

TRENDS

Electronics & Design

HiFi Magazine

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JULY-AUGUST 2024 • VOLUME 05 ISSUE 04

WHEN THE MUSICAL COMPASS POINTS TOWARDS THE NORTH

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- AUDIO CRAFTSMEN, VICTORIA
- MICHELL, TECNODEC & T2
- JVC, RS3200 / NZ8

Rhythm & Music: **CLASSICAL, BLUES, JAZZ, PROGRESSIVE ROCK**

AUDIO CRAFTSMEN VICTORIA STAND-MOUNT LOUDSPEAKERS





Tight Bass, Excellent Mid-Range Clarity and Clear, Clean High


BY ANTHONY SIGNOROTTI

If I asked you to describe the perfect loudspeaker, what comes to mind? For some audiophiles, the pin-point imaging, wonderful mid-range tonal beauty and exquisite balance often captured by a set of well-crafted *stand-mount* loudspeakers is what immediately leaps to mind. For others, an enormous sound stage, stunning dynamics and sheer power tell them that only a large floor standing loudspeaker will fit the bill.

So, who is right and who is listening to the wrong loudspeaker?

Of course, as always with all things audio, the answer is: it depends. It depends on the listening room, it depends on the program material and it depends on the person doing the listening.

When the **Audio Craftsmen Victoria** loudspeakers arrived at my home several weeks ago, I'll admit to some unanticipated bias. As I hoisted my current **Monitor Audio floor standers** and moved them out of my listening space and replaced them with the stand-mounted *Victoria's*, I had already come to some conclusions in my mind. Surely, the bass, dynamics, and sense of scale of my **MA's** would be lost to me for a while and replaced with a more delicate set of qualities. But is one set of wonderful qualities better than another? Or are they just different? What does one really lose when moving from *floor-standers* to *stand-mounts*? The answers to these questions in the context of our *Victoria* loudspeakers surprised me.



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The Victoria Loudspeakers

Offering four models that increase in size (and price), from the *Laval* and *Victoria* stand-mounts to the *Kingston* and *Halifax* floor-standers, **Audio Craftsmen** is a small direct to consumer Canadian loudspeaker manufacturer located just west of Toronto, Ontario.

While the loudspeaker cabinets (more on those below) and crossovers are hand-built by the actual craftsmen at **Audio Craftsmen**, they leave the speaker driver duties to no less a source than legendary Norwegian manufacturer **Seas**, who also supply some of the best speaker manufacturers on the planet.

Arriving in a gorgeously finished American Walnut real wood veneer, the *Victoria* stand mounted loudspeakers (\$3,999 US) along with a set of matching *Z* stands (\$699 US) are part of **Audio Craftsmen's Excel** series.

Weighing in at a mighty 35 pounds (16 Kg) and measuring 16 inches high, 9 inches wide and 14 inches deep, the *Victoria's* certainly look and feel very expensive. **Audio Craftsmen** uses a design ethos they refer to as their split and angled design. Not only does it look super cool, it gives us a hint at how thick and well built these loudspeakers actually are, and gives **Thom**

Palmer, **Audio Craftsmen's** chief cook and bottle washer, loads of colour combinations to work with.

Let's see how these loudspeakers are made

But it's inside the loudspeakers where things get interesting. To control unwanted resonances and improve overall clarity, Thom didn't just use an extra thick layer of *MDF*. He used TWO extra-thick layers of *MDF*, giving the *Victoria's* a very solid 38 mm (1.5 inch) thick set cabinet walls – a feature normally reserved for ultra expensive loudspeakers. The added benefit to the double-walled design is the extra mass, what **Audio Craftsmen** refers to as their *Enhanced Mass System* or *EMS* for short. Toss in some extra internal cross bracing and the result doesn't just pass the old knuckle test with ease, it obliterates it. A solid rap on the top of the loudspeaker cabinets produces nothing but a dull thud and a sore knuckle. No unwanted ringing or resonance here.

The *Victoria's* drivers are equally impressive and form part of **Seas' Excel** series. These are very high-end designs and **Audio Craftsmen** wants you to know it – they post the technical details for both the tweeter and the woofer right on their website.

Without getting too far into the technical weeds, it's clear that the **Seas** drivers are an excellent match to the over-engineered

cabinets. The **Seas Crescendo** tweeter features a 29 mm soft dome tweeter, an extra thick 6 mm front plate and **Seas' HEXADYM** magnet system while the 18 cm (6.5 inch) woofer is equally over built. Combined, the frequency range is an impressive 25 kHz – 42 Hz (+/- 3 db). Crossing over at 2.2 kHz, and unique for a two-way loudspeaker, we find, not one but two independently mounted, hand-built crossovers, using mostly French components. The result of all this technology and attention to detail is an 88 dB sensitive, extremely inert, very heavy, and extremely well-made set of stand-mount loudspeakers, finished beautifully and priced quite aggressively for the value they bring.

Associated Equipment

Audio Craftsman recommends an amplifier power of 25 – 125 watts. Thus, I felt confident that my **Parasound A23** would get the job done with this pair of relatively efficient loudspeakers. Handling line-in duties would be my **Schiit Audio Freya+** preamp, running variously in either tube buffer mode (which the *Victoria's* loved) and J-Fet buffer mode (which the *Victoria's* also loved). Keeping things simple on the source side of things, I used my **Schiit Audio Bifrost 2 DAC** and streaming duties were handled by a **Sbooster** hot-rodged **Bluesound Node N130** streaming **Qobuz**. Cables were a mixed bag of **Audioquest**, **Bluejeans** and **XLO**. For the duration of the review, I single wired the loudspeakers (though, bi-wiring is possible) to the amp via a set of **Atlas** loudspeaker cables via the *Victoria's* super high-quality gold-plated speaker inputs. To provide a counterpoint to the lovely *Victoria's*, I had on loan a gorgeous set of beryllium tweeter **Focal Electra's** thanks to my good friend and fellow **TED** contributor, **George de Sa**. I listened to both sets of loudspeakers with the exact same system to keep things fair and balanced. Plunking the *Victoria's* roughly where my **Monitor Audio Bronze 500's** normally sit, I played with positioning and ending up with the *Victoria's* rear baffles about

twenty-six inches from the front wall and roughly 80 inches apart. I found they needed very little toe in to achieve their ideal sound.

Listening Sessions

I haven't listened to **Santana's Abraxas** (FLAC, 24/176.4, via **Qobuz**) in a hot minute and now seemed as good a time as any to throw it on. I was at once entranced by the incredible solidity of the *Victoria's*. On *Singing Winds, Crying Beast*, those opening glass and crystal chimes were almost super naturally present, each chime with its own unique signature and with incredible air and space around each one. The *Victoria's* imbued them with a wonderful balance of crystalline clarity and natural warmth. Never did they feel harsh or too brightly lit.

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When I switched to the **Focal Electra's**, those beryllium tweeters opened up every molecule of the recording. I got even more specificity, almost as if I could zoom in and focus on any piece of the sonic picture and know I'm missing nothing. For example, on the same track, there are several cymbal rolls, where the percussionist uses a set of padded drumsticks to repeatedly strike a large cymbal. Listening via the *Victoria's* gave me a wonderfully balanced sense of tonal the qualities of the padded sticks against metal. The metallic shimmer never became etched or irritating. On the **Focals**, those tweeters let me hear each individual padded stick striking the cymbal in turn with longer, clearer sustain on each strike. But some of that warmth and naturalness took a step back verses *Victoria's*. Whereas the **Focals** allowed me to see with perfect clarity each molecule of the

picture, the sense of cohesiveness wasn't as completely drawn, and I was taken somewhat out of the moment. The **Focals** told me I was listening to a recording, but the *Victoria's* were telling me the artists were in the room with me. Score one for the *Victoria's* ability to balance an excellent sense of detail with wonderful, natural tones. I've been a fan of **Radiohead** for decades now. When *OK Computer* was released in the spring of 1997, it took a lot of fans by surprise. Moving away from the over-driven guitars of earlier records while instead using more electronic effects and filled with weird, dystopian lyrics, the band began to show the world their true genius. My favorite cut from that album continues to be *Paranoid Android*, not only for the music, but for the reference

to **Douglas Adams'** memorable character from *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* – one of my favorite books ever. I chose it for this review because I wanted to see how the *Victoria's* dealt with the nearly symphonic levels of scale and complexity. Here again, the *Victoria's* excelled at sorting out complex rhythmic patterns and the abrupt cadence changes throughout the piece. They remained poised throughout the chaotic sections, never losing control – even at higher *SPL's*. If anything, they managed to add a lovely warmth and naturalness to a track that can be harsh and biting at times. Indeed, the entire track seemed somehow a little sweeter and a little more musical while at the same time retaining that biting, propulsive drive. Again, the **Focal Electra's** continued to surprise me, allowing me to dig deeply

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into the mix, laying bare each tiny effect and moment throughout the song. They were incisive, like little stand mounted scalpels – peeling back each layer in turn. Where the *Victoria's* impulse was to add warmth and beauty, the **Focals** told the story as it was, sorting out that chaotic complexity with almost preternatural ease and nonchalance.

It's clear that if you're a detail hawk, the *Electra's* are your loudspeakers. But I kept finding myself returning to the warmth, presence and tonal accuracy of the *Victoria's*. Never did I feel like I was missing details with the *Victoria's*. Instead, I could hear the detail I needed as part of a balanced and cohesive whole.

But what about that bass?

The elephant in the room whenever one discusses a set of stand-mounted loudspeakers is whether there's enough bass. To test the *Victoria's* ability to bring the boom, I turned to **Billie Eilish's** *Bad Guy* from 2019's *When We All Fall Asleep, Where Do We Go?*

I wasn't disappointed, but I had to accept that six and a half inch woofers in a cabinet that's only 16 inches high and rolling off at 42 Hz simply can't bring the

same pant leg flapping that a large pair of floor-standers with larger woofers can muster – it's just physics.

That said, within the limitations imposed by the size of the speakers themselves, the bass I did experience was powerful, clean and clear, perhaps aided and abetted by my amplifier's ability to maintain an iron grip on those woofers – they seemed to start and stop on a dime, were never boomy, flabby or otherwise out of control. The bass on the *Victoria's* was, perhaps, a touch more soft and polite than the similarly equipped and sized *Focals*. However, on the *Victoria's*, **Billie's** voice has never sounded more sultry and full-of-life. Her nearly whispered vocals on this track pulls this listener inexorably into the music to the point where the bass simply didn't matter. I couldn't ask for more.

Time for a palette cleanser. **John Wright's** 1960 debut record *South Side Soul* is a slow, bluesy, soul filled churn that grooves and rocks. The *Victoria's* warm, detailed presentation was a perfect match for this type of music that emphasized not only **John's** wonderful phrasing on piano but imbued the recording with incredible jump and boogie. Indeed, a wonderful

balance of propulsive, tight bass, excellent mid range clarity and clear, clean highs.

Conclusion

In short, the **Audio Craftsmen Victoria** loudspeakers were a joy to have in my listening room. They, along with the **Focal Electra's**, taught me that aside from a bit of chest thumping bass (remedied with a subwoofer if absolutely needed), we lose nothing when moving from *floor-standing* speakers to *stand-mounts*. In fact, the incredible naturalness of tone, wonderful mid-range clarity, and ease with which these loudspeakers played music made me a stand-mount believer. Combine the truly high-end sound produced by these loudspeakers with the fact that they are made right here in Canada for less than a high-end price and their value speaks for itself. Highly recommended.

GENERAL INFORMATION

Price: 3 999 \$ / a pair
(loudspeaker stands not included)

Warranty: 10 years, parts & labour

Manufacturer: Audio Craftsmen by Pahmer,
T.: 416.705.3700,
<https://www.audiocraftsmen.com/>

