

SA Equipment

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Penaudio Serenade
Making a statement... quietly.
Review By Rick Jensen
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Sometimes great things come in small packages. Or medium-sized packages, as in the case of the Penaudio Serenade speaker system, currently the flagship product of the Finnish manufacturer. That the Serenades would not be a behemoth is no surprise to anyone who has encountered Penaudio products before. The company, which started operations in 1999, has only a few finely crafted products: two small monitors, one bass unit to pair with either of the preceding, and two floorstanders, one of which is brand new. Each of the speakers is modestly sized and very attractively designed to fit into almost any imaginable listening space. Remember that European houses and apartments tend to be much smaller than the castles in which many Americans live: the Penaudio products have sold very well in Europe and especially in Japan, where space is at an even greater premium.



Indeed, the Penaudio web site captures designer and president Sami Penttila's feelings about statement (or any other) speakers without mincing words: "He envisioned speakers that engaged the listener as they disappeared... speakers that were elegant and not mammoth wooden monsters defying common sense and making room interaction an impossible task." Now I have to confess that there is a little piece of me that is still very impressed by mammoth wooden monsters. If I only had the house for it, I would love to have everyone I know bow down before some magnificent speaker that required three body builders to deliver. Happily for me and my family, neither the means nor the real motivation is there to allow me to indulge that delusion. And to be clear – there are some terrific and very large systems out there that impress by their sound even more than by their size. Most of us have no use for them.

A brief digression: I have learned the hard way that the integration of the audio system into the flow of the home is essential. Perhaps like many audiophiles, I dreamed of a dedicated listening room. My mantra was "don't compromise the living room with the stereo and don't compromise the stereo with the living room." It made sense: optimize the room for the best possible sound without worrying too much about the decor. So I did, albeit with a small and less-than-ideal room. And it has been a failure. Why? Because by placing music in its own little corner, I actually hear less of it and it is less a part of daily life. Certainly, there are many audiophiles and music lovers (is that redundant?) who might not have had that reaction, but it has been my experience.

Granted, many audiophiles would say, "well, put a second, more modest but still high-quality system in your living area. But not everyone wants to do that or has the space to do that. And getting the equipment out of the living area was one of the objectives up front. So one finds oneself in the arena where Penaudio excels. If it seems as though I am making too much of this, we need only to think of the vast majority of people who think that the ideal is to have small Bose satellites hidden around the room. Among them there are likely many who could be persuaded to have a slim, elegant, and finely crafted speaker like the Serenades if they got beautiful music in return.



The Serenades measure 44.5" high by 6" wide by 11" deep (1130mm by 150mm by 285mm). Like many similarly slim speakers, that narrow profile allows them to disappear in the room both physically and sonically. It is a three-way system. Two units – the 1" fabric-dome tweeter and a 4.5" paper midrange are situated right up at the top. The woofer, like that in Penaudio's Chara woofer, is side-firing. The Serenade driver, though, is a larger 8.5" aluminum unit and allows for considerably deeper bass than that of the Chara.

Note that I had [reviewed the Chara/Charisma](#) "sub-sat" system earlier for *Enjoy the Music.com*[®] and some of my comments make reference to my listening impressions from a great deal of time spent with that system. Penaudio knew that they needed a 3-way floorstanding speaker to complete their line and in the development of the speaker

Sami Penttila came across a new tweeter that was the best he had ever heard. It overwhelmed the woofer from the Chara. By taking the driver from the original Charm subwoofer, increasing the cabinet size (the woofer enclosure is 30 percent larger than the Chara's), improving the crossover, and chanting under a full moon, Sami was able to get both a match in the sound and a seamless transition.

The cabinet, by the way, is both beautifully finished and clean-looking in the Penaudio style. It has two compartments separated by a diagonal brace and the wall between the midrange and the woofer. Both compartments are ported.

The bases look simple and attractive but are deceptively complex. According to the importer, Val Kratzman, they were "designed to give the speaker a sense of air or floating while isolating the cabinet. The first layer seals the bottom of the speaker. It is smaller than the actual footprint of the speaker. Beneath this are two more larger plates that are separate with rubber/nylon spacers. The bottom layer supports the cones." From the perspective of the listener, none of this is very visible; the speaker looks in balance as much as it sounds in balance.



Cables

Penaudio has used Alpha-Core wiring for all the inductors and internal wiring in their speakers for quite some time and so one would expect that the same speaker cables would work well with the Serenades. That was indeed my experience: I have used Goertz AG-3 cables for years. Their ever-so-slightly-sweet sound beautifully complements the overall neutral character and extended highs of the Serenades. However, I also had the opportunity to experiment with a few other cables over the course of my listening, including Kimber Select, Audience Au24, and some old Transparent Reference. All sounded great, which tends to reinforce my general impression that, at least on my system, good components tend to sound good with good cables. There were some small differences: the Kimbers made the sound very coherent and a little cool but with very solid bass, the Audience were more like the Goertz, with a fine and detailed presentation, and the old Transparents jazzed it up a little, seeming to impart an extra sizzle to the mids and highs. Still, these were small differences, all operating within the spectrum inscribed by the Serenades themselves and did not detract in any way from the authoritatively open and neutral picture painted by the speakers.

Penaudio have themselves had very good results as well with Jorma Design #1 and Analysis Plus Big Silver speaker wires, which are the cables they use most often. I have heard the Analysis Plus with the Serenades and can vouch for their being an excellent match.

Sound

The Serenades exhibit clarity, transparency, and neutrality at every listening. That may sound like dispassionate praise, in comparison to waxing tearful over the emotional power of a component. It is not. It is almost impossible to fault the Serenades – not that one should try, but part of assessing the speakers is to look for discontinuities, holes, exaggerations, and the like. They are just not there to be found. Indeed, I constantly asked myself "wouldn't I prefer a little more depth / a more forward midrange presentation / a silkier top end?" Each time I pressed the issue with further listening to recordings, the Serenades responded correctly and appropriately, without demonstrating the suspected "flaw."

In addition to the overarching strengths cited above, the Penaudios are coherent as all get-out. The search for a good match among the drivers seems to have paid off because the speaker sounds all of a piece, as much as any three-way I have heard. By comparison, my older Genesis VIs (which I still love, by the way) are nowhere near so continuous – one can hear the (small but noticeable) different temporal and spatial qualities of the bass drivers, the mids and the tweeters. Admittedly, the latter is a more complex speaker system, but it was priced at the same level as the Penaudios ten years ago.

The final general observation I would make about the sound is that these are wide-range speakers, as well they should be for the price. Though the cabinet is of modest size, the bass goes down really low (the manufacturer claims 28Hz) – deep extended and well-defined bass is a hallmark of this unit. And at the top end, the tweeter is open and extended (certainly well beyond the hearing range of someone my age) and never seems to breathe hard.

Enjoying The Music

On *Smack Up* [Analogue Productions APJ 012] the midrange seemed just a little prominent, with great articulation of the piano notes and yet I detected a certain reserve, except for the string bass. The latter I noted as "incredible, hard to believe" and that I could hear the bass notes vibrating. The image was not forward at all, almost laid-back, which led me to question whether what I heard from the midrange was part of the recording that I had just not noticed before. The lower midrange, so noticeable via the sax, couldn't have been better, "supple and musical". As noted above the highs did not strike me as super-detailed, sparkly, light as a feather or anything similar. Rather, they seemed merely clear and revealing. In a sense, the Serenades take a back seat to the music. Many great speakers do, but some take the back seat after startling the listener with one or more signal qualities. Not so here: once you are done admiring the elegant cabinet and the fact that there is a lot of very nice sound coming from the Serenades, they lie back and let you listen.

Let me not imply that they do not have the ability to jolt when called for. On *La Folia de la Spagna* [HM France 1050] the tinkly almost-metallic quality of the winds stands in sharp contrast to the lightning-fast percussive attacks that make this piece so much fun. As a side note, I had never noticed before that the tabla in "La Folia" sounds just like the one in "Witchi-Tai-To," the old Brewer & Shipley song from the early 70s.

Similarly, I was mightily impressed by the darkness of Tanita Tikaram's voice in "Twist in My Sobriety" from the *Ancient Heart* LP [WEA 243 877-1]. Yes, it's a dark voice anyway but I had not heard the sadness in it quite so deeply before. The Serenades were made for the Rod Argent synthesizers in this song which sounded almost human. If this recording is made too pretty, too smooth or too silky, it just isn't right and it undermines the song. The Serenades get it right.

During my listening I joked to Val Kratzman and Sami Penttila that maybe they didn't know they had a very good rock speaker. Sâmi and his wife are both accomplished musicians but neither one, to my knowledge, is much of a headbanger. I had been listening to one of my favorite recordings of the past ten years, AFI's *Sing the Sorrow* [Dreamworks, LP and CD], from 2003. Longtime AFI purists lamented the postpunk's band's integration of more pop/goth elements into their music, but I would submit they were always there, albeit somewhat submerged under the death-metal screams and buzz-saw guitars. In any event, both the LP and the CD (the CD is better in this case) highlight the terrific pacing of the upper bass notes on songs like "Silver & Cold." The soundstage is recessed on the Serenades – and that is how it was recorded. It is both centered, like a wall of sound, and back behind the plane of the speakers. In contrast, the image of the Tanita Tikaram recording above stretches beyond the outside edges of the cabinets. AFI's shouts, claps, choking vocals, and stop-start guitar riffs impressed



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even more than they could have on a pair of old Cerwin-Vegas. You don't need a rigorously accurate and musical speaker to enjoy this kind of music, but it sure does help.

Way, way off at the other end of the spectrum, I thought that Corelli's *Concerti Grossi* [McGegan, Philharmonia Baroque, HM France 7014] would be a good test for the Serenades because the light metallic character of this fine recording might not sound quite so good as it does on a richer, more "passionate" speaker, like the Ars Aures Midi Sensorial that I reviewed last year. I can't say which is more "correct" overall; I like both speakers very much and they are very different. But I have had the pleasure of listening to 17th and 18th century music twice in small, bright halls in Europe – in Venice and in Paris. It seemed to me, perhaps naïvely, that such halls were where this music was *supposed* to be played; I have not heard the like here in the US. But the Serenades got it right again by capturing the very lack of weight of the early instruments without skimping on the delicious timbre. I was looking for flaws and didn't find them – the Corelli was a joy.

While it is difficult to single out one particular aspect of the character of the Serenades, I should focus once more on the vocal range. Once more, there is nothing showy about the rendering of live vocals in a real space. The later choral sections of Elgar's *Coronation Ode* [EMI LP ASD-3345] echoed "naturally" around my modest listening room. More precisely, the lightness in the high female voices and the total lack of edginess in the dispersion of those voices through the hall came very close to creating the illusion that the space was mine. (Of course, it helps to have a great recording to paint that picture). As "Land of Hope and Glory" started, the sonic image immediately filled the virtual space with greater weight and the room seemed bigger. Both male and female voices could be clearly distinguished all through, never collapsing into a formless mass.

Concluding Observations

The Penaudio Serenades caused me to reexamine what I look for in a speaker, or even more, in an audio system. In a sense, this self-questioning parallels the false dichotomy of musicality and accuracy, terms which should not be at odds with each other but often are. Why do many of us persist in making the distinction? My own guess is based only on my own experience. I will confess that as I get older, I have less and less tolerance for things that are strident, cold, or grating. At the opposite end, too warm and too romantic (too "musical") are also annoying – they take a split second longer to annoy me, but annoy nonetheless. So I look first to hear what sounds "good" and at the same time to note what annoys me.

In the rarefied world of high end audio equipment, the distinctions may objectively be small ones. Consequently, in assessing a neutral and transparent speaker like the Serenade that imposes almost nothing upon the music, we (I) might be looking for echoes of things that we know we like. Hence my having asked myself if they were too reserved, or a little cool. The answer, so far as I can tell, is an emphatic no. It is impossible to say if the Serenades have every quality one may ever need in a speaker, but they are close to flawless. Equally, they do not demand that you be impressed, they are not of monstrous proportion, and while not inexpensive, they are much less costly than many speakers I have heard and have not liked anywhere near as much. This is a statement product that speaks quietly, firmly, and asks only that you take a listen. They merit serious consideration by anyone who loves music and might rather not spend \$20,000 or more on a speaker – that's most of us, right?

Associated Equipment

Linn LP-12/Lingo/Ittok
Sumiko Celebration cartridge
conrad-johnson Premier 17LS preamplifier
conrad-johnson Premier 15 phono preamplifier
Music Reference RM-9II amplifier
Proceed PCD-3 CD player
Grand Prix Audio Monaco equipment and amplifier stand
Cables: Nordost SPM reference interconnects, Goertz, Kimber, Transparent, Audience speaker cables as noted
Argent RoomLens and Echo Buster room treatments
The usual various accessories

Specifications

Type: Three-way floorstanding loudspeaker

Drivers: 25mm fabric dome tweeter, 120mm treated-paper cone midrange, and 215mm aluminum woofer

Crossover: 4th order @ 180z, 4.5 kHz

Nominal impedance: 4 Ohms

Sensitivity: 87dB/W/m

Dimensions: 44.5 x 6 x 11 (HxWxD in inches)

Price: \$9000/pair

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