

stereophile

ROBERT J. REINA

Audience ClairAudient The ONE

LOUDSPEAKER

As the years pass and I turn into a crotchety old man, I'm reminded of those old TV ads for the Honda Accord: "Simplify." Even though I now have more things going on than at any other point in my life, I try to eliminate complications everywhere I can. I now can't believe that, for over 15 years, I used the Infinity RS-1B as my reference loudspeaker. Sure, I loved it—the RS-1B was the first speaker I'd owned that produced a wide, deep soundstage, the full dynamic range of an orchestra, and bass extension down to 25Hz. But it was ridiculously complex: a five-way design with three different driver types and a servomechanism for the woofers. It also required biamplication—I got the best sound with a combination of high-powered tube amp and high-current, solid-state amp.

I wouldn't put up with such a complex setup today. For my own purchases, my biases now lean toward simple, three-way, dynamic floorstanding designs for cost-no-object speakers, and two-way, dynamic bookshelf models for affordable speakers. These simpler designs have simpler crossovers, and there's much to be said for minimizing crossover complexity. The ideal speaker would have no crossover at all—just a single driver that could produce full-range sound. However, finding a single-driver speaker that can accurately reproduce the entire audioband is a tall order. The most satisfying one I can think of is Quad's ESL-63 electrostatic. I've enjoyed many hours of listening to a broad range of music through the ESL-63s over the last 30 years, especially when they're driven by first-rate tubed electronics. (See J. Gordon Holt's excellent review of the ESL-63 from 1983 at www.stereophile.com/floorloudspeakers/416/index.html.)

So when Audience asked if I had any interest in reviewing their ClairAudient The One (\$995/pair) which has only a single dynamic driver and no crossover, and which they claim is a full-range loudspeaker . . . well, I jumped.



SPECIFICATIONS

Description Single-driver desktop speaker with 4" passive radiator. Drive-unit: 3" titanium alloy-cone, full-range unit. Frequency range: 50Hz-23kHz when placed near desk or wall. Impedance: 4 ohms. Sensitivity: 84dB/W/m.

Maximum RMS continuous output per pair: 98dB.

Maximum RMS continuous power per speaker: 25W.

Dimensions 7" (180mm) H by 5.5" (140mm) W by 7" (180mm) D. Weight: 3 lbs (1.5kg) each.

Finishes High-gloss black.
Serial numbers of units reviewed 54 (listening); 10 (measuring).

Price \$995/pair; desktop stands, \$75/pair. Approximate number of dealers: 50. Warranty: five years, limited.

Manufacturer Audience, 120 N. Pacific St., K-9, San Marcos, CA 92069. Tel: (760) 471-0202. Fax: (760) 471-0282. www.audience-av.com.



The single drive-unit is loaded with a passive radiator on the speaker's rear.

Description

The ClairAudient The One is a “bookshelf” speaker that measures only 7" high by 5.5" wide by 7" deep and sports a single 3" full-range, dynamic driver. The driver's cone is made of a titanium alloy, has a moving mass of only 2.5gm, and is capable of 12mm excursion. This A3-S driver is the same one found in Audience's flagship model, the ClairAudient 16+16 (\$72,000/pair), which uses 32 of them. According to Audience, the elimination of the inherent sonic compromises of a crossover and dissimilar drivers eliminates phase distortions and transient response degradation, and results in improved resolution. The One loads its single driver with a rear-facing, circular passive radiator. This occupies most of the speaker's rear panel and is mounted above a pair of binding posts. The One is wired internally with Audience's Ohno continuous casting (OCC) monocrystal wire. Audience also sent me a pair of the One's optional desktop stands (\$75/pair) and a sample of their Ohno speaker cable (\$199/3' pair, \$249/5' pair).¹

The One is currently available in only high-gloss black. I was supplied with four samples, one pair each in blue and black; both looked sexy, rugged, and unimposing. On spying the blue pair, my 12-year-old daughter, Caitlin, remarked, “What a cool speaker! How much are those?” Caitlin has seen dozens of speakers enter and leave my house. This is the first one she's commented on.

I tested the Ones with and without their attractive, magnetically attached cloth grilles. They sounded nearly identical in both configurations; leaving the grilles off resulted in slightly improved detail.

All the lonely speakers . . .

Audience claims that the One is capable of full-range sound when placed on a desk or near a wall, but that “a subwoofer is required for full-frequency response when The One is situated away from a wall.” I tried them in two configurations, both without a subwoofer: 1) , driven by Audio Valve and Audio Research electronics, and sitting on my 24" Celestion Si stands (loaded with sand and lead shot) about 4' from the front wall of my large (15' by 35') listening room; and 2) on a console table, the Ones at about the same height as when sitting on the Celestion stands, approximately 6" from the front wall, driven by a Creek Evolution 50A integrated amplifier (reviewed in the August 2013 issue).

With setup 1, I expected to hear a bass-shy sound, but I was proven wrong with the very first track I listened to. Bill Evans's piano, on his *Live at the Village Vanguard Featuring Scott LaFaro* (CD, JVC JVCXR-0051-2), was rich, deep, and involving in the instrument's lower-midrange register. Throughout the recording, the piano never sounded thin, and the trio's sound filled the entire room—I felt I was listening to much larger speakers. Jack DeJohnette's *Dancing with Nature Spirits* (CD, ECM 1558), includes interesting interplay between the drummer and pianist Michael Cain that's full of transient subtleties and great dramatic swings. Every minute detail of the musicians' phrasing was perfectly captured, each piano note and drum stroke followed by a long decay. Even the high-level passages bloomed with no trace of compression or strain—bloomed so much that the Ones triggered the Ellen Test: my wife told me to turn the music down.

The One resolved so much inner detail that the wide variety of acoustic and electric guitars played by Bill Frisell on the various tracks of his solo album *Ghost Town* (CD, Nonesuch 79583-2) were clearly differentiated. The One's resolution also ruthlessly revealed differences among recordings. Unfortunately, its reproduction of an early CD edition of Herbie Hancock's *Cantaloupe Island* (Blue Note CDP 8 29331 2) was uninvolved, two-dimensional, and dead, with very little color or liveliness to Hancock's piano or Tony Williams's drums.

I'd wondered if the One had been optimized for the mid-range, and if it was capable of extended, detailed, uncolored reproduction of the high frequencies. With every recording

The One's resolution ruthlessly revealed differences among recordings.

I tried, the highs were natural and shimmering, without a trace of coloration and no curtailment of upper harmonics. The massed string tone in Paul Paray's recording of Hector Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique*, with the Detroit Symphony (CD, Mercury Living Presence 434 328-2), was silky, airy, and never strident, even in the violins' upper registers. And every *plunk* and *pling* of Derek Bailey's extended guitar technique on his *Improvisation* (CD, Ampersand Ampere 2) was perfectly reproduced. The One's excellent articulations of transients, combined with its high-frequency extension and purity, made it a showcase for dynamic and complex percussion recordings. With each track of Chick Corea's *The Ultimate Adventure* (CD, Stretch/Concord SCP-9045-2), I was able to follow every nuance of the dramatically explosive and syncopated textures created by drummers Steve Gadd and Vinnie Colaiuta.

But how did the bass fare in such a large room with no support from a subwoofer? With most recordings, quite nicely. In “Walking on Sacred Ground,” from Janis Ian's *Breaking Silence* (CD, Morgan Creek/Analogue Productions CAPP 027), the boisterous interplay of bass drum and bass guitar was solid and tuneful. Similarly, the bass synths and electronic percussion in Sade's *Love Deluxe* (CD, Epic EK

¹ The Audience Ohno is slightly smaller in diameter than 24-gauge lamp cord—it's the thinnest speaker cable I've ever seen. The cable comprises conductors of continuous-cast, single-crystal, OCC copper, insulated with polypropylene and jacketed in cross-linked polyethylene.

53178) were forceful—no sub needed. However, I did feel that the drums and bass guitar on Jennifer Kimball's *Oh Hear Us* (CD, Epos 1094-2) were a bit lightweight on the bottom, and that the Ones robbed the music of a bit of its pace and drama.

In setup 2—the Ones on the console table, driven by Creek electronics—the speakers' overall timbral balance and articulation were pretty much identical to that of setup 1 in the midrange and highs. Alison Krauss's *Forget About*

I was able to follow every nuance of the dramatically explosive and syncopated textures.

It (CD, Rounder 11661-0465-2) revealed her rich and holographically reproduced voice, with all stringed instruments articulated with high frequencies extended and intact. The low end did seem more extended with setup 2. "The Man-Machine," from Kraftwerk's *Minimum-Maximum* (CD, EMI ASW 60611), features some thundering electronic percussion on the bottom, and these were reproduced with clarity, drama, and sock, though the Ones didn't shake the room as other speakers have with

this track. Similarly, in *Stampede*, the second movement of Lou Harrison's Piano Concerto, with pianist Keith Jarrett, Naoto Otomo, and the New Japan Philharmonic (CD, New World NW 366-2), there is a highly spirited interchange between pounding lower-register clusters in the piano and a fortissimo bass drum. The Ones reproduced this perfectly, with startlingly explosive high-level dynamics, and the most realistic reproduction of a bass drum I've heard from a small bookshelf speaker.

It reminded me of the sound of a performance of this work I heard more than 25 years ago from my front-center orchestra seat at Carnegie Hall, again with Jarrett, and Dennis Russell Davies conducting the American Composers Orchestra. However, with the speakers closer to the wall behind them, this recording's depth was foreshortened compared with how it sounded with the speakers in free space.

With the console table system, I tried the Ones sitting directly on the table and on their optional desk stands, which, designed as they are for nearfield desktop listening, tilt the speakers up at a slight angle. The stands made no change in timbral or dynamic performance, and will be a good option for those who want to use the Ones in a computer-based system. Finally, I also tried the Ones with Audience's own Ohno speaker cables. The Audience cables and my reference Acarian Systems Black Orpheus cables were both neutral and detailed, but I felt the Ohno had a slightly cleaner upper bass, the Black Orpheus slightly deeper bass extension.

A caveat: I wouldn't try to push the ClairAudient Ones beyond their intended limits with respect to bass reproduction or volume levels. I listened to a test recording John Atkinson made of me performing my composition *Recessional* on the Greenlaw Memorial Organ, at the Community Church of Douglaston in New York City, which I was preparing to record and perform with my quartet, Attention Screen. I was very careful *not* to play the finale, during which I played three 32' pipes at full cry. But before the finale comes a solo passage for organ pedals that includes a very forceful section covering the 35–45Hz region. I left the volume up a bit too loud during this passage, and could hear the driver in the right-channel One flapping. I immediately turned the volume

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Analog Sources VPI TNT IV, Rega Planar 3 turntables; Immedia, Syrinx PU-3 tonearms; Koetsu Urushi, Clearaudio Virtuoso Wood cartridges.

Digital Sources Lector CDP-7T, Creek Destiny CD players. Integrated Amplifier Creek Evolution 50A.

Loudspeakers Epos M5i.

Cables Interconnect (all MIT): Magnum M3, MI-330SG Terminator, MI-350 CVTwin Terminator. Speaker: Acarian Systems Black Orpheus, Nola Blue Thunder, Audience Ohno. AC: manufacturers' own.

Accessories Various by ASC, Bright Star, Celestion, Echo Busters, Salamander Designs, Simply Physics, Sound Anchor, VPI.—Robert J. Reina

down, but a bit too late. Although the speaker sounded fine after that with recordings of acoustic instruments, cuing up the Sade disc triggered the flapping—which it hadn't the first time I'd played those tracks. I shipped that review sample back to Audience for repairs and they sent me a second pair of review samples, which JA measured. For the first time in 28 years of reviewing speakers, I'd damaged a review sample through my own carelessness.

Comparisons

I had a hard time deciding which speakers to compare with the ClairAudient Ones. My first thought was the Audioengine 2, which I'd reviewed in December 2007 (see www.stereophile.com/standloudspeakers/1207ae/index.html)—I thought it would be interesting to compare two nearfield desktop models. But comparing the \$995/pair One to a \$200/pair powered speaker didn't really make sense. Neither did it make sense to compare the Audience to a \$1000/pair floorstander.

So I chose an old bookshelf standby, the Epos M5i (\$899/pair when available). The Epos sounded more relaxed than the Audience, with better resolution of low-level dynamics and low-level detail. The M5i's high-level dynamics were superior as well, as was its bass extension when compared with the ClairAudient Ones sitting on the Celestion stands in free space. However, I heard an intoxicating coherence in the sound of the single-driver Ones that I didn't hear from the two-driver M5i's. After listening to the Audiences, I could hear the Eposes' tweeters and mid/woofers crossing over to each other—something I hadn't noticed before.

... where do they all belong?

Audience's ClairAudient One is an extraordinary speaker with superb resolution of detail, excellent dynamic contrasts, and subtle articulation of transients. It's capable of providing satisfying, involuntarily uncolored long-term listening over a broad range of music. Given the One's unusual design, however, I suggest that potential buyers think very carefully about how they might configure a pair of them. I think the Ones would be an excellent match for a conventional system when mounted on solid stands 4' from the front wall, so long as you're not that concerned about bass extension. It would also work well in systems for which the buyer is limited to very small speakers that must remain on bookshelves very close to the front wall, and is willing to live with a shallower soundstage.

The Ones could also be a superb match for a desktop system when hooked up to a computer with a first-rate soundcard

playing high-resolution digital files. But I wouldn't use these high-resolution speakers to play MP3s in a computer-based system with a cheap soundcard.

I'm skeptical that a subwoofer can be found that will seamlessly blend with these extraordinary speakers—after all, adding a subwoofer crossover to your system somewhat defeats the purpose of having a single-driver, crossoverless speaker. Finally, trying to find a spot in the room for a subwoofer that 1) achieves the most seamless blend with the Audiences, 2) maximizes bass definition, and 3) is a cosmetically appealing place, is likely to result in three different answers.

I wouldn't try to push the ClairAudient Ones beyond their intended limits with respect to bass reproduction or volume levels.

Nor do I want to underemphasize the importance of matching the Ones with high-quality electronics. These speakers could ruthlessly reveal differences among components as easily as they could sort out differences in sound quality among various recordings.

On balance, John McDonald, president of Audience, and his design team have created a revealing and involving loudspeaker. For \$1000, I can't imagine obtaining significantly better sound than from a pair of ClairAudient Ones properly set up and used within their dynamic range low-frequency extension limitations. Congratulations to Audience for a stunning achievement in such a small package. ■



The optimal desktop stand aims The One at its owner's ears.

MANUFACTURERS' COMMENTS

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Editor:

With great enthusiasm, thank you for evaluating and writing the in-depth review of the ClairAudient The One loudspeaker. My experience with The Ones is that they integrate quite well with most good-quality subwoofers. In my system, I leave full-range signal going through The One speakers even when used with a subwoofer. Because The Ones provide energy, albeit rolled off, down below 20Hz, the bass "definition" is provided by the speakers and is therefore easily enhanced by supplementation of a small amount of low-frequency weight from a subwoofer. However, for desktop, bookshelf, or near-wall placements, the bass is quite good without supplementation.

*John McDonald, President
Audience*