

AudioSolutions Figaro L Loudspeaker

Punching Above Its Weight

Andrew Quint

I can tell you exactly what was playing at the moment I concluded that the AudioSolutions Figaro L was a great loudspeaker, and it might surprise you. It surprised me.

Mostly, I use classical music to assess audio gear, less because of the “live, unamplified music in a real space” paradigm than because it’s what I know best. When I was young, I aspired to be an orchestral trombonist (that this didn’t happen makes the musical world today a better place), and I do still get to around thirty performances a year—symphonic, choral, chamber, keyboard, and opera. I’ve published over a thousand classical record reviews, in TAS and elsewhere.

But one afternoon, after the Figaro L’s had been installed here for a few weeks and were sufficiently broken-in for critical listening, I was struck by a sudden urge to hear 1980s synth-pop. I fired up Tidal and navigated right to my favorite specimen, Madonna’s “Cherish” from *Like a Prayer*, released in 1989. It was mesmerizing. The rock-solid foundation of Jeff Porcaro’s propulsive drumming and the potent synthesized bass—I assume that the Material Girl’s co-composer and co-producer for the album, Patrick Leonard, was responsible—support a joyous earworm of a melody, surrounded by a halo of churchy backing vocals with the chorus and, throughout, discreet triadic harmonies on keyboards that are continually resolving from dissonance to affirming consonance. The song, the arrangement, and the engineering are pure pop genius that I appreciated as never before with these speakers hailing from the unlikely place of Vilnius, Lithuania. As loud as I cranked it, the music maintained intelligibility, coherence, and logic. I immediately called up other examples of the genre—“Take on Me” (A-Ha), “Don’t You Want Me Baby” (Human League), “Valerie” (Steve Winwood)—and enjoyed myself in a way that’s all-too-rare with canned music. What did the neighbors think? And would Handel, Mahler, and Shostakovich ever be the same?

The neighbors weren’t home and classical music still engaged me when I returned to a Beethoven quartet set I was working my way through. But I’d come to the realization that AudioSolutions has the potential to become a “disruptor” in the small universe that is perfectionist audio.

Gediminas Gaidelis, an acoustic and electrical engineer who, though only in his early 30s, is already greatly experienced as an audio designer, founded AudioSolutions in 2011. During the Warsaw Audio Video Show last fall, I met with Gaidelis in a quiet corner of the Golden Tulip Hotel lobby and asked him what he



did before starting his company. Smiling, he answered with one word: “Speakers.” Gaidelis has been building them seriously since he was a teenager and his interest in woodworking and electronics goes back further than that. At the age of five, young Gediminas extracted a couple of drivers from a Soviet entertainment console and installed them in a cardboard enclosure with steel bolts for binding posts. They worked. Before AudioSolutions, Gaidelis had a successful run building loudspeakers for the local Lithuanian market, but the demand for high-performance products costing more than 1000 euros wasn’t great and, after several years of R&D, Gaidelis raised his sights and launched AudioSolutions. He now has six employees and has cultivated significant markets in Poland, Germany, and China, with

distribution in a total of 25 countries. Ozan Turan in Los Angeles (High End By Oz) began importing the brand into North America in 2018 and currently supports five dealers in the United States.

In addition to the diminutive Guimbarde—that’s French for Jew’s harp, an odd name for any audio product—AudioSolutions produces four multi-model lines of loudspeakers. In ascending order of price, parts-quality, manufacturing tolerances, and man-hours required for their fabrication, they are the Overture, Figaro, Virtuoso, and Vantage series. The Figaro line includes bookshelf and center-channel two-ways plus a quartet of three-way floorstanders, the S, M, L, and XL models. (Just think of T-shirt sizes.) The Figaro L, the subject of this review, is a substantial box with curved sides measuring 14" (W) x 48.4"

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(H) x 24.3" (D). The weight is 150 pounds per speaker, though in their sturdy wooden crates that increases considerably. Unpacking and, especially, repacking these babies is at least a two-person undertaking. The Figaro L's bulk is just one of many factors that make their selling price of \$10,000 per pair remarkable. Apart from the cost of getting the speakers from Lithuania to the U.S., it ran Turan \$900 to ship the Figaro's from L.A. to me in Philadelphia.

And that's without the second set of grilles. Uniquely, in my experience, Figaro loudspeakers ship with two sets of front baffles, one with protective fabric and one without, both manifesting the same "power response." The enclosures themselves employ a self-locking technique borrowed from Japanese woodworking and are manufactured from a combination of MDF and plywood. Contributing further to the substantial weight of AudioSolutions loudspeakers is their "box-in-a-box" design, partially implemented in the Figaro line. There are three internal compartments within the cabinet, one for the tweeter and one for each pair of midrange and bass drivers. As massive as the Figaros are, Gaidelis maintains that they'd have to be a lot heavier to achieve the results he's getting without these construction methodologies. To further reduce vibration within the enclosure, natural and synthetic wool are applied and Gaidelis has carefully considered the internal geometry of his cabinets to advantageously reflect and absorb sound.

All the loudspeakers in the Figaro series have drivers sourced from the Danish company SB Acoustics; they are manufactured to AudioSolution's specifications in Indonesia. High frequencies in the Figaro L are handled by a 1" silk dome tweeter with "mini-horn" loading, thanks to an integral waveguide. Above and below the tweeter are 6" ER paper cone midrange driv-

ers (the "ER" signifies "extra rigid"); a pair of 9" woofers toward the bottom of the cabinet completes the driver complement. The speaker is ported to the rear. The crossovers use different slopes and topologies for different parts of the frequency spectrum; it's described cryptically by Gaidelis as a "complex phase and acoustical phase-linear crossover with minimum delay." For non-EE types such as myself, it's enough to know that the design is asymmetric, with crossover points at 400Hz and 4kHz. The frequency range handled by the midrange drivers is exceptionally wide, the goal being to reduce crossover distortions in the critical midband. Sensitivity is rated at 92dB and the L's nominal impedance is 4 ohms.

There's a single pair of copper WBT NextGen binding posts close to the bottom of the Figaro's rear panel. The side panels, available in

17 colors, have a sexy high-gloss Xirallic finish, and the remainder of the loudspeaker is coated with a black polyurethane paint mixed with powdered stone for a texture that's luxuriant, both visually and to the touch.

One miscalculation that Gaidelis freely admits to was the lack of adjustable spikes in his original design. Figaros sold in Europe have simple round puck-like feet. "I thought the speaker would be quite stable on a hard surface," Gaidelis told me. "I completely forgot that, in some countries, there's a tradition of having carpets everywhere. And thick carpets." Ozan Turan had a Cypress company, called Custom Isolation Products, design substantial outrigger structures for all the Figaro models. Two heavy steel bars running perpendicular to the front-to-back axis of the speaker screw into the threads intended for the original feet and

Specs & Pricing

Type: Floorstanding, three-way, bass-reflex

Driver complement: 1x 1" silk dome tweeter, 2x 6" paper cone midranges, 2x 9" paper cone woofers

Frequency response: 25Hz–25kHz

Nominal impedance: 4 ohms

Sensitivity: 92dB

Dimensions: 14" x 48.4" x 24.3" without outrigger/spikes

Weight: 150 lbs. each

Price: \$10,000/pair (steel outrigger bars with 4 spikes adds \$650)

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Associated Equipment

Digital sources: Oppo BDP-103 (transport), T+A DAC 8 DSD, Baetis Reference 2 music computer, MusiCHI SRV-01 server, Ideon Master Time re-clocking platform, Synology DS1813+ plus DX 513 NAS file storage

Analog source: VPI Scoutmaster and JMW Memorial tonearm, Sumiko Blue Point Special EVO III cartridge

Preamp/processor: Anthem D2v

Phonostage: Audio Research PH2

Power amplifiers: Pass XA 60.8, Pass

Aleph 0s, David Berning Quadrature Z

Loudspeakers: Magico S3 Mk2, Magico S1 Mk2, Magico S-Sub

Cables: Transparent Gen 5 interconnects and speaker cables, Cardas interconnects, Shunyata Anaconda USB, Ideon USB, Revelation Audio Labs AES/EBU, Transparent Premium HDMI, Apogee Wyde Eye SPDIF, Pangea AC-1 45E power cord

A/C power: 20-amp dedicated line, Transparent Ultra PowerBank

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four massive spikes screw into the bars from below, with caps to accept the posts as they emerge from the top surface. The purchaser is provided with steel cups to accept the spikes' points if the Figaros are deployed on a wood or tile surface. In my room, the spikes readily pierced the carpet and underlying acoustical pad to achieve firm contact with the concrete slab below, which was sonically advantageous.

As the Figaro L's are two feet in depth and a rear-ported bass-reflex design, I had concerns that they'd need to be placed at some distance from the front wall to avoid low frequency bloat—and that, as a result, the front plane of the speakers would encroach unacceptably upon the listening position in my 225 square-foot room. I should not have worried. Oz Turan assured me that Figaros did fine when located close to a room boundary—in fact, he told me that one of the Figaro XLs set up in a 13' x 15' hotel room at RMAF 2018 was actually touching the

wall with no ill-effect. I listened to the Figaro L's with both solid-state and tube amplification, and with analog and digital sources. [See Associated Equipment.]

For nearly two months with the Figaro L's as my primary loudspeaker, I was continually amazed by how such physically large transducers could effectively disappear. This was especially evident with small ensemble recordings where the goal was to put the performers in one's room, such as the late David Wilson's Abel/Steinberg Brahms/Debussy/Bartók violin sonata program. The scaling of instruments with well-made chamber music recordings—the Hanson Quartet's recent two-disc set of Haydn quartets or my old standby for assessing this sonic parameter, Paavo Järvi's account of *L'histoire du soldat*—reflects reality. There was no exaggeration of instrumental size, especially if the recordings were played back at an appropriate volume.

Timbral accuracy was gratifying. With a

2019 release of the Canadian woodwind quintet Pentaèdre performing arrangements of Mozart string quartets, the distinctive color of each member of the ensemble—flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon, and French horn—were faithfully represented, as was the characteristic blend of these five voices combined. The rich, mellow sonority of *divisi* violas and cellos at the outset of the Ruhevoll movement from Mahler's Symphony No. 4, as heard on a 1967 Philips LP with Bernard Haitink leading the Concertgebouw Orchestra, achieved the calming (but not soporific) effect that the composer was surely going for.

The Figaro L's were revealing, both in terms of uncovering meaningful musical detail and demonstrating differences in recording technique. It was easy to hear that guitar doubles the pianist's right hand melody on "LTMBBQ" from Wayne Horvitz's *Sweeter Than the Day* album, as well as the contrast between the very "wet" acoustic chosen for Artur Pizaro's performances of Ravel's keyboard music for Linn Records and the much drier one heard on Matti Raekallio's Prokofiev piano sonata CDs for Ondine. Todd Rundgren recorded every instrumental and vocal part on the first three sides of his classic gatefold LP *Something/Anything*, this at a time when overdubbing wasn't nearly as easy to do as it is now. The Figaros let one know when Todd actually brought this off (usually) and when his efforts to function as a one-man band were less than fully convincing.

Dynamics were impressive, as with the aggressively miked acoustic guitar on that audio show favorite, Nils Lofgren's "Keith Don't Go." The ability to resolve the most complex scores was excellent, the cacophonous third movement of Julia Wolfe's *Fire in my mouth*, a 2020 Grammy nominee for Best Engineered Classical Album, being a good example. The image specificity and soundstage reproduction on my usual reference for large ensemble spatiality, Haitink's recording of the Shostakovich Symphony No. 15 for RCO Live, was pretty much what I hear with my usual Magicos. Low frequency-wise, bass was without overhang. Orchestral weight was satisfying, and deep organ pedal notes, such as those heard on the



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live recording of the Saint-Saëns “Organ” Symphony performed with the Philadelphia Orchestra at the 2006 inaugural concert of the Dobson instrument installed in Verizon Hall, support the veracity of AudioSolutions’ LF specification of 25Hz. If you want your pant legs to flap, you’ll need a subwoofer though you will risk wrecking the wonderful top-to-bottom balance of the Figaro L. Pant leg flapping is overrated, anyway.

This honor-roll-caliber sonic report card notwithstanding, I’m not, please note, maintaining that the AudioSolutions Figaro L is the Best Speaker on Earth. First of all, I’ve not yet had the opportunity to hear Gaidelis’ top models and then there are the many justly admired brands that I am quite familiar with. My Magicos reproduce music with a speed, refinement, and complete lack of coloration that brings life to recordings of all genres. Likewise, Von Schweikert, Wilson, YG, Rockport, and others build loudspeakers that manifest—for lack of a better word—an organicity that the Figaro L doesn’t quite achieve. But not for \$10,000. And this is what I meant earlier when referring to the Figaro as a “disruptor.” Eastern Europe is a part of the world where the artisanal skills and engineering chops required to design and manufacture world-class loudspeaker flourish in an environment where the costs of production are significantly lower than in the West. The Figaro L’s punch well above their considerable weight—if, by weight, you mean their sticker price. They are, by a wide mar-

gin, the best speaker I’ve had in my listening room costing \$10k or less, and if your budget is anywhere close to that you should find your way to an AudioSolutions dealer, or at least make it to one of the several audio shows to which Oz Turan plans to bring Figaros this year.

With the Figaro L’s scheduled for pickup, I wanted to hear something special to remember them by. My choice was a 1980 album that I once couldn’t get enough of, *Frontline*, by a band called The Elevators. The Elevators were from Western Massachusetts but became quite popular around Boston as the New Wave movement gathered momentum. They had the same instrumental lineup as

another Boston band, The Cars, and like that group, wrote short catchy songs with stop-and-go rhythms and quirky lyrics (“Love is like wearing a Rayon shirt/ Making me itch and making me sweat”). But, unlike The Cars, it was one and done: There was no second Elevators album. If there was a CD version of *Frontline*, I missed it, and it’s currently not being streamed. So, as impulsively as I called up “Cherish” on Tidal, I found my copy of The Elevators’ only album and cued it up on the VPI for the first time in 25 years. The songs crackled with the same off-kilter energy I recall my younger self being so addicted to, and my mood brightened. Was I surprised? Not this time. **tas**

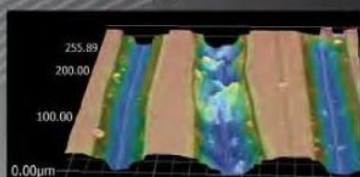
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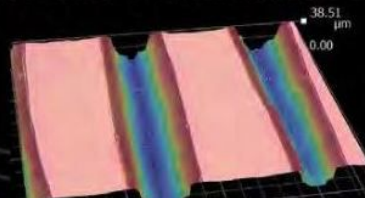


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