







I admit, I was warned – something special is on its way. But I could never have imagined what can come out of such a seemingly non-descript box.

When a voice comes to life

Laon is a small town with a population of around 25,000 inhabitants, about 80 miles northeast of Paris. It's famous for its early gothic cathedral which overlooks the town from atop a hill like a spaceship that's just landed.

When I was studying art history in the early '90s I realised that I would never really understand what makes a cathedral from reading books and tomes. So I upped and left Amsterdam and visited all the important cathedrals in France. Laon impressed me the most because of its bearing, size, and at the same time its simplicity. I only understood Laon and ultimately its great cathedral when I entered through the side entrance one Tuesday morning. As soon as my gaze was directed up into the nave, it became clear to me how small and insignificant a mediæval person would have felt in the face of this upwardly-striving architecture. Gradually I continued and was drawn to the sound of infinitely tender singing emanating from the direction of the chancel in the east. Monks invisible to me let their voices float towards the ceiling and further towards heaven. Totally weightless, these sounds appeared to be neither created nor reproduced. They were simply "there". This experience made a strong impression on me and affected my perception and judgement of sound. Naturalness, airiness and authenticity are high on my personal list of desirable characteristics for audiophile playback equipment – normally without the cathedral sound, obviously.

Some 20 years later, at the end of 2013, as I connected the Living Voice Avatar IBX-R2 the first few notes immediately reminded me of Laon. Living Voice – here a voice really does live. But I'll come back to that.

The first question I asked myself was: how could such a visually unassuming loudspeaker recede so completely behind the music and allow me to forget that I was here to concern myself with musical reproduction? This would be a fascinating journey.

Maybe you've never heard of Living Voice before? Until Uwe Kirbach's article on their big sister, the Avatar OBX-RW, with its external crossover (image hifi 3/2013) I hadn't either. Although I had vaguely heard about a colossal horn loudspeaker that was said to be practically unaffordable and in every respect utterly uncom-

promising. Since the aforementioned article I now know this to be the Living Voice Vox Olympian, a speaker that costs at least £300,000 and is built with incomprehensible extravagance and extreme craftsmanship. This is where I find the link to the mediæval workshops where top craftsmen of various disciplines were united for the purpose of building cathedrals under the leadership of one or more master builders. Cathedrals were manifestations of leading Occidental architecture thanks to this concentration of skills. I think in this way one can understand the Vox Olympian. Because Kevin Scott, head of Living Voice, seems like just such a master builder to me. A man who is aware of tradition, and who uses contemporary methods to translate this into products that don't primarily follow commercial considerations.

I'll happily admit to being a lover of horn loudspeakers in general, although I know how difficult they are to set up, never mind integrate into a living space. The majority of listeners simply have no optimised listening room available, and therefore not only do they quickly find the limit in terms of set-up and room acoustics, but also have to live with non-audiophile life partners. And that is usually the point at which large horn speakers are abandoned.

So now master builder Scott, to stay with our architectural metaphor, with his cumulative knowledge, has effectively built a house rather than a huge cathedral. Thus came the Auditorium series into being. So is it a compromise? Caving in to market

Associated equipment

Turntable: Lenco PTP **Tonearms:** Schick, Denon DA-305 **Cartridges:** Decca Blue, Decca Super Gold with Paratrace needle and ebony body, Grace F-9 **CD transport:** Philips CDM 4/19 modified **DAC:** Tobian Dac **Preamplifier:** Croft Micro 25 "R" **Power amplifiers:** Eastern Electric Minimax; Eastern Electric M520 **Loudspeakers:** Tobian 12, JBL L-19 **Cables:** Belden 9497 LS, Audio Consulting und Jupiter copper and silver interconnects **Power:** Kreder Audio Tuning **Equipment stands:** Thixar Silence Plus

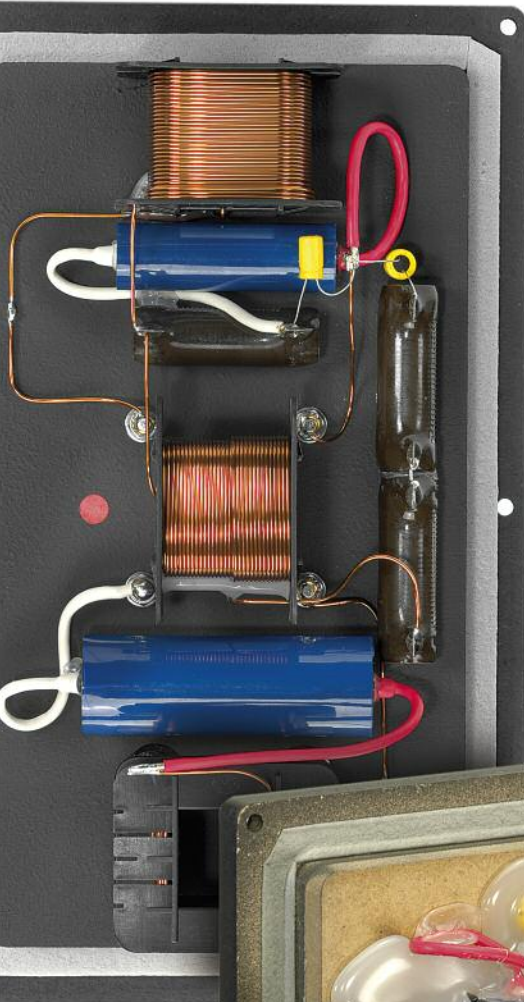




Loudspeakers Living Voice Avatar IBX-R2

exigencies? Nothing could be further from the truth. As UK distributor for Kondo electronics, Kevin Scott has the opportunity to develop loudspeakers to a level unadulterated by amplifier “artefacts” as he calls them. And that is true not only of his flagship but clearly also for the Auditorium series. Four models share the same cabinet and two-way bass reflex designs. They differ primarily in the driver (type and quality), the crossover (components/built-in or external) and wiring (material/cross-sectional area). The IBX-R2 sits second in the Auditorium hierarchy, or position 2b, as it were, because it is also available with the external crossover. Everything Kevin Scott uses in these speakers is in

Crossovers squared: One hot-melt glued, one “beautifully” made. Either way, the heart of the Living Voice beats loud



principle conventional but never mundane, rather quite the opposite – special and exact – it is this that distinguishes a great developer.

Uwe Kirbach covered these fine details and the decade-long development work with great precision in his article so I will therefore just briefly touch upon them here: the well-known Scan-Speak Revelator tweeter is a real charmer thanks to its configuration and the component choice in the crossover. Scott also had Scan-Speak recreate and improve upon a classic lower-mid-band driver with a flat paper cone which he then coated. The tweeter is framed by two lower-mid drivers which noticeably extends the radiating surface and bass capability. He has the cabinets manufactured from specially chosen Welsh particle board by a specialist in Denmark(!) The actual material proved itself during lengthy experimentation to be particularly sound-enhancing, in part because the enclosure is not over-damped. Rather than go down the supposed Royal Road espoused by many speaker manufacturers principally using MDF to try to suppress any resonances, he shifts them into a “friendly” range. In my view that is the only sensible way in this price class, as truly effective damping is very elaborate, costly and – sloppily expressed – deprives some speakers of any musicality whatsoever.

Incidentally the IBX-R2 is extremely good-natured: it’s very easy to drive but responds well to any change in source or peripheral equipment. There is a reason why it is so easy to drive: between 100 Hz and 25 kHz the impedance ranges between an easy-going 6 and 10 Ohms. Consequently one can achieve outstanding results even with low output valve amplifiers. Kevin Scott considers the crossover to be the heart of the speaker and I’m sure every developer would agree. But how barbarous, almost perverse, it would be to take the incoming signals, chop them up, drive them through a crossover and then put them all together again. He’s right and he has succeeded in making a seamless whole out of it. How exactly he has managed this he won’t say. But had all this prepared me for the musical experience? Not in the least! The combination of the abovementioned components, the sustained development effort and its constant refinement, as well as Kevin Scott’s character, who in conversation reveals himself as a passionate music lover, therein lies the secret. In every sentence he utters I hear passion for what he does. It reminds me of a cookery seminar I once attended, given by a vegan Japanese cook. At the outset he asked us what the most important ingredient was. His answer: love.



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Before I start to completely float off towards the cathedral ceiling I'd just like to give a little insight into my personal approach to new components. Often, after I've unpacked everything, I connect everything up without paying too much regard to the finer points. And that's how it was with the IBX-R2. They consist of basically two parts: the actual speakers and their plinths, including spikes and a strip of Blu Tack. To start with I couldn't be bothered dealing with all that so I unceremoniously placed the speakers directly on the carpet minus their plinths. As I went to connect my speaker cables, I realised that the connectors required bi-wiring. I didn't have suitable bi-wiring cables that were long enough for my listening room (i.e. about 6.5 m). Since I had neither cables nor jumpers, I made myself some jumpers out of

old Western Electric cable and ran the speakers standing directly on the carpet to start with. When forming my initial impressions, I don't feel obliged to sit in the sweet spot, I generally prefer to do something else, wander around, cook etc. If the playback distracts me from what I'm doing, then I know I'm dealing with a really special component. So I had put on Ravi Shankar's rare Live in San Francisco (LP, World Pacific) and was actually intending to tidy up something in the

meanwhile. I failed. I was simply compelled to listen attentively to the meditative sitar music, and was able to notice Ravi's fingertips flitting over the many strings. The IBX-R2s forced me (in a friendly kind of way) to direct my attention to the music rather than the loudspeakers. After that I put on record after record. The original Bavarian bluesman Willy Michl recorded some really special discs in the '70s. One such record is *Blues & Balladen* (LP, Decca). "Drah di net um" developed such a level of tension that late in the evening a pleasant shiver ran down my spine. Or my favourite guitarist Grant Green on *Green Street* (LP, Blue Note). How "Round about Midnight" suddenly gathers pace, the percussive immediacy and danceability of his music – the IBX-R2 conveys this intoxicatingly. During the following weeks I often forgot to listen for details and make notes, I was quite simply immersed in the music. And of course I soon placed the speakers on their plinths which tightened up the sound. Interestingly, their basic nature, this involving effortless rendering, remained more or less intact. I admit, making eight equally-sized Blu-Tack balls and placing the 21 kg speakers exactly in the right place on their plinths is a bit of a shirtsleeve approach and doesn't necessarily succeed first time. Blu-Tack may well be an outstanding way to couple the speakers to their plinths. All the same, I'd prefer a more elegant and customer-friendly solution. Not everybody enjoys rolling Blu-Tack balls. And even if bi-wiring is the manufacturer's preferred configuration for the speakers it would be nice to have the option of

Left: From the House of Scan-Speak: the Revelator tweeter and the improved lower-midrange driver with coated flat paper cone

Below: Acoustically outstanding cabinet material, but difficult to work with. The precision work on the inside speaks for itself. This is tuning, not heavy damping





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wire links using the same cable as the internal wiring. And while I'm grumbling I would also like to see suitable spike plates for delicate wooden floors.

But that's it, I have no other niggles, as I've had, and still have, nothing but pleasure from the speakers themselves. The IBX-R2s – and this is exactly what makes them so special to my mind – have such an unintrusive presence, that in the best possible way, I con-



Bi-wiring is ideal, but naturally it also works extremely well with jumper cables

stantly found myself compelled to listen to music. Perhaps I ought to explain. My main speakers are bass-reflex floorstanders, twice the size volumetrically speaking, with a heavily-modified 12-inch BMS Triax driver with about 98dB efficiency and feature compression drivers for mid and tweeter, plus a spherical horn. And that's exactly where the difference lies – a compression driver really make some pressure. Let's take Miles Davis' once-in-a-lifetime record *Kind of Blue* (LP, Columbia). His horn is reproduced by the compression driver in a way that, with the best will in the world, the Scan-Speak never could due to its construction type. But do I necessarily want that? I start to doubt, because the Living Voice's overall performance is more balanced, effortless, yet at the same time completely present and self-evident. Bon Iver's stroke of genius "*For Emma, Forever Ago*" (CD, 4AD) completely transported me back to the cathedral in Laon. Their music can appear to the casual listener as conventional, perhaps analogous to the IBX-R2's appearance. As soon as you engage with it, however, you are rewarded with so many levels, so many nuances, so much depth. "*The Wolves*" is almost like a Mass. I figuratively take off with the music and simply allow myself to float – what a transcendental experience! And all that even at low levels. Like the way a vintage Jaguar, purring away in neutral, could accelerate away at any time. Because the IBX-R2s play just as well loud as they do at low levels. Dave Stewart's timeless *Greetings from the Gutter* (CD, east west) serves as an example: dynamics, Bootsy Collins' bass breaks, Stewart's crashing solos, an intensive studio mix, everything fits together organically as if it had never sounded any different, and ought never to sound any different. The same goes for Vladimir Horowitz' late interpretation of the *Sonata in C major* (K. 330) on *Horowitz in Moscow* (LP, Deutsche Grammophon). Thanks to him I finally understood Mozart and can now completely immerse myself in the timeless beauty of this music. All the subtleties are integrated, every nuance flows, the intentions of both composer and interpreter become clear. It makes no difference whatsoever whether the music is more simply structured or complex, with the IBX-R2 every form of music can be understood and experienced. Keith Aschenbrenner of *Auditorium 23* once wrote something very true in a little green book: "the desire to hang onto something you have once experienced is boundless". For me, that translates as "there can be no such thing as the perfect loudspeaker". But now I know of a loudspeaker that in the totality of its characteristics does pretty much everything right. That creates a spaciousness that seems organic

rather than dissecting or confusing and conveys a real sense of three-dimensionality. The timing, atmosphere and musicality breathe and allow the listener to have extraordinary, nay, supernatural experiences, thereby lifting him out of the banality of everyday life. The Living Voice Avatar IBX-R2 is such a loudspeaker. And even though I might appear to have my head in the clouds on my musical journey, I'm quite able to give a grounded verdict: to me this speaker is pretty much perfect. To really comprehend this fascination you simply have to experience it for yourself. And just as it is with the great cathedrals – the journey really is worthwhile. Guaranteed.

Loudspeaker Living Voice Avatar IBX-R2

Functional principle: 2-way bass reflex **Efficiency:** 94 dB **Nominal impedance:** 6 Ohm **Special features:** Scan-Speak lower midband driver based on an improved version of an old Vifa model **Measurements (Width/Height/Depth):** 21,5/103/27 cm **Weight:** 21 kg **Price:** from 7250 Euro

Contact: Living Voice, WEB: www.livingvoice.co.uk, EMAIL: shout@definitiveaudio.co.uk, TEL +44 115 9733222, FAX: +44 115 9733666

