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Perreaux Audiant SR35 Floorstanding Loudspeaker REVIEW

MARCH 11, 2014 10:42 AM GARY STEEL 29 COMMENTS

Perreaux Audiant SR35 Floorstanding Loudspeaker REVIEW
$3995
5 Stars

Features & Construction

The first thing to note is that the SR35s look lovely. They really do. But it's worth going back a step, first. I'm often disappointed at the way gear is boxed, and with it's "first look" presentation. Perreaux have got that just about right. It's easy to figure out how to get them out of the box, and easy to set them up. There's no glossy manual, but that's okay. I don't need hyperbole, I need simple set-up instructions, and that's what you get on the installation sheet that comes with them. No badly-translated-from-Chinese gobble-de-gook for Perreaux.



The Audiant S35's distinctive feet.

As you can see, they are very thin speakers (but deep), and not particularly tall: even with their spikes on, when sitting on an average couch, depending on the length of your upper body, you'll find that your ears will be a similar height to the tweeter, or the upper driver, or more likely, somewhere in between. And that's just about right. The thin form factor could be a problem in a household with out-of-control children or out-of-control dogs because, even with the spikes to hold them firmly to the ground, they're fairly easy to tip over. I know, because in my crowded lounge, I had to fitfully lunge to save one from falling when my oversized ass didn't have the brains to know its own dimensions. Having said that, most column loudspeakers are vulnerable in bull-in-a-china shop situations, and my advice is simply to be bloody careful.

Those spikes: interestingly, they screw into a kind of buffed aluminium brace (or feet) that is a design feature of the SR35s. Those spikes then sit in eight spike 'shoes', which prevent the carpet from getting ugly holes, and possibly even adds further isolation.

The speakers come with terminal jumpers, so plugging your cable in the back is a smooth and swift operation. The quality and look of the cabinetry, binding posts, etc, is all spiffing, but the thing that really knocked my socks off was the loudspeaker baffle. Rather than just gouging holes in the cabinet for the two drivers and the tweeter, there's an extremely pleasing and rigid grille that I like very, very much. According to Perreaux, it's a 12mm thick "machined aluminium baffle" which "provides excellent mechanical stability that ensures accurate driver placement and controls unwanted resonances." Works for me. "The result is a sound that is extremely dynamic with crystalline clarity and detail."

Additionally, the tweeter is to the right on the left speaker and to the left on the right speaker – in other words, it's not placed centrally on the column. Perreaux's blurb said that the configuration (two drivers, and in between the tweeter to the left or right) corrects "lobe tilting inherent in conventional mid-tweeter configurations, controls vertical sound dispersion – greatly reducing ceiling and floor reflections, providing a sound that is accurate and









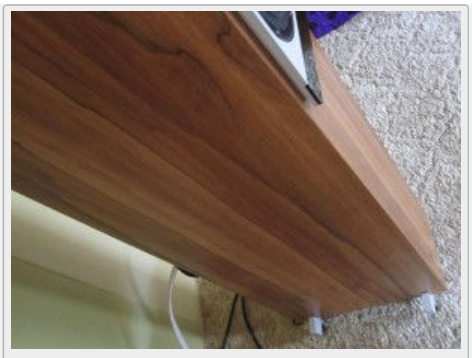
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Birds-eye view of the SR35 and Steel's ancient carpet.

engaging."

As for the speakers themselves, the tweeter is a 22m "high definition Sonomex dome" that the blurb says "allows a smooth and extended frequency response, while the wide surround combines the low frequency response of a 1-inch dome with the high frequency dispersion of a ¾ dome." Then there's the two 5-inch woofers, which have a "lightweight copper-clad aluminium wire voice coil that allows low distortion and excellent transient response, while the coated paper cone gives an extended frequency response with a controlled roll off."


You can't hear it, but this speaker is sounding damn good!

Then there's the stuff you can't see, like the low-loss air core inductors and the audiophile-grade polypropylene capacitors, gifting the speakers low distortion, a clean signal path, vivid sound and "a high level of detail and purity".

Sound Quality

I was expecting to have to run them in, but within minutes of firing them up, I was sitting back like Cleopatra luxuriating in a sweetly scented bath while sexy slaves peeled me grapes and popped them in my mouth. Yes, they sounded that good.

Most of the time, I had them running on power from a Perreaux Audiant 80i integrated, and the source was my Yamaha CD-S2000. Occasionally, I switched to a Vincent SV-237 integrated amplifier and matching CD-S7DAC CD player (reviews for those coming up soon). The Vincent gear proved not to be a terribly good match for the SR35s, proving the need for symbiosis in matching components. It wasn't that the SV-237 sounded poorly through the SR35s, just that there was a distinct sibilance apparent on some selections, as if all the treble was compressed into a narrow bandwidth; something I wouldn't have expected from gear with a tube stage.



That lovely, distinctive front baffle.

The SR35s have clearly been designed as a perfect match for Audiant amps, because the two really sing together. I do have a slight predilection for the 80i, one of the most impressive integrated amps I've come across, but it needs to be emphasised that the speaker will sound splendid with many different amps and source components – as always, it's a matter of trying out the various candidates.

I tried loads of different music selections on the SR35s, and found that just about anything I flung at them revealed hitherto unknown facets of the tracks. I get tired of hi-fi reviewers going on endlessly about hearing more and more detail in tracks, as if detail was the holy grail, and that nothing else mattered, but nevertheless, it's always amazing when you listen to an old favourite, only to hear it in a new way because of the gear you're playing it on.

Here's a particularly piquant example. One of my favourite songs is from Icelandic singer Emiliana Torrini's 2008 album *Me And Armini*. I could write a thesis about this song, it's so multi-dimensional, and there are so many aspects to it. At heart it's a simple acoustically oriented piece on which her voice is so honey sweet that it just captures your heart, but as it goes on it gets a bit darker, there's a second section with a long bass groove and various ambient sound effects, and she also places discrete nature sounds in the mix. Some instrumentation is up-close, and others are far away. Oddly for a track called 'Birds', I had never noticed the bird sounds in this song before, even on my forensically inclined Martin Logans, and the SR35s made Torrini's voice sound the sweetest I've ever heard it.



Because I'm perverse like that, I plonked on one of Neil Young's least well-liked albums, the early 1980s *Re-ac-tor*. I love the song

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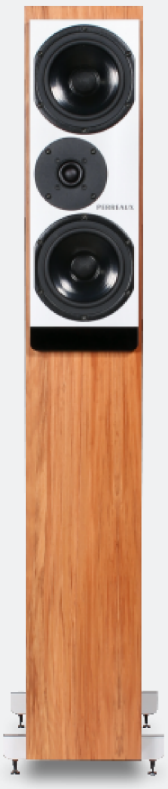
And another close-up showing Steel's risible 1950s green wall. Sorry about that.

'Opera Star' with it's chook-clucking and it's line, "You were born to rock/You'll never be an opera star", but it's a fairly thin recording, symptomatic of that period of recording technology.

Now here's the thing: the SR35s accurately portrayed that thinness, but when the cymbals splashed it sounded like a drum kit in the room, and the guitars really sounded flinty and textured. On 'T-Bone' (beautifully moronic lyric: "Got mashed potatoes/Ain't got no t-bone"), the percussion again sounded terrific, dynamic. Even on this rough and ready record of guitar extrusions, I can hear delicious layers that would be absent on most speakers.

Local band Dimmer's 2001 masterpiece *I Believe You Are A Star* has always sounded good, and its dubby bass, looped drums and up-close-and-intimate recording is rendered convincingly by the SR35s. Again, the sheer wallop factor and dynamism and detail that you can almost smell and taste make listening to a track like 'Evolution' a transformative experience.

Frank Zappa's *Grand Wazoo* (1972) is the best rock/big band fusion I've ever heard, and drummer Aynsley Dunbar is a mad octopus on his kit. While the SR35s enable the perfect reveal of the complex mesh of horns, keyboards and guitars, there's something going on here that I've only ever heard on very expensive speakers. It's something about the timing, and the tuning, and their perfect, dynamic crispness; and something about the way they can capture not just musical sounds with near-forensic ability, but emphasise the musicality of a multiple part harmony, for instance.



Perhaps the single most striking thing about the ability of the SR35s, however, is their 3D effect. I've only ever heard such a convincingly wide soundstage on electrostatic speakers before, and it was a revelation to shut my eyes and to literally be immersed in the sound. Brendan Perry's *Ark* was probably the most widescreen recording of 2011, and 'The Bogus Man' is particularly striking, with its deep, resonant vocals, synths buzzing from speaker to speaker (and hovering somewhere behind the speakers); and the SR35s capture it all. Sure, I've heard cone drivers that disperse sound convincingly around a room before, but often that comes at the expense of definition, making everything sound rather amorphous. The Perreaux speakers, on the other hand, sacrifice none of that, always remaining present, taut, absolutely in the moment.

Just for fun, I played my favourite version of Wagner's 'Mild Und Leise' (*Tristan And Isolde*), sung by Kirsten Flagstad in the 1940s. Loads of surface noise, and her incredible vocal sounds like it's rupturing the microphone. Despite the denigrated signal and the distortion, the essence was still there, where some hi-fi systems would render it utterly unlistenable.

Weinberger's 'Polka And Fugue' is a real hi-fi torturer, a circus-like number that builds to an incredible climax, and can show off both the positive points and limitations of a system. The Perreaux components sounded like they were made expressly for this, and had no trouble at all dealing with these uncompressed, unrestrained acoustic explosions.

I'm also auditioning the latest iteration of Oppo's celebrated BDP105 universal player, so I had to take the opportunity to play the DVD-Audio 24/96 hi-res stereo version of King Crimson's legendary 1969 *In The Court Of The Crimson King*. Even the remastered CD of this album sounds incredible, because it's the first time the original multi-tracks have been used, and Stephen Wilson's mix really makes it come alive. The SR35 captured the extra detail with poise and perfect control, dealing expertly with the transitions from acoustic guitar plucking and fluty bits to the surging Mellotron crescendos. And once again, they were superlative at handling those incredible drums.



Lastly, I'll talk about International Observer's *Seen*, a 2002 album of melodic electronic dub that still stands as one of the finest-sounding recordings made in this country. The project of Tom Bailey (the British multi-instrumentalist behind the Thompson Twins), Seen uses a lot of very deep-sounding snaky modulated bass lines that I just didn't think the SR35s were going to be able to deal with. This proved not to be the case, and the bass in all its glory sounded as huge and impressive as I've heard it sounding on speakers with much larger drivers.

The point I'm making here isn't that the SR35s are mega-bass speakers. In fact, if I bought a pair I would add a subwoofer, because I like a lot of electronic music that uses the kind of bass-quaking sounds that they're simply not capable of. The thing is, though, for most "normal" music tastes (rock through jazz and classical, say) the SR35s' bass response will be sufficient, and in fact, as many a hi-fi fan will attest, it's not really about how low you go (because the quality, and our ability to hear it well, drops off) but how tight and well defined the bass is – and the more low-end bass you have, the less you'll hear the delectable mid-bass tones.

Having said that, the SR35s aren't for everyone. The installation notes recommend placing them around 250mm from the rear wall, which is pretty damn close. That's great in a way, because they're not taking up precious floor space and can blend in with the furniture, but if you do decide you want them further out in the room, you'll lose a lot of the bass, because the port on the back relies on the wall to reinforce those sonic wallops. Having noted this, it's also true of any ported standmount speaker, and a good deal of other smaller floorstanders, so it's not a flaw, but simply a matter of taste and requirements.

Conclusion

At $3995, the SR35s are not only a bargain, they're a steal. Given the Perreaux signage, I knew they'd be quality speakers, but I've heard speakers worth 10 times as much that don't sound half as good. Admittedly, those were much bigger, more powerful speakers, but the refinement, and the sheer attention to detail has resulted in truly revelatory speakers. As owner Martin van Rooyen notes in **this Q&A**, the SR35s are sophisticated speakers geared towards sophisticated music – if you want to listen to Motorhead, buy a set of Cerwin Vegas. Which doesn't mean that rock music sounds terrible on the SR35s. During an audition of a pair of $250,000 Wilson Audio speakers a few years back, some wag insisted on playing an AC/DC track, and it sounded pretty good, rampant compression and all. And the rock music I played through the SR35s sounded perfectly acceptable, too. To reinforce the point, it's worth pointing out once again: these are accurate speakers that will give out what you put in, so you'll hear any weaknesses in the recording, although those weaknesses won't ruin your enjoyment of the music.

But getting back to where we started: by putting science, and the principles of sound engineering first, Perreaux has ended up making something that's simply magic. It has given life to sound. **GARY STEEL**

www.perreaux.com

* Read Witchdoctor's interview with Perreaux's Martin van Rooyen **here**.

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