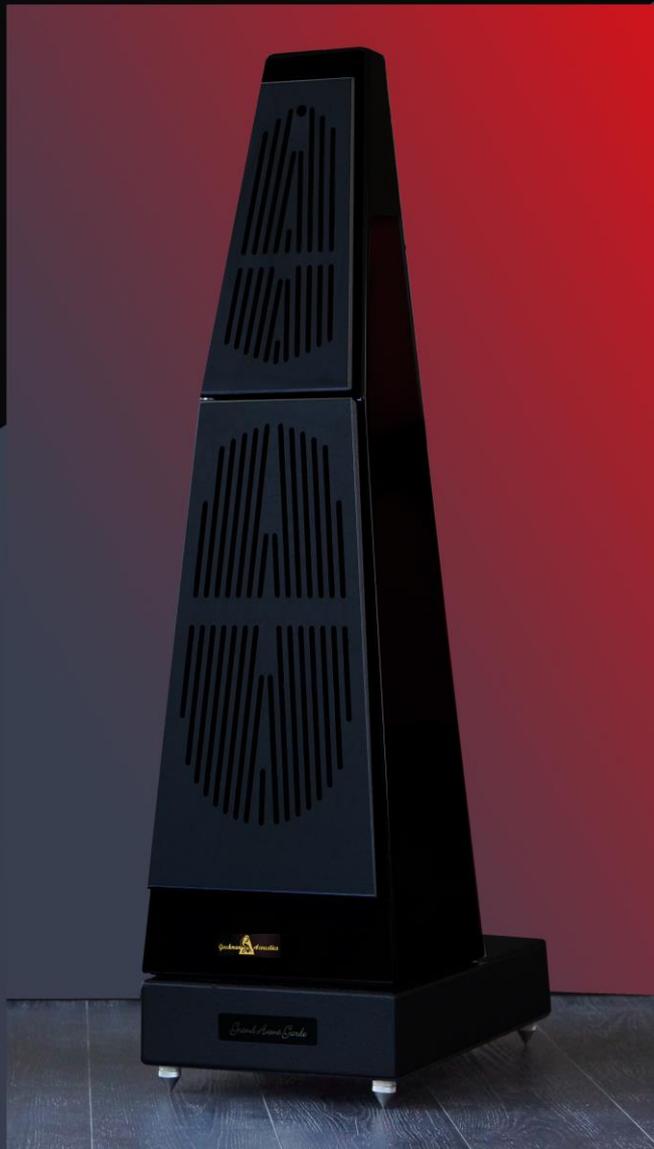




Better in every way!



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...these Gershmans bring living, breathing performers to your room, with body, presence and a natural ability to engage and entertain" ...

Roy Gregory Hi Fi + Issue 186

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Gershman Acoustics Grande Avant Garde Loudspeaker

Hi Fi + issue 187

By Roy Gregory



**“Gershmans bring living, breathing performers to your room, with body, presence and a natural ability to engage and entertain...
... they perform beyond price and beyond expectations”**

Gershman speakers don't look like other loudspeakers – but surprisingly often, **other loudspeakers come to look like the Greshmans**. Estalon's striking XB caused a stir when it was first launched a few years ago – but followed firmly in the footsteps of the Gershman GAP-828, already an established model when it was reviewed way back in Issue 44. Likewise, at first glance, many people will mistake Gershman's Grande Avant Garde for Wilson's Sabrina – even though the original Avant Garde (*sans* base – which makes it look even more like the Sabrina) predated the Wilson model by almost

two decades. It would be a mistake to read too much into these aesthetic coincidences, but they do illustrate something of the Gershmans' individualistic and innovative streak. The company's speakers break more than just aesthetic moulds – and have done so for years – with conspicuous musical success, success that has imbued them with long working lives and eventual acceptance (and even adoption) of their 'different' cabinet shapes and appearance.

These days, the Avant Garde's tapered, truncated cabinet and sloping baffle looks almost familiar, so widely has it been imitated. It's tempting to surmise that the distinctive oblong base added to create the Grande Avant Garde was a response to this general acceptance of the speaker's looks, but in fact it simply illustrates another essential aspect of the Gershman credo, an attitude that might best be describes as, “Never stop experimenting”. Even so, this developmental imperative has always been harnessed to a stable core philosophy; for all their distinctive looks, acoustically and electrically, the different **Gershman speakers share common and consistent DNA. What defines a Gershman? Extended low frequencies at the expense of overall efficiency and an extremely low system signature. As wildly different as they might look, one to another, all Gershman speakers have two things in common – inherent musicality underpinned by surprisingly deep bass.** The Grande Avant Garde (or GAG) reviewed here stands a little under a metre tall (plus cones or feet) but its tapered cabinet appears smaller and less intrusive than that. The bottom of the cabinet proper is roughly 300mm square, the oblong base extending back behind it to almost twice that depth. Its form factor is neat and discrete – yet the specs quote a -3dB point of 22Hz and 89dB sensitivity. It's the sort of number that has you assuming that the small enclosure contains a heavily equalised, active bass unit – probably pointing downwards. But actually, the GAG is an entirely passive design, its prodigious and clearly audible low-frequency prowess the result of clever acoustic design.

The driver line up in the GAG looks pretty standard, consisting of a 25mm Peerless soft-dome tweeter, a 90mm Audax carbon-fibre coned mid-range and a proprietary, 180mm aluminium bass unit. What's not obvious is that the bass-driver is a Gershman-designed, dual voice-coil unit, making this a three-and-a-half-way speaker. The tapered main cabinets, with their divided, sharply sloping baffles arrive packed separately from the oblong bases. Their bottoms feature heavily rebated shoulders and these sit into a square opening in the top of the base, the junction sealed and decoupled by a neoprene gasket. Stability is aided by a large, circular weight set into the cabinet's underside that also helps create a distributed vent between it and the air volume enclosed by the base element. Gershman describe this arrangement as the BCT (Back-wave Control Technology) and as the name suggests, along with the resistive line in the main bass enclosure, it is designed to trick the bass units into 'seeing' a larger volume than is actually there. The combination of tuned venting and the interior matrix constructed within the oblong base helps create a pressure differential between the main cabinet and the base. That draws the back-wave energy into the acoustically and mechanically separate base element where it is dissipated, reducing both intermodulation distortion and re-radiation through the cone.

Despite the not insignificant 40kg weight, the GAG is easily handled and assembled, not least because of its two-part structure. I have only two practical complaints. The most serious is that the ball-bearing tipped Delrin cones supplied lacked long enough threads to allow for proper adjustment, or locking nuts for proper stability. Instead I used Track Audio feet, which raised the speakers by a couple of cms (necessitating a small forward rake to compensate) but made levelling and angular adjustment simplicity itself. Longer threads and locking collars on the original cones would have solved this and would be well-worth Gershman instituting (spikes and lock-nuts are already an option) as height off the floor and attitude are crucial to the speaker's performance. My second observation (complaint is too strong a term) concerns the supplied grilles. These are magnetically attached, slatted MDF and the best thing that can be said about them is that they are easily removed. In place and to my eyes at least, they rob the speaker of its unobtrusive elegance as well as impairing transparency, focus and immediacy. Despite their robust nature, I'm not sure they even provide that much protection; isn't a partially obscured driver, peeking through the slots even more fascinating to the enquiring juvenile mind? I listened to the speakers with them; I listened to the speakers without them; I consigned them to the packaging where they remained for the duration.

Set up was completely straightforward, the bass being deep enough and clean enough to let you clearly hear the impact of any positional shifts.

With the speakers positioned slightly closer together than normal but with minimal toe-in, I drove them with the Levinson 585, the VTL S-200 or the CH Precision A1.5, all you'll note, capable of delivering a healthy 200W/Ch. That really is the one proviso to a happy, long-term relationship with the GAGs. They like power and lots of it, but provided that you feed them their preferred diet they'll respond with some serious musical gusto. Unusually for these

days, the speaker is also bi-wirable. That means including a set of decent jumpers in your cable budget, although it does allow for bi-amping, which given the Gershman's bandwidth and modest sensitivity, could be an attractive option.

I opened the original GAP-828 review with the comment that, **“If hi-fi should be about music rather than the system delivering it then these Gershmans are a great place to start...”** It's a sentence that can simply be recycled for this review, over 10-years later, the GAGs exhibiting exactly the same natural warmth, musical presence and easy, unforced dynamics that have come to characterise the brand. In that, the Grande Avant Gardes are (almost literally, given their shape) a real chip off the old block. But that doesn't really help if you've never heard their other speakers and nor does it explain how, or how successfully, those qualities have been translated into such a compact and domestically friendly design.

Listen to familiar recordings – pretty much regardless of genre – and you should immediately notice how the music steps away from the speakers. Despite their small size, the GAGs throw a huge acoustic space that extends out beyond, behind and well above the speakers. **Voices are set at a natural height and the speakers seem to unearth a soundstage from within the most unpromising of recordings.** Not since the Audio Physic Virgo have I heard a speaker that makes everything image, but this Gershman gets close and, in many ways does it less spectacularly but more convincingly. Modern studio mixes, like Michael Kiwanuka's *Love And Hate* (Polydor 4783458) or Vampire Weekend's *Father Of The Bride* (Columbia 19075930141) take on an open, **dimensional quality, with natural spatial separation of voices and instruments, layers and overdubs. Indeed, voices are one of the GAG's party pieces,** whether it's unearthing meaning from Steve Earle's slurred lyrics, or the realisation, courtesy of Vampire Weekend's 'We Belong Together' that Danielle Haim really can sing.

But to achieve these results, you are going to have to be prepared to use the volume control. It's not that the GAGs need to be played loud, but in common with many moderately efficient speakers, you'll find that each album has a precisely preferred volume level. Too quiet and they sound overly warm and shut in, too loud and they (or the system) start(s) to flatten and congeal. But get it right and **the sound blossoms, growing away from the speakers to spread beyond them and fill the end of the room and, if the recording supports it, pushing out the back wall. Voices breathe, instruments fall into place and the sense of the song and the sense of performance lock in.** Get the system and the set-up right and these **Gershmans bring living, breathing performers to your room, with body, presence and a natural ability to engage and entertain.** It's only when you really start to analyse the sound that you realise just how uncannily natural it is. Playing the Sayaka Shoji/Gianluca Cascioli recording of the Complete *Beethoven Sonatas for Violin and Piano* (UHQCD/DGG UCCG 90824/7) the relative scale of the instruments is beautifully captured, the weight and body of the piano, as its phrases flit from playful to authoritarian, the body and intensity of Shoji's

Strad. And that's when it dawns on you; it really is Shoji's Strad – from its concentrated tonality to her powerful technique, this is an instrument and its voice that are remarkably reminiscent of her live performance. Not just that, the Gershmans get the height just right. Shoji's seriously petite. The first time I saw her I assumed that she was playing barefoot – only to discover that she was perched on five-inch heels. And she still looked like a schoolgirl – which made that massive musical power and the sheer authority in her playing all the more arresting. Listening with the GAGs, the speakers project all of that power and musical intensity and do it from an instrument placed just where it should be – left of the piano and lower than you'd expect. Getting those voices at the right height was clearly no accident...

This sense of natural perspective, combined with the weight, body and presence that come with extension into the low 20s and 200 watts doing the driving is the essence of Gershman DNA. It also defines the speakers overall balance and presentation. That feeling of warmth and substance translates to what has euphemistically become known as a 'mid-hall' balance and that too is reflected in the perspective. The GAGs display none of the shut-in character that bedevils some other traditional soft-dome 'hold outs', but they do lack a bit of top-end bite, texture. So listening to the Shoji Beethoven Sonatas, you are not doing it from the front row, but several rows back. Likewise, familiar recordings like Natalie Merchant's *Tiger Lily* (Mo-Fi MFSL 2-45008) present a holistic and slightly distant performance, lacking some of the separation and stark immediacy that comes with higher-end pretensions. Is that a bad thing? In no way: in fact, in many cases it's the complete opposite, bringing a welcome sense of coherence and musical integrity to proceedings. Barbirolli's legendary *Enigma...* with the Philharmonia (UHQCD/EMI UCCG 28019) presents an impressively coherent soundstage and sense of acoustic space, to go with its natural string tone and lively orchestration, the different instruments all bound into a single purposeful whole by their almost physical relationship. ..

The Peerless tweeter is certainly sweet enough, but with a stated -3dB point at 22kHz, there's no escaping the fact that a little more extension would help with focus and transparency. I can absolutely understand Gershman's reluctance to trade in the tweeter's considerable virtues in search of sonic (as opposed to musical) gains, but as a purchaser, you need to appreciate that it's a decision that you also are buying into.

By now it should be pretty obvious that the **Grande Avant Gardes do big, do bass and do imaging. They also do natural and naturally expressive. It's a particularly impressive overall performance and balance of virtues.** It ain't hard to get big bass out of modest boxes – if you are prepared to accept a crippling electrical load, low efficiency and the sort of constipated dynamics that result in a total failure to emote. The fact that the modestly proportioned GAGs achieve the scale and bandwidth that they do, while neatly side-stepping the practical and musical pitfalls that so often result is testimony to the efficacy of their chosen solution(s). The explanation offered for the operation of the separate bass enclosure is either disarmingly or disingenuously simple – but there's no ignoring the speakers' low frequency performance. Likewise, the small, non-parallel and heavily braced cabinet

panels suggest a low-storage enclosure, its reluctance to contribute to the sound or interfere with the music ample recompense for the cost and complexity of construction. Building a two-part cabinet this shape is never going to be cheap or easy, but in the end the results justify the means, results that certainly stand out from the crowd. Just listen to a pianist shape a phrase, accelerating through it or pausing for affect and the absence of slurring, lag or hesitation in the notes tells its own story. This is one speaker system where the music doesn't have to drag the cabinet with it. Instead, performances proceed at their player's pace, fast or, just as importantly, slow. Unlike a speaker or amp that leans on the leading edge to add pace to proceedings, the Gershmans allow notes freedom of passage, without editing, cropping or giving them a push. This lightness of touch is especially apparent in slow movements, with poise, grace, delicacy and pathos all equally part of the GAGs musical vocabulary. **They deliver the full emotional range, whether its expressed reflectively or explosively – and they transition from one to the other with an enthusiastic fluidity that makes most other speakers at this price level sound stilted and constricted.** It's a sure indication that as a design, they are sorted, both electrically and acoustically/mechanically.

If you have tired of hi-fi hyperbole and audio's obsession with ultra-resolution, the Gershman speakers are (and always have been) the perfect anti-dote. Never less than engaging, they wrap you and your recordings in the warm substance of their musical embrace, celebrating the sense and the whole rather than the specific (and the all too often disjointed) parts. Great music comes from musicians working in harmony, the whole greater than the sum of the parts. The Gershman Grande Avant Gardes have that happy knack of preserving both those parts and the relationship between them. **It's the very essence of high-fidelity – and it's a rare draft.** Not without their flaws or challenges, the GAGs demand care and understanding – and a serious dose of serious power. But the combination of musical quality and unobtrusive domesticity places them in an extremely select group, right alongside the taller, similarly demanding and not quite as wide-bandwidth Vienna Acoustics Liszt. Like the Liszt, they **perform beyond price and beyond expectations.** Compared to your average big-brand box, the Gershman Grande Avant Gardes do something quite different, are doing it differently, and **doing it really well.** In this instance, it's very much a case of *Vive la difference...*

Technical Panel:

Type:	Three and a half way dynamic loudspeaker
Loading:	BCT composite enclosure with resistive venting
Driver Complement:	1x 25mm soft-dome hf 1x 90mm carbon-fibre mf 1x 180mm dual-coil aluminium lf
Bandwidth:	22Hz to 20kHz
Sensitivity:	89dB