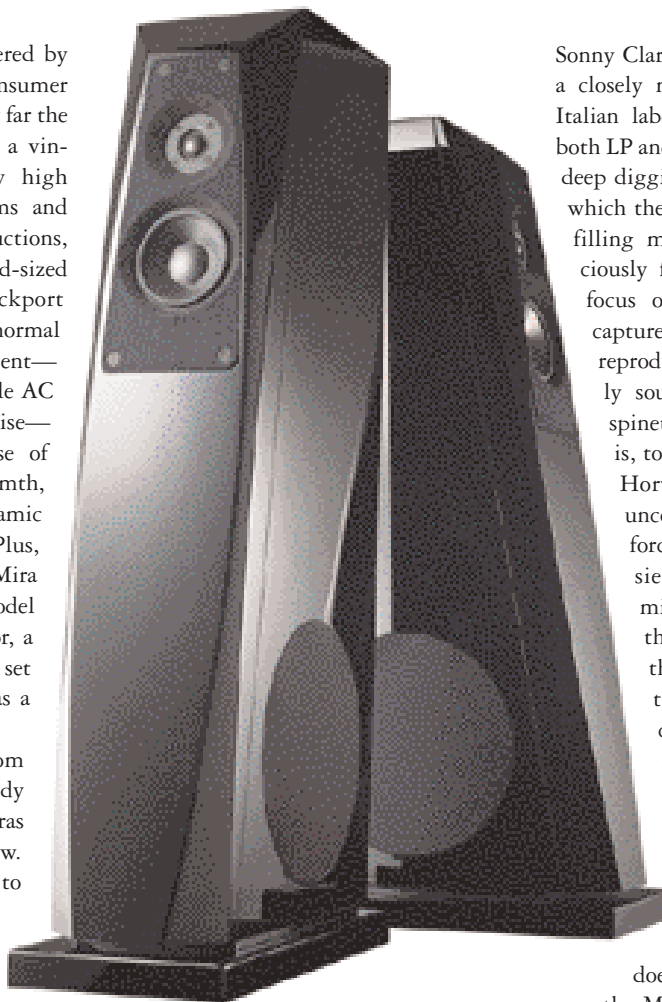


Rockport Technologies Mira Loudspeaker

Wayne Garcia

As you've probably gathered by now, last January's Consumer Electronics Show was by far the most exciting in many a vintage. Among the impressively high number of good-sounding rooms and intriguing new product introductions, one notable standout was the mid-sized floorstanding Mira from Rockport Technologies. Even within the normal limitations of a show environment—lousy room acoustics, questionable AC quality, high-levels of ambient noise—the Mira communicated a sense of musical “rightness,” a natural warmth, a fine sense of balance and dynamic ease that left me wanting more. Plus, while costly at \$13,500/pair, the Mira is the newest “entry-level” model from artisan designer Andy Payor, a guy whose flagship Hyperion will set you back about the same price as a Porsche 911 Turbo.

Shortly after returning from that Las Vegas trade show, Andy and I agreed to have a pair of Miras shipped to San Francisco for review. It took a while for the speakers to loosen up—they needed at least a week of non-stop playing before they shed their mechanical tightness—yet once they did and I'd fine-tuned the setup, I was struck again by how many things the Mira does well, and also by how beautifully it integrates these strengths into a complete-sounding whole. I will expand on these shortly, but what first deserves attention is a certain kind of energy that Andy Payor was shooting for and got with his newest design. Particularly because this energy lies in two frequency ranges where all but the finest speakers tend to fall short, and that is the midbass and lower treble. Considering



that Payor's wife is a piano player, and that Andy hears a live baby grand at home on a daily basis, it isn't surprising that these two frequency blocks would become something of a fixation for him. “I was shooting for a synergistic entity that conveys musical enthusiasm,” he would tell me later.

To get a feel for what Andy has achieved in these critical areas, I'll try to describe what I hear from a single and very well recorded jazz album—the

Sonny Clark Memorial Quartet's *Voodoo*, a closely mic'd studio affair from the Italian label Black Saint (available on both LP and CD). Although there's some deep digging bass work going on here, which the Mira reproduces beautifully, filling my room with waves of lusciously fat harmonics, I'm going to focus on this record's realistically captured piano and alto sax. While reproduced pianos all-too-frequently sound like granny's dusty old spinet, the Mira's way with them is, to me, revelatory. Here, Wayne Horvitz's grand projects an uncommon richness, intensity of force, and lightning fast transients—strikingly so in the midrange-to-lower registers—that is so physically present that you can virtually touch the instrument's keys, the felt-covered wooden hammers, metal strings, and curvaceous body. Indeed, I'm hard-pressed to name another speaker of this size and price that delivers the sheer physical presence of a piano the way the Mira does.¹ Equally noteworthy is the

way the Mira handles John Zorn's alto. The way horns project, when heard relatively close up, is so direct, and such a product of air blowing through their tubing (particularly the bell-like opening), that because most midranges and tweeters (and the tricky crossover regions they fall in) can't quite cope, what we normally get are horns that sound like cardboard cutouts instead of something like full-bodied instruments. But because the Mira's drivers (discussed below) launch these frequencies with less compression than we're used to

¹ Unsurpassed reproduction of grand piano is also something Jonathan Valin made special note of in his review of Rockport's top-of-the line Hyperion in Issue 136.

hearing, Zorn's sax cuts through the band like a siren through traffic, all the while maintaining its brassy, ringing bell tones, strangled squawks and howls.

The Mira's frequency extremes exhibit the same kind of uninhibited strength, making it one of the most dynamically balanced speakers of my experience. A solo violin, such as Nathan Milstein's [Bach Sonatas and Partitas, DG LP], displays great quickness and agility, as do instruments such as cymbals and the upper reaches of guitars. At the lower end, along with the rich harmonics described above, the speaker brings a matching energy to the bass region (I'd estimate that in my room the Mira reaches somewhere around a low-30Hz), be it acoustic or electric bass, the concert drum used in Stravinsky's *Petrushka* [Ansermet, Athena LP reissue], or Roy Haynes' kit on Analogue Productions fantastic-sounding 45RPM edition of *Tbelonious in Action*, which will raise the hair on the back of your neck. Check out his brief solo toward the conclusion of Monk's "Evidence." Even if you're lucky enough to hear live drums in an intimate environment (and it's hard to, given even the smallest venues' obsession with amplification), it's easy to forget just how staggeringly loud and visceral a drum set can be. In my small listening room, the Mira delivers that kind of thrilling percussive pressure to the torso.

Yet none of this energy and dynamic power is delivered at the expense of subtler pleasures: Milstein's Stradivarius displays beautiful harmonic layering, string tone, and agility with small dynamic shifts, while vocalists ranging from Sarah Vaughan [*In Hi-Fi*, Columbia LP] to Jeff Buckley [*Live at Sin-é*, Columbia CD], are reproduced with a natural balance, lack of cabinet coloration, and emotional expressiveness that makes the Mira a very engaging listen, and this remains true even at low playback levels.

Although the Mira does not have the extraordinary holography or quite the transparency of something like the Epiphany 6-6, neither does anything


else I've heard. The soundstage it presents certainly doesn't lack depth, though the sound in my room doesn't reach much beyond the speakers' outer edges. Imaging is very good, solid yet not laser-sharp, which is more true to life than super-fi. The Mira is also more user-friendly than the Epiphany, which is larger, less attractive, and pretty much a one-at-a-time experience.

While there's a lot of art in the Mira, there's clearly a lot of smart science, too. The 5.25" custom-designed midrange went through 23 different iterations before the final design, which uses a mineral-filled poly-cone with a sophisticated motor system built to Rockport's specs by Denmark's Audio Technology. This robust unit handles frequencies from 140Hz–2.5kHz and features something Andy calls "Symmetric Drive," which is said to reduce rise time by a factor of ten, resulting in greater linearity regardless of the cone's position. Moreover, "Symmetric Drive" is said to lower voice coil inductance, creating a more stable impedance and therefore simpler crossover topology, making the speaker easier to drive for high-impedance tube amps. The tweeter is a 1" Scan Speak driver, using the "Revelator" motor system. Andy chose this model for its low resonant frequency (1.5–2kHz) and ability to deliver the natural body of instruments. Woofers are 10" Danish-made Vivas.

As with the \$91,500 Hyperion, the Mira's 24dB-per-octave *acoustic slope* crossover is hand-built, and point-to-point wired with custom film/foil caps (made exclusively for Rockport), custom inductors, and Caddock resistors. All are spec'd at 1% tolerance, and the unit is epoxy-potted for mechanical stability as well as reduced microphonics. The Mira is internally wired with Transparent cable and connected via Cardas rhodium posts.

Unlike Rockport's top models, which are a built of a very costly carbon fiber, glass fiber, and epoxy composite, the Mira's Danish-made enclosure is pure MDF. The front baffle is 3"-thick and the walls are 1"-thick. Seven individual

braces lock the cabinet's panels together, while at the same time creating separate acoustic chambers for each driver. The side-firing woofer housing has a 2"-thick panel for the driver mounting surface and is rear-vented, says Andy, "with deeply radiused edges to prevent port turbulence." (Payor believes that a properly designed vented enclosure allows for both lower driver distortion and higher motor strength, and can couple to room boundaries as well as a sealed cabinets.) The front-driver baffle uses a laser-cut Steinway-felt insert to reduce reflections from the midrange and high-frequency drivers. Long-fiber wool is used to damp the midrange enclosure, and a mixture of anechoic wedge foam and polyster is found in the bass cabinet. Finally, the enclosure is finished in high-gloss piano-black polyester, an eleven-step process performed by the same European company that finishes Steinway grands—ah, that piano thing again.

At the end of one of our talks, Andy confessed to me that the Mira's sound actually exceeds his expectations for the design. Given how high I know these were, it's no wonder that the Mira turned out so well. 

SPECIFICATIONS

Floorstanding, 3-way vented loudspeaker
 Driver complement: 1.1" soft-dome tweeter,
 5.25" mid/bass driver, 10" side-firing
 woofer
 Frequency response: 30Hz–20kHz
 Sensitivity: 88dB
 Impedance: 4 ohms
 Recommended amplifier power: 50 watts
 minimum
 Dimensions: 10.25" x 44.75" x 19.5"
 Weight: 115 lbs. each

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Please see list on page 64.

MANUFACTURER INFORMATION ROCKPORT TECHNOLOGIES

229 Mill Street
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 Price: \$13,500/pair