Stereo Sound Avalon SAGA Review

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THE DEPTH OF THE SOUND ROSE LIKE FLOATING STEAM, RISING FROM THE FLOOR SURROUNDING EACH SPEAKER. I WAS WRAPPED IN MUSIC.

Listening to a passage of “Simple Symphony” by B. Britten, in which the strings of the orchestra play only with the pizzicato, I was fascinated by the speed (rise and decay of the notes) and clarity of the sound of each of them. The depth of the sound rose like floating steam, rising from the floor surrounding each speaker. I was wrapped in music.

The speaker was SAGA by Avalon Acoustics. It is named like a romantic novel in literature, a SAGA, reflecting the accumulated knowledge and technology of Avalon Acoustics through 35years of experience. As a speaker of this size by Avalon Acoustics, SAGA is the first one in 15 years after the launch of its Sentinel speaker system. Its height is 178cm. The front baffle is slightly inclined as seen from the side, it was designed to align the sound source position from the woofer to the tweeter.

Despite the height of the speaker, I did not feel that sound was pouring over my head. The sound image and the sound field are connected to each other at the height and center of my head, even though my position was on a sofa. The accurate soundstage is because the acoustic center is properly designed. This is Avalon, indeed.
Today, with many metal and lacquer painted speaker enclosures out there in the marketplace, and popular, Avalon’s wooden veneer enclosure with beautiful natural grain appears to me more beautiful. They have approximately 20 employees including a few craftsmen of American traditional furniture. Chamfering of Avalon’s unique enclosure with as many as nearly 30 facets in Saga, I imagine it takes a lot of time and effort to fabricate this polyhedron cabinet, then finishing it with a smooth surface and natural wooden veneers.

THIS IS NOT SIMPLY NON-RESONANCE CABINET IDEOLOGY, BUT LIKE A MUSICAL INSTRUMENT, GENERATING A SOUND ENVELOPE THROUGH THE SUBTLE USE OF RESONANCE.

Avalon utilizes customized drivers, designed in partnership with driver manufacturers, but details have not been disclosed. Previously Avalon has not publicly shared the SAGA development story, so I have

asked Avalon directly in writing this review for some inside information. Following is what I discovered through a discussion with Mr. Neil Patel, the designer and owner of Avalon Acoustics.

First, developing the concept of SAGA:

1) Keep the driver distortions (all types) as close to zero as possible. Thereby, the entire loudspeaker is able to have wide dynamic range in the audio band.
2) The drivers will not break-up even if driven by high power, so that the music signals are not compressed.
3) Zero phase error within the audio band, or as low as possible.
4) Construct an enclosure with wooden materials common to many music instruments.
5) Tailor its sound quality by utilizing enclosure's resonance smartly and correctly.

In other words, it seems to emerge that he has not designed this speaker with a non-resonance enclosure ideology (a technology that Avalon pioneered). In the past with ISIS, but also with SAGA, though there is a very heavy, inert front baffle, the side panels still show resonance to some degree. However, I did not sense, nor did I hear its eigentone or resonance note at the listening position. Even if there were eigentone or resonance modes within the sound field, it was not at all negative. Such resonances are harmoniously well blended and help in constructing music with life.

Ringing and overshoot caused by excessive motion; don't allow them.

SAGA produces sound lightly, without stress. The sound is not just light without density, but the sound appears airily with authority. Natural, without any obstacles, the sound comes out smoothly. Four drivers are used in a 3-way design, but the timing of each driver unit matches perfectly. Therefore, the sound envelope, from its time of rising and to disappearing, is in order (coherent). Even when the volume level gets higher, the rising note and the reverberation of the note will linearly extend with ease. This is indeed a characteristic of large speaker models, but SAGA has plenty of headroom in its capacity and remains coherent at loudness levels of live-music reproduction. On another point, SAGA is even different when compared with other large size speakers. Other large speakers produce bass which is thick and tubby (and slow). SAGA's bass is tight, which gives it the feeling of gripping the lower notes. This is very well defined, with the staccato of the kick drum punchy and clearly articulated. It's an exciting and joyful sensation which gives pace to the music. AVALON's tight bass is characteristic to all their models.

To better explain this technically, there is a "Q" value which is generated from the motion of the

woofer diaphragm and the spring component of the air inside the enclosure. When Q is larger, the volume of the bass felt by our ears increases, and when Q is small, the bass gets tighter. For many speakers, the setting of Q is about 0.6, but at AVALON, it is 0.5. The bass of Avalon should be tight!

As an aside, B & W original Nautilus speaker does not have a so called enclosure, it has a muffler, so Q value is only 0.18. With such a muffler, bass will not develop , therefore the bass level is increased by its active crossover.

Returning to the story of SAGA, the setting of Q in SAGA is 0.5. I told Mr. PATEL of AVALON that "staccato of kick drum is very well expressed with a pleasant feel of speed, a direct note to my brain (or heart)". Mr. PATEL expressed the term "braking" during our correspondence. The term was interesting, so I continued the questions.

Q: Breaking has the opposite meaning of a rising and developing tone, but is it a commonly used term in the US or in American audio design?
He said, "Nobu, it is a good question". He started the answer, and responded enthusiastically with a very long explanation, too long to reproduce here, so I will summarize.

This 'braking' is Mr. Patel's term and unique expression. It does not mean damping against the movement, but freeing the note, releasing it from the ringing and overshooting that come with excessive movement of a driver. This is achieved not only through the movement of diaphragm or cones themselves, but also by tuning the inner air of the enclosure and through electrical manipulation of the signal in the crossover network. When setting "breaking" correctly and properly, the soundstage gets clearer and more three-dimensional, expression and articulation get more precise, since energy is eliminated after the transient has passed, this according to Mr. Patel.

The ideal listening room for SAGA would be 5m x 7m with a ceiling height of 3m. The price tag is high and my room size small, so it (unfortunately) won't find its way into my home. Still SAGA has a superb ability to create three-dimensional sound staging that keeps me wanting.

Back to the music for a quick note. A Danish female vocalist, Sinne Eeg (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sinne_Eeg), who I like very much and play often during my many presentations, is just standing there between the left and right SAGA cabinets. Although I'm embarrassed to say, I was actually ready to embrace her right there!