



MARTIN
DESIGN

The Marten Design Duke Loudspeaker and Ellington Sub-woofer

by Roy Gregory

There's only one problem with making a great £30000 speaker; no matter how well-regarded it is, or how much critical acclaim is heaped upon it, sales aren't going to pay the rent. To do that you need something affordable that a few more people can actually buy. Which brings us to the problem. Looking at his lovingly crafted masterpiece, which elements does the designer sacrifice in order to cut costs?

Well in the case of Marten Design, when it came to decimating the budget for the Coltrane to produce the £3500 Duke, designer Leif Märten Olofsson didn't have to look too far. First to go was the diamond tweeter, followed in short order by the fancy cabinet and a whole hunk of bandwidth. The question is what have we been left with? Well, in the case of the Duke, the answer is quite a lot. Whichever way you look at it this is a speaker that offers a few surprises.

Take the performance on paper: 87dB sensitivity and a -3dB point at 39Hz look pretty standard stuff for a speaker this size, even if that bass extension goes deeper than you might expect. You start to form a mental picture of how the speaker is going to sound – only, once you actually listen you find that it doesn't. In fact, it sounds far more immediate, focussed and dynamic than any 87dB speaker has a right to. Somewhat surprisingly, the Dukes struck up an instant rapport with the Tom Evans Linear A – all 25 Watts of it – no doubt helped by the 5.8 Ohm minimum impedance.

There's a crispness and liveliness to the music that you'd normally associate with far more efficient designs, like the

94dB Living Voice OBX-R2 that I normally use. In fact, it's an interesting comparison, because on paper, the OBX offers an extra 7dB of sensitivity but not a lot more bandwidth, with a -3dB point at 33Hz. But listen to the two speakers side by side and you'd swear that the Duke is far more sensitive than the specifications suggest – and that it doesn't go as deep in the bass. Just listen to Britten conducting the ECO, playing his *Young Person's Guide...* (XRCD-0226-2). The opening is impressive enough, with a lovely sense of space and orchestral space, but where the OBX tracks the bassoon that underpins the second section with perfect weight, pitch and precision, it's a mere ghost on the Dukes. So whichever way you cut it, this speaker isn't quite what it might seem.

There again, it looks pretty surprising too. The cabinet is built from 26mm MDF, internally damped and

order crossover, set at 3kHz, while on the outside there's a 25mm ceramic dome tweeter and a 180mm ceramic cone (or dish) bass-mid unit. The back panel sports a large diameter, flared port and a set of nice bi-wire binding posts, mounted on a rigid, aluminium plate rather than the more normal plastic molding. It might seem like a small thing but it's also one that's often overlooked. (Molded panels look pretty but introduce a weakness and flexibility to the cabinet.)

Now, generally, a compact stand-mount would be expected to sit atop a pair of 24" stands or thereabouts, the fashion being something that weighs considerably more than the speaker itself. Now

the Duke isn't that compact (its front baffle is fully 400mm high) yet the price includes a matching stand that's 30" tall once you put the spikes on it. With three, large diameter extruded aluminium uprights it looks incredibly solid and rigid – which it is – yet pick it up and it's also astonishingly light. You also get four thick foam pads to space the speaker from the top-plate. The Dukes need to be placed a little closer to the wall than you might expect, about 15" in my room, and you need to toe them in to point almost straight at the listener. Also, be aware that such is their transparency that you need to get the stands absolutely vertical.

Set up in this way and driven by the Linear A, the Dukes deliver a fantastic performance on smaller scale recordings. The Steve Dawson and Diane Christansen album *Duets* springs to life, the familiar voices immediate, focused and lifelike against the inky black background. Both have tremendous



tapered heavily towards its tail, vertically and horizontally. It makes the speakers look a little like you

are viewing them through a wide angle lens, although combined with the good quality veneer, the effect is far from unattractive. Inside, there's a second

► presence, stability and dimensionality, while the sparse instrumentation is beautifully handled. Acoustic guitar notes are reproduced with a clarity and precision that leaves playing, placing and pitch, the energy that goes into each note, in no doubt. It's this combination of micro-dynamic discrimination, energy and spatial definition that makes the sound so convincing.



Even something as grungy as the fabulous Wilko album *Back In The Night* has just the right combination of drive and aggression. Just listen to the live closer 'Roxette' to appreciate the way this speaker organises the rhythmic aspects of a track. The trip-hammer beat and surging, heaving bass line underpin the man's vocals, the angry, confused blues of the lyric, absolutely perfectly, propelling the track into high-energy overdrive. Yet even here you learn something about this speaker: notice the way in which the vocals are held back within the coherent soundstage rather than projected forward in the way that so many (especially small) speakers do. It's also far more forgiving of recording quality than the Coltrane, which along with its other strengths

make it a superb transducer for live recordings. More Fun? You might think that but I couldn't possibly comment...

How much of that sense of precision and clarity, especially at the bottom end, comes from the extension available at the top. With the ceramic dome going out beyond 40kHz this is one speaker that doesn't need a supertweeter. Which makes it kind of appropriate that what it does need is a sub-woofer. As impressive

as the performance on smaller scale, especially acoustic recordings is, play larger works and the Duke's shortcomings at low-frequencies become all too apparent. The bass that there is, is quick, agile and pitch perfect, but it lacks substance and weight, robbing orchestral music of its essential foundation and rock music of power.

Enter then the Ellington sub-woofers (shouldn't the names be the other way round?) active units that replace the stands below the Dukes. Imposing in their black satin finish, each

Ellington contains two, forward facing 8" long-throw aluminium coned drivers, loaded by a substantial port in the bottom of the cabinet. The footprint is tapered in the same way as the Duke, while a backwards slope limits internal parallel surfaces in exactly the same way as the smaller cabinet, just in a different plane. Rear panel connections are provided at line and speaker level, along with controls for phase, roll-off, level and equalisation. The internal 200W Class D amplifier will offer

potentially damaging levels at anything down to 18Hz, making these pretty serious subs, as they should be at \$4000 per pair. The satellites sit perfectly on top, again resting on the foam pads, while larger sheets of open cell foam are used to block their ports and roll them off a little earlier.

Although I tried the subs run at speaker level, I preferred the sound with them fed directly from the line-stage. They also enabled me to pull the speakers forward into the room, giving the Dukes even more space to breathe. Of course, the best results will be obtained with the satellites left on their stands and the subs sited separately to best exploit the room nodes, but I'm not sure that option was really considered in the design brief - or would be visually acceptable in most situations! As it is, the Dukes and Ellingtons make for an undoubtedly imposing combination, but one that has enough style and character about them to carry it off without being awkward or ugly. The sharp edges might

jar with more traditional décor,

but fit right into a modern aesthetic.

If ever a speaker was crying out for a sub then it's the Duke - and the Ellington certainly delivers. It's

a powerful beast, which is something of a double-edged sword if you get the set up wrong, but as with all subs, patience delivers

serious sonic dividends. My only gripe is the lack of fine graduation on the control panel, a provision that makes set up and repeatable adjustment so much easier. But with a properly sorted set of Ellingtons in play, you are left in no doubt that this is an extremely capable, full-range speaker system.

As expected, the soundstage simply opens out while images take on a new sense of solidity and dimensional presence, further extending the



► Dukes' already impressive performance in this regard. Playing Janos Starker's performance of the Dvorak Cello Concerto for Mercury demonstrates the available weight and power. The soundstage extends well beyond the speaker boundaries while the speakers themselves simply disappear. Starker's instrument is larger than life, exactly as one expects with this recording, wonderfully vibrant and woody, the tension and power in the playing having an almost reach-out and touch quality. The agility and mastery in the playing does full justice to the maestro's skills.

Just like its more expensive sibling, playing the music of this speaker's namesake is instructive. The complex rhythms and melodic lines of Ellington's music are the perfect playground for this system's easy flow and top to bottom agility. The bass, despite its extension, never slows or plods, and powerful rock music has real drive and purpose.

Of course, with the £7K speaker market just about to wake up (all those new B&Ws don't you know...) the Marten combination faces stiff competition, but such are its strengths that it need have no fears. With a remarkably lucid and clear sound that manages to offer resolution without becoming clinical or dry in the process, coupled to a seamless coherence capable of casting a huge soundstage and realistic dynamic range capabilities, they seem to have all the bases covered. And they're easy to drive into the bargain.

Their weakness lies in a slight bleaching of tonal colours through the mid-bass and lower mid-band, which leads in turn to a slight pinching of

harmonic roundness. If you want warm and cuddly then this isn't it. You also need to take considerable care in matching the subs and satellites to avoid a mid-bass thinning which exacerbates the character. I managed to minimize it but never eliminate it in my room – however, given the bass performance of the Dukes alone it might be down to the room rather than the system itself, so experiment here. Get it right and

I suspect my tonal reservations would evaporate. As it is this speaker system delivers many of the qualities of the four times the price Coltrane but with a more accessible and less demanding character that really invites extended listening. The clean sound is devoid of edge or strain, especially at the top, which soars clear and high, delivering air and detail without drawing attention to itself. Leif Márten Olafsson has successfully pulled off that hardest of all tricks, downsizing without eroding the essential quality and character of the product. Along the way

he has created a system that is far less demanding of accompanying equipment, easier on the ear, and potentially as a result, more fun to listen to. Yes, they lack the absolute resolution, the preternatural evenness and refinement of the Coltranes, but boy do they make up for it with sheer musical enthusiasm. The Duke/Ellington combination could hang on the end of an extremely rewarding, genuinely high-end system, and one that's not extortionately expensive. Add a Lavardin IT and a decent front-end and you'd have an awful lot of highly enjoyable music for your money.

The icing on the cake is the Duke. Not as a standalone speaker, in which

capacity it's limited by its bandwidth, but because it offers the option of a stepping stone via a cheaper alternative than the Ellingtons, making the performance even more accessible. This is one speaker system that anybody spending up to five-figures should definitely hear. Just don't lose sight of the fact that it is a system. And I still think that they got the names round the wrong way. ►+



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Duke Satellite

Type:	Two-way, reflex loaded loudspeaker
Drivers:	25mm ceramic dome tweeter 180mm ceramic cone woofer
Sensitivity:	87dB
Bandwidth:	39Hz – 40kHz ±3dB
Impedance:	8 Ohm nominal (5.8 Ohm minimum)
Cross-over:	3kHz, 2nd order
Dimensions (WxHxD):	220x400x330mm
Finishes:	Walnut, maple or cherry veneers Piano lacquer, any colour, £200 extra
Weight:	13kg ea.
Price:	£3500 including stands

Ellington Sub-woofers

Type:	Active sub-woofer system
Drivers:	2x 205mm aluminium cone
Amplifier:	200 Watt class D
Bandwidth:	18 – 150Hz
Dimensions (WxHxD):	290x700x330mm
Weight:	25kg ea.
Finish:	Satin black
Price:	£4000 pr.

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