

Ascend Acoustics CMT-340 SE

By Clarke Robinson

Specifications

Typical In-Room Frequency Response 45Hz - 20kHz
 +/- 3dB
 In-Room Sensitivity 92dB @ 1 watt / 1 meter
 Frequency Response (Anechoic) 48Hz - 24kHz
 +/- 3dB
 Sensitivity (Anechoic) 90dB @ 1 watt/ 1 meter
 Average Impedance 8 ohms
 Minimum Recommended Power 35 watts
 Maximum Continuous Power 240 watts
 Maximum Short Term Peak Power 400 watts
 Cabinet Internally Braced 5/8" MDF, Magnetically
 Shielded, Bass Reflex via Rear Tuned Port
 Dimensions H x W x D (grill on) 21" x 7.5" x 10.5"
 Dimensions H x W x D (with stands) 45" x 10" x 14"
 Weight (each) 26 lbs. each
 Tweeter: (1) High-definition 27mm soft dome tweeter w/
 damping chamber and wide roll surround, ferrofluid
 damped voice coil, wide dispersion faceplate, magneti-
 cally shielded
 Woofer (2) proprietary 6.5" long throw polygel cone
 woofers w/phase plug, non-resonant polymer chassis,
 rubber surround, shielded
 Connectors (4) gold plated all metal 5 way binding
 posts, bi-wire ready.
 Price \$568/pair, optional stands \$140/pair

Without question, the best fast food restaurant in the Western U.S. is In 'n' Out Burger. They consistently deliver the freshest, best quality ground beef sandwiches available within arm's reach of your driver's-side window. Their secret? Focus. Their entire menu consists of just three items: the Hamburger with onions, the Cheeseburger with onions, and the Double Double. Optionally, you can get fries, a soda, or a shake. That's it. No chicken, no fish filets, no burritos or chipotle bacon ciabatta whatever...they just keep it simple, and do it right.

If speaker companies were fast food restaurants, Ascend Acoustics would be In 'n' Out Burger. Ascend was started in February of 2000 by an experienced team of audio pros (head honcho Dave Fabrikant is a veteran of M&K Sound) with the goal of providing the highest possible sound quality at the most affordable price. Since then they have added but three products to their line up: a compact sealed speaker (the HTM-200), an award-winning 6.5" bookshelf speaker (the CBM-170

SE), and its larger sibling, the MTM-aligned CMT-340 SE.

The original version of the CMT-340 was released in 2003, three years after the birth of the much-lauded CBM-170. Both were redesigned last year and given the "SE" distinction

(meaning "special edition"). Most of the SE improvements were to the drivers (Ascend designs their own drivers but has them built by outside vendors: the tweeters by SEAS of Norway, the woofers by a manufacturer that Fabrikant has agreed not to name). The tweeter was completely redesigned, resulting in im-



proved frequency response in both directions; and a new cone material was developed for the woofers, allowing better bass performance with lower distortion.

Not Exactly Love at First Sight

To be honest, I didn't think much of the CMT-340s when they first came out of the box. Built out of 5/8" MDF, they're not particularly heavy, and barely passed the "knuckle rap" test. Also, and maybe I'm getting spoiled by AV123's gorgeous veneers, but for \$568 a pair I was somewhat put out by the Ascend's unremarkable black "orange peel" texture vinyl finish.

If the build quality of the 340s was cause for concern, the matching stands were cause for

alarm. These are basically hollow boxes made from even lighter 1/2" MDF and the same black vinyl siding, albeit with a set of good quality brass spikes.

Mind you, they don't look bad, and even though their black vinyl finish matches nothing in my living room, at only 7.5" wide they don't really stand out. The 340s are technically mini-towers (21" tall), but when mounted on the stands they certainly look the part of floorstanding tower speakers, rivaling in appearance most anything you can find at a typical big box electronics chain.

Don't Judge a Book by its Cover

...or a set of speakers by its cheap vinyl finish. I positioned the CMT-340s according to manual's (very specific) directions: 2 feet from the wall behind them, 7.3 feet apart, toed in directly at the listening position 10 feet away. Once I put on some music, I went slack-jawed...I was struck immediately by the 340s articulate sound, with a detailed, airy presentation I've only thought possible with much more expensive speakers.

At first, I did notice a slight boxy coloration in the mids. It was subtle, but would stand out for the first few minutes of each listening session...after that my ears would adjust and the coloration seemed to fade. I suspected a cabinet resonance, and fired off an email to Dave to ask what he thought. The cabinets, it turns out, are braced and damped in very specific (and effective) ways; he thought the culprit was probably the stands, which he strongly recommended be filled with sand or shot. The only requirement

was that the material be thoroughly dry, as moisture is an enemy of MDF. One trip to Home Depot later and each stand was filled with 50 lbs. of kiln-dried playground sand (total cost around \$10)...and I haven't heard that boxy coloration since. Gone also was any notion of the 340s dedicated stands being lightweight or inadequate for the task...at 50 lbs. each, they are now the most solid fixtures in my system.



The CMT-340s highs have a crisp presence that is extended without being overbearing. The bass is tight and tuneful, not bleeding into the lower mids at all. This could make them sound bass shy to some, but I assure you the bass is there (flat to below 50Hz in my room), it just doesn't make itself known unless specifically called upon. Still, the 340s benefit greatly from the addition of a subwoofer...I used a single Onix x-sub (easily the most musical sub you'll find for \$200) for the majority of my listening tests.

As nice as the 340s bass & treble are, their pièce de résistance is the midrange. Neutral but lively, this seems to be the heart of where

the Ascends' detail lies. The new CMT-340 SE drivers use a new light-mass cone material Ascend calls "polygel", which, according to Fabrikant, "combined with the advanced motor assembly used and a real phase plug (which eliminates compression caused by a dust cap) allows the woofer to reproduce fast and accurate transients." That means when the ampli-

fier tells the speaker to stop playing, it stops... quickly. Subtle details (like the guitar pick scraping the string just before the note sounds) are kept intact, as are the even more subtle sonic clues that make up accurate imaging and soundstage.



This gives the 340s a level of detail that is precise but non-fatiguing. I was able to listen to the 340s for hours on end, and I never found them unmusical or uninvolved. A good example of this was with *Led Zeppelin II*...a recording with a boatload of raw rock 'n' roll energy, but a fair helping of studio artifacts as well. Clinical

sounding speakers will call so much attention to the latter that you miss out on the former, but this was not the case with the Ascends. While they made the musical (and non-musical) detail in the recording clearly audible, they presented this rock classic with enough guts that it practically begged to be turned up. When I did, they gave it back to me in spades, hitting volume levels that got my fist pumping and head banging even in my 13x20 foot living room.

Of course, speakers capable of demonstrating such nuance do far more than rock. An audiophile acquaintance of mine recently turned me on to Holly Cole's album of Tom Waits covers, *Temptation*. "Unless your speakers are up to it, it sounds like something is missing from this recording," he advised. I first gave it a spin at work, with a pair of \$25 headphones¹ plugged in to the side of my laptop. Something was indeed missing, and I wondered just what all the fuss was about this recording. When I came home and cued it up on the Ascends, however, Cole's vocals came to life, and her band's deeply understated sense of groove bubbled to the surface.

The CMT-340s are particularly effective on large ensemble recordings, quite often the bane of smaller speakers, which can have trouble keeping up during complex musical passages. One of my favorite moments with them was with Paquito D'Rivera's powerful *Portraits of Cuba*, a Chesky SACD with particularly good recording quality. I had it playing loud in the living room one night while attempting to clean the kitchen one room away...I was continually pulled back into the living room, as I was repeatedly convinced there was a 14-piece Cuban horn band in my house!

David Murray, for my money the world's greatest living saxophone player, has long been a noteworthy composer and arranger as well. This is demonstrated powerfully on his Octet recordings, where he has always managed to make his band sound bigger than it really is. This illusion wasn't lost when listening to Murray's classic *Home* (Black Saint 120055) on the Ascends. However, they presented the music with more space around each musician than I've previously heard, which gave me new insights into the brilliant timbral and harmonic contrasts Murray uses to get his "big band" sound.

The same can be said for symphonic recordings...I was transfixed hearing specific instrument placements in Fritz Reiner and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra's *Also Sprach Za-*

rathustra (RCA Living Stereo, SACD). The 340s also did an excellent job with the schizophrenic dynamics of Berlioz' *Symphonie Fantastique* (Mercury Living Presence, SACD), in particular the dramatic tympani/oboe duet section near the end of the 3rd movement, and the chaotic finale. I did detect a bit of congestion near the end of the 1st movement, where I couldn't quite hear each individual mallet strike in some of the more complex tympani work, however this could just as well be room sound from the original masters (the performance was recorded, after all, in 1959...in a Detroit high school auditorium).

Room sound is a big part of avant-garde alto sax player Jemeel Moondoc's *Spirit House* (Eremit 029), recorded live in Bezanson Recital Hall at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. The naturally-recorded reverb present in the hall was portrayed realistically, making for a particularly life-like listening experience...I found myself clapping after the solos! The spirited performance gets a bit cacophonous at times, especially during two conducted group improvisations, but the 340s projected a consistent, stable image of each of the 10 musicians position on stage (7 horns plus a guitar, bass & drum rhythm section), making the complex music easier to follow.

Comparisons

During my time with the Ascends, I borrowed a pair of the highly-regarded Von Schweikert VR-1s from a friend. The VR-1s are mini monitors, but at nearly twice the price of the 340s, I thought they would make good competition.

In a beauty contest, the VR-1s would walk away with the rhinestone-encrusted tiara in a heartbeat. The least expensive of Von Schweikert's venerable line, they sport the same light maple veneer available on their five and six-figure models, and 45° chamfered edges give them a touch of class that the Ascends don't attempt.

When the lights went down and the music came on, however, these two were much

more difficult to tell apart. Both were obviously voiced with neutrality in mind, and each arrived close enough to the goal that I was unable to pick a favorite. The VR-1s have more extended bass, which gave a solidity and weightiness to their lower midrange presentation that bested the 340s during full-range listening, but this advantage diminished with the use of a subwoofer. The VR-1s also threw a wider soundstage, and boasted a smoother top-end (although I'm not 100% convinced that this "smoothness" was anything more than treble roll-off).

Although the Ascends' more punchy upper mids made the Steinway Model D on Keith Jarrett's *Carnegie Hall Concert* and the Bösendorfer Imperial on Clark Terry's *One on One* sound a tad bright (two pianos not normally known for being bright), they brought a welcome presence to vocals, guitar, saxophone, trumpet, etc. that the more polite VR-1s lacked. Also, the 340s are 3db more efficient in-room (according to both manufacturer's specs), and with double the midrange cone area, are capable of playing a good deal louder before running out of steam.

I don't really know which speaker had the most neutral, uncolored presentation, as I wasn't there for the final mixdown of any of the recordings I own. I found most of the differences between these two sets of speakers to be just that: differences, and one could make a case for either speaker based on individual priorities. It is entirely possible that higher quality electronics could reveal subtle refinements in the VR-1s more clearly, but overall I found that while the Ascends may not be giant killers, they can stand comfortably in their presence without embarrassment.

Conclusions

The longer I spend with the CMT-340s, the more convinced I am that Ascend got the recipe absolutely right: a perfect combination of quality sound, transparency, and value. These are serious speakers...probably the most "no nonsense" I've ever had in my system. They

won't pass for fine furniture, and they won't caress your ears with sweet, tubey warmth. If either of these is something you're looking for, look elsewhere. What the Ascends are great at is providing a clear window into your recordings, and they do it in a lively, dynamic way. These are speakers I could live with for a very long time.

1. Sennheiser HD-201s. While they certainly fall into the category of cheap headphones, these are actually an incredible bargain, and sound leagues better than anything I've heard in the price range (they make a noticeable improvement over the stock iPod earbuds). \$25 is \$25 however, and they're only going to take you so far.

Ascend Acoustics Manufacturer's Comments

Thanks for the review, Clarke and I am pleased that you enjoyed the speakers. I think

it is important to note that in order to deliver this level of performance at this price point, compromises are necessary. Most (if not all) loudspeaker manufacturers allocate the bulk of production costs to the cabinetry and finish. Our approach is a bit different in that the majority of our production costs are spent on the "guts" of the loudspeaker, namely the proprietary drivers and advanced crossover — the components that we feel matter most. For those consumers who desire a less discrete and fancier finish, we offer gorgeous custom finishing options for an additional fee.

David Fabrikant



The highest quality
and the greatest passion
in hi-end amplification

www.rudistor.com

General product information:

info@rudistor.com

USA/Canada representative:

us-operations@rudistor.com

RudiStor Sound Systems is a trademark of Audio Research Alliance LLC



RPX-33



RP 5.1



NX-33

Interview: Dave Fabrikant of Ascend Acoustics

By Clarke Robinson

A\$\$A - How/when did you first get into audio as a hobby? What was your first audio system?

Dave Fabrikant - I think I was about 8 years old. I was fascinated with my grandfather's audio system, can't use the term "stereo" as it was a monaural system. The single loudspeaker, I believe it was a Fisher, was the size of a refrigerator. A few years later (I think I was 10) I blew up one of my father's loudspeakers and I convinced him that I could fix it and make it sound better. That was not as easy as I thought it was going to be ;-)



A\$\$A - What is your all-time favorite speaker/amp combination?

DF - For a long time my favorite combination was a Spectral DMA-250 amp with matching DMC-20 pre-amp together with a pair of the original B&W matrix 801s. Over the past few years, I must say that the TAD Reference-1 mated with the right amp is amongst the best I have ever heard. But to be perfectly frank, I have a very special pair of Ascends that I absolutely love listening too and I feel compare well with some of the best I have ever heard. These are my current favorites.

A\$\$A - How/when did you first get into audio as a career?

DF - I think it was 1982 — I worked as a tech in the service room of a popular A/V retail

chain. When they started to outsource service, they moved me into "sales" where I spent most of my time locked away in the soundroom listening to all the different loudspeakers.

A\$\$A - What is your favorite aspect of running a speaker company? What is your least favorite?

DF - My favorite aspect is that I am 100% free to design what I want to design, no matter how absurd. My least favorite aspect about running a speaker company is just that — running a speaker company :-)

Oh, and marketing...I hate "marketing".

A\$\$A - Do you manufacture your speakers in-house?

DF - Our loudspeakers are assembled in-house using parts that are built for us from a variety of locations, including the US, Norway, France and Asia. Each and every loudspeaker is then subjected to rigorous QC testing before it is cleaned and boxed for shipping. A loudspeaker that we ship to a customer is typically assembled and tested 1-2 days prior to the day it ships, often being assembled and tested even that morning!

A\$\$A - How come Ascend offers so few speaker models?

DF - Simple, because I spend years developing each model and I am a fanatic regarding performance. I have a problem with determining when performance optimizations are completed. I can't ever seem to say "OK, it is finished"...obviously, I drive my vendors a bit crazy ;-)

A\$\$A - Will there ever be an Ascend floorstander?

DF – I guess that depends on how you define “floorstander” ;-). I do know what you mean though, and it is probably one of the most common questions asked of me. I believe we will someday offer a true “floorstander” but for now I am a firm believer that a subwoofer + “limited bass” loudspeaker is the way to go in order to achieve the most accurate in-room response. Generally speaking, the ideal room location for midrange and high frequency reproduction is not ideal for bass reproduction. With a sub + limited bass loudspeaker system, you can optimally place both the loudspeaker and subwoofer in order to achieve an overall more accurate in-room response.

A\$\$A - What was the overall sonic/market goal for the 340?

DF - As with all of our products, we don't look for a particular market segment or price point. Our loudspeakers are used by audio enthusiasts, audiophiles, professional and amateur recording engineers, college music rooms, churches...we have a very diverse customer base. The design goal was for a loudspeaker that offered accurate sound reproduction with the added output capabilities to fill large rooms with clean and effortless good sound.

A\$\$A - What do you listen for when determining the quality of a sound system?

DF - If am familiar with the source material, I listen for the realistic reproduction of the source material. If I am not familiar with the source material, I try to listen to the subtle details behind the fundamental output of an instrument, such as a harmonic created by the pick hitting a guitar string, the breaths of a vocalist etc. I also listen for how balanced the system is so that no range of frequencies are emphasized or de-emphasized more than another.

A\$\$A – In order from greatest to least, what do you think are the most important components in a sound system and why?

- DF** –
1. the loudspeakers
 2. 2-7 the loudspeakers
 7. room
 8. 8-10, everything else

As to why...obviously the loudspeakers represent the single biggest influence on audio performance, as they are the component that converts the electrical energy into kinetic energy so that we can hear it. It has the most influence on the characteristics of what we hear. The room interacts with that kinetic energy so in my opinion, it offers more influence than any of the electrical energy components provided that those components do their job correctly.

A\$\$A – What do you think are the most important aspects of a speakers' design (cabinet, drivers, crossover design/components, etc.)?

DF - I would say all components are equally important, the performance of each component is determined by the performance of every other component.

A\$\$A – In designing a speaker, do you rely more prominently on measurements or listening tests to determine the success of your designs? How do you know when a new design is “done”?

DF - I rely more on a very specific set of measurements that I have developed over the course of many years of evaluating and designing loudspeakers. I do extensive listening tests, but most of my listening is to familiarize myself with the character of the loudspeaker itself and to confirm that what I hear or can't hear, correlates to my measurements.

As far as how I determine when a design is finished; I have no set formula for this and I find that this aspect often causes me great distress. With my latest design, I spent (wasted) about 4 months making a costly change to the magnet assembly of the tweeter, only to come to the conclusion that this change actually hurt performance and I reverted back to the previous revision. It was at this point that I realized I could do no more and I was done.

A\$\$\$A – What are some recordings you use to voice/test/evaluate your designs?

DF - I try to use a wide variety of music, with each recording highlighting a different instrument and style but the majority of what you call voicing is done by precise measurements. I don't like to use the term "voicing" as that implies trying to give the speaker its own unique sound, we attempt to try and remove any "voicing" the speaker creates such that what you hear is as close to the source recording as we are capable of accomplishing.

My own list of recordings constantly changes... Some of my all time favorites are Santana "Supernatural", Nils Lofgren "Acoustic Live", Sara McLachlan "Solace", Roger Waters "Amused to Death", various Jesse Cook recordings, a local band called "Venice" (fantastic vocals), Dave Matthews "Crash", and many more...

A\$\$\$A – What trends in the audio industry do you currently see that you find particularly alarming/encouraging?

DF - I am very encouraged by the rebirth of quality audio which I feel has been helped by the internet direct audio industry. At the same time, I find it somewhat alarming at the number of new ID audio companies entering the market and attempting to use this distribution method to give the illusion of passing savings to the consumer while in reality, the consumer

is a "target" and the products are junk. Much like the well known white van scam, only instead of selling out of the back of a van, they are selling the products from a fancy website. Often, these websites don't even offer a contact address or phone number.

A\$\$\$A – Where do you see Ascend Acoustics in 5 years? In 20 years?

DF - I would like to see our controlled growth continue as we introduce one exceptional product after another. I see our customer base and sales volume expanding but never to the point where we are unable to provide the personal service and quality control measures that we are able to offer now. This is a delicate balance and something we have been able to maintain through the years, but it becomes increasingly difficult as a company grows.

I am most curious as to what the audio industry will be like in 20-years. With the popularity of the PC and the major advancements in PC-Audio, I suspect that eventually, the PC industry and audio industry will merge. When this does happen, I am positive that there will still be a large group of consumers who will relish the hours spent listening to good sound and you can bet we will be there to provide it!

