



Gershman Acoustics Black Swan Loudspeaker

- [REVIEW](#)

- by [Tony Cordesman](#)

A pair of speakers has to be more than god. It has to be exceptional. The Gershman Black Swans meet this standard, not only to my ears but also to those of some other very demanding critics. As an audio reviewer, you can't raise three children to adulthood without raising three highend cynics. I've ended up with three kids who have no concern for hype and no tolerance for "subtle sonic differences" that don't actually enhance the musical experience.

What is really striking about the Gershman Black Swans, therefore, is that they proved to be as much of a "music magnet" for my three cynics as they were for me. Each quickly ended up praising the Blacks Swans, and each went back to listen to his or her own music at length— perhaps the finest compliment to any speaker that I can think of.

I found myself as caught up in the Black Swan as they did, and I have biases of my own. Even in the best of times, I don't get involved in a speaker all that easily. When I listen to recorded music, I want a speaker that gets as close to what I hear from live music as possible, and with a wide range of recordings, not just those that meet high-end standards for recording and production values. I focus almost exclusively on acoustic music that could actually fit in a large home—not a concert hall. I prefer my symphonies and operas live; sonic spectaculars and specialist audio recordings are at most about five percent of my listening, and I almost never listen to music involving electronic instruments. I'm not a fan of socalled audiophile recordings—too much upper-octave energy, musical detail you'll never hear live, imaging that is too threedimensional to be realistic, and boring or overblown performances of third-rate music. I am not an "information" junky— I want my music to have the warmth it has in a live performance, with natural detail, not a distorted mess designed to show off the recording.

I say all of this because the Black Swan truly is an exceptional path to enjoying music, not a glorified toy for detail freaks. It gets the best out of all recordings, rather than being tuned to the "high-end" ear. One key indication is its ability to accurately reproduce Bach, Vivaldi, and Telemann played with period instruments. Far too many highend speakers are voiced too brightly for the period strings, brass, and woodwinds. Bach becomes tiring rather than inventive and complex. Listening fatigue sets in with Baroque music, often compounded by the impact of close-miking and overbright recordings. Instrumental details and differences are disguised, particularly in the

midrange and lower midrange. Several hundred years of music becomes analytical, rather than impassioned.

In contrast, the Black Swans rivaled the realism of my far more expensive TAD-1s. They brought these kinds of classical recordings convincingly to life. Strings, woodwinds, brass, and piano were not only “right” in terms of timbre, but detail was exceptional where the recording actually provided it, and not in terms of exaggerated upper-midrange and treble energy. Imaging was as natural as the recordings permitted, without being etched or exaggeratedly wide. Depth is as important as width, and the far-too-wide soundstage that many modern audiophiles seem to want from every recording was only audible when it was actually on the recording.

If you're in a jazz mode, the Black Swans are equally excellent. To date myself in jazz as firmly as I have in classical music, I still relax to groups like the Modern Jazz Quartet, though the Black Swans do equally well with the best modern recordings, too. Pick a good AIX or Chesky jazz disc, or any other state-of-the-art recording you like, and the Black Swans will show them off to their best without losing the soul of the music.

I could not fault them on any type of voice, and I was particularly impressed with their performance in what I call the “Judy Collins test.” Many of her recordings are close-miked, and have exceptionally loud aspirants. After a few tracks, many speakers began to sound hard and sometimes annoying. This is almost always a warning that the same speaker will have trouble with demanding soprano voice and demanding female jazz singers, as well as pushy female pop singers who tend to swallow their microphones. The Black Swans get voices right.



Much of this superior performance is clearly due to the unique design of the Black Swan, which also helps explain their cost. Virtually all modern speaker designers emphasize the enclosure and controlling its vibrations. Eli Gershman, architect of the Black Swan, has taken these efforts to a new level.

The Black Swans are constructed as two entirely separate enclosures, with one placed above the other in such a manner that the treble and midrange enclosure rests just above the bass enclosure beneath it without actually touching it. The woofer enclosure is a remarkably solid unit placed on metal cones. An A-shaped midrange and treble enclosure is suspended above and straddles the woofer cabinet. Both cabinets are made with two 2"-thick layers of MDF to further reduce resonances. An external silver connecting cable joins the top enclosure to the bass unit.

The use of two separate enclosures is intended to do more than deal with the problem of enclosure vibrations and the attendant colorations added to the sound of the midrange and treble; the sub enclosure can be moved by a couple of inches to fine-tune time alignment with the mid and high-frequency drivers. While the use of two enclosures may sound awkward, it makes the speaker easier to ship and set up (not a minor issue with enclosures this heavy), and once setup is complete the speaker appears to be a single cabinet. The end result is a speaker styled in a way that is both distinctive and relatively compact. Each loudspeaker is finished on all sides in a high-gloss piano lacquer finish. (The standard finish is black, but the Swans can be ordered in any color.)



I should also make it clear that this is not simply a speaker for those who love chamber music or acoustic jazz. I did listen to all of the usual horrible sonic spectacles, “power” symphonic music, and full-blown (or blowhard) Wagner. The dynamics rank with the best, and I was a little stunned by the quality of bass performance. First, the Black Swans were easier to set up and place than

virtually any speaker I've reviewed in several years. I can't promise you how transferable my experience is, but their deep bass performance locked in almost immediately. I was also able to set up the Black Swans for best imaging as well as treble and midrange performance with minimal trade-offs to bass response.

The low bass was exceptionally deep, even with a friend's test recordings of the deepest organ music. Overall the bass was exceptionally flat and revealed the differences between the low, mid, and upper bass with no audible peaks or suck outs, and an exceptionally seamless transition to the midrange. Bass viol, percussion, and grand piano were truly musical and balanced, and my children assured me this was equally true of bass guitar and synthesizer.

Though the Black Swans can vibrate your furniture before they have problems with bass dynamics, I don't want to exaggerate this aspect of their performance. They are not designed to blast you out of the room with bass energy. However, no sane listener trying to avoid hearing loss is going to push the bass or overall dynamic envelope this far. If you want any listening level you can hear in live music, and you want to grow old with functioning ears, the Black Swan meets every practical test.

Quite frankly, this quality of bass performance surprised me, as did the quality of midrange and treble detail and air. Putting cabinet designs aside, I've always had a bias towards exotic drivers. My TAD-1s use an integrated Beryllium midrange and tweeter driver, and I've had several past love affairs with ribbons and electrostatics. The Black Swans are far more conventional. The top enclosure holds a 1" dome tweeter and a 6" midrange driver made by Scanspeak. The bass enclosure accommodates a single 12" Peerless woofer. These are "conventional" drivers, but they don't sound conventional. Perhaps part of the reason is that the crossover is superbly made. It uses matched, tight-tolerance capacitors and polypropylene caps wired point-to-point with silver cable throughout. Crossover occurs at 150Hz and 2kHz with third- and second-order slopes.

As for system compatibility, the Black Swans were relatively cable-indifferent, although in this case I got the most musically natural results with Kimber Kable Select speaker cable. The Black Swans are rated at a system sensitivity of 89dB with a nominal impedance of 6 ohms. This is not particularly low sensitivity, and the Black Swans are not particularly demanding. They will work with vacuum-tube amplifiers, but they really come alive with a high-powered transistor amp with good current capability and damping.

I don't regard these caveats as a limitation. No full-range speaker I know of, other than a horn, can really do its best in the deep bass without a lot of power and damping. The Swans also offer the plus that they do not need any artificial warmth from the amplifier. You may be surprised to hear how good your transistor amp really is with the Black Swans. Their musically natural timbre and excellent upper-bass and lower-midrange performance show up the shortfalls of most competing designs.

All in all, the Black Swans are one of those few speakers really worth a long trip to audition and whose high price is matched by real-world musical sound quality. TAS