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Ascend Acoustics Sierra-1 A great loudspeaker foundation for an audio system.

Review By Clarke Robinson

In some ways, writing about Ascend Acoustics' new Sierra-1 bookshelf monitor is an easy job. Easy because, simply put, the Sierra-1 is the best loudspeaker ever made under \$1000.

There, I said it.

Now, I could make this the shortest review ever and just leave it at that. That is, if I wanted half my readers to write me off as ignorant, and have the other half fire a salvo of angry emails that my new editor (new, in that this is my first review for enjoythemusic.com) would certainly force me to answer. I wouldn't blame you! I was skeptical at first myself... allow me to explain:

A few months ago, I wrote a glowing review of Ascend's CMT-340SE for another online publication. Great speakers these 340s as they are articulate, clean, and uncolored as anything I'd ever had in my system. I liked them so much I bought the review samples. About a month and a half after that review went online, Dave Fabrikant (president & chief designer of Ascend Acoustics) started making audacious claims on his company's Internet message board about a new speaker he had coming out:



"The Sierra is quiet and clean like few loudspeakers I have ever heard, yet it is dynamic and punchy, extremely refined and airy, and most important -- incredibly easy to listen to."

"It would be at home at \$1,500/pr or \$4000/pr, ... it is that unique."

"It is deeper and more dynamic than many 'full range' floorstanders I have auditioned.

"The bass response will surprise you and if you have a sub, I think you will be turning it off."

Turns out the loudspeaker he was gushing about so frothily was a 5.25" two-way called the Sierra-1, and he was going to start selling it for \$798 a pair that very week. Now, you need to understand Dave Fabrikant, as he's not a marketing guy and not prone to excessive hyperbole. He doesn't even really like running a speaker company, so being president of Ascend is kind of like a side job to what he really likes doing, which is design speakers (and play racquetball).

I wondered why this normally straightforward guy was making up such outrageous excrement du taureau... a 5.25" driver that was going to make me want to turn off my subwoofer? A \$798 bookshelf two-way that keeps up with speakers in the \$4000 range? Yeah, right. I was beginning to think the four-and-a-half years that Fabrikant spent designing the Sierra has somehow knocked a screw loose in his head...or maybe he was really on to something. Either would make a pretty good story, so I put in for a pair of review samples.

Looking

Fast-forward about two weeks: the Sierra-1 arrived, and I was impressed right off the bat. Up close, the natural finish bamboo cabinets look amazing. Sure, they look good in the photos on Ascend's website, but pictures don't do justice to the exquisite joinery and sturdiness of these cabinets...to say "they pass the knuckle rap test" is a major understatement. Turns out bamboo is a near-perfect material for speaker cabinets: stronger (in this application) than steel, it has excellent sonic damping properties, natural good looks (something you certainly can't say about MDF), and eco-friendliness.

The Sierra-1 is just over 14 inches tall, with the same footprint as the CMT-340SE (7.5" x 10.5"). That these speakers share two dimensions is no accident, it was actually the first decision made regarding the physical aspects of the Sierra. The 340s have exceptional horizontal dispersion characteristics due to their narrow baffle, so Fabrikant made the decision to use it again to make initial computer modeling of the Sierra more accurate.

It was a great choice from my perspective, because all I had to do to set up the Sierra-1 was plop them down on the 340's dedicated stands (Ascend's TP-24 simple MDF boxes with floor spikes, each filled with 50 lbs. of playground sand), which I already had positioned 32 inches from the front wall, about seven feet apart, toed in directly at my listening chair ten feet away. This position provided excellent imaging and horizontal soundstage, as well as spectacular bass...flat to around the mid- to high-30s in my room.

Fabrikant was right! I turned off my subwoofer within one minute of my first listening session.

Later on, I experimented with moving the Sierra to about 54 inches into the room. I lost a little bass reinforcement (I forgot to measure, but I'm guessing high 30s-low 40s, similar to Ascend's published specs) but the soundstage grew *dramatically* in depth and height. Unfortunately, this is a "special occasion only" setup for me, as it requires a rather inconvenient furniture rearrangement...I've settled for day-to-day listening at around three feet from the front wall. The Sierra aren't what I'd call fussy about placement (they sounded good everywhere I tried them), but when it comes to tweaking the presentation, inches do matter. Care in positioning pays unmistakable dividends.

Listening

Beside the bass, the first thing that struck me about the sound of the Sierra-1 was the highs: flawlessly detailed, and yet velvety smooth and airy. The Sierra hides none of the detail lurking in the pits on my CDs, but displays it all in a way that is a pleasure to listen to. This was a revelation for me, because I'd always thought of detailed and smooth as polar opposites in the sound spectrum. Revealing or musical? Accurate or euphonic? Having both just never occurred to me, at least not for under \$1000 a pair. Turns out this was exactly the sound that Fabrikant pursued relentlessly for four and a half years. In his words:

"It [was] a concentrated effort to reduce the common causes of harshness and listener fatigue while maintaining and enhancing detail and transient reproduction. For example, the bamboo cabinet reduces cabinet resonances which can be a cause of harshness, while at the same time, it enhances detail because it is quieter than MDF thus allowing the listener to better recognize low-level detail that might normally be masked by various noises produced by the cabinet itself. The entire speaker, from top to bottom, was designed with this philosophy."



I'm not sure how to describe a midrange that isn't there. I don't mean recessed, I mean completely transparent. The Sierra has no "sound" in the mids...midrange-dominant instruments (and that would be pretty much all of them: piano, guitar, horns, stings, the human voice, etc.) are presented with a compelling allure simply because they *sound like instruments*. Transient articulation is fast and controlled, and dynamics are astounding for such a small speaker.

If I could only gush praises on one aspect of the Sierra-1, it would be the bass. This is not the forced, "chuffing out the rear port, trying too hard to sound like a big speaker" kind of bass, I'm talking about cognitive disconnect inducing, "where did you hide the subwoofer?" kind of bass...after two months I still find myself looking in the corner to make sure my subs are off. Mickey Hart's *Planet Drum* has been a bass-nut favorite for years, thanks to an instrument called the earth drum on the track "Temple Caves". Different systems present this monster in a variety of ways, sometimes in a "you can't hear it, you feel it" kind of way; sometimes in a boomy, obnoxious way; but on the Sierra it sounds shockingly real: I can hear the skin of the drum vibrating the air around it.

Fact is, the reason I turn off my subwoofers with the Sierra isn't because I don't need them (the subs still play lower and are more effective at pressurizing the room...although the little 5.25 incher on the Sierra does better at this than you'd imagine), it's because music on the Sierra sounds *better* without them...tighter, more controlled, with unbelievable low-end nuance and detail. I'm sure a subwoofer exists that will do the Sierra justice...I've heard some have had success with the JL Audio Fathom f112, but I've got a '93 Corolla to replace and a bathroom remodel to pay off before any \$2600 subwoofer is going to be crossing my front door step. In the mean time, however, (and I thought I'd never say this about a stand-mounted monitor) I am completely satisfied with the bass on the Sierra-1.

Of course, great treble, mids, and bass would mean nothing if they didn't come together into a cohesive whole, and that's the job of crossover. Having no crossover at all is the ideal. Crossoverless, single-driver speakers, free from the timing and phase errors of their multi-way cousins, have a lifelike quality that seems to put nothing between the music and myself. Fabrikant has really knocked one out of the park on Sierra's crossover, which he calls an "Optimized Paradiromic Phase Integrated X-Over", or OPPIX. Careful attention to phase distortion gives the Sierra more of the "single-driver" sound than any dynamic speaker I've ever had in my system. Imaging is precise, and the soundstage wide...perhaps not quite as natural as some single-drivers I've heard, but as far as delivering the entire musical package (complete with bass and output levels you can feel) I'll stick with the Sierra.

...And More Listening

I'm a huge fan of the upright acoustic bass, so with the Sierra's bass performance as good as it is, it should come as no surprise that many great players have been spending time on my system lately. The acoustic bass is a beautiful and incredibly nuanced instrument... it takes a lot more than good low-end extension to bring one to life in your living room, but that's exactly what the Sierra does. On Scott LeFaro's performance on Bill Evans' *Sunday at the Village Vanguard*, Peter Kowald's *Was Da Ist*, Dave Holland's *One's All*, and others; each player's unique tone is presented with conviction and impact. If reproducing the bass this well was all that the Sierra-1 did, I'd still consider keeping them around. Fortunately, though, they are far from being a one trick pony.

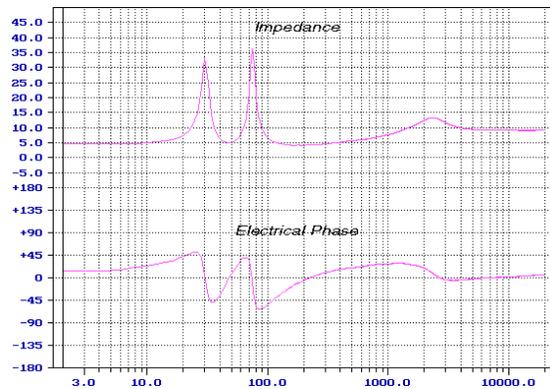
The Sierra-1 gave an engaging performance with every kind of music I threw their way. During the course of the review, I hit them with albums as diverse as Tool's *10,000 Days*, John Abercrombie's *The Third Quartet*, Eva Cassidy's *Songbird*, Stevie Wonder's *Songs in the Key of Life*, and many points beyond and between. They never failed to get out of the way of the music and inspire an emotional or physical response, whether that was putting me in a contemplative mood, getting me out of my seat and getting down, or pounding my fist in the air banging my head.

I was a bit nervous, however, about how the Sierra-1 would do with concert music. I loved what it did with soloists and chamber ensembles, but those are still just 5.25" drivers, and I've had enough small speakers around to know that the reproduction of a full orchestra can be their tripping point. I needn't have worried. Sure, they were a touch congested during loud, intricate passages when played at visceral levels (actually, "congested" is too strong a word... "not effortless" is more like it), but cueing up Charles Munch and the Chicago Symphony's 1959 recording of Saint-Saëns' *Symphony #3* (RCA Living Stereo SACD), was a thrill. The soundstage grew so wide, the (albeit miniaturized) orchestra appeared in a 180-degree panorama across my living room, with the "hall sound" generated by the 32' organ pipes emanating from behind my listening chair...and this on my modest 2-channel system.

Plays Nicely With Others

Of particular interest to the budget audiophile is the Sierra's remarkably linear impedance response. From about 1kHz on up, the impedance curve is within a few ohms of ruler flat, not dipping below 8 Ohms...this is an incredibly easy speaker to drive. Efficiency is fairly low by today's standards, around 86dB/W/m, so you'll still want a lot of watts. Watts are cheap these days, though, and cheap watts will do to drive the Sierra.

For the majority of the review period, I ran the Sierra on less than \$300 in electronics...a Sony SCD-CE595 spinning discs into an 80-watt Denon DRA-395 stereo receiver I picked up refurbished for around \$130. Humble-fi indeed, but I've heard \$20,000 systems that didn't do as much for me. Later on in the review period I took delivery of a Parasound Model 2100 preamp and Model 2125 amplifier (review to come). The Sierra took to the additional juice like an altitude-sick Kilimanjaro hiker to oxygen, improving dynamics and extending the frequency response in both directions (that's right, even more bass).



Okay, But Is It Really The Best <\$1000 Speaker Ever Made?

Despite the sensational statement I used to begin this review, I don't really believe in "best". This is audio, after all, and personal taste reigns. I'm sure there are people out there who simply have no use for a highly accurate stand-mounted monitor, no matter how great the bass is, how much (or how little) it costs, or how long you can listen to it without fatigue. That said, I sincerely believe the Sierra-1 is the least compromised speaker currently available under \$1000 (yes, I'm including floorstanders in that). Challengers are welcome.



I say "least compromised" because compromise is the name of the game in speaker design. However, the limitations of the Sierra-1 are really only those inherent to all small speakers... efficiency, dynamics, and overall volume output. Dynamics are nonetheless remarkable for a speaker its size, and while there are many larger speakers that can beat the Sierra in total volume, they don't do badly in that area, either. My room is fairly large, about 13' wide by 25' long, but during my "push it to the limit" test (where I turn up Green Day's *American Idiot* until the speaker audibly distorts) the Sierra didn't cry uncle until SPLs were beyond comfortable.

Every speaker has strengths...if you spend enough time with anything decently designed (and that's most everything these days) you're bound to fall in love with the sweeter aspects of their performance. It is at that point of the review process I find it useful to do direct comparisons. The Sierra-1 outperform the best speakers I had around (the CMT-340SEs) in almost every area. I needed something to compare them to that was well outside their price range, and for that I enlisted the help of a local dealer: AudioVision SF in San Francisco.

There are many different types of audio dealers. Some are okay, many are not, but AudioVision SF is what you hope for any time you walk in to a hi-fi shop. They represent a broader range of manufacturers than any shop I've ever seen, and Chris, a refreshingly low-pressure salesperson, loves this stuff and he's not afraid to show it off. I made an appointment initially to compare the Sierra-1 with the much-lauded Dynaudio Focus 140, around \$1800...an excellent speaker that was designed, like the Sierra, with total neutrality in mind. After a few swaps I really couldn't hear any difference between the two. To hear anything resembling an improvement over the Sierra-1, we had to step up to the Dali Helicon 300, a cool \$3299 a pair.

The Dalis demonstrated a broader dynamic range and even smoother highs than the Sierra. If the Sierra-1 treble is like velvet, the Helicon 300 treble is like crème brûlée (just without the crunchy top)... every demo disc I brought in sounded *gorgeous*. This made for intoxicatingly pleasurable listening for three of the four selections I played (McCoy Tyner's *New York Reunion*, Paquito D'Rivera's *Portraits of Cuba*, and the aforementioned Saint-Saëns Symphony #3), but the creamy Dalis went with AC/DC's *Back in Black* about as well as crème brûlée goes with a cold Budweiser. Smooth and gorgeous isn't the same as neutral...I couldn't live with a speaker that falls down (or, to put it bluntly, wimps out) with rock music, although I'm sure there are people out there who could.

Conclusions

By the time you read this, the price of the Sierra-1 will have probably gone up to \$898 for the natural finish, and \$958 for the piano black. That's not chump change, but for those whose toy budget can open far enough to accommodate them, I give the Sierra-1 my highest recommendation.

Despite the price, the Sierra is an amazing value. The improvements it makes over Ascend's previous flagship (the CMT-340SE, \$568/pr) are significant...most manufacturers would have you pay 2 to 3 times more for an upgrade of this magnitude. The fact that Ascend does not is due to Dave Fabrikant's insistence on pricing his products only in proportion to their cost of manufacture (an unusually rare position in this industry). Four and half years of sweat equity on the Sierra-1's design is thrown in for free.

If you are one of the more well-heeled among us, and happen to be in the market for an accurate yet enjoyable stand-mounted monitor in the upper echelons of the price continuum, I encourage you to put the Sierra-1 on your short list. Open your mind (or more importantly, your ears)...great things await those who dissuade themselves of the notion that spending more money always equals better sound.

For the serious music lover (I'm talking about those of us who spend more on music each year than we spend on gear our entire lives) or budget audiophile, the age-old truism of "put the majority of your money in speakers" could not ring more true here. The Sierra-1 makes a great foundation to an audio system, one that you can upgrade around for years (or not)...they could be the last speakers you ever buy. In fact, they may well be the last that I ever buy.

Specifications

Type: two-way rear ported monitor loudspeaker

Tweeter: 26mm high-definition soft dome tweeter w/integrated elastomer wave guide, wide surround, low-viscosity magnetic fluid cooling, pole-piece damping chamber. Manufactured by SEAS of Norway

Woofers: Proprietary 5.25" long throw mineral-filled polypropylene cone, non-resonant cast aluminum frame, copper shorting rings, low-inductance motor assembly, vented pole-piece and vented spider.

Typical In-Room Frequency Response: 39Hz to 22kHz (± 3dB)

In-Room Sensitivity: 87dB/W/m

Average Impedance: 8 Ohms

Minimum Recommended Power: 45 watts (400 watts peak)

Cabinet: Exclusive V-LAM construction featuring vertically laminated bamboo.

Dimensions: 14.25 x 7.5 x 10.5 (HxWxD in inches)

Weight (each): 20 lbs each

Connectors: Gold plated all metal 5-way binding posts.

Warranty: 7 years parts and labor

Price \$798 is natural finish, \$858 in piano black

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