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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

# Avalon Transcendent

*by Alan Sircom*

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**T**he Transcendent sits in a relatively new price point for the Colorado based company. At £15,000, it's more than the Ascendant or the Aspect but not as much as the Indra. It has the same back-swept and faceted look common to most Avalon designs, but owes a lot to the recent Time loudspeaker in terms of performance. In other words, it sounds remarkable.

Loudspeaker builders are the laziest product designers on the planet. What other branch of consumer electronics would you find a range of oblong veneered boxes that followed in the footsteps of other oblong veneered boxes dating back half a century or more? Set against this going nowhere industrial design, the backswept, angular Avalon design is radical. Okay, it was radical a few years ago, but it still looks fresh and is designed for a specific reason... to make the loudspeaker work better. Those faceted sides are designed to minimise internal standing waves while the loudspeaker is swept backwards to accommodate time loudspeaker time alignment. It also makes the loudspeaker surprisingly easy to install, as the centre of gravity allows those armour-piercing spike-cones to be installed without tears.

Avalon has a reputation to observe about its fit and finish. It has book-matched veneers and a grade of finish that is the envy of many cabinet-makers and the Transcendent is no exception. The sad fact is that despite a pair of loudspeakers often being one of the largest pieces of wood in many listening rooms, most loudspeakers fail to set themselves out as furniture makers, preferring instead to choose a relatively cheap veneer and a mediocre finish, sourced in a distant factory. With the options of curly maple, quilted cherry and figured walnut, all produced under Avalon's wing, the level of finish is every bit as anally retentive as the loudspeaker design, which means it's finished to the sort of levels furniture makers would be happy with. This is understandable when you think of that faceted cabinet; a lesser finish would quickly become a loudspeaker

of peeling edges; here, just so long as you don't use the speaker as a column for a vase or light, or your kids or your animals don't include the Transcendent in their kung fu shenanigans, these speakers have timeless appeal and the cabinet work will last the distance.

This is a two-way, three-driver design, with a one-inch ceramic inverted dome tweeter and a pair of seven-inch Nomex/Kevlar bass units, the two bass drivers working together, not as a bass unit and an ABR. All three are made to Avalon's tight specification, and like all Avalons, the speaker is vented into the floor. That's deliberately 'vent' not 'port'; while the vent allows the lower bass cabinet to 'breathe' when dealing with high-excursion bass notes, it is not tuned to a specific frequency, is not filling in the gaps in the bass response of the cabinet or drive units and – as a consequence – doesn't create a 'chuff' at any given frequency.

If there's a simple tag-line for the Transcendent, it would be "the Avalon loudspeaker for the rest of us". Avalons require precise set-up and a long run-in (although some of this is rooted in audio mythology), but it seems the Transcendent is the exception; it still benefits from some careful installation and run-in, but will happily work in smaller rooms with a foot or less between it and the rear wall and sounds good as soon as it leaves the packing crate.

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It's also more partner tolerant than traditional Avalons. The 88dB efficiency and benign impedance notwithstanding, this is a loudspeaker that doesn't make heavyweight demands on the equipment it is partnered with. Like all good loudspeakers, the better the parts further up the chain, the better the overall sound, but you could potentially use the Transcendent with five grand's worth of electronics for the ultimate 'mullet' system without tears. Yes, you would quickly want to upgrade to something better in the process, but the Transcendent's un-prissy nature means you don't need to make the speaker the cheapest part of the system to get top-notch performance.

To this end, it's the Avalon that even the most tubular will admit that it sings with solid-state equipment. Which is perhaps why it has been cropping up in shows on the end of fine-sounding solid-state electronics. Such as Karan Acoustics in the UK and Edge in the US. And in demonstration, it's been partnered with the likes of Ayre and Jeff Rowland. What all these amplifiers have in common is very clean and open midranges, and this is no coincidence; the Avalon Transcendent is marked out by its open midrange.

I wouldn't take the action at shows as too much of an indicator of ultimate performance, because the results can vary both from room to room and the last room you visited alters your perception of the sound of the next room. And it's here where I lay perhaps my biggest criticism of the Transcendent, right at the feet of the company that makes it. In the US, Avalon is also the distributor of Acoustica Applicata's DaaD room acoustic treatments and Prolifemo and Phemo Helmholtz resonators. Nothing whatsoever wrong with this, but in this ▶

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► year's CES, the Avalon room was so dominated by acoustic treatment that people walked out of the room unsure whether the sound was down to the room, the treatment or the speakers. Acoustic treatments are vital, but this profusion of DaaD treatments clouded the issue.

If my biggest criticism is how they are demonstrated in America, my second biggest criticism is actually a positive element. They react precisely and accurately to the sound of the system further up the chain. So much so, the Transcendent could be used to challenge the 'all competent amps sound the same' argument. They do not need exotic or necessarily expensive equipment (above a certain point), but if you use a system that is bright or hard, the speakers will sound bright and hard, if you use a system that is gently laid-back, it will sound gently laid-back. It doesn't fail to impose its own character on the system, but it's far more likely to show up characterful electronics elsewhere in the chain. This means careful and intelligent system building is mandatory; not simply throwing money at the solution, but finding a sound you like and honing it.

That incredibly lucid midband comes across throughout, though. It makes The XX sound a lot deeper than they have any right to be. The female lead singer's voice normally sounds 'foreign' (as if she's doing a bad Nico impression), but here you can hear it's actually a combination of accent and adenoids. This has a by-product of being able to hear every word they utter, even making sense of the relatively weak diction on offer. So 'wawnaah thninn aah feazyah' (as you hear on most speakers) turns into 'We watch things on VCRs', and most importantly, there's a plural on the end of the acronym that you don't get to hear on anything apart from very occasionally and on the sort of loudspeakers that makes the Transcendent appear small and cheap. I moved over to 'The Fall of Troy' by Tom Waits and once again, the speaker is like a decoder ring for 'difficult' voices. Everything makes sense here, even words I've struggled to make sense of despite owning and playing the album regularly for the last decade and a half.



*“Careful and intelligent system building is mandatory; not simply throwing money at the solution.”*

Move over to someone with good diction – Neil Diamond's *12 Songs* – and you don't need the Avalon's Rosetta Stone impression. So, instead, you get some significant and profound insights into the recording and mix. You know from even a mediocre loudspeaker system that there are two acoustic guitars accompanying Neil Diamond's voice on 'Oh Mary', and you can usually tell that one's a steel string and one's nylon, but the fact that

one sounds softer and warmer than the other, but what you can tell even clearer through the Transcendent is that he's playing the steel string and it's a big 'whispering giant' Gibson jumbo, while the nylon sounds more like a traditional Spanish than something like a Chet Atkins. The Avalon's precise enough here to determine that both have the same 'fist', in that I'd wager

it's Diamond playing both pieces, instead of being accompanied by Tom Petty or Mike Campbell (of the Heartbreakers fame).

If this sounds like studio-like analysis, you are both right and wrong. This is an open window into the control room, yes, but more importantly it's endlessly satisfying with it. It's like a musician's musician's speaker; capable of deep levels of insight into what's going on in a recording (if the second violin is a couple of cents of a semitone out of tune, not only will you spot it, but you'll know where in the ►

► mix the offender is situated) but also musically entertaining enough to make you love your discs all the more. This is yet another one of those loudspeakers that if I could distribute through much of what's left of the big studio system, planting a pair of these in the office of every head of A&R, every top producer and CEO of a big label, the days of bad recordings would come to an abrupt end. Because they don't blur or soften the midrange, extend well into the treble and give good, deep bass, they are merciless on modern clipped and compressed recordings and the Loudness War would be over by Christmas.

There's a last part to this of course; the oft-touted and thoroughly incorrect statement that Avalon doesn't make 'rock' loudspeakers. While these loudspeakers do sensationally well with orchestral music (their dynamic range serves up those tympani with shock and awe on Pickard's 'Flight of Icarus'), they also start and stop with the sort of speed that's needed to play bangin' dance music. And they can go loud enough to receive a visit from a guy in a uniform brandishing a sound pressure meter while doing so. I managed to make Leftfield sound taut, deep, tuneful and impressive, something beyond a non-rock loudspeaker. What surprised me with this album was just how good it sounded when the sound was turned down to a whisper; the full gut-mangling bass and the beat stayed intact and the tonal balance didn't change. In other words, it did it all well.

Of course a two-way floorstander has its limits, especially when compared to the bigger speakers. Here, the limitations are down to frequency extremes and when you decide on a bit of headbanging. The speaker goes deep and low, but compared to speakers that might weigh twice as much, stand a foot taller and include an additional brace of bass units, the Transcendent gives up those last few organ pedal notes and won't double up as a PA system. In addition, those who think high-end loudspeakers are all about glitz and huge sound might want to look elsewhere; no Attack of the 50' Woman Singer, no mile wide pianos or 3,000-piece orchestras here, just good, honest right-sized audio. And all the better for not falling into the big sound trap.

It's an obvious comparison to draw and end up calling the Transcendent something like the 'tiny Time' in the process. It does so much of what the Time loudspeakers do in terms of naturalness, precision and dynamic range, the comparison cries out to be made. But it's a faux comparison, because you almost invariably end up damning one or other speaker with faint praise. The two



exist side by side and demand different things from listener, system and room. The Time requires you to be more rigid in installation, needs a larger room and has a tighter set of demands upon the system, but in return gives you the kind of directness of sound that makes those who can give it all reach for the credit card. The Transcendent swims in the same seas as the Time, but doesn't swim as far or as fast and consequently there's no need to be afraid of the undertow. Your room isn't the right size or shape for the Time, go for the Transcendent; the amplifier isn't powerful enough for the Time... ditto. Can't be bothered with precise adjustments to the installation, you know what to do. Ultimately, it comes down to you... if you haven't got the time (or the energy, or the room), go for the Transcendent. +

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Driver Complement:** (1) 25.4mm Concave Ceramic Neodymium Tweeter  
178mm Nomex/Kevlar Composite Cone Woofers  
**Sensitivity:** 88 dB @ rated impedance  
**Impedance:** 4 ohms nominal  
**Frequency Response:** 26Hz to 25KHz  
**Recommended Power:** 50 to 500 Watts  
**Wiring Method:** 2 Position Binding Post  
**Dimensions (WxDxH):** 25x37x105cm  
**Weight:** 44 Kg per loudspeaker  
**Standard wood finishes:** curly maple, quilted cherry and figured walnut.  
**Price:** £15,000 per pair

**Manufactured by** Avalon Acoustics:  
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