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Acoustic Zen Technologies Adagio Loudspeaker

What is the sound of no distortion?

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My soap-box speech begins with a reminder that *all* designed (as opposed to formula) audio equipment is a dance of compromises, and any unit's strengths and weaknesses are the product of the designer's sonic priorities and skills. Speakers are relatively easy to characterize in this arena, because we can usually identify their traits more readily than those of other system components. I enjoy listening and then picking out the areas of magic and comparing them to places where I want more. That's called "easy reviewing."

Rarely, though, a speaker comes along that baffles me. What *is* its nature? Where *did* the designer put energy and resources? The performance of such speakers is so balanced and smooth and seems so accurate across the frequency range, I find myself working to find faults. And have to stop myself. Reviewers also need balance, between picking apart a performance and keeping a sense of the whole.

The Acoustic Zen Adagios are such an enigma. At \$4300, they should present music satisfyingly. But in fact they do a great deal more. The quality of this sound bespeaks a much higher price. They are also beautiful—my review pair is a bright red, burl wood veneer with a piano finish. But the sound is the number-one surprise. These speakers are so good they're difficult to write about. They make wonderful music. It is nearly impossible to pick through the parts.

But to try: Their specific strength is clarity across the frequency range (spec'd at 30Hz–30kHz, with impedance and phase measuring nearly flat from about 100Hz to 10kHz). The designs of their drivers are unusual: mid/bass drivers, housed in transmission-line enclosures, feature under-hung voice coils (the voice coil is short and does not leave



the magnetic field even during long excursions), while tweeters sport a modified circular ribbon that broadens the "sweet spot." These may well contribute not only to the overall clarity, but to seamless crossover points; tonal and timbral accuracy; sparkle and sweet detail in the highs; depth and detail in lows; richness and nuance in midrange; and a soundstage that is satisfyingly wide, deep, and high, and does not collapse when you move out of the sweet spot. These virtues are heard throughout The Silk Road Ensemble's *Silk Road Journeys: Beyond the Horizon* [Sony], short pieces written by a variety of Eastern composers, from the Steppes of Russia to the Middle East to Asia and India. They have subtlety and drama and a bit of strangeness, which comes from instruments that are unfamiliar. Yo-Yo Ma plays the Morin Khuur, a Mongolian "horse" fiddle (a square wooden box with a horse's head at the top of the neck), as well as his cello. You can hear the instrumental timbres clearly in this recording, and the strange strings, sometimes played open for eerie effect, are as engrossing as Scheherazade's tales.

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Throughout, the Adagios played loud passages without distortion and without overloading the room or my ears. Soft passages were beautifully subtle and clear, no single nuance buried by the louder sounds. No frequency range emerged from the smooth musical fabric to assert dominance, not even with increased volume. The decay of even the sometimes odd high notes was clear and lingering, without protruding into the overall fabric of the music or disturbing the sense of being curled up at the story-teller's feet.

All this illustrates my difficulty: How do you describe the sound of purity? I put on an eerie cut, “The Wood Nymph” from *Sweet Sunny North* [Shanachie], in which the high plucked notes on the hardanger fiddle and the high vibrato of the ghost’s voice (Wood Nymphs in Norse mythology were not the “nice” sprites of our cleaned-up fairytales) make a duet that dances with the hairs on your neck. These speakers were as adept at presenting the late-night pulses of the far North as they were with the mysteries of the Far East.

But finally, in this piece, I got a break. I heard a soft, far-off wolf howl (instrumentally produced) that I’d never picked up before. My joy at listening to new speakers is, as I’ve often said, that I hear new things in familiar recordings, which in itself often helps me zero in on the details of a speaker’s character.

Here, the wolf gave me a clue to the Adagios. I listened to the passage over and over. I listened to the details, shutting my brain to the overall music; I listened to the whole, with the new information woven in. And finally I caught hold of what I think is happening. The Adagios are so free of distortion that sounds usually lost in “noise”—soft sounds that get masked all too easily—were coming through across the entire frequency range. In other speakers, there is often an enviable clarity in a certain range but it’s not matched by other ranges. A virtue, as it were, is pointing out a failing, or to be more exact, the point of compromise. But this is not so with the Adagios. The nuances I heard were across the whole musical spectrum. Elsewhere in this Norse recording, there is also a soft, deep thunder on drums that a powerful female vocalist usually overwhelms. Not now. And the harmonics of all the instruments on both these recordings were so clear and so mesmerizing I had to listen again and again.

I pulled out my hard-test recordings: Gamelan pieces, choral ensembles, orchestral complexities. And the Adagios unthreaded them all, with the

kind of purity that makes you gasp. And without losing the orchestral roar, through which, in a good hall and on really, really good speakers, the subtle accents whisper their soft wonders.

On good studio vocal recordings, the Adagios put the singer in the room, breath, spit, and timbre. A doublebass (emphatically *not* a cello) in a Schubert sonata made my body vibrate with its rich, deep power, and the rasping vocal quality, like a wonderful singer whose pure voice has thickened and deepened with feeling and fatigue, made my own throat ache with the power of song [*Basso Cantante*; Gary Karr and Harmon Lewis, Lemur Music].

In a nice touch, the Adagios are tolerant if not completely forgiving of badly recorded music (sopranos too closely miked still sound metallic); you can listen to your entire collection without wanting to throw away your 1980s CDs. And on finely recorded albums, of course, they are superb. They present all the goodies with clarity, grace, and excitement. They handle full orchestras better than any speakers I have had in my house.

They played magnificently with the Musical Fidelity kW500 integrated amp. I turned them up louder than I normally do and heard no distortion from that exercise. They played well with the MF X-150 integrated, though like most good speakers, they appreciate power. And they are reputed to like single-ended triode amps, too.

So my question is: What *don’t* they do well?

They don’t do the 16Hz organ pedal note. Nor are they supposed to. They go cleanly into the 30Hz region and then taper off gently as the music descends below that point. Since this was so smooth, I didn’t feel the need of a subwoofer, but you may want one if you listen to opera, full organ recordings, and complex bass-heavy rock. Acoustic Zen offers a sub, and a center channel, neither of which I’ve heard.

And that, Dear Reader, is all I can find to carp about after three weeks of

listening. They took 100 hours of break-in, which is a drag, but you forget that once it’s past (and they are not unpleasant to listen to in the process). They weigh a ton, and that’s a real drag if you’re a reviewer. But if you aren’t, you can just set them up once and forget about them. The manual, incidentally, goes into glorious detail on good setup.

The Acoustic Zen Adagios make extraordinary music. They present such a smooth and balanced performance you almost forget to get excited by them. Instead, you get lost in the music you love. 

SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Two-way transmission-line loudspeaker
 Driver Complement: Two 6.5" woofers (with 2.5" under-hung voice coil linear motor system); one 1.5" circular ribbon tweeter
 Nominal Impedance: 6 ohms
 Sensitivity: 89dB/1W/1m
 Frequency response: 30Hz–30kHz
 Recommended power: 50–200W
 Dimensions: 9" x 48" x 13"
 Weight: 78 lbs.

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Musical Fidelity A5 CD player, kW500 and X-150 integrated amplifiers; Sendor S82 loudspeakers; Nordost Blue Heaven cabling

MANUFACTURER INFORMATION

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