



Penaudio Charisma and Chara Loudspeaker System

The Way It Ought To Be

February 2004



Associated Equipment:

Digital Front End

Electrocompaniet
EMC-1 CD Player

Amplification

Electrocompaniet EC
4.7 Pre-Amp (modified
by Talon Audio)
Electrocompaniet
Nemo Mono Amplifiers
deHavilland 845 Mono
Amplifiers
deHavilland Ultra
Verve Pre-Amp

Loudspeakers

Talon Audio Peregrine
X
Dynaudio Contour
S5.4

Cabling

Virtual Dynamics Nite
II Interconnects
(XLR /RCA)
Virtual Dynamics Nite
II Speaker Cables
Virtual Dynamics Nite
II Power Cords
Soundstring
Interconnects
(XLR/RCA)
Soundstring Speaker
Cables
Soundstring Power
Cords

Power

Conditioning

APC Power
Conditioner (modified
by Talon Audio)

Accessories

DH Labs Cones and
Discs
Golden Sound
Acoustic Discs

Dave Thomas

Where Did You Guys Come From?

During HE 2003 in San Francisco, I visited a room that had a rather interesting looking speaker in it. At first I thought it was a Pro Ac Tablette Signature in what looked like cabinet with a bamboo veneer. It was sitting on top of another cabinet made with a beautiful birch veneer that had the same footprint but was three times taller and housed a slick looking side-firing woofer. The great Conrad Johnson Premier 140 amplifier and Premier 17LS preamp were driving the system. There was no one in the room at the time so I decided to come on in and have a listen. A gentleman named Val Kratzman welcomed me into the room and asked if I had brought some music to listen to. As I handed him one of my favorite recordings, Kurt Elling's Live In Chicago, I asked him what the name of the speaker was? "This is the Penaudio Charisma on top and the Chara subwoofer on the bottom," he said.



I sat back centered on a sofa that was positioned in the "sweet spot" and began to enjoy the music. The speakers created such a realistic experience that I soon closed my eyes and began to feel myself sitting at one of the quaint bistro tables that populate the fabled Green Mill Jazz Club where this disc was recorded here in Chicago. I could almost smell the smoke. The first song that we listened to was "Night Dream." This is nice mid-tempo melody that is very easy on the ears but does also have a great drum solo that sounded wonderful via the dynamics that this system was capable of reproducing. This considering the rather narrow footprint and slight dimensions of this speaker amazed me. I was so swept up in

this thoroughly enjoyable experience that by the time the song ended and I opened my eyes I was stunned to find that the once quiet room was now full of more listeners. I just hoped that I hadn't been too animated in my enjoyment of the sound. There are times when I can enjoy music so much that I'll begin rocking from side to side like Stevie Wonder on an I-V drip of caffeine.

I asked Val, who is a member of the Finnish Trade Council, representing Penaudio, to play another track from that same disc called "Goin' To Chicago." This is a rockin' good blues tune in which Elling and the "Father of Vocalese" Jon Hendricks, perform a duet that is both poignant and hilarious, raising up cat-calls and howls of laughter from both the crowd on the recording and the one that was in the Penaudio listening room with me. Things were going so well that Val and a rather attractive young lady who had suddenly appeared on the sofa next to me, asked that I give them another disc to play. So I handed Val yet another live jazz recording The Ray Brown Trio's Live At The Loa. I had Val play track 7, "Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man." This cut features a crowd-pleasing solo by Gene Harris that is executed wonderfully through the Charisma/Chara system. Once again, the crowd got into the performance, some even clapped at the end of the song. The young lady who was sitting next to me had now engaged Val in a discussion in a separate corner of the room. "She bought a pair," Val said. That's one of the neat things about a show of this type when it is opened to the public. Real people, real music lovers, get to experience things that they ordinarily would not get to see and hear. The result is that they get to immediately express their appreciation for the products and, in this case, put their money where their mouths are. We need more of this in high-end audio.

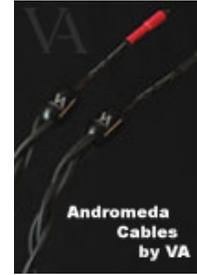
Fit and Finnish

The Penaudio speakers are made in Finland by a quiet, unassuming, yet brilliant young man named Sami Penttila who is the Owner, Founder & Chief Designer of Penaudio. I called Sami at his home in Finland to discuss his design and learned a lot about what makes these products so unique. "I am trying to achieve the voice of natural instruments," said Penttila who is himself a musician. In designing these speakers Penttila went to the University of Jyvaskyla to conduct tests on the effects of the sound of music coming from his speakers on people when hearing music that is played from an SACD in a wideband format versus the same music also on SACD with the ultrasonics removed. After listening they measured the EEG and heart rate of the individuals and were able to conclude that the speakers sounded best with music recorded in the wideband format. "The wideband recording sounded better than the recording with the cut off ultrasonics," said Penttila. Now the key here is not so much that one recording sounded better than the other, but that the speakers were so highly resolved that the difference could be sonically and physically felt by the listeners. This is something that was somewhat evident to me and the other visitors to the Penaudio room when we heard the speakers for the first time in San Francisco, and again just recently at the 2004 CES.

I alluded to the Charisma and Chara's attractive cabinetry at the start of this review and learned just how unique it was during my discussion with Penttila. "The cabinets are made exclusively for us. There is a 1.5mm plywood veneer covering 19mm of MDF, and another sheet of plywood veneer inside of the cabinet," explained Penttila. "This veneer is made only for us and makes the cabinet extremely non-resonant." What it looks like is if you took eighty or so 1/8" thick sheets of plywood and stacked and glued them together and then cut out your cabinet. It's a very slick look that has an extremely high Wife Acceptance Factor (WAF). In other words, she'll think they look cute.



SEAS make the drive units on the Charisma and Chara. The Charisma uses a modified 20mm textile dome tweeter and a 120mm specially treated paper cone midrange driver with a solid copper phase plug. The Chara's passive subwoofer uses a 176mm treated paper cone driver with a 39mm voice coil. The crossover points are at 180Hz and 5500Hz and achieve a silky smooth transition between the two boxes. *"Most people describe the sound as 'astonishing'",* says Joe Abrams, of Portal Audio, Penaudio's U.S. importer. *"The Charisma/Chara system has the quickness of an electrostatic and defines a wonderfully realistic soundstage much like a proscenium."*



The system also uses top quality WBT binding posts that allow you to torque down on your speaker cables for a tight connection. To help prevent any cabinet resonance interaction the Charismas are placed on absorbent feet, which sit atop the Charas. The cabinets are only connected electrically not mechanically. And this electrical connection is accomplished via specially made MIT Magnum jumpers. Coupling the speakers to the floor is accomplished by a couple of metal rails that attach to the bottoms of the Charas and accommodate spikes that screw down through the rails and into the floor. This also allows for easy height adjustment.

Music Maestro Please

When the speakers arrived I was a little worried about the difficulty that they might have projecting an accurate stage in my large (24' x 20') listening room. Fortunately, they were being paired with my Electrocompaniet Nemos, amps that are probably capable of creating a huge stage with a pair of Grado headphones. So the combination proved to be a synergistic match in my room.



The first piece of music that I listened to was Barbara Morrison's I Know How To Do It [Chartmaker Records CMR14460]. Now, this entire disc is wonderful to listen to but the track that got my attention most was the final one, "Come Home To Me." The Charismas hung such a delicate image of Morrison's delicious vocals that it was easy to develop a visual image of her in my mind. The chestiness of her voice and the sweet, sweet sentiment with which she sings, drips with romance. Not even my reference Talon Peregrine X achieves quite this level of holography.



Solo piano work does not ordinarily float my boat unless it is a performance that is truly personal and thoughtfully portrayed. Such a recording is the first effort from Patrick Noland called Gathering Light [Naim cd011]. Naim Audio engineer Ken Christiansen recorded this disc in the acoustically splendid Ascension Church in Oak Park, Illinois. The space and size of the stage upon which Noland performs is captured accurately by the Penaudio system. The percussive nature of the hammer strikes on piano strings is kept intact, while all of the resonance and decay sound natural. This is more than evident on track 6, "When Dawns Glide."

Now don't get the wrong impression here, this is still a full-range system. Just because a speaker excels at rendering the delicacies of jazz vocals and acoustic music, doesn't mean that they can't bump and boogie too. The Chara's side firing woofer provides plenty of low-end weight and the bass is, of course, tight and tuneful. On the Yellowjackets' Greenhouse [GRP GRD-9630], Jimmy Haslip's bass line pushes the envelope on the Chara's deep bass capabilities, particularly on track 2, the title cut "Greenhouse," but the Charas never lost their composure ... And then I got greedy.



One of my favorite R&B artists is D'Angelo. On his debut album, Brown Sugar [EMI 7243 8 32629 2 2 RE-1], he wrote, composed, and performed all instrumentals and vocals himself. It's a brilliant

piece of work. But like much of the music that is of the R&B and Hip-Hop genre, this recording borders on deep bass overload. I've had a number of speakers in house this past year that, while attempting to play songs like the track 9 hit, "Lady", ended up making that odd farting sound, as if the woofer could not push out enough air, and causing the cone to vibrate too hard. The Chara fell prey to this as well, though not before handling this disc at surprisingly higher volumes than I thought it could. Frankly, music at this level is pretty non-musical and the bass sounds more like low-end energy and less like music.

Conclusion

My time with the Penaudio Charisma and Chara system was extremely enjoyable. At a price of around \$5,500 this is a stellar looking and sounding performer. Another advantage is that you can build a Penaudio system as your budget suits you. You can start with a pair of Charismas, which are excellent mini-monitors on their own, and add the Charas later. Either way, you'll be rewarded with a speaker that is thoughtfully designed, sonically stunning and, yes, they're cute too.

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Specifications: Charisma and Chara System

Type: three-way, floorstanding, reflex-loaded loudspeaker.

Drive units: 20mm ferrofluid textiledome tweeter, custom made 120mm special treated midrange/bass unit 26mm voice coil, heavy copper rings above and below pole piece, solid copper phase plug, long throw 176mm treated paper woofer, 39mm voice coil

Cross-over: 180Hz, 5500 Hz

Cross-over slopes: acoustical 3.order

Frequency range: anechoic response +/- 3 dB 30-25000Hz, in room 25-20000 Hz

Phase shift: +/- 15 degrees at 20-20000Hz

Sensitivity: 87 dB/1m/2.83V

Nominal impedance: 4 ohms (3,8-15 ohms)

Recommended amplifier: 30+ W

Dimensions: (wxhxd) in mm: 140x1000x285

Weight: Charisma 17 kg/pair, Chara 30kg/pair

Extra: WBT connectors, internal wiring and inductors are from 99,997% copper foil (alpha-core), polypropylene caps, Goertz MI1 internal wiring.

Price: Charisma - \$2,995, Chara - \$2,500

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