

Audio Physic Virgo 25 Loudspeakers

You can pretty much count on a German loudspeaker to grab your attention. Take those from Acapella, Ascendo, and Avantgarde, for examples . . . and we're still in the A's, for crying out loud. Each of those manufacturers produces speakers whose looks and sound will just plain knock you down on your butt.

Sticking with German speaker makers whose names begin with A, Audio Physic, now celebrating its 25th anniversary, has seen fit to revise and add "25" to the names of its top-tier models, including the venerable Virgo. I've heard Audio Physic speakers several times over the years, and this anniversary seemed an auspicious time to arrange a review. I sent my request to the SoundStage! Network overlords, and next thing I knew, a pair of Virgo 25s had landed in my listening room.

My first impression of the Virgo 25 (\$13,990 USD per pair) was that it's a very nicely finished floorstanding speaker. My samples were finished in a beautifully applied Gloss White lacquer, which, like AP's Gloss Black and Macassar Ebony, commands a \$1000 surcharge. Besides its extremely high-end paint job, the Virgo 25, at 41.1"H by 9.1"W by 15.7"D, presents an extremely low profile. It's narrow and mostly devoid of fins, ports, and extrusions, but the real story lies deep within.

First, Audio Physic pretty much makes its own drivers. I say *pretty much* because, while the drivers aren't manufactured in-house, the company that does do that job makes them to AP's own, proprietary design, with AP's own, proprietary tooling. In short, you won't find these drivers in any other company's speakers. All three of them -- woofer, midrange, and tweeter -- are made from ceramic-anodized aluminum, and incorporate a ton of technical tricks.

The midrange cone is damped to reduce ringing, and is housed in dual baskets. The outer basket is made of cast aluminum and acts as a heatsink, while the inner basket is formed from polymer. The magnet is encased in the outer basket, which, combined with a phase plug, helps with heat dissipation. Further niftiness is found inside that phase plug, where other magnets help the coil move within a perfectly spherical magnetic field.

North of all that is a very interesting driver: a cone tweeter. What looks like a fairly conventional dome tweeter is actually the cone's dustcap. Go ahead -- push it in and you'll see. What appears to be a nod to nostalgia is actually some very interesting forwardthink. At first I was skeptical about this cone-tweeter idea. Don't we use dome tweeters to aid in dispersion? Well, when you think about it, a dome tweeter is actually somewhat compromised. Only the apex of a dome works as a piston -- the sides of the dome aren't perpendicular to the direction of the dome's travel. The sides of the dome push out at a lateral angle and, according to Audio Physic, that's not optimal. They claim that the Virgo 25's cone tweeter acts as a true piston, and so exhibits better-controlled dispersion.

Still skeptical, I queried Audio Physic's Reinhard Goerner about the 800-pound gorilla in the corner: Wouldn't a wider tweeter (the cone is 1 7/8" wide) tend to beam at the highest frequencies? He explained that the cone itself is curved, which assists in the dispersion of high frequencies. We'll be measuring the Virgo 25 in the anechoic chamber at the National Research Council in Ottawa, so we'll see if its off-axis dispersion drops off a cliff at high frequencies.

Each Virgo 25 cabinet contains two 8" woofers, one firing to each side in a push-push configuration. Like the midrange and tweeter, the woofers are contained in their own separate enclosure, inside a cabinet that's heavily braced and damped. There are no parallel surfaces inside a Virgo 25; instead, a three-dimensional structure covers the internal walls to help diffuse backwaves. At 66 pounds, the Virgo 25 isn't stupid heavy, but it definitely feels as if hewn from a solid chunk. The front baffle, to which are affixed the midrange and tweeter, is made of a solid slab of cast aluminum, and the drivers are decoupled from that baffle. The front of the speaker is raked back by 7 degrees, which Audio Physic claims helps time-align the drivers' outputs. I wasn't clear about whether or not the crossover is a first-order jobbie, which would go along with that time-alignment concept.



There's a lot more interesting stuff going on in the Virgo 25 -- I spoke at length with Goerner about it -- but I'll cap this off by telling you that each speaker is completely hand-built by one person. When he's done and satisfied with his work, he signs the speaker.

The Virgo 25 is rated as a 4-ohm load. Sure enough, it sounded best run off my Audio Research VT100 tube amp's 4-ohm taps.



Performance

When I first hooked up the Virgo 25s to my system, my house was in total disarray. A drain pipe behind a wall of my living room had sprung a leak, and the water had lifted the floor in the kitchen. I'd called in a plumber, who proceeded to rip out the *entire* drain and vent stack, through all four floors of my house. The kitchen, too, had to be gutted -- I'd had to remove the wall by the sink to get at the stack -- which meant I might as well redo the whole kitchen. Sigh. This cost me many coupons.

To further add to the mayhem, my girlfriend, Marcia, had just moved in with me, and I had to find places for her many books and substantial collection of artwork. Oh yes -- she was seven months pregnant at the time, and busy stacking box upon box in teetering Leaning-Tower-of-Pisa formations. And, oh yes -- we found mold, so I performed my own semiprofessional office-worker mold remediation.

So when Reinhard Goerner came by to install and set up the Virgo 25s, he didn't exactly have my full attention. Goerner was most accommodating. He unboxed and positioned the speakers, then gave them a listen while I ran up and down the stairs, checking to see if Marcia was trapped under piles of boxes and kitchen implements.

It wasn't an auspicious beginning. For the first few weeks my involvement with the Virgo 25s consisted of glancing guiltily at them as I scampered past the system on my way to shuffle boxes into and out of the garage. But when I listened, I found that the Virgo 25's sound went layers deep.

Some speakers just sit there and play, serving up music in a passive manner, aiming at euphony: a dishing out of palatable aural goods. That's all well and good, I say, for that's a kind of sound I generally enjoy.

The Virgo 25 didn't do that. It was an active participant in my listening experience. The sort of passive, laid-back speakers just mentioned generally don't show you what lies deep within your music, glossing over some of the details buried deep within. It's easier to write, read, or sleep through music when it doesn't demand your attention.

The Virgo 25 demanded my attention. It didn't let me sit there doing something else. This was a reach-out-and-grab-you speaker. I shall explain.

Right after Goerner had finished setting up the Virgo 25s, and before work on my kitchen had begun in earnest, I loaded Neil Young's *Greatest Hits* (LP, Reprise/Classic 48935-1) on my turntable and gave it a spin. By this point I still hadn't had the wherewithal to give the Virgo 25s any real attention, but I cued up "Down by the River" and cranked up the gain of my dear old Sonic Frontiers preamp. My mind was elsewhere, thinking renovations, dust, dirt, the impending doom of fatherhood. But with that first crackling guitar lick, my head snapped to attention. I was riveted. There was so much energy in the midrange right up through the lower treble that I was startled. I went *tharr*. The Virgo 25 is reasonably efficient, and the volume setting was a fair bit louder than I usually listen at, but there was no way I was going to get up and turn it down. I sat there through the whole first side, sliding into "Cowgirl in the Sand" and *grooving* with it, as it were.

I don't generally write listening notes. I much prefer to rely on impressions that stick with me. Right there and then, I knew that this moment -- my first real listening session with the Virgo 25 -- would remain burned into my mind. The definition of Young's guitar was astounding. Some of the credit for this has to go to Classic Records' remastering of *Greatest Hits* -- they've done a wonderful job cleaning up the recording and pressing such a quiet LP. Tape hiss is practically nonexistent, and there's no surface noise to speak of.

See what I mean? Right there, you can tell that I was listening actively, listening *into* the recording and dredging up observations about ancillary events beyond the music itself.

My mood tends to drive my listening sessions. Early in my time with Virgo 25s, I found myself wanting to sit and listen, but I was still feeling a touch antsy, preoccupied with the renovations. I needed something involving that would keep me planted but not further agitate me. Instinctively, I reached for Duke Ellington's *Piano in the Background* (LP, Columbia/Classic CS 8346). This is an enormous recording -- Ellington's orchestra is actually quite restrained, but there's never a moment when I can't feel the latent power of all those musicians, sort of like being in the presence of a very large, tough, strong MMA fighter -- he might be the nicest guy on the continent, but you're always aware that he could crush you like a quail's egg.

Piano in the Background presents an enormous acoustic. The sense of the giant studio in which it was recorded is palpable, and the Virgo 25s transformed the entire front quarter of my room *into* that space. Goerner had placed the speakers quite far apart -- about a foot more than I would have -- but there was no hole in the middle. On the contrary, the soundstage was seamless from side to side -- or, more accurately, from wall to wall. The Virgo 25s did height, too. I could envision -- perhaps incorrectly, as I know nothing about the 1960 recording sessions for this album -- the orchestra arrayed in a semicircle, the players at the back on risers. This was the first time I'd experienced my system apparently reproducing *height* information.

The Virgo 25s imaged at least as well as, and perhaps better than, any other speakers I've had in my room. Listening to *Piano in the Background*, I could pick out each instrument's position on the soundstage, both laterally and in terms of depth. And -- you might want to call me on this, and I won't blame you if you do -- I could *swear* that Ellington was sitting at the left-hand side of his piano. It was spooky.



I then switched the 'table to 45rpm and the music to something a little more dynamic: Richard Thompson's EP *Some Enchanting Evenings* (45rpm LP, Mobile Fidelity Sound Lab MFSL 1-45006). "1952 Vincent Black Lightning" is a wonderful if slightly odd song: Boy meets girl, boy marries girl, boy is critically injured in armed robbery, boy gives girl his motorcycle. And they say romance is dead! I regularly play this album for visitors, but only motorcycle fans get it. When it's just me listening, I crank this track up much louder than usual and revel in the crisp attack of the guitars. Via the Virgo 25s I could almost see, in holographic detail, each string as it was plucked.

Thompson's voice occupies an entirely different frequency range from the guitars -- perhaps an octave lower? -- and, interestingly enough, the Virgo 25s presented him with a rich palpability pretty much at odds with the instruments' crispness. This speaker isn't a one-trick pony. In my room at least, the Audio Physic had a very slightly recessed lower midrange, right where Thompson's voice sits. I could mitigate that somewhat by moving the speakers closer to the front wall, but that compromised the Virgos' otherwise outstanding imaging and their transparency in the upper mids -- so I just lived with a bit less lower mids. But even with that leanness, I was clearly aware that the all-important midrange sounded clear, clean, and unmuddied.

Do you like Led Zeppelin? I sure do, but it's *hard* to find a good-sounding LP of theirs. I don't know where I got them, but I've recently rediscovered a whole bunch of Japanese pressings sitting in my record rack. I must have picked them up early in my analog career, when I was buying everything in sight. Anyway, *Physical Graffiti* (LP, Swan Song P6317-BN) is close to the perfect album. The tracks all cohere into a delicious whole, and there's some countrified twang mixed in with the deep *blooze* that so defines the band. Playing "Black Country Woman" through the Virgo 25s, I found myself focusing on the higher registers, and on the harmonics near the top of Jimmy Page's guitar. The APs' tweeters seemed to add a bit more definition than I would have liked, but I didn't find it bothersome. I said earlier that I was concerned that AP's cone tweeter might beam and not involve the room as much as it should, but I shouldn't have worried. The highs were extended and clean, without the slightest taint of grit, but I was somewhat aware that they were just a little elevated, at least in my room. Flipping the side, I found the crash cymbals in "In the Light" pushed farther forward in the mix than I prefer. That said, the *quality* of the highs was superb, with excellent extension and definition.

Perhaps part of why I found the highs a touch forward was that the Virgo 25's low end seemed to have a slight dip in the mid- to upper bass. This was the first time I'd had side-firing woofers in my room, and I'm not certain that they integrated all that well with it. Still, I had no problem getting excellent bass from the Virgo 25s -- far from it. Eleni Mandell's *Country for True Lovers* (LP, Heart of a Champion HoC-011) is my go-to album for bass quality and quantity. "Another Lonely Heart" features rich, tight, beautifully recorded bass, and the Virgo 25s just slammed it out. Those four woofers had tons of extension, and Audio Physic's claim of a 30Hz low point (they don't specify the -3dB point) sounds eminently reasonable. But I was aware of a slight dip at the lower end of male voices, for instance, on that stupid, stupid song, "Oh Yeah," from Yello's *Stella* (LP, Elektra 96 04011): the refrain "Oh yeah" (go, Duffman!) lacked a teensy bit of its richness (for want of a better word).

The Virgo 25s left me in a bit of a quandary. On the one hand, they gave me a crystal-clear view into the music I love. So many times in my listening to these speakers I sat there with a smile on my face, my book hanging limp at my side as I tranced out to the music in that fresh, open-faced manner we all remember from our teenage years, when music meant so much, and there was so much to discover.

But at other times I found myself dissatisfied with the sound quality of the recordings themselves. The Virgo 25 proved to be a scientific instrument that dissected recordings, allowing me to hear their flaws. Keep in mind that I say that the speaker *allowed* me to hear these flaws. At no time did the Virgo 25 slam those details down my throat or fail to make music. I could happily argue that the Virgo 25 presented music in a more realistic manner than do the speakers I usually listen to. But while I do sometimes sit there, chin resting on knuckles, listening studiously, at others I'd rather relax into the music and forgive just a little bit. Remember, this is a case of preference. I've had visitors roll their eyes and accuse me of preferring euphony to accuracy, and I don't argue with them. Regardless, and despite that bias, I still had some serious fun

getting to know my music collection in a new way through the Virgo 25s.

Conclusions

The Audio Physic Virgo 25 is an impressive speaker, and I have no doubt that it's easily worth \$13,990/pair. It's made with care, integrity, and pride, and is finished to an extremely high standard. If you *really* want to hear what's going on in your music, and you want a pair of speakers that look stunning and that you can be proud of, I suggest you give the Virgo 25s a listen.

... Jason Thorpe

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Associated Equipment

Analog sources -- Pro-Ject RPM 10, Well Tempered Labs Amadeus turntables; Roksan Shiraz cartridge

Phono stage -- AQVOX Phono 2 CI

Preamplifier -- Sonic Frontiers SFL-2

Power amplifier -- Audio Research VT100

Speakers -- Definitive Technology Mythos STS

Speaker wires -- Nordost Frey

Interconnects -- Nordost Frey

Power cords -- Nordost Vishnu

Power conditioner -- Quantum QBase QB8

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Price: \$13,990 USD per pair; premium finishes, add \$1000/pair.

Warranty: Five years parts and labor.

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