

Bookshelf Speakers III: Gershman X-1 Loudspeaker

Parts I & II appeared in Issue 119 and 120.

The Gershman X-1 stalks perilously close to the no-longer-small speaker line. A mini-monitor from the front, there is not only heft but depth as well in this truncated pyramid, enabling these Canadians to appear smaller head-on than from aside. The finish on my box is mahogany-stained oak. (It is also available unfinished for those who insist on teal or dusty rose, the better to match the living quarters.) The X-1 is a rear-ported design with hefty bi-wire posts, a dome tweeter and, by the looks of the articles in operation, a relatively loosely damped six-inch woofer.¹

Unlike larger speakers, two-way bookshelf speakers, I believe, actually sound more alike than different, and the Gershmans do not break this mold – from the midrange on up. Their chief virtue is a specificity of image and a credible, if shrunken, soundstage. On Iris DeMent's "Shores of Jordan" [*My Life*, Warner 45493, CD], all vocalists appear together, near center, manifest but smaller than life. Extending the area between the speakers ameliorates this tendency, but does not overcome the predilection for constricted instruments or voices.

Even at more expansive distance, though, center fill is no problem, as it tends not to be for speakers of this nature. Mohr and Layton's terrific production on RCA's *Song of India* LP [LSC-2320] exhibits a terrific depth and an effortless fill between speakers, whether driven by manly amps or the small integrated. Take that album's version of Leroy Anderson's "The Typewriter," a cute percussion number: Tympani are precisely placed in their duet with strings, and there is excellent depth and distinction between violins on the listener's left and the rest of the strings on the right.

The tweeter is made by Vifa, and the high frequencies, especially in the presence range, constitute the greatest strength of the X-1. Van Morrison's "Madame Joy" [*The Philosopher's Stone*, Polygram 31453 1789, CD], a recently released vocal originally recorded in 1973, the heyday of Warner Brothers' "green label" pop work, serves as example. Morrison's recordings in general display great presence, and here is yet another example, gloriously revealed by the small Gershmans.

This sense of detail is also apparent in Martinon and London's reading of Dvořák's *Slavonic Dances* [RCA/Classic LSC-2419], on which we find a finely detailed triangle on *Dance No. 3*, in addition to the

abovementioned sense of depth and even, if one attends closely, the flurry of page-turning. (Oh, we audiophiles are deranged.)

But not all is joy. The Dvořák also highlights the chameleonic bass of the Gershmans. In *Dance No. 4*, they track the bass dynamic well, but there is very little of the last two octaves at all. In *Dance No. 3*, the coda is weightless, hinting at a sort of opalescent tone – not really a whiteness or yang, but rather a pearly, swirly coloring, especially on any music whose foundation is in the lower octaves.

This feeling is true in pop music as well. Steve Earle's "Tom Ames' Prayer," from his sensational *Train a-Comin'* CD [Winter Harvest 3302], also elaborates on the concerns the Gershmans elicit: an excellent sense of the room (one of the best features of the recording), undermined by somewhat constricted depth as Roy Huskey's mammoth acoustic bass enters and taxes the woofers beyond their limited means. On Norman Blake's solo guitar number from the Earle album, the Gershmans nail the dynamic. But as soon as there is bass again, the balance shifts and the X-1's woofer is outclassed.

Another excellent recording, the title cut from Hank Mobley's *Workout* [Blue Note 84060, LP] yields yet more evidence for our theory. Philly Joe's cymbals are clear, but there is no concussion to the drums. Mobley's lines burn with passion, but Paul Chambers' bass notes cross from merely perceptible to achieving some limited impact. At a certain point, suddenly there is bass, but on this recording it has a one-note quality and never fulfills any serious interest beyond the technical.


My concerns over the bass were not mitigated, no matter where I placed the speakers. Initially fretful that the bass was simply under-emphasized, I men-

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

VPI Aries turntable with VPI Synchronous Drive System, VPI JMW pick-up arm, Grado Reference Platinum and Benz Glider phono cartridges, Micromega Drive 1 CD transport, Analog Research Segue D/A converter, Audible Illusions Modulus 3A preamplifier, Proceed Amp 2 and Quicksilver Silver Mono amplifiers, Synergistic and AudioQuest cabling.

¹ This woofer – which Gershman tells me goes to 40 Hz – is designed by Gershman especially for the X-1; it is shielded. – SR

tioned it to Ofra Gershman when she called. She suggested removing the binding post panel, and “disconnecting the blue wire” [in the crossover innards]. This sounded like an outright modification of the speaker, and so at Scot Markwell’s insistence, I requested an explanation for what that would do. Gershman’s official explanation, faxed to me, said this, verbatim: “One of the capacitors on the x-over that allows the high frequency to travel through the components is being disconnected therefore reducing the high frequencies. This creates a balance which favors the bass.” Given especially my favorable impression of the high frequencies and the apparent dulling of the highs (as predicted), I decided in the end to leave well enough alone and evaluate the speakers as they were shipped to me. Nonetheless, when my concerns were again conveyed to her, Gershman said that all she meant to say was that I should flip the switch on the crossover, which would bypass a capacitor therein. (The only problem with this suggestion is the crossover switch, a feature built into Gershman’s larger speakers, but not, most assuredly, into the smaller X-1).

In either case, after experimenting much with placement, I simply could not get reliably accurate bass from these speakers in either of my listening spaces. I tried them in a small space and a larger one, against short walls and long, close to the wall, and several feet in front of it. This is not to say that in other spaces they might not clear up this issue, or that the speakers were not in many ways satisfying. The X-1s are well balanced above the bottom two octaves, and are not what one would call “up-tilted.” There is a terrific sense of space and on small-scale acoustic recordings, the Gershmans truly shine. But for those who are looking for full-scale wallop² – and there are indeed some bookshelf speakers very near the price that provide a credible sense of that – I can’t help feeling that the Gershmans are bettered by other designs. 

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Manufacturer’s Response

We would like to thank Neil Gader for his view of the Gershman X-1 mini-monitors.

When we set out to design the X-1, we did not wish to build just another small two-way loudspeaker. Using technology from our state-of-the-art loudspeaker, the Avant Garde RX-20 and the CA-P 520-X, we set out to build a truly extraordinary loudspeaker that offered stunning sonic performance and unparalleled value. Another important factor was the ability of the X-1 to be modular, for audiophiles who would like to start with a limited budget and upgrade in the future (without losing money on the upgrade). Gershman offers the SW-1 subwoofers. These passive units are designed especially to integrate with the X-1. The SW-1

extends the low frequency response of the system to 20 Hz. Owing to the time alignment achieved with the design of the SW-1, imaging is also enhanced, giving musical instruments a solidity that is almost palpable.

The X-1 frequency response is 40 Hz – 20 kHz and very simple to set up in a room to “comfortably drive material into the meat of the 40-cycle frequency region.” (Neil Gader)

These are just a few of the many wonderful comments we are receiving from experienced reviewers as well as satisfied customers: “offering steadfast imaging, well refined high and midrange data and surprisingly robust bass. . . . Gershman’s knack to conjure a soundstage comparable to designs at twice the price.”[sic] *Inner Ear Report*

“The X-1 is a splendid product with sonic performance that will appeal to audiophile[s] looking for exceptionally well-balanced performance suitable for a wide variety of music.” *Soundstage*

“Simply outstanding!!! I had understood that the X-1[s] were capable of conveying music; upon hearing them I was convinced of their musicality. As an added bonus, I feel that they are an incredible bargain in comparison to the rest.” M. C. Carroll

OFRA GERSHMAN
DIRECTOR OF MARKETING

Neil Gader Comments

I find myself pretty much in agreement with PB on the strengths of the X-1; to a lesser degree on its shortcomings. Construction is quite sturdy, the lack of parallel side panels probably contributing to its non-boxy character. It’s an attractive if slightly beefy compact with solid imaging and soundstaging and good overall balance from the mids on up. Dynamic and transient behavior in this region is also quite good. Treble response is smooth and fairly flat, with a residue of treble constriction that is forgivable at this price. As stated, the presence range is rich, allowing vocals to step forward a bit.

The difficulty PB encountered in the lower two octaves is somewhat similar to my experience, but to these ears, the X-1 has a particular tuning in the mid-bass that allowed it – in my room – to comfortably drive material into the meat of the 40-cycle frequency region. This also proved to make it compatible with movie soundtracks that pump a lot of ill-defined special effects into this octave. The problem I had was not the X-1’s ultimate extension, which was well within the average for loudspeakers of this dimension and cost, but the lack of frequency-response linearity from the X-1’s lowest extension into the upper bass and perhaps a bit higher. The net result was an unpredictability in the bass that has the speaker sounding weighty and in full bloom during portions of “Dance of the Tumblers” [*Tutti*, Reference Recordings HDCCD] and conversely a bit undernourished on the boozy, deep baritone of Tom Waits from his recent *Mule Variations*. Then the bass line is once again extended and resonant with Holly Cole’s cover of “Jersey Girl.” The result is that depending on the low-frequency material, the speaker’s tonal character shifts slightly. Given the strengths, which PB cogently enumerates, I suggest that listeners assess their own biases and audition these speakers thoroughly.

² Gershman offers a subwoofer SW-1, designed specifically for the X-1, that can bypass the lower frequencies of the X-1 and extend the bass to 20 Hz. The X-1 sits on the SW-1, and makes a compact unit. The sub module costs \$1,800 per pair. – SR