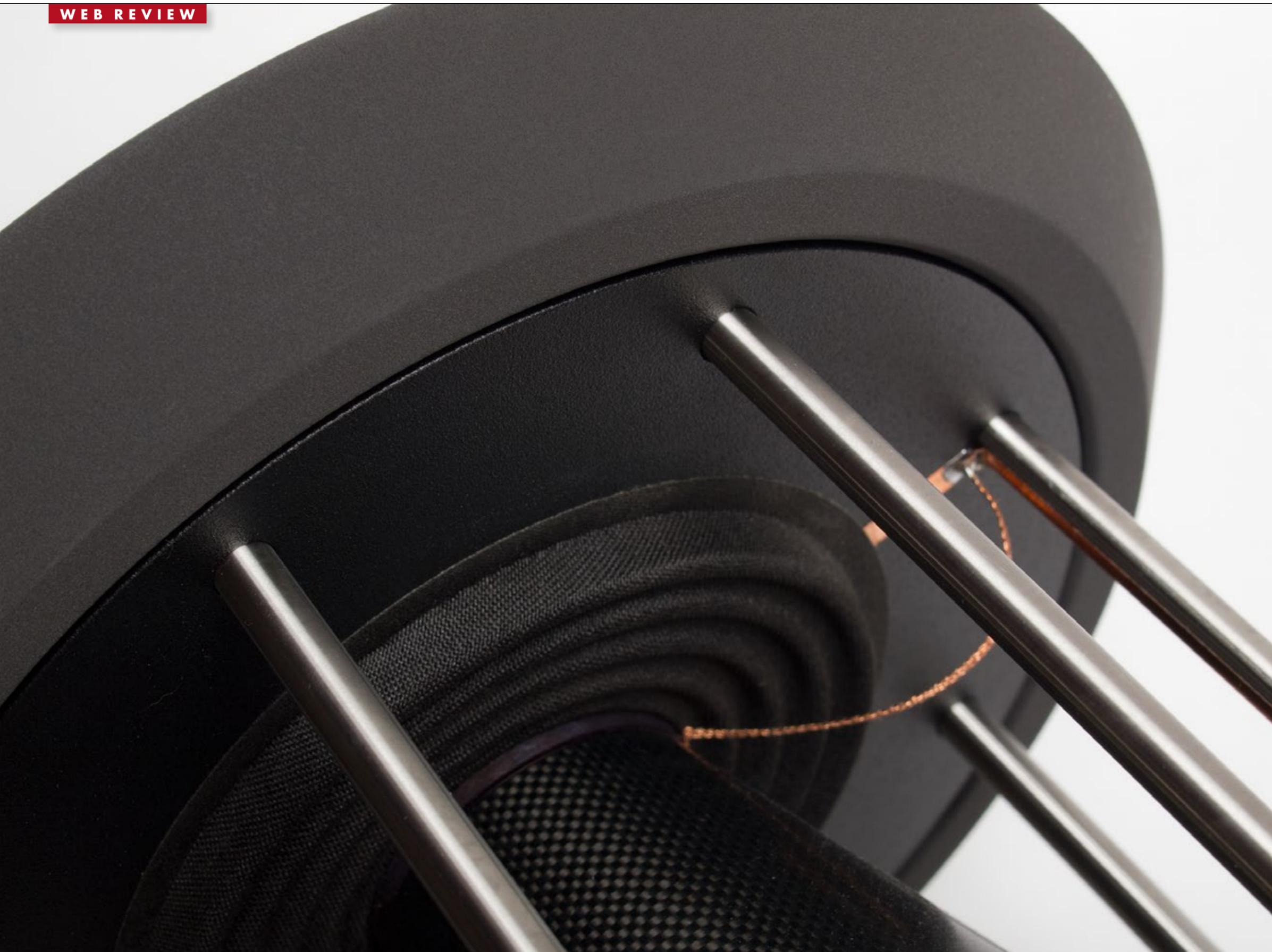
equally stunning performances with either.

The highest compliment I can pay these speakers after extended listening is that they improve in sound quality as you keep upgrading your equipment and are not out of place in a mega system, making them perfect for the audiophile not having a large room, not wanting to give up sound *quality*.

Yet they are not finicky and great results are achieved with entry-level electronics; so this is a speaker you can buy with long-term system aspirations even if you don't have the spare change to buy the whole system in one go. And spinning vinyl, fantastic! In room two with six turntable/ tonearm/cartridge combinations at my disposal, it is easy to discern the nuance of each. Most of my final listening sessions centered around the VPI Classic 1 turntable, fitted with an Eminent Technology ET2.5 tonearm and Grado Statement 1 cartridge. The Aesthetix Rhea phono stage and Burmester 011 preamplifier fed the Jubilee monoblocks for a breathtaking analog experience.

Rock till you drop

The 10cc classic, *Deceptive Bends* instantly reveals the cinema-scope like soundstage painted by the Unlimiteds. The engaging studio trickery, full of layer upon layer of texture, overdubbed vocals and a wall of guitars comes alive through these speakers, feeling highly psychedelic, indeed. *(continued)*



The opening beats of “Good Morning Judge” pin me back in the listening chair, neither the Unlimiteds nor the Jubilees any worse for the wear and tear.

This prompted playing the band’s most noteworthy hit “I’m Not in Love,” from *The Original Soundtrack*, harkening back to the Crème and Godley days of this wonderfully witty band. In the middle of the track, as the female vocal wispily claims “big boys don’t cry, big boys don’t cry,” there’s yet another group of layered vocals set well behind the speakers main axis with a handful of tinkly bits floating all over the room as if I were wearing a giant pair of headphones. Brilliant.

Turning the clock even further back (and turning the volume way up) to the Ten Years After masterpiece, *A Space in Time*, Alvin Lee’s acoustic guitar intro almost feels larger than life. No matter how dense the mix, the Unlimiteds are masters of keeping the pace rock solid – something my favorite electrostats struggle with when there is a heavy bass line present. Because these speakers can play so loud without distortion, I advise a bit of prudence – if you have a high power amplifier, you’ll find yourself constantly turning it up because the clarity of the presentation is so intoxicating.

Resolving reality

The Unlimiteds high resolution makes listening sessions fun, re-discovering favorite recordings mining low level details that may have been lost or diminished via other speakers.

As much fun as the Unlimiteds can be rocking out, they provide an extremely convincing look at acoustic music as well. Thad Jones trumpet fills the room, playing the 45-rpm copy of Music Matters, *The Magnificent Thad Jones*. The wide, spacious sound of these speakers gives real instruments more room to breathe. *(continued)*

The lightening fast attack of the DDD driver does not blur drums and percussion in the least and cymbals fade out with an ease that fools you into thinking you are hearing the real thing.

Slowing down the pace much further to take in Bax' *Sonata For Flute and Harp* illustrates the delicacy that these speakers provide, even at low volume. The harp hovers between the speakers, allowing the flute it's own space, with neither of these faint instruments polluting the sound of the other.

This clarity extends to the vocal range, male and female. Again, the extreme clarity these speakers provide give vocals a sense of immediacy that is tough to beat. Thanks to that low 200hz crossover, the DDD driver handles it all, not breaking up the coherency with a crossover network.

Whether you're listening to Tom Jones, Tom Petty or Tom Waits, the Unlimiteds will satisfy and yes, female vocals are equally intoxicating. Ella Fitzgerald's "My Cousin in Milwaukee" is absolutely slinky.

Great dynamics

Visiting some of my favorite hip hop and electronic tracks, I had to push the Unlimiteds really hard to find their limits with the 600 watt per channel Burmester 909 power amplifier that we recently reviewed. Anyone who is less than punishing will find they play incredibly loud without strain. Much like a ceramic driver, the DDD is so clean it doesn't go easily into distortion like a cone or dome speaker, it just kind of flattens out. Again, this is way beyond the point of reason.

Romping through the driving beats in Thievery Corporation's *The Mirror Conspiracy* poses no problems for

these speakers, regardless of volume, again underlining their ability to reproduce a powerful bass line and maintain a huge spatial perspective with everything else. Investigating a few classic dynamic tracks from Pink Floyd, Yello and Genesis are all handled with equal ease, making these incredibly well rounded speakers.

The entire line of German Physiks speakers, due to their omnidirectional nature, are incredibly easy to place, not requiring a tuned room to give their best performance. This was readily apparent from the minute we unboxed them, making for the shortest set up we've ever encountered. The major upside here is that the Unlimiteds will sound just as good, if not better than what you'll hear at your dealer.

After a few months of enjoying the Unlimiteds, we took them on a quick, local road trip to confirm this theory, sharing them with a few staff members and a couple of traditionally difficult rooms, as well as a wide range of amplification. As hinted at in the first segment of this review, the Unlimiteds really only require about 25-40 watts to get busy, thanks to a very gentle, unobtrusive crossover network that separates the down-firing woofer and their DDD omnidirectional driver, that covers the frequencies from about 200hz on up.

The last installment of this review consists of test driving the Unlimiteds in a number of different, more "real world" listening environments.

First stop: My living room

You might laugh, knowing that the publisher of *TONEAudio* probably has one of the worlds most dreadful sounding living rooms on Earth. *(continued)*





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Handmade in Germany

S/N: GP-201432

However, this room's wooden plank floors, large glass coffee table and highly reflective surfaces provides a great torture test, because most speakers usually require a *lot* of fiddling to even achieve passable sound quality.

This was the first big revelation with the Unlimiteds, and the reflective nature of this 11 x 17 foot room actually played to the strength of the speakers. As I mentioned earlier in the review, the key to setting up the Unlimiteds (and

I suspect all GP speakers) is to optimize for smooth, solid bass response. Once accomplished, the rest falls into place nicely. Powered by a Simaudio MOON 700i integrated (150 wpc) and matching CD player, the Unlimiteds create a gigantic soundfield in what is normally a troublesome room. Gato Barbieri's soundtrack from *The Last Tango In Paris* has his signature horn floating effortlessly, sounding larger than life, the speakers virtually invisible in the room.

Next step: Anechoic chamber

Well, not really, but one of my neighbors has a particularly dead room, full of rough hewn siding and an angled wood ceiling (much like staff member Jerold O'Brien) that sucks the life out of most of the speakers we've tried there. Because of its absorptive nature, this room presents an equal challenge to my living room that is wildly reflective.

Should you possess a room like this, I suggest placing the Unlimiteds a bit closer together than normal, we achieved a coherent balance with the speakers about 6 feet apart rather than the normal 8-12 foot spread used everywhere else. Due to the room absorbing the reflections that provide much of the spatial information, I also suggest listening in closer than you might in a normal to reflective room.

While the presentation sounded a bit small at the normal ten foot couch to speaker distance, pulling it in to 7 feet from the speakers brought the life and imaging performance back to life, providing an almost nearfield set-up. After hearing the Jung Trio's recent disc of piano and violin, my neighbor also remarked that this was the most lifelike he'd heard acoustic instruments in his troubled space. *(continued)*

The last ingredient for a more benign environment is amplifier power. Where the Unlimiteds could rock the house with 35 wpc in a highly reflective space, it took a couple hundred watts per channel to light them up in this sonically dense environment. My neighbor had this well in hand with a pair of Parasound JC1 monoblocks at the ready. Before long, we were playing Edgar Winter's "Frankenstein" and clinking beer bottles in triumph.

Final stop: House party

A short road trip to a somewhat large room of 20 x 30 feet (with average acoustic properties) quenched my fears that these speakers could not play to a larger room. Again, a little more power helps, but not as necessary as in the dead room. The new Rogers EHF-200 that we have in for review (with 110 watts of KT120 power per channel) proves an exquisite match here, giving the Unlimiteds enough weight and control to really rock some house music.

Thunderball's "To Sir With Dub" fills the room with solid beats, and after a little bit of experimentation, 11 feet apart is the magic spot for the speakers. Placing the Unlimiteds in a large room provides an excellent listening position everywhere. The image shifts slightly, but nowhere near what it would if you were listening to box speakers. Whether sitting on the couch, standing off to the side or even sitting on the floor, well off axis, a great stereo perspective is achieved. On many levels, these could be the ultimate speakers for your next party, because everyone can enjoy the music. The Unlimiteds wide dispersion and smooth response also allows enjoyment of the music at a lower level than you would need from a pair of box speakers.

Mid way through the party, when someone got carried away with the volume control, reminiscing college days (and for me, that's the late 70s) and cranking up Styx' *The Grand Illusion*, we all got a chance to see that these speakers could deliver high sound pressure levels without fatigue and not lose their composure.

At the evening's close, many of my host's friends asked about the speakers, which were surprising, as there was, not an audiophile in the crowd. Proof positive that you don't have to be an audiophile to appreciate great sound.

Wrapping up

Living with the German Physiks Unlimited II loudspeakers has proved illuminating in many ways. This is a pair of speakers that can be used in virtually any environment with a wide range of amplification, and requires minimal set up fuss. Their tiny footprint and contemporary shape should also help them to blend into any décor situation as well.

Highly recommended.

German Physiks Unlimited MKII Speakers

MSRP: \$13,500/pair

www.german-physiks.com

