

All good things are - less than six

Do we really need another new speaker?

by Claus Volke

There is some evidence: when there is a choice of six products of the same kind, the potential customer sometimes is unable to cope with it and finally cannot (or doesn't want to) make a decision. This was proven by two US-researchers within the framework of a field study they conducted with different kinds of jam. Based upon these results I want to express it a little more simplified with respect to the High-End- Speaker industry: with more than six speakers the probability increases significantly as function of the number offered that the music-lover will not buy any. Or when there is a choice of more than six speakers, many who are interested will not buy any - or an espresso machine instead.

Dream dance or gut choice

Why do I tell you all this? Well, the other day the editor-in-chief called me and offered me a new speaker for a test. And my first reaction was the same as the customers above: I simply did not want. Honestly: when there is a product of which the High-End market is more than saturated, it is loudspeakers. Not only that, obviously, every morning someone wakes up having dreamed (what actually do they dream of?) to have invented another best speaker in the world. No, furthermore today practically every concept is available in numerous designs and "revolutionary new developments": broad-range, horn-designs, electrostatic, and of course an apparently unlimited number of 2-, 3-, 4- or even-more-way concepts. Of all those I am only interested in the "way back" - back to the concepts that supplied sound in big (cinema) halls in the 1920s and 1930s. To my opinion, here still a lot of novelties can be found.

But what does CB (note: Cai Brockmann the editor-in-chief) has to offer? A classical 3-way-concept for 20,000 Euro per pair. Promptly I am bored, extremely bored. But this changes rapidly as I get to know that this speaker is said to have an efficiency of 92 dB, practically never goes below a nominal impedance of (tube friendly) 8 ohms, and has been developed by the Austrian manufacturer Ayon. All Ayon amplifiers and CD-players - all in tube technology - I have listened to in the past were good without exception. As the Ayon company is managed by a certain Gerhard Hirt, who is not only a very sympathetic man but also a real music aficionado, finally my defence attitude weakened. The argument that I would be the first worldwide who could listen to this speaker for a longer time period definitely convinced in favour of the new Ayon speaker bearing the name of "Black Hawk". A gut decision - but not my worst as should become clear soon.

A soloist can breathe deeply

Out of the packaging boxes - almost as tall as a man - 2 speakers emerge: each 128 cm high, 42 cm wide, 32 cm deep and as heavy as 50 kg. At a first glance the shape of the Black Hawk is indeed exceptional. You notice immediately, besides the AMT-tweeter (Air-Motion-Transformer), an oval basic shape, that shall enable a "dripping" of the sound-waves off the cabinet, and a slight backward

tilt of the cabinet. The Ayon Black Hawk really is, to be admitted immediately, a ravishingly beautiful speaker!

Who is acquainted with Gerhard Hirt, knows, however, that this man does not focus primarily on design but always on sound. The cabinet with the oval base consist of resonance-optimised "dual instrument laminated wood" - dual because for each layer two different wooden layers are used. In total the cabinet consists of 10 such layers and has a wall thickness of 28 mm in total. Furthermore, the cabinet was computed in a way that the usual internal damping could be omitted. A thin layer of damping material is applied on both the top of the crossover and the bottom of the bottom cover plate.

Ayons developer call this principle "Airflow Damping". Behind this a little strange sounding denomination is a, technically speaking, very sophisticated concept of airflow exit, supposed to realize the best tune, the best interaction between air column and resonances. According to Ayons' measurements an increase of 1,5 dB of efficiency can be achieved with Airflow Damping in the proprietary cabinet design compared to conventional "damped to death" cabinets of MDF or HDF (medium or high density fibreboard). Last but not least for reasons of impedance Ayon abstains from switching multiple bass-chassis in parallel; the soloist implanted in the Black Hawk already achieve the desired frequency range with its cabinet volume of 85 litres. The mid-range-chassis and the tweeter have been selected in a way that no level adjustment between them is necessary. Therefore the crossover could be minimized; e.g. in the signal-path of the AMT you find only one single capacitor.

A question of power?

By accident Ayons' Black Hawk are my guests at the same time as the Momentum mono amplifiers of Dan D'Agostino. Furthermore I have 3 tube amps at hand: my thoroughly modified Jadis DA5, the 300B monos by Welter, and an Audio Note P2 SE. All tube amps are controlled by the well-proven Shindo Aurieges, whereas the D'Agostino-monos are controlled by the Americans' adequate Momentum pre-amplifier, of course. The speaker connectors are the Gran-Finale-Top-Match-Series by HMS, providing by far the best sound with all combinations - except the Welter 300B monos. Only on the small-power tubes again the wires of Auditorium 23 and the Kondo pure-silver wires were more convincing for me than the HMS wires normally considered as the ones "one can bank on". As the speaker is capable of bi-wiring the HMS wire is applied in the respective configuration, whereas with the 300B-amps the connection with both the A23 and the Kondo is made "only" in single-wiring.

Immersion into music

Now at last to the essential, the music. In 2013 the Danish label Stunt Records celebrated its 30th anniversary. One of my personal Stunt-highlights is *Etta* by Etta Cameron and Nikolaj Hess with friends, a CD published in 2009. Etta Cameron, a native of the Bahamas, lives in Denmark since 1972, where she also recorded this lovely collection of ballads together with her long-time piano partner Nikolaj Hess shortly before her death in 2010. Incredible her version of the standard "what a wonderful world". Here, speakers are much more required than it seems at first. Because the very intimate mood of the song - Cameron starts only very late - captures the listener only when it is

reproduced with all tonalities and the finest tonal grades. The music lives from the contrast between the voice determining the mood and pushing forward and the accompanying musicians.

Tonally and musically the floating dedication of the percussion instruments, played by Marilyn Mazur, and the hypnotic piano of Hess. After seven minutes of dreaming, with the Ayon Black Hawk there is only one reaction possible: once more, please. In the most important frequency ranges the brand-new Ayon provides a completely shear-free sound picture with absolutely credible "real" warmth.

Certainly, an important role plays here the well-known Air-Motion-tweeter, which doesn't push itself into the foreground but is simply perfectly integrated. In fact, I never before heard the AMT, this exceptional converter, as good as here.

With the eternal Gershwin-hit "Summertime" the Black Hawk shows that the dialogue between the gospel voice of Cameron and the voice-like sound of Jens Søndergaards saxophone is the fundamental element of this piece. Finally, in the song "you've changed" the Ayons give an exemplarily perfect shape to the internal tension and the flow of the piece - primarily determined by the bass and the piano that focuses on the melody. The comprehensive bass shows the richness of details and differentiates, is emotional and warm at the same time, but does not try to conceal or even cover the contrasting hardness of the piano. Here the Black Hawk is able without any effort to create an acoustical warmth of sound that I also know and estimate from my equipment. Especially with such a small group with a profile of acoustical instruments unfortunately some speakers often mean it too well. It is not unusual that they excessively anatomize the music and let every instrument sound "separately" in too much of a disproportion. - notably with its complete sound spectrum, but not with the required interaction of all instruments for the superior musical aim. How "right" and impressively fast the Ayons play - also at very low listening levels - I know from comparison with my big Odeon No. 38 and a full-range electrostatic speaker.

Without words even more beautiful

Let's enter the romantic: the new CD of cellist Jan Vogler - recorded with exceptional pianist Hélène Grimaud - centres the song cycle *Dichterliebe* by Robert Schumann, but without the well-known lyrics of Heinrich Heine. This interpretation require the open-minded engagement of the listener. Here the Black Hawk fully support him and are capable at any moment to reproduce the recognisable independence of this magical music from the lyrics in a deep melancholy and an almost unsurpassable expression of intimacy.

Especially with the Welter 300B it becomes clear from the first second on, why Schumann so often leads us into an internal conflict: exceptionally intensive lyrical-musical perceptions not rarely evoke in the listener an internal disturbance - note well not a disturbance created by reproduction equipment, but solely caused by the sensation of the poetic content and the dramatic expressions of Schumann. I am deeply impressed by the competence of the Ayon to reveal this exciting area of conflict of musical magic and subtle but deeply rooted strain in such a delicately subtle way.

Is Austria a part of Scandinavia?

Finally I allow myself jazz of incredible plainness and almost classical beauty: Gisle Torvik and his album *Tranquil Fjord* (ozella music). Music lovers and musicians consider Torvik one of the best

guitarist of the world - rightly. Although his sound is not new at all and strongly recalls Jim Hall, what certainly is not only due to his guitar built by Roger Sadowsky. Also the rest of the trio is not really exotic with Audun Ellingsen on bass and Helmut Nygård on drums. When the reproduction chain does not play on the point a first listening could lead to a premature and wrong judgement: smooth jazz for elevators of the simplest kind. When the reproduction chain is harmonious and best balanced however, with this album sound horizons of exceptional transparency and directly perceptible relaxation, i.e. almost idyllic placidness.

The Black Hawk takes us, guided by the narrative-delicate melodies of the trio, to a wonderful journey far away from the well-known "Norwegian sound" but still so catchy. With the Ayons the musicians sound in a clearly equated room, their melodic arcs and also their artistically played and arranged stories are presented in an enormously sensible, fine and positively caressing form creating - yes, really - images in the head of the listener. Wonderful paintings, recalling the early ones of Edvard Munch the Norwegian pathfinder of expressionism. Or images arising at the first contact with the books of Norwegian musician and author Ketil Bjørnstad, e.g. his novel *Vindings Spiel* or his recording of the century *Water stories* of 1993. If I would not know better, after this symbiosis of tone and content I would locate the cradle of Ayon much further up north than in Austria.

The audiophile sovereign

Until now I extremely rarely could experience that one and the same speaker plays at the same top-level of reproduction with completely different amplifier concepts. Whether powered by Dan D'Agostinos exceptional bolides of US-American high performance class per HMS Gran Finale Jubilee Perfect Match in bi-wiring, or the manageable 8 watts of the Welter 300B monos "simply" wired with A23-cables: with both concepts the Ayon produces the same intense sound textures, and - to be highlighted explicitly - independent of the sound level. At very low levels as well as at higher levels the sound is equally full of spirits, here and there she acts with natural energy and musical vitality. Perhaps the most important is: no matter whether eight or some hundred watts, solid-state or tube, an amp of more than 90,000 € or just 3,000 € - the performance of the Ayon Black Hawk distinguishes itself by true passion and mere boundless seeming sound colours - and she always plays on world-class-level.

I should listen to my gut more often.

redaktion@fidelity-magazin.de

Bildunterschriften:

1. On the backside of the beautiful Black Hawk a double-terminal awaits adequate connectors.
2. "perfect match" is not only an audiophile requirement but also a very good bi-wiring connector by HMS.

Technical Data:

Principle: 3-way floor-speaker, bass-reflex

efficiency: 92 dB

nominal impedance 8 ohms

Chassis: 30 cm bass-driver, 13 cm mid-range cone, Air-Motion-Transformer - tweeter (AMT)

cross-over frequencies: 380 Hz, 2500 Hz

Cabinet options: various highly polished wood veneer, e.g. tino (Indian apple), French walnut, etinoè, walnut

Specialties: oval base cabinet shape, airflow damping system, bi-wiring terminal

Measures (W/H/D): 42/128/32 cm

weight: 50 kg

warranty: 5 years

price per pair: 20,000 €

Contact: Ayon Audio, Hart 18, A-8108 Gratkorn, Austria - www.ayonaudio.com