



Leaning In...

The Peak Consult Sinfonia Loudspeaker

by Roy Gregory

Given the generational change in audio (both in terms of manufacturers and customers) an old name but a new company is not an unusual scenario: Established names are being snapped up by incoming money or upwardly mobile industry members, hoping to leverage the reputation (and any residual parts or technology) from the previous owners/founders. The plan is always to reinvigorate the acquisition, but continuity is a tricky path to follow and all too often the result is either a slowly fading echo of past glories or a complete *volte face* that takes the company in an entirely new direction. You need only look at what has happened to most of the old and storied brands in the UK industry (and what is currently happening in the US) to understand that financially viable or not, when it comes to names like Quad, Audiolab, Leak or KEF, things are definitely not the same...

But occasionally – just occasionally – things come good and the revitalised enterprise climbs to new heights of performance and market presence, recognisably the same beast, just better: possibly, much better.

In the beginning...

Peak Consult was another of the slew of Danish loudspeaker companies that hit the market in the '90s.

Founded by Per Kristoffersen in 1996, I remember the brand's arrival in the UK, mainly in the shape of the El Diablo, cited at the time as a competitor to Wilson's Watt/Puppy. Similar in size and driver line-up, somewhat similar in shape, that speaker (like so many before it, in the UK) failed to challenge that firmly established model, or make much of a market impact – although the brand achieved considerably more sales and greater recognition in the USA.

The speakers I remember were stolid and somewhat understated or 'traditional' in appearance (if you are being kind - 'old-fashioned' if you are not). With their leather wrapped baffle, Audio Technology drivers and solid wood cladding there was more than a hint of Sonus Faber about them – albeit without the exaggerated curves that seem somehow, quintessentially Italian – while the flat sides and kinked, sloping baffle supplied their own Wilson-esque impression. Caught between two-stools? Quite possibly. Either way, those original Peak speakers lacked the gorgeously rich tonality of the better Sonus models, the dynamic slam of the Wilsons that worked. They certainly had their own attributes, but those tended to be eclipsed by the familiar characteristics of the then dominant brands. The Danish invaders duly

▶ retreated from British shores and settled elsewhere. Which might be all she wrote – except that the company changed hands in 2021 and Peak Consult experienced a significant rejuvenation, culminating in their appearance with three, floorstanding models at the first post-Covid Munich show.

The second coming...

The identity (and roles) of the new owners is a big part of Peak Consult's resurrection. Lennart Asbjørn has assumed responsibility for production and logistics, while design and development has passed into the hands of Wilfried Ehrenholz, the one-time owner and co-founder of that Danish audio engineering success story, Dynaudio. That's a lot of audio specific experience and business horsepower to bring to the table – which helps explain how the company was able to show three new/ revised floorstanders in 2022 and an ambitious new flagship in 2023. Outwardly recognisable as Peak Consult products, with essential characteristics and even names that related to earlier models, looking a little closer quickly established just how comprehensive a redesign they'd undergone.

The devil is in the details...

Back in the day, Peak's (none too) original pitch was the combination of high-quality drivers with high-mass, low resonance cabinets, built entirely in-house. The well-respected

Audio Technology drivers were certainly a visible sign of serious intent, while word from the scales supported the high-mass claims, perhaps explained by the thick, laminated HDF carcass and the additional stiffening and dissipation of the solid hardwood outer layer. Those features remain in essence, but significantly refined in execution. Three-layer laminated panels are still used, but these days three different HDF/MDF materials are layered using soft-setting glue to create a heavily damped substrate 36mm thick. Over that is added a hard-wood layer, pared back to a 'mere' 14mm thick, for a total wall thickness of 50mm or 2", with acrylic inserts breaking up the side panels. At first, you might think these changes are a money-saving or retrograde step, but as well as helping to save the planet, it's evidence of an evolving understanding of the cabinet's mechanical behaviour.

Take three layers of HDF/ MDF and glue them together with a lossy adhesive compound and you end up with that familiar construct, a constrained layer – or, in this case, layers. The idea is that the multiple layers of material and interleaving damping create a stiffer, non-resonant structure. What is less widely appreciated is that constrained layer construction can't kill resonance (unless the damping layer is efficient enough to convert all of the stored energy into heat – and for that you need a lot of material: think the high-volume sandwich used in the Rockport speakers). Instead, what most simple constrained layers do is concentrate the remaining energy that they don't dissipate at a single, dominant frequency. Consider that in the



►► context of a wide-bandwidth loudspeaker and it's not a good thing – unless you do something about it.

Which brings us to the third member of the Peak Consult team. Few small companies can afford to invest in the latest, most sophisticated measurement devices and analytical tools – the facilities necessary to really refine the mechanical behaviour of a cabinet. The answer is to contract with someone who can – in this case, loudspeaker design 'gun for hire' Karl-Heinz Fink, a man with so many speaker designs and consultancies to his credit that his drawing board is more notch than surface. If you want access to the very latest and most powerful analytical tools (and someone to drive them) then Karl-Heinz is your man. The beauty of the Peak Consult cabinet construction is that by simplifying the resonant behaviour, you make it easier to deal with, in this case through the time-honoured practice of critical bracing. What Karl-Heinz brings to the party is greater insight into the mechanical behaviour of the cabinet (and drivers) creating the ability to calculate precisely the position and size of any brace, controlling rather than adding to the problem – as well as input to other aspects of the design.

The Sinfonia (€45,000 inc 20% sales tax) is the current incarnation of an earlier speaker dubbed the Empress. It is the middle model of the three compact floorstanders. A straight 8" three-way design, it sits

one down the range from the twin bass driver El Diablo mentioned above. The first thing that strikes you about this speaker (after you've come to terms with its near 80kg weight) is its unusual shape. The bass driver occupies its own, vertical baffle that extends to two-thirds of the speaker's height. Above that, the mid and treble drivers share a tapered and heavily profiled sub-baffle that cants back, in what has become a familiar arrangement designed to deliver a measure of time-alignment to the three drivers. That baffle

is constructed in two parts, from the same three-layer sandwich as the carcass, then wrapped in thick, leather-look vinyl, which adds a further (admittedly minimal) degree of mechanical damping.

But it's the radically tilted top plate and forward sloping rear baffle that afford the Sinfonia its distinctive looks. I've seen more than a few speakers in my time, but I don't recall any that look like this – although that's not necessarily a bad thing. That forward leaning stance gives the speakers an eager, alert posture, that actually echoes their sonic character and which (somewhat to my surprise) I find quite attractive. The acrylic inlays on the side panels update the looks and further accentuate the tapered profile of the cabinet, while the 'leather' clad rear baffle sports a heavily flared reflex port whose angle of elevation and calibre seem more akin to a trench mortar than an audio application. Internally, separate enclosures for each driver contribute to the extensive cabinet bracing, while the crossover enjoys its own, mechanically



▶▶ and acoustically isolated space. Peak Consult state that, internally, the cabinet has no parallel faces, although the side panels are perfectly parallel. What they are referring to are the front, top and rear panels – in other words, those panels perpendicular to (rather than parallel with) the driver axes. Hence the sloping top and rear panels.

As well as the hard-wood surfaces, the driver line-up is another facet of the Peak speakers that contributes to what some might consider a 'dated' or old-fashioned appearance. I've already mentioned the 8" bass unit (so visually different to carbon or Nomex drivers) and both it and the midrange unit use modified polypropylene cones, a material that may have gone beyond "no longer fashionable" into the realms of "deeply unfashionable", but one that continues to give excellent results in speakers from the likes of Wilson Benesch and Vienna Acoustics. Like everything else in audio, it's not what you use, but how you use it that counts. The beauty of polypropylene is that it has inherently good self-damping. Judicious additives and careful profiling of the cone can produce superbly smooth mechanical behaviour within the pass-band, with an equally smooth natural roll off. The traditional downside is that it can sound 'soft' and 'slow'. Well – yes, if you get it badly wrong. But working closely with Audio Technology (another spin-off that shares the Dynaudio DNA) has allowed Peak Consult to not only tailor the drivers to their own system requirements, but to optimise the fundamental elements to minimise perceived shortcomings. Engineer a good cone and generating dynamic range comes down to the power and capabilities of the motor driving it. A lot of

companies expend effort on the magnet structure in order to generate more power (it is the most visible part) and Audio Technology is no exception. But the drivers in the Peak speakers take things further and look at the voice-coil properties too, augmenting the contribution of the magnetic structure with a denser and far more tightly wound construction in the coil itself. If you think the Peaks are going to sound dynamically sluggish, think again.

Tweeter is a 'regulation' 26mm coated-silk

dome sourced from Scanspeak (why mess with success), and completing the image of a 'classic' 8" three-way is a 110mm midrange unit. These days, when 7"/175mm midrange drivers are more or less *de rigeur*, it looks like a saucer when you are expecting a soup-bowl! Crossover points are ultra-traditional too, at 450Hz and 3.1 KHz, employing gentle 2nd order slopes and impedance compensation to arrive at a far from frightening impedance profile for the driving



amplifier. Taken together, that's a line up that might well have stepped straight out of the 80's so, if customers start by looking at products long before they get to touching or hearing them, the Sinfonia could have some catching up to do – at least with the fashion conscious customer.

Peak's specs list a bandwidth of 25Hz to 30kHz -3dB, with a 5Ω nominal impedance ($\pm 1\Omega$). Combined with a realistic 89dB sensitivity (in this case, Danes really don't lie!) that makes the Sinfonia a seriously amp-friendly load, at least on paper. Maybe not the speaker for 15Watt tube amps, but it shouldn't give your half-way competent power amp any trouble at all. However, as ▶▶

▶▶ is so often the case and as will become clear, those numbers only tell part of the story.

Two other specifics are worthy of note. Firstly, the WBT binding-posts that graced older Peak speakers have been replaced with far superior Argento models. Sonically a very good move, it's not without its associated challenges. The Sinfonias are bi-wirable. The Argento binding posts accept a 4mm banana plug OR a spade (but not both simultaneously). Nor, in my experience (and I own a few products that use them) do the Argento terminals like accepting two spades at once. Peak Consult are clearly serious about you bi-wiring or better, bi-amping their speakers, to the point where they don't supply jumper cables. I concur wholeheartedly with the sentiment but, if you do want to run the speakers single-wired, fitting separate jumpers is a pain in the proverbial. Speaker cables fitted with short flying leads to bridge across the terminals are by far the best option. Failing that you can resort (like me) to a lot of frustration and not a little swearing.

In one of those ying/yang experiences, the Peak Consult outriggers and feet are amongst the best executed and operationally the easiest I've used. The outrigger beams are damped with inlaid strips of rubber that press against the cabinet plinth to prevent them resonating, while the footers run on smooth, large diameter threads, incorporate a captive ceramic ball for single-point contact and lock from above. You even get post-holes in the adjustable feet and a tool to turn them with – important because turning the 'cone' doesn't necessarily adjust the foot. The blunt cones with their flat bases aren't going to penetrate carpet, but with speakers this heavy and with this footprint, achieving stability shouldn't be a challenge. Equal loading of all four feet is another matter...

One particularly nice touch is the supplied single-setting torque-driver, which fits the outrigger bolts and the bass and midrange driver fixings. Getting all of those driver bolts not just tight, but exactly the same tightness throughout makes a surprising contribution to the overall musical coherence of the speakers. Surprising that is, until you consider the affect that even, regular contact with the baffle will have on the resonant behaviour of the driver's basket and surround. Other manufacturers (notably Wilson) do supply torque

settings for their driver mounting bolts. Peak is the first I've come across that actually supplies a torque driver with each pair of speakers: A moral victory for the Viking invaders? Definitely.

Three steps forward...

Setting up the Sinfonias is either going to be simplicity itself or a prolonged, patient, gradual struggle. There doesn't seem to be any middle ground. The deciding factors? Space and amplifier matching. Give the Sinfonias enough room to breath and enough power to grab a hold of their generous bottom-end and it should be plain sailing, helped enormously by the ease of adjustment of those excellent outrigger feet.

In the larger Music Room, this was the nearest thing to a PNP speaker (that's "plonk-and-play") that I've used in a very long time. After the requisite run-in period (Peak Consult recommend 300 hours of continuous use – and they're not kidding) I was rewarded with a musically performance so potent that it quite took me by surprise. Effortlessly rhythmic and dynamic, positional shifts were limited to optimising bass weight and speed. Driven by the CH Precision M1.1s in bi-amp mode, the results were infectiously engaging and entertaining, to the extent that I started wondering whether we'd maybe missed a trick with the earlier models? Instead, what I should have concluded was that I'd chanced on the secret of success – at least as far as setting up the Sinfonias is concerned.

One thing it was impossible to miss was the essential rightness of the Sinfonias' tonal balance. On the basis of a quick listen, it would be easy to conclude that they veer to the warm side of neutral. Listen longer and it soon becomes evident that that isn't the case. The pace and musical momentum that the speakers deliver with such obvious enthusiasm tells you that they aren't burdened with the clogging affects of the second-order harmonic distortion or intermodulation artefacts that so often generate that familiar, warm and rounded tonality. Instead, the combination of a naturally weighted balance, with enough body exactly where it should be, together with a total absence of glare, edge or harmonic clipping creates the easy instrumental and harmonic warmth of genuine neutrality. It's the foundation on which all other aspects of the speakers' performance rest.



▶▶ However, moving the speakers upstairs to the smaller Reading Room was a real Jekyll and Hyde experience: speakers that had been so eager, alert and musically enthusiastic suddenly turned recalcitrant and grumpy, sluggish and reluctant. Running the Sinfonias with first the TEAD linear B mono-blocs (80 W/ Ch tube output hybrids) and then the VTL S-200, I persevered with endless positional shifts and subtle adjustments to the low-frequency absorbency in the room, but struggled to spark the speakers into life. Their

powerful bottom-end, so impressive in the large, well-vented volume of the Music Room, with its excellent bass linearity, might have been made for the Peak speakers. In the Reading Room, with its more domestically typical dimensions and acoustic characteristics, the speakers' bottom-end interacted with the room's peaks to present a string of challenges. It wasn't until I swapped out the tube amps for the resolutely solid-

state (and significantly more affordable) Levinson 585 integrated, that the speakers woke up and regained their former enthusiasm and musical energy. Suddenly, re-positioning them ceased to be a fight. Instead, it was as if the speakers were working with me – again. Set up wasn't quite the walk in the park it had been downstairs, but the Sinfonias were quickly restored to their impressive best.

All that time spent working in the Reading Room was far from wasted. Two things quickly became apparent: take a well-behaved cabinet of this size and combine it with a massive reflex port and 89dB sensitivity and (not surprisingly) you'll generate significant bottom-end weight and power – sufficient to get you into serious trouble in smaller or less well-behaved spaces. Secondly, the Sinfonias are far more sensitive to lateral placement and height off the floor than they are to fore and aft adjustment (at least in

the Reading Room). The post holes in the speakers' footers, along with the rod-tipped driver makes precise height adjustment a welcome breeze. But if you do want to shoe-horn the Peak speakers into a smaller space, power and control from the amplifier are going to be just as crucial to success as careful placement.

Rolling these various set up experiences together, the conclusions are straightforward. The Peaks have a clear preference for well-behaved rooms, space to

breathe and plenty of solid-state power. Bi-amping or at the very least, bi-wiring should be high on the agenda too. That doesn't mean that you can't use them in smaller rooms or with simpler systems and lower powered amplifiers, but it does suggest that if you take that path, you'll struggle to maximise the musical return on your not inconsiderable financial investment. As the saying goes, "Why

fight City Hall?" Give the Sinfonias what they so clearly want and they'll repay you in kind – with interest!



Getting down to business...

I've owned the Wilson Sasha DAW since its launch, and still consider it the high-water mark for the Watt/Puppy family and, in many ways, Wilson's speakers as a whole. It is a genuine benchmark performer, while my limited experience with the Sasha V suggests that the loss of 3dB sensitivity, its lower impedance/more awkward drive characteristics and higher price are retrograde steps. Yet the Sasha (in whatever guise) really is a natural mirror for the Sinfonia – as well as the slightly larger El Diablo, with its twin bass drivers – in terms of both performance and market position. I've used the DAWs extensively in both the Music and the Reading Room. Stand it alongside the Sinfonia and the two speakers are so uncannily similar in size and frontal aspect that I suspect comparisons

▶▶ are almost inevitable. In my case, the fact that the Peaks actually replaced the DAWs in the Music Room was as convenient as it was instructive, allowing direct comparison of these two, similar loudspeakers.

With the Sinfonias installed and optimally positioned (slightly forward and slightly narrower than the DAWs) height off the floor and rake angle (measured across the caps of the front/back outriggers) both proved critical to the presence and immediacy in the musical picture. With those details attended to, both the similarities and differences between the two speakers were writ large. The Sasha (and its Watt/Puppy predecessors) has traded on the ability to project



convincing scale and dynamics from a cabinet volume and footprint that remains just about manageable. The Sinfonia is cut from the very same cloth, matching and even exceeding the Wilson's sense of weight and scale. Both speakers present a coherent soundstage and both manage surprisingly well with double-bass and timps. But these are also the points at which they start to diverge. The Peak Consults offer a fuller, weightier and richer tonality than the DAWs, with slightly shut-in upper registers that limit the air and extension at the top-end. The slightly rounded warmth that results is far from unpleasant, but there's no missing the fact that the DAW's greater high-frequency extension and life deliver a more transparent, spot-lit and focussed soundstage with greater intra-instrumental space. In

contrast, the Sinfonia offers a more developed and coherent overall acoustic, with greater depth, more dimensional images and more clearly defined side and rear walls. Voices have more chest behind them and orchestras are able to swell more convincingly.

One of the first discs I played on the Peaks was the Sony Music SMH-SACD re-issue of the Leontyne Price/HvK *Carmen*, with the Vienna Philharmonic, State Opera Chorus and Boys Choir (SIGC 41-2, originally released as an RCA Soria Series box-set LDS 6164). The broad stage of this live concert performance is an acid test of both the extent of a system's soundstage and its ability to locate instruments or voices within

it. The first Act offers plenty of examples, from Carmen's stately, menacing advance on Don José (*Habanera*) to the various arrivals and departures (the girls from the cigarette factory, the guard, the street urchins...). The Sinfonias can't match the locational precision of the DAWs when it comes to the bugle calls that herald the guard's arrival, but the entry of the guard itself and its movement across the stage has greater substance and is far more

convincing, just as Carmen herself carries greater poise and conviction. It all adds up to a greater sense of presence and drama. The DAWs might be more startlingly spacious, with crisper dynamic jumps, but the Peaks offer more presence, more impact and with their sure-footed sense of musical ebb and flow, a greater sense of performance.

Going solo...

Switching in scale to Anastasia Kobekina's *Ellipses* (Mirare MIR604) the Sinfonias invest her cello with a greater sense of shape and body, bolder colours and her playing with a more explicit sense of direction and intent. Her bowing is more purposeful if less incisive, with a greater sense of motion, energy and sheer vigour in the performance, making the four *Siciliennes* and two ▶▶

▶▶ *Folias* more obviously dance-like in rhythm and tempo. Throughout the different pieces, the Peak speakers convey the energy, body and substance generated by the instrument – and the challenge and effort that presents. The final *Gallardo* is a spectacularly physical experience, as impressive for the sheer gusto in the playing as it is for its musicality. The solo instrument (with occasional accompaniment) really underlines the Sinfonia's ability to bind the elements in the recording into a single coherent, purposeful whole. In contrast, the DAW's presentation zeros in on the agility and dynamic tension in the performance, but is less impressive when it comes to presenting the overall shape and direction of the pieces.

That sense of instrumental weight and substance is especially effective with piano. The peaks present Víkingur Ólafsson's instrument on his recent recording of the Goldberg Variations (DGG 4864559) with greater weight, body and dimensionality. His playing seems more poised and reflective, lacking the sparkle generated by the DAWs but with a greater clarity to the structure and phrasing. The overall impression delivered by the Sinfonias is one of unhurried and total control, utterly appropriate to the music.

But in some respects, the most telling comparison of all involved the track 'Skateaway' from *Making Movies* (Dire Straits, Vertigo SHM-SACD UIGY-9636). Knowing that I'd be using it to dial in the bass weight and speed on the Peaks, it was the last track I played

on the DAWs. Sure enough, it duly demonstrated its value when it came to really dialling in the Sinfonias' height off of the floor. But at the same time it also clearly demonstrated their greater depth, weight and sheer dynamic heft. From the opening, treated drum pattern, advancing inexorably from a seemingly impossibly distance, through the building intensity and sharp dynamic contrasts, the Peaks impart an almost

irresistible motive force to the music, propelling the song, the vocal, the conjured image with vivid energy and purpose. If you want a system that injects life and vitality into recordings (especially rock or pop recordings) you could do an awful lot worse than investigate the Peak speakers and a suitable amplifier. Given the proper encouragement, their powerful sense of musical momentum, rich tonality and irrepressible enthusiasm produce exactly the sort of

emphatic musical results that (even huge) audio systems so often struggle to deliver.

Reaching out...

Longer term listening to the Sinfonias in isolation and in a range of systems throws their musical merits into even sharper focus. Whereas comparative listening naturally fastens on specific differences, it's general listening that really underlines the holistic qualities of this speaker. The combination of Isabelle Faust and Giovanni Antonini is a frequent and familiar one from the Tonhalle Zurich. Their recent recording of Locatelli pieces (*Il Virtuoso*, ▶▶



▶▶ *il poeta*, Harmonia Mundi HMM 902398) featuring Antonini's small, original instruments, baroque orchestra, *Il Giardino Armonico*, is a real joy, full of the vigour and vitality that characterises not just recent such recordings, but the music of Locatelli itself. It also dovetails perfectly with the musical qualities of the Sinfonia. The speakers' musical enthusiasm and sense of momentum give a sense of substance and a purposeful, emphatic quality to the rhythms and phrasing. Their broad and beautifully proportioned soundstage doesn't just give space around and dimensionality to the instruments, it accentuates the complex structure, layering and counterpoint of the compositions.

But the real beauty here is how the Sinfonias allow you to delve into the performance without ever losing sight of the whole. Faust's playing is beautifully fluid and articulate, despite the virtuoso demands of the scores. Locatelli

was not just a famous virtuoso violinist, he was famous for extreme fingering and playing to the inner limits of the fingerboard (once famously getting his fingers stuck in the bridge of his instrument). The harmonic substance and musical body that characterises the Sinfonias extends right to the top of their range, so that when Faust explores the extreme upper registers of her instrument (as in the *Andante* from *Violin Concerto in A major, Op. 3 No. 11*) you get none of the thin or scratchy sound that so often afflicts loudspeakers. The instrument's tonality and the harmonic structure and body of even these extreme notes is beautifully

preserved, the soaring lines beautifully articulate, played with immaculate poise and control. It might just be the ultimate musical high-wire act, making what could be a purely technical exercise into a captivating musical event, full of grace and tension, the physical action of the bowing as apparent as the controlled pressure it demands. Meanwhile, the swoop down to the other extreme of the instrument's range underlines just

how seamlessly Peak Consult has engineered the transition from treble to mid-band, while the clean, effortless clarity of the trills and double stopping further reveals the textural and tonal resolution of the speakers. There's none of the edgy discord you hear so often, just cleanly defined fundamentals and harmonics in perfect harmony.

Faust's playing is as beautiful as it is breathtaking, but there's so much more to admire here. The body and weight

that the Sinfonias bring to the orchestra's bottom end, especially the left hand of the harpsichord (and you won't see that written very often!). The single double bass and thorbo combination is imbued with just the right, rich roundness to give a planted foundation to the performance, the cello have astonishing texture, the harp continuo (!) is as surprising as it is deftly incorporated. The sheer quality of the musicianship here is remarkable: the Sinfonias render that quality remarkably apparent. Just as apparent as they make the shifts in orchestral composition and musical density as the programme moves from one piece to the next. ▶▶



▶▶ Hidden voices...

In the same way that these speakers bring substance and body to violin or cello, they bring chest and an identifiable character to voices, enlivening performances with the sort of incidental detail and nuance that brings them to life. Shawn Colvin's *Cover Girl* (Columbia 477240) is a great example on one album that contains a number of different 'voices'. Play the opening track, 'Every Little thing (He) Does Is Magic' and you hear Colvin run through her expressive range, mixing up breathy intimacy, slurred syllables to stretch rhythm and phrasing, hitch kick changes of pace and curling, spoken emphasis to bring a personal feel to this familiar lyric. The whole vocal firework display is delivered with an effortless clarity and stable sense of substance that allows the lyric to command the song and dictate musical terms without you even noticing that that is what's happening.

Then there's the ease with which you can separate Colvin's and Mary Chapin Carpenter's vocals on the duet, 'One Cool Remove'. It's not just about the certainty with which you know who is singing what: it's about appreciating the arrangement of the vocal parts, the way they add to the song, the beauty and intimacy of the harmonies, a whole that is much greater than the sum of its parts – and why.

And finally there's the live tracks, instantly identifiable through their distinctly different acoustic, but also through the change in the character and quality of Colvin's voice, partly down to the change in venue and microphone, but also due to the added power she needs to project in a live environment. It's not just that it is instantly and obviously different: the reasons for that difference are equally obvious, testament to the natural expressive range of which the Peak speakers are capable. It's not about neutrality – although the Peaks are certainly neutral, in the

classical sense. It's about the ability to track signal and dynamics, density and musical emphasis. So when Colvin sings '(Looking For) The Heart Of Saturday Night' she does so almost deadpan, the rhythm and emphasis in the song injected entirely by the attack, shaped notes and phrasing of the acoustic guitar. The result is at once yearning but also desperate, emotional qualities the Sinfonias capture without you noticing them doing it. It's indicative of the ease with which the speakers incorporate and reveal such musical nuance and performance detail, information that all adds to the creation of an engaging and convincing whole.

A wholesome approach...

Roll all this together and what does it add up to? I've talked before about products (and particularly speakers) that separate instruments tonally as well as



or instead of spatially. The various Vienna Acoustics speakers are a perfect example. They throw a huge soundstage, but don't populate it with the pin-point, etched or spot-lit images that are so characteristic of high-end, high-resolution audio systems. Instead, the clarity and separation of musical strands is a function of the speakers' ability

to define the tonal distinctions between individual instruments. The Sinfonias follow that musical path. Their bandwidth pretty much guarantees a spacious acoustic and they deliver a natural perspective with good instrumental spread or spacing across the stage. What they don't do is give you the mic's-eye view of the space between individual instruments. It's not that the layout of the band isn't defined in space, it's a question of degree. The Peaks simply don't portray the ultra focussed and extreme separation that you hear in certain systems.



▶▶ You pay your money and make your choice, but it can be (and frequently has been) argued, that what the Peaks deliver is more akin to what you actually hear in a live, acoustic performance. Or, to put it another way, that the pinpoint location of instruments on the stage is a stereo artefact. Listening to the Locatelli *Concerto Grosso in C Minor Op.1 No. 11*, I hear enough natural, spatial separation between Faust's instrument and the second soloist to be convincing, while the distinctive character of each instrument separates their musical contributions with complete clarity. That clarity of musical purpose certainly contributes to the engaging vitality of the recording, but the natural, unforced perspective also underpins its ability to convince.

The Peaks' presentation – and their ability to shift or adjust that presentation – reflects their innately natural sense of weight and balance, the evenness of their energy output and resolution. These are not the highest-resolution speakers in the world – but they do resolve evenly across their entire range, whether they're asked to teeter across the top-most notes of Isabelle Faust's fiddle or capture the woody resonance and body of a baroque Cello, the dull thud of a damped kick-drum or the attack and zing of a pedal steel guitar. Importantly, they don't go higher at the top than they go low at the bottom: as a result, musical density, and shifts in density – whether between one band and another or within a musical performance – are defined by the incoming signal, rather than limited or gated by imbalances in the speaker or system. It might sound like an obvious requirement, but it is remarkable how many speakers/systems fail this basic test. The Sinfonias navigate it with unusual ease – and that driven by the

relatively modest Levinson 585. Step up to the CH M1.1s and the speakers' ability to portray shifts in orchestral density or build into a pop chorus is seriously impressive, making the musical impact of those shifts explicit – occasionally shockingly so. Just as they should be...

Combine the Peaks' enthusiastic dynamic response with that sense of even energy across the spectrum and naturally weighted balance and the result is the ability to generate an almost Linn-like sense of musical urgency and momentum. Except that with the Peaks it's a quality that's on tap rather than a constant.


When the music demands it, they deliver with gusto. But they can back off the pace too, without the music or sense of performance shutting down. So just as they can change density, they can change pace too. Play Víkingur Ólafsson's recent recording of the Goldberg Variations (DGG 4864559) on the Sinfonias and you'll marvel at the grace and fluidity in the playing. That's down to the effortless clarity with which the speaker tracks changes in attack and note pressure, its ability to capture the shape and pace of left and right hands simultaneously, keeping them both separate but related. It's a master-class in musical coherence, the prioritising of fundamental musical demands over overtly impressive hi-fi qualities.

Hear to stay?

The Peak Consult Sinfonia is a real surprise package. It's a long way from being the largest, the most detailed or the highest-tech loudspeaker – even in its price band. It doesn't have the most stylish or striking cabinet – although the quality of fit and finish is exemplary. It doesn't have that one, knock it out of the park sonic attribute that blows away the competition on the shop floor. It doesn't scream, "Look at me!" – visually or sonically. Install a pair in your lounge at home and I doubt most of the neighbours will even notice, let alone comment. But the longer I spend with the Sinfonias, the more I suspect that, if you are Peak Consult, that's kind of the whole point. ▶▶

▶▶ This is a speaker that does everything at least really well. Its absence of stand out qualities is what allows it to do the thing it does best of all – which is get behind the music. It's not that the speakers are sonically invisible, but they refuse to intrude or draw attention to themselves, instead standing firmly behind the performers and the performance, the recording and the event. What they don't do, you don't notice, which is what allows them to engage your musical attention and hold it. Few speakers that I've used are as effortlessly enjoyable and satisfying as the Peak Consults – and those few are the ones that I return to again and again.

I have never understood the audiophile fascination with 'studio monitors'. I get the attractions of the 'pro' association, but it overlooks the fact that studio monitors do an entirely different job and play by a different set of rules. What has that got to do with the Peak Consult Sinfonias? I suspect that all those people buying ATCs think that they are somehow investing in 'the musical truth'. But if you want speakers that are true to the music, but also deliver it without fear or favour – and without pulling it apart – then it is

the Peak Consult Sinfonias that are the real deal. The concept and appearance might have stepped straight out of the late '80s, but the musical integrity and overall coherence is as timeless as it is consistently enjoyable. Ralph Waldo Emerson famously stated that, "The best tunes are played on the oldest fiddles." This particular 'fiddle' has been a long time in the making – and it's all the better for that. 

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Peak Consult Sinfonia
€45,000 (inc. 20% sales tax)
\$55,000 USD (exc. sales tax)

Finishes American Walnut or Wenge