

as reviewed by Danny Kaey

The Duke is a sensational new loudspeaker from Marten Design, based in Göteborg, Sweden. I was very familiar with their previous hotshot, the Miles II, which was my reference speaker for more than a year, and was very eager to receive these blond bombshells (the review samples were finished in lustrous birch). Shortly after CES, Marten's U.S. distributor, Dan Meinwald, gave me the okay to take possession of a pair of fully-broken-in Dukes.

The Duke is a bookshelf-sized two-way loudspeaker that features the latest German-made Accuton ceramic drivers for both the highs and the bass/midrange. The smart people at Marten have also designed a complementary bass unit, aptly named the Ellington, that sits under the Duke a la the Watt/Puppy. Each Ellington contains two high-stress, high-power aluminum drive units powered by a 250-watt digital ICE amplifier with built-in, multi-adjustable crossovers and level settings. Thus, the Duke/Ellington is a compelling full-range system with a bottom end around 20Hz and a top end around 40kHz. Cost for a complete system starts at \$15,000 for the standard finish, which for the Duke includes three real wood veneers—birch, oak, and walnut. The standard finish for the Ellington is a matte black. For an additional \$3500, both the Duke and the Ellington can be ordered in a high-gloss black finish, or the Duke can be had in a high-gloss wood finish. The Dukes by themselves are \$7000 in standard veneer, \$8500 in high-gloss veneer or lacquer.

I was very impressed with the complete system at CES, but the prospect of reviewing the Dukes by themselves seemed like a special opportunity. Armed with the sensational Velodyne DD-15 subwoofer, I knew I had access to the lowest of registers with the flick of a switch (actually, the press of a remote control button—welcome to the subwoofer class of 2005). Nevertheless, the point of this review is to explore the performance of the Dukes sans the superwoofer. With extension down to the 40s, the Dukes should prove to be optimal for many situations, save perhaps the largest rooms. Those who have been following the rise of Marten Design know that only the best components are utilized in their loudspeakers, from the wiring (which is from another Swedish high-end manufacturer, Jorma Design) to the crossover, and of course, those oh-so-expensive, ultra-high-definition Accuton drivers (called Accuton in the U.S. only—the rest of the world knows them as Thiel & Partner).

The Duke/Ellington was born out of necessity. The ever-growing multi-channel market can benefit from a well-executed modular loudspeaker, and Leif Oloffson, the designer of all of the Marten speakers, feels that the Duke/Ellington combo plays in an even higher league than the already-awesome Miles IIs. When I met Leif at



this year's CES, we had a chat about just that topic. I had sold my Miles IIs to fellow PFO reviewer Victor Chavira (see the review here) in order to upgrade to the Coltrane Altos, but a reality check revealed that I could not afford to spend that kind of money (\$24,000) on a pair of loudspeakers, as I was in the process of setting up a home-based recording studio. The Miles IIs were already so awesome that I then began to question the necessity for an upgrade, but the promise to Victor had been made, so off they went, and I was left speaker-less. When I spoke to Leif about my dilemma, he replied that the Dukes would be my ticket. I always believe that things happen for a reason, and since I would be in need of super-precision monitors for my recording studio, the Dukes would kill two birds with one stone, provided they could really sing.

The Duke's cabinet employs non-parallel surfaces and a time-aligned sloping front. The speaker appears to be somewhat smaller than Marten's previous two-way monitor, the Monk, but Leif assured me that it packs a bigger punch than even the Mingus, a far larger, floor-standing two-way. When I looked closely at the cabinet, I noticed the amount of time Leif spent optimizing the shape of the cabinet for the best possible performance. Each side wall is angled in toward the back of the speaker, and beautifully made, heavy-duty dual binding posts (for bi-wiring or bi-amping) take up the

lower half of the back wall. The upper back section houses a bass port, while massive internal bracing provides for a super-stiff and structurally superior cabinet. All of this time-consuming design work adds up to an optimal mounting area for the luxury Accuton drivers.

Much has been said about these drivers, but suffice to say, many experts consider them to be the best on the market, and designers of far more expensive loudspeakers employ them. Among the first things people talk about when they hear the Dukes is their electrostatic-like qualities of speed and agility, and their insane stop/go performance. It is no wonder—the ultra-thin ceramic membranes (thinner than a human hair strand!), coupled with a powerful and carefully executed motor structure, make for a precision propulsion device. The bass/midrange driver, a 7-inch unit, is the top-of-the-line model in that series. The tweeter is Accuton's latest 1-inch ceramic driver, with real-world extension to 40kHz. If you choose not to purchase the Ellington bass units, Marten offers a nicely made stand for the Dukes, which positions the speakers at exactly the same height as they would be if they were placed atop the Ellingtons. (By the way, if you opt for the complete combo, the time-aligned plane extends down to the subwoofers, to offer a completely coherent musical signal.) The Duke's fit and finish is very nice. The wood veneer has a beautiful, deep, natural gloss. The veneers are not book matched, something I expect at \$7000 a pair, but I console myself with the knowledge that the speakers contain nothing but the best components, and that hundreds of hours were spent optimizing the driver placement and cabinet construction. I must admit that the pristine white drivers look exceptional paired with the cream color of the birch veneer. The review pair have plenty of WAF, and I imagine that the high-gloss black finish will look equally stunning, if not more.

There is much more to loudspeaker design than taking good components, slapping them into fancy cabinets, and expecting to have a reference-grade speaker system. I have heard all of the speakers in the Marten line, including their top-of-the-line Über-speaker, the Coltrane. I have also heard other Accuton-based loudspeakers that sound nothing like the ultra-musical and real Martens. It is interesting to see people at CES walk up to them saying, "Oh yeah, another company using the Accuton drivers," yet upon the first note, the proverbial "I told you so" doesn't seem to do justice to the overwhelming difference between what they hear and what they expected to hear. On the other hand, I was expecting greatness from this new model, and I got it.

Setup was a breeze. It's not that you can simply drop these puppies anywhere, but a basic eyeballing of the playback conditions almost immediately suggests a

good starting position. Their resting place was about 6 feet from the rear wall and about 5 feet from the side walls. The distance between the speakers was 10 feet, which provided lots of space for them to unveil their sonic signature. I toed the speakers in until the tweeters and midrange/bass units were pointing almost straight at me, for greater focus, clarity, and cohesiveness. On a side note, the room had recently been helped with a generous number of RealTraps room treatment panels, which work extremely well, especially compared to my experiences with other so-called room treatment panels (review forthcoming).

During the past year or so, I have had the pleasure of hearing several sets of headphones, in addition to my AKG K1000s. What always amazes me about headphones is their sheer resolving power. With the K1000s feeding off the speaker terminals of my E.A.R. 890, no matter what record I play, these ear speakers give me the honest truth about the recording. This is sometimes a great thing, particularly when the recording is good. At other times, it can be downright dreadful, with the music sounding so harsh and bright that I simply cannot enjoy the performance. It is that ability to reveal every little nuance of a performance—the striking of a bow against the strings of a violin, the movement of a pianist's fingers across the keyboard—that characterizes headphone listening. One of the reasons headphones offer this level of resolution is the simple fact that the transducers are no more than an inch or so away from your ears. Every movement of the headphone's membrane causes an immediate translation into acoustic information at your ears. By comparison, a loudspeaker has a much more difficult job. First of all, it is a freestanding acoustic generator interfacing with your room. Second, the laws of physics dictate that the further a sound wave has to travel from its source, the weaker (and more dispersed and out of focus) it will get. Of course, there are speakers that aim to sidestep these disadvantages, but sadly, they are either large, or worse, cost more money than your average German-made, four-door family sedan.

What is striking about the Marten Design Dukes is that they are the first speakers to achieve headphone resolution in my room, and let me tell you, this is quite an experience. Never before have I heard such resolution of the details buried on CDs, LPs, or tapes. This level of detail can be a double-edged sword with some speakers, which substitute excessive brightness or overly pronounced high frequencies for resolution. Resolution done right, as it is with the Dukes, will never call attention to itself. Instead, it will simply be there. Take (what else?) Duke Ellington's Piano in the Foreground, recently remastered to DSD and released as a standard CD, as an example. The second track, "Cong-go," captures what is so right about the Dukes, which sound more correct than any other speakers I have had in my room. First, the soundstage is lifelike.

Closing my eyes and savoring the performance, I truly feel that I have been taken to the recording venue. Every instrument seems to be right there, with a touch and feel that is simply breathtaking. The piano is in front of the left speaker, the bass way to the left, drums to the right. Surely, Duke Ellington himself would have approved of this! The group's tight interaction and jaw-dropping timing is breathtakingly apparent. This track reveals the stunning speed, yet incredible delicacy, of which the Dukes are capable. Every key on the piano is precisely defined and carved in space. The plucking of the bass sounds real, without a single sign of veiling or smear.

Speakers Corner has been releasing some exceptional material lately—fantastic Mercury, Impulse, Verve, and Decca titles. I recently received a batch of vinyl, all pop- and click-free on ruler-flat 180gm vinyl, including Getz and Gilberto on Verve, with effortless performances by Stan Getz and Joao Gilberto. This is one of my all-time favorite records, and it always manages to take me back in time to when it was recorded. Of the various reissues available, on CD, SACD, and vinyl, this remaster is the finest, bar none. I am not sure how the Speakers Corner team managed to extract so much more information from the master tapes, but the proof is in the pudding, and what a creamy, sweet, smooth, pudding it is! The Martens reveal the innermost sanctum of this recording, putting me in touch with Getz and Gilberto. This is one of the finest qualities of the Marten Dukes—when everything is right in the playback chain, from the source forward, they reveal so much of the inner soul and life of a performance. It can be quite scary at times, in a good sense. Other speakers of far greater cost reveal a lack of coherence under similar circumstances. They may have great bass, but lack the dynamic drive associated with it. They may have speed, but fail to connect the instruments to the notes and performers. The Martens do so much right that the quibbles I have with them are of small importance, and in fact are easily addressed.

Quibbles? I have heard better bass. On their own, the Dukes lack a certain amount of force in my rather large listening room, which is as much the fault of the room as the speakers. On the other hand, I would gladly take speakers that get everything else so correct, but lack bass output, over ones that pretend to have bass but really have boominess in the 60-to 80-Hz range. I measured the Martens in my room, and can tell you that they have useful bass down to the mid 40s, below which they drop off rather quickly—hence the lack of slam. On the other hand, augmenting the Dukes with my Velodyne DD-15 solved the problem in spectacular fashion. Playing my copy of Classic Records' reissue of the Gershwin Concerto in F on RCA, a fine example of large-scale orchestral dynamics if ever there was one, I didn't feel the awesome power that this record is so capable of conveying, but when I brought the Velodyne into play, I was barely able to wipe a grin off my face. Try this LP for yourself if spectacular hi-fi is your thing.

Based on that experience, I concluded that the Marten Design Dukes could be upgraded from hyper-realistic performance to true world-class status by the addition of a modern subwoofer. Let's see, a world-class speaker system for less than \$10k? I'll take one, please (and I am—I'm buying the Dukes). Another fine example of what the Dukes can do is "Fever," from Steve Hoffman's excellent DCC release of Elvis is Back!. The pressing I have is dead quiet, without one tick or pop blemishing the performance. From the darkest of backgrounds, Elvis' voice emerges with such realism that you could take singing lessons from the King himself. (The song was of course made famous by Peggy Lee, but I have to confess that I prefer Elvis' version.) The Martens were again in full command of the performance. Elvis' voice was so irresistible and smooth, with such startling definition. The clearest and most concise way I can describe the experience is that I never felt as though I was listening to a recording, but it doesn't end there.

As I write these words, it is a tick after 11 PM, my family is in bed, and yet I am still able to enjoy the Dukes. Unlike many speakers I have had in my room, the Dukes are capable of providing all of their resolution, power, and tactile touch and feel at low volume. My amp is pushing maybe a tenth of a watt, yet I can still hear George Szell conduct Schumann's First Symphony in almost all of its grandeur, save of course for the overall dynamics. Everything is still there—the size of the orchestra, the depth of the hall. Each row of instruments is so clearly and believably portrayed that I feel I have full access to the performance. No other speakers I have come across have had such an amazing ability to convey the essence of the performance at low volume levels without my thinking that something was amiss. These speakers are something else. As I embark on my new hobby of making minimal, two-microphone, all-analog recordings, the Marten Design Dukes will no doubt become the ultimate location/post-production monitors. (Here's an idea for my friends at Marten Design: Why not offer the Dukes in a durable, hard-coat finish for that sort of work?)

According to designer Leif Oloffson, the drivers in the Dukes are the best and latest that Accuton has to offer. Adding the Velodyne DD-15 (see that review here), I get ruler-flat response to around 18Hz while maintaining all of the benefits that monitor loudspeakers have to offer. Add to that the fact that the Dukes offer built-in expandability by virtue of adding more monitors to create a surround-sound system, and what more could you desire? Danny Kaey

Duke

Retail: \$7000 a pair

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