

WLM Gran Viola & Duo Subwoofer

WLM stands for Wiener Lautspecher Manufaktur which translates to Viennese Loudspeaker Manufacturing—a specialty design and manufacturing company located in Austria near the Swiss border. The company is run by a couple of dedicated music lovers who have also worked in the audio industry long enough to understand that superb sound is very difficult to find. That is why they designed their own line of loudspeakers, apparently without regard for cost, but with heightened regard for quality. Indeed, every model—WLM produces four of them—seems to have been finished with great care and full attention to technical and structural details. The Gran Violas with Duo subwoofer are the company's top of the line loudspeakers, constructed with what seems to be loving care, which brings me to their...

Appearance:

Audio cabinetry can be made inexpensively or shockingly costly depending, of course, on workmanship and materials. The Gran Violas fall into that costly category because the enclosures are made like fine furniture by master cabinet makers. The pair I received were immaculately veneered with rare yew, resulting in a very striking finish. The veneers had been arranged to result in seamless continuity which lends the loudspeakers the appearance of having been made of a solid piece of wood (yew is a hard wood with intricate markings, used by wood sculptors and fine furniture makers). Each enclosure accommodates a ten inch woofer located at the top section—and that's it. The tweeters are housed in their own small enclosures attached to and aligned with the top of each cabinet.

Source:
Globe Audio
Marketing

Price:
\$14,000.00 to
\$22,000.00 US

Rating: 🎵🎵🎵

The enclosures holding the tweeters have a slightly curved front, covered with a perforated metal grille. On the rear, each enclosure has two pairs of WBT terminals mounted on a clearly marked plate that also holds lockable toggle switches for active and passive operation for both drivers, another toggle with a 3dB cut function for the woofer and a variable tweeter control. Everything is arranged in an orderly fashion and even the right and left channel set-up is shown—important for proper alignment. Each enclosure stands 48.03 inches high, with a footprint of 10.63 inches wide x 13 inches deep. The weight is 67.90 pounds for each cabinet.

The Duo subwoofer is huge measuring 32 inches high, almost 20 inches square and weighs 114 pounds and finished with great care to match the quality of the loudspeakers. Its shape is that of a large pedestal, finished on all sides. The enclosure hold two woofers firing up and down and the top is covered by a black grille. The bottom section that holds the other driver is raised about 5 inches off the floor and is supported by the enclosure's four legs, cleverly extended to appear as part of the cabinet.

I find it intriguing, almost surprising, to see the common configuration of a loudspeaker enclosure—a box—made into a beautiful pedestal-like artistic composition. Few other loudspeaker manufacturers offer the immaculate finish and the necessary craftsmanship to attain that distinct appearance of class offered by these loudspeakers. A variety of high-end finishes are available and include Canadian maple, hand-polished piano finish and rosewood.

Technology:

At first glance, the loudspeaker's technical layout seems uncomplicated, but upon closer examination, a complex arrangement becomes apparent. The GVs are available as a pair without the subwoofer and external crossover. A simple bi-wire hook-up will get them playing in no time. Alternatively, a two-

way electronic crossover can be used to drive the basic two-way system with two sets of amplifiers—this system works extremely well. The third possible configuration works with the addition of a subwoofer with another crossover module and an additional external amplifier. The subwoofer is optional and works within the system to augment frequencies below 90Hz. A suitable amplifier must be connected to the sub' terminals and the signal is derived from the bass module, connected to the preamplifier. All this may seem a bit complicated, but isn't all that difficult: signal into (active) crossover from the preamplifier; frequencies divided by the crossover; divided signal to power amplifiers; cables from power amplifier to loudspeakers—simple, or is it? Now to the GV's components. Each enclosure holds a 10-inch woofer that features an old-fashioned doped paper cone. I'm not going to presume the company's justification for the use of paper cones, but I do know that many loudspeaker designers love the paper's reaction to an electrical stimulus—resulting in a somewhat softer, likely more musical response and increased speed. WLM chose a US-made midrange and woofer from Eminence and they state that no other high-end manufacturer could match the performance of these drivers. The enclosures are kept off the floor with 35mm spikes to achieve the correct distance between a quasi port (exactly 110mm in diameter) and the floor on which they rest. The spikes are specially made by a German contractor and, though they are a small part of the entire loudspeaker assembly, they do contribute to the all-round sonic quality.

The separately mounted tweeters are housed in their own small, slightly curved mini enclosures, behind perforated metal grilles. The enclosure is impenetrable yields no information as to the type, configuration or anything else for that matter. However, I think that the tweeters provide extreme dispersion characteristics and sonic resemblance to the woofer thus integrating effortlessly

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with the system's overall sound. An alignment gauge—a simple device—allows the listener to place the loudspeakers for maximum imaging.

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The GV's built-in crossover is activated when two toggle switches (for tweeter and midrange/woofer) are in the "up" position. There is a variable tweeter control adjustable from -4 to +2. The mid/woofer offers another adjustment toggle—0dB and -3dB. Two pairs of high quality three-way binding posts allow bi-wiring or bi-amping.

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The external active crossover offers a lot more adjustments and allows listeners to customize the sound for room acoustics, personal preference or both. Depending on what system configuration is chosen, you can get the GV system without the active crossover, a two-way or a three-way crossover. If you choose the basic arrangement (just a pair of GVs) you can upgrade later with a two-way crossover design and add the third module at a later date. The crossover modules offer a lot of flexibility and allow separate volume adjustments for high, mid and bass frequencies. Other adjustments can be made to vary the acoustic characteristics, the "harmonic wave" and "bass line". In other words, the system can be adjusted to integrate with the listening environment, the amplifiers used in the set-up and last, but not least, to suit personal preferences.

I found the crossover modules handy to fine-tune and harmonize the sound with the production attributes of CDs which vary greatly. The specs state that the GVs' frequency response is from 25Hz to 20kHz—a rough estimate, as my tests showed a more precise range from 27.5Hz—the lowest note on a keyboard to the inaudible but harmonics-rich

20kHz. Now to the use of the WLM system in a tri-amplified and sub-woofered set-up...

The Sound:

The Gran Violas came to *TIER's* listening studio broken in and all I had to do was to connect them to the amplifiers. For my first auditioning session, I used the Wyetech Labs 300B Sapphire monoblocks (reviewed in Vol. 16 #2) to drive the GV's high frequency drivers, an Audio Aero stereo power amplifier, the Capitole for the midrange and one Bryston 7B SST (part of a pair of monoblocks) for the subwoofer. All connections were made with Nordost Valhalla and Valkyrja cables. An Audio Aero Capitole CD player (reviewed in Vol. 15 #2) served as the source component.

The hook-up wasn't simple as the active crossovers had to be placed and connected properly—three amplifier outputs and one preamplifier input. Then I proceeded to adjust the crossover's controls for gain, phase and crossover points until I was happy that the various parts integrated harmoniously. I spent some time fine tuning and made sure that I couldn't hear one or the other component in the system. The blending of subwoofer, midrange and highs didn't take a lot of time, though I had some help—it's easier when one person listens and the other operates the controls. Satisfied with my tweaking, I began listening to my favourite CDs, which I had carefully chosen for production quality and musical content. I played back *Todo Sobre De Madre*—full range musical arrangements featuring violins, horn, tympani and lots of deep bass. This CD exemplifies difficult-to-reproduce material as the music ranges from fortissimo to pianissimo, sometimes simultaneously. The GVs handled every tonal shade, dynamic extreme, delicate detail and complex musical passage with ease and the kind of musical flow and continuity I had never before experienced. Well, I thought, now to the B3 organ—Joey De Francesco's *One Take*. This CD features the driving sound of jazz, expertly played

by a master organ grinder. Again, the B3 never sounded more authentic, the drum far back on the sound stage, the horn steadfast up front and the B3 slightly behind the horn—simply awesome and unpretentiously realistic. Unpretentious, because nothing was added that didn't belong—and all without missing an iota of the instruments' harmonics and/or timbre. To see/hear what these loudspeakers can do with female vocal, I played back a CD titled *Mozart Portraits* featuring Cecilia Bartoldi on the London label. This 1993 recording is likely the best production to capture Bartoldi's crystal clear voice; and the GVs handled it with ease and, in fact, revealed musical subtleties never heard before. To bear out what I had heard, I played another CD—an EMI Classic label with a recording of **MOZART'S Le Nozze Di Figaro** under the direction of Riccardo Muti featuring Kathleen Battle as Susanna and Thomas Allen as Figaro. Again, I was impressed with the loudspeakers' ability to "extract" more musical information. On this CD, sound stage dimensions, air around instruments and voices and the effortless overall presentation made me believe that I was listening to a live performance. To test the subwoofer for bass accuracy and resolution, I used the Fidelio recording of *Sept Paroles Du Christ* with fundamental notes at 27.5Hz (an A). While I have heard this CD many times, I have never heard power and resolution all the way down to the lowest fundamental (and what I used to regard as harmonics under the fundamental tone(s) were NOT, they were cabinet resonances—very pleasant ones, but not accurate at all). The GVs handled the lowest note, but didn't introduce cabinet colouration thus resulting in absolute resolution.

Needless to say, my "ordinary" blues, folk and popular music albums never sounded better, but poorly produced CDs simply didn't cut it—these speakers are just too good for cheap recordings. The crossover adjustments almost invite one to "tweak" and I did what comes

naturally—carefully turning the various knobs until I perceived proper integration of high, mids and bass. It's best to do this with the help of another person, but once the set-up is done, the final tweaks can be made from the listening position with the (included) remote control. I found that adjustments are useful to fine-tune the sound to correspond with the various productions of the software (CDs or vinyl).

Two things came to light in the few weeks I operated the system: fine tuning while playing one CD often isn't right for another, because no two are produced/mixed the same and, though there are more components in the signal path when using active crossovers, they did not diminish performance. In high-end, where typically "less is more", the complexity of the full-blown Gran Violas and Duo subwoofer system stands as the exception to the rule. Fact is, the component combination I used turned out to be made for those who wish to assemble an entire synergistic system where every component contributes to the sound so as to reach the top rung on the performance ladder. Here is a recommended system—high-end, high performance and hi fidelity at its best. Total price: About \$120,000. Total benefits: Music without hearing the system.

Synopsis & Commentary:

The Gran Violas without the sub sounded good enough to me with the controls set for "passive" using just one pair of Sapphire amplifiers. However, in the bi-amplified mode and active crossover two-way configuration, the performance, meaning refinement, went up by about 20%. The full-blown three-way active system (with sub) raised the performance level another 20% or so, thereby carrying the musical elements through to completion. Nevertheless, the GVs easily held their own when connected in the very simple and basic configuration. It is important to provide quality amplification and, though the GVs can handle power, this isn't as important as an amp's level of refinement, which is often found in low

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powered SE amplifiers. Remember that the final sonic character of reproduced sound is imposed by the weakest link in the chain of components, which is why I used the components described above. In my column, "Notes from the Editor's desk", I listed what I'm looking for in a good system and/or loudspeaker and I'd like to repeat my wish list, because the Gran Violas perform within its realm:

1) Firm—but not hard; 2) Sweet—but not sugary; 3) Tight—but not constrained; 4) Wide in reach—but not infinite; 5) Deep—but not bottomless; 6) Detailed—but not detached; 7) Dynamic—but not forceful; 8) Full bodied—but not opulent; 9) Balanced—but not monotonous; 10) Resolute—but not rough.

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The Gran Violas did all this and had me musing about forgeries of famous paintings and hundred dollar bills that were so good that only learned experts could distinguish the difference. In a way these loudspeakers are impeccable forgeries of art—musical art. They are what I'd call the mirror image of the art form, inasmuch as they are capable of authentically reproducing the original works on a live stage. Owning these babies is like having Beethoven, Brubeck or the Beatles dropping in for an intimate concert. The Gran Violas aren't inexpensive to be sure, but then again, neither are the artists, if you could get them to perform in your home. ¶

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