

Avalon Saga

IT'S NOT EVERY DAY ONE CAN SPEND TIME LISTENING TO A PAIR OF AVALON'S SAGA LOUDSPEAKERS – AND NOT JUST BECAUSE THEY ARE EXPENSIVE (€170,000) AND TOO BIG FOR THE AVERAGE EUROPEAN LIVING ROOM AT 1.78 M TALL. THE SPEAKERS, HANDBUILT BY THE COMPANY IN THE SHADE OF THE ROCKY MOUNTAINS IN COLORADO, ARE ALSO VERY RARE AND SELDOM DEMONSTRATED. JOSÉ VICTOR HENRIQUES DESCRIBES HIS RECENT BRIEF ENCOUNTER

Only two pairs of Avalon's Saga speakers have so far made it to Europe: it takes almost six months from order to delivery, which is indicative of how much Avalon owner and designer Neil Patel cares for his products, and the laborious handcrafting that goes into them. One of the two pairs is in Italy, and the other has only recently arrived in Portugal – which is where I got to listen to them.

The Avalon Saga is, by any standards, an extraordinary speaker, and not just in terms of price, size and weight – even though 118kg apiece, while substantial, sets no new records for flagship speakers. Indeed, a Focal Grande Utopia EM Evo would not just tower over the Saga, at a bit over 2m tall, but weighs just on two and a half times as much, while a Wilson Audio WAMM Master Chronosonic is even taller, and a back-breaking 408kg.

So, while (relatively) tall and (fairly) massive, these speakers are neither imposing nor menacing in their design, and in fact could almost be said to look somewhat delicate. Like all of Avalon's top-end models they boast somewhat exotic, sculptural lines, with their multifaceted, polyhedral shapes having a distinct air of ancient Egyptian architecture about them. However, they're less extreme than the flagship Tesseract, named after the mythical four-dimensional hypercube, and the culmination of Patel's quest to control diffraction.

The Saga uses some of the technology developed for the Tesseract in a cabinet more alike the former Osiris and Isis models – see what I mean about the Egyptian influences? – with the complex multi-baffle geometry and alignment working as a concave lens, designed to place the acoustic centre slightly above the ear-line of a seated listener despite the height of the speakers.

It also draws on the low noise technology developed for the Tesseract project, while evolving on the pin-point focus accuracy of the Isis, now with the implementation of a full-range driver array comprising a 7in radial-magnet ceramic midrange, two 13in Nomex/Kevlar composite bass units and a new 1in carbon/glass concave tweeter. All the drivers use 'proprietary magnetics technology', based around Neodymium, to 'increase energy transfer and reduce noise floor,' and claim purely pistonic behaviour, with 'no diaphragm break-up modes within 70dB of signal.'

The crossovers, meanwhile, are entirely hard-wired, with no PCBs, and use 'proprietary all-phase crossover topologies' as well as delivering 'control of all magnetic field interaction.'

The aim of the Saga, Patel says, is 'a large dynamic system that behaves like a small monitor, revealing the most subtle details of space... within an envelope of explosive sound pressure contrasts.' To that end, he explains, the speaker uses 'constrained-mode damping to absorb cabinet





vibrations;’ has ‘smooth, wide polar response for superlative imaging capabilities;’ and ‘flat impedance characteristics, damped and purely resistive, for ideal interface with any amplifier.’

With all that in mind, and the rarity of the opportunity, I could hardly pass up the opportunity to audition the speakers, at my own leisure under optimal conditions, in the distributor’s comfortable, well treated listening room in Lisbon, with the appropriate associated equipment.

At the very least, this was to be an introductory ‘hands-on’ appraisal – after all, given their size and mass these are hardly speakers you can have shipped to your home for a quick listen!

For my listening session, I was lucky to have equipment to hand well suited for use with the Avalon speakers, starting with a full solid state Nagra HD setup (CD/DAC, preamp and monoblocks), then moving on to an all valve (300B) preamp/stereo amplifier from Thöress.

I much enjoyed the latter for its glowing tonality, albeit at the cost of focus, resolution, dynamics and power of the Nagra equipment, so took the decision

to stick with the Nagra setup, as seen in the photo, for most of my listening sessions.

The Sagas changed mood accordingly, acquiescing to both solid state or valves in a most gracious manner, always sounding civil and beautifully transparent and engaging, be it with LP courtesy of a Bergmann Galder/Lyra Etna and the new Nagra Classic Phono, or digital from the Nagra CD/DAC HD front end, with high resolution files streamed via a Roon Nucleus server. However, this ‘civility’ is not extensive enough to flatter bad recordings: instead the resolution here lays bare any wrong doings upstream.

The naked truth

Until now all Avalon loudspeakers I have heard, and there were many over the years, have sounded best with their grilles on: the Sagas broke that trend, sounding more open and airy when used ‘naked’ – and, to be honest, looking prettier.

The Saga sound is said to be ‘tailored’ by ‘intelligent use of enclosure’s resonance’. Whatever that means, it sounded more like ‘a musical

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Specifications

Driver Complement	
1" Concave Carbon/Glass Neodymium Tweeter	
7" Concave radial magnetic Ceramic Midrange	
2 x 13" Nomex/Kevlar Generation II Composite Woofers	
(All drivers utilize proprietary neodymium magnetic technologies)	
Sensitivity	92 dB
Impedance	4 ohms nominal (3.8 ohms minimum)
Frequency Response	20Hz to 45kHz
Recommended Amplifier Power	25 to 500 watts
Wiring Methods	
	Dual binding post
Dimensions	
	68" high (178 cm)
	14.5" wide (37 cm)
	17" deep (43 cm)
Weight	260lb (118 kg) each

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instrument natural resonance' than a cabinet induced coloration. Furthermore there was no apparent compression or mechanical stress, even at intimidating live concert levels.

Yet these big speakers could also sound intimate with solo instruments, keeping the recording venue dimensions, and all its contents, plausible by offering clear geometric boundaries, while maintaining an *invisibility* that contradicted their bulk.

There was an immediate feeling of phase coherency and time alignment. They sounded of one-piece, which seldom is the case with tall three-way, four-driver speakers, the Sagas tending rather towards that most desirable driver concentricity, boasting a perceived polar response more akin to a point-source design, provided you seat at a 'safe' distance of at least three meters. Make it four meters for good measure, if you can.

Stable imaging

As a result, baritone voices tarnished by tobacco and alcohol, such as Dean Martin, Sinatra or Cohen – or Jacques Brel singing 'Jojo' overwhelmed by grief – didn't shift in perceived height in their lower octaves, despite the handover between the drive units: instead, they always exhibited stable imaging, and the same goes for higher pitched female voices that might have been expected to shift higher up towards the tweeter.

Listening to Sinatra and Aretha singing 'What Now, My Love?' (from the *Duets* album) I was presented with an accurate rendering of a male and a female singing *cheek-to-cheek* - even though Sinatra never recorded in the studio with any of his *Duets* partners, despite the sheer presence of both the singers and the spread of the big band.

Even better was Ella and Armstrong's *Can't We Be Friends?*, recorded in the good all days when the musicians played all together. Ella sounded so very real, that the difference in quality between CD/ streaming and LP was not just a reminder of past

things lost, but set the bar very high. From that moment on, no matter how good, digital seemed dull by comparison, even though the Nagra HD DAC (not the latest tubed version) is no slouch when it comes to digital reproduction.

Bass sounded tighter than was the case with Saga predecessors, no doubt revealing of a lower Q, but the speakers could also sound explosive with percussion, for example with the menacing rolling timpani in 'Marche au Suplice' (from the Berlioz *Symphonie fantastique*, the Concertgebouw Orchestra conducted by Sir Colin Davis. The snarling brass and gnawing strings, bassoons lurking in the background, prepared us for the ghastly falling of the severed head, introduced by the 'sliding' clarinet cut short, by the sudden blow of the entire orchestra. The Sagas survived this nightmare with flying colours – and kept their heads!

Jeff Porcaro's kick drum in 'L'Daddy' (from *James Newton Howard & Friends*, Sheffield) came up really tight and punchy, while Ödön Rácz's dramatic double bass, accompanied by The Franz Liszt Chamber Orchestra (in the *Double Bass Concerto in D Major* by Johann Baptist Vanhal, Tidal), kept the lines clean at all times without disrupting the arch of the small supporting orchestra.

But if you really want to hear a double bass energize the air in your listening room play *Moonlight Sonata* (Ray Brown & Laurindo, Almeida). You can feel the bass in your gut, the Saga's downward-venting port coupling with the surrounding air to deliver clean, powerful bass.

Midnight Sugar by the Tsuyoshi Yamamoto Trio goes a long way to justifying spending €170,000 on a pair of loudspeakers: from the endless power of the piano to the filigree detail of the cymbals, it's all there with an astonishing degree of realism. Meanwhile Jen Chapin singing 'You Haven't Done Nothing Yet' (from *Revisions*, Chesky 192/24), with baritone sax (on the left) and a double bass (on the right), recorded with a single stereo microphone in a church, sounded absolutely brilliant. Via the with the Sagas it was clean, articulate, powerful, intense and airy, and almost as much of an audiophile treat as Chie Ayado singing *Mr.Bojangles*.

Of course, soundstaging depends on the recording, but the Sagas have no problem painting realistic sonic pictures, whether with a solo piano, a guitar, a jazz combo or a big band. They can take you to Cobo Hall in Detroit to join the crowd listening to Bob Seeger (*Nine Tonight*, Capitol), even bring to your room the 'thousand voices' of a choir, orchestra and organ performing Mahler's Eighth: *Veni creator spiritus* (CSO/Solti, Decca).

These speakers may be a rarity, but my advice is simple – if you do get an opportunity to hear them, you really should make every effort to do so.

