



REVIEWS

hardware



living voice

IBX-R2 loudspeakers

as reviewed by Roger S. Gordon



Living Voice Speakers, from Nottingham in the U.K., have earned an excellent reputation over the last decade. They produce both very expensive horn speakers and their more moderately priced Audience line of speakers. The Audience line includes the Audience II (GBP 2100), the Avatar II (GBP 3000), the OBX-R2 (outboard crossover GBP 4400) and IBX-R2 (inboard crossover GBP 4,100) and the OBX-RW

and IBX-RW which are essentially the IBX and OBX R2s with substantially upgraded components and wiring loom plus cryogenic treatment. The subject of this review is the IBX-R2 speakers which are sold in the USA for US\$5900.

I obtained my review pair of speakers from a local Living Voice retailer who also acts as the USA distributor. Since he was located only an hours drive away I drove over to his place with my wife's van. I really did not need the van. These speakers are small floorstanders - h/w/d 104/22/28 cm or 41/9/11 inches. And they only weigh 20 kg / 44 lbs. After having become used to moving 50+ kg speakers it was a joy to have speakers that I could lift up and carry in my arms.

On arriving home I immediately put the IBX-R2s into my system. From the very first notes out of these speakers I knew I was in for some very good listening. I then proceeded to waltz the speakers around the room trying to find the best location for sound staging and imaging. This was difficult in the sense that the IBX-R2s throw an incredibly wide soundstage regardless of where I positioned them. After a couple of hours of moving the speakers, listening, then moving again I arrived at what I thought was the best position. This was four feet out from the corners of the room which meant the speakers were nine feet apart. From my experience the physical location of the speakers is not critical. They will sound very good regardless of where you place them (within reason). What is critical, at least in my room, was toe-in. Small changes in toe-in had a major effect on imaging. After experimentation I ended up with the speakers toed in so that the speakers were aimed at a place five feet behind my listening spot.



Having set the speakers in their final position it was time to listen. My own listening system consists of deHavilland 845 mono block SET (single ended triode) amps driving VMPS RM30C speakers and two 500 watt Dayton plate amps driving a VMPS Larger subwoofer. I have placed capacitors in front of the inputs to the amps to roll off the signal at 6dB starting at 100Hz. Not having to amplify the deep bass takes a substantial amount of stress off of the SET amps. This arrangement allows me to play bass down to 20Hz at very loud volume. The IBX-R2s were inserted into the system in place of the RM30Cs. The subwoofer was on and the amps were being rolled off.

For a number of days I just listened casually. I have found that when some equipment is moved it takes a few days for them to settle down and start sounding their best. Once I was ready to start serious listening I turned the subwoofer off and removed the capacitors from the amp inputs. I started doing A-B comparisons between the RM30Cs (with their external ambience tweeters removed) and the IBX-R2s. The IBX-R2s did not sound as they had before. They were kind of lifeless and dull. I asked the distributor to come over for a listen. He came over and agreed that something wasn't right. The RM30Cs, which are 4dB less efficient than the IBX-R2s, sounded fine. The manufacture specifications for the IBX-R2s say that they can be driven by as little as 3.5 watts. The deHavillands are 24 watts per channel. They should have had enough power to drive the IBX-R2s. However, not knowing what else to do the distributor lent me an E.A.R. 890 stereo tube amp with 70 watts per channel. The E.A.R. 890 was using 6550 tubes instead of the usual KT-90s. With the E.A.R. 890 driving the IBX-R2s they sounded wonderful once again. In talking with a friend, who is also a reviewer for an audio magazine, he mentioned that he had had a similar problem driving the IBX-R2s with a SET amp.

With the E.A.R. 890 in place it was time to restart the serious listening. First I got out my Radio Shack Sound Pressure Level meter and a CD of pink noise. While my Herron VTSP-3A preamp has a digital read out for volume, the steps are not linear. Thus, I had to recreate the table I had previously constructed that showed for any volume setting for the IBX-R2 what the corresponding volume setting had to be when I switched to the less efficient RM30Cs in order to match sound levels. With the table reconstructed I started doing A-B-A-B-A-B-A-B-A... comparisons between the IBX-R2s and the RM30Cs. Fortunately, both the Living Voice and the VMPS speakers are set up for bi-wiring with two pairs of five way binding posts. With my speaker cables terminated in banana plugs detaching and reattaching the cables was a simple and quick task. Moving IBX-R2s in and out of their position so as not to interfere with the RM30Cs, which at 110 lbs I really did not want to move, and switching the cables was a 90 second process.

I used the following LPs for my comparisons:

Warner Brothers 25491 – *Trio* with Dolly Parton, Linda Rondstadt, and Emmylou Harris, track 1, side 1

Island 12 WIP 6598 – *The Secret Policeman's Ball*, side 1, tracks 1 and 2 – Pete Townshend singing Pinball Wizard and Drowned while playing acoustic guitar.

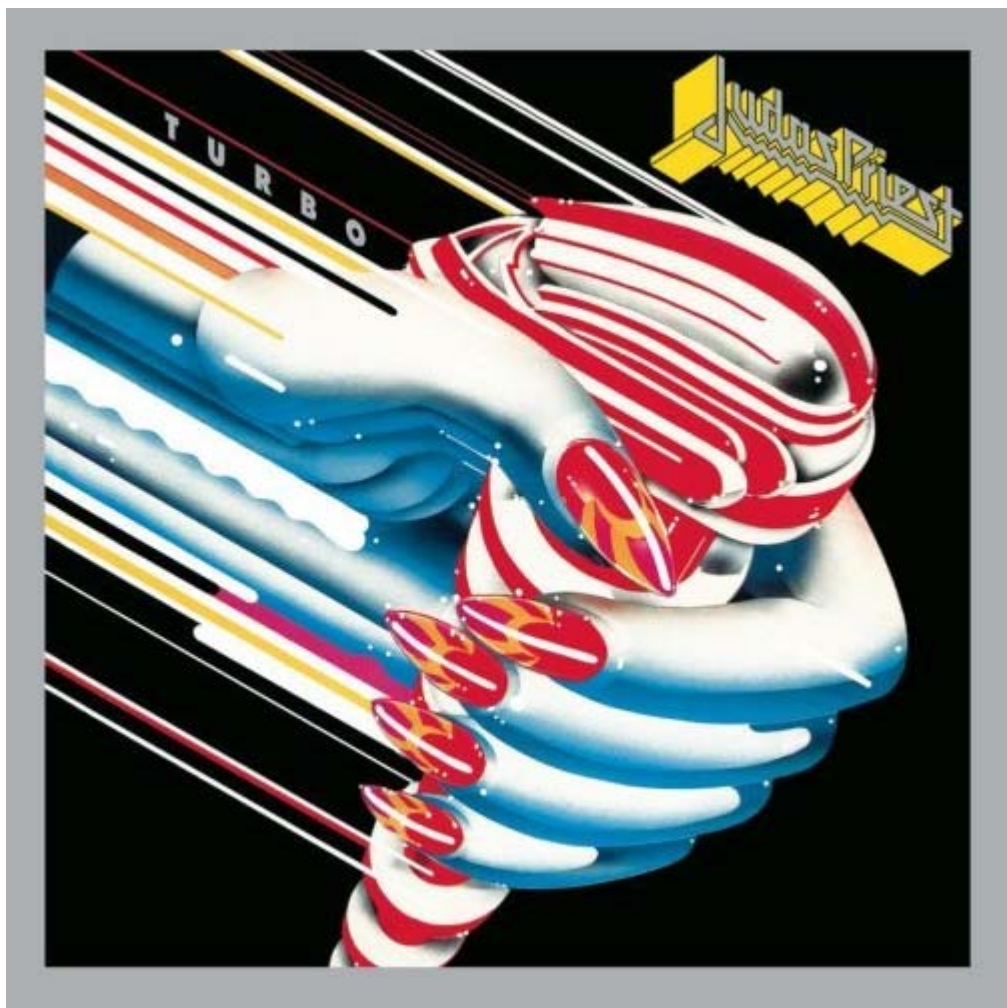
Classic Records 45rpm reissue of Louis Armstrong – St. James Infirmary side

Columbia OC 40158 – *Turbo*, Judas Priest, side 1 track 1

Geffen Records DGX 24727 – *Nirvana Unplugged in New York*, track 1, side 1

Athena Records ALSY-10003 – *Alexander Nevsky*, Prokofiev, side 2, tracks 2 and 3, mezzo-soprano soloist and chorus

Acoustic Sounds 45rpm reissue of RCA VCS-2659 – *The Power of the Orchestra*, Side 4, The Great Gate of Kiev from Moussorgsky's Pictures at an Exhibition



The listening comparisons revealed that the IBX-R2s had quite a few strong points:

Vocals - Whether the vocals were male, female, or chorus the sound was outstanding. The vocals on all six vocal recordings had a fullness and richness of sound that made the voices seem very natural and life-like. If you listen to a lot of opera or vocalists these speakers are made for you. Gorgeous vocals.

Dynamics – Being 94dB efficient you would expect the IBX-R2s to be dynamic and they are. Any very rapid transition from quiet to loud or vice versa was immediate. Drum whacks were sharp and would startle you in your seat. No dull or lifeless performances from these speakers unless the source material is lacking.

Micro-Dynamics – The sounds of the real world are filled with small, subtle changes in volume within the overall sound volume. If these small variations in volume are absent, the music does not sound life-like. Many speakers can handle the macro dynamics. This is the flash and sizzle that sells the speaker. However, having macro dynamics does not necessarily mean a speaker can get the subtle variations correct. Listening with the IBX-R2s to Kurt Cobain's voice on the Nirvana LP you can hear the tiny changes in volume, tone, and timbre as he sings. That really brings his voice alive. It makes his voice seem so natural. The same thing is apparent with Louis Armstrong's voice on St. James Infirmary.

Sound Staging – Before I set up the IBX-R2s I went on the web to see if there was any guidance as to how to set up the speakers. On one forum one IBX-R2 owner said that he had the speakers set 16 feet apart. I wish my listening room was big enough so that I could have tried that. The IBX-R2s appear able to throw as wide a soundstage as you can spread the speakers. Sound stage depth on the Louis Armstrong LP appeared to be a proper recreation. On the Alexander Nevsky the instruments of the orchestra and the chorus were properly delineated in depth. On some speakers the back of the sound stage is not as wide as the front. Not on the IBX-R2s. The sound stage does not shrink in width as you move to the back. If there is depth on the recording the IBX-R2s should be able to faithfully reproduce it.

Imaging – Imaging means were the instruments or vocalists clearly delineated in space and were the images 3D or only two dimensional. The IBX-R2s do clearly locate the instruments and vocalists in three dimensional space. The 3D imaging is not as precise as I have heard on other speakers. However, those speakers either cost much more than the IBX-R2s or the speakers are much more analytical sounding.

Musicality – As one sage wrote "If it ain't got mojo, it ain't got nothin' ". Musicality is a hard term to define. Reproduced music either has the drive, pace and rhythm of live music or it doesn't. Just as a woman can't be half pregnant, neither can music be half musical and half analytical. If you are listening to a rock album and you are head-banging, if you are listening to classical music and waving your air baton, if at the end of a song you jump to your feet, pump your fist into the air and shout "Yeahhh!" that sound had musicality. If you sit quietly in your seat and are not emotionally involved with the music chances are the sound does not have musicality. If the IBX-R2s are anything, they are musical. Besides the albums listed above, I played many other LPs and CDs from my eclectic collection. The IBX-R2s never failed to draw me into the music regardless of the genre. Even on poorly recorded material the IBX-R2s made the experience worth listening to.

Bass Reproduction – The IBX-R2s are small speakers yet they reproduce sounds down to 35 Hz and they do it with authority. Even if you play power orchestral music these speakers don't need a subwoofer. If you are an organ aficionado or like soundtracks and other genres of music where the synthesizer plumbs the lowest regions then you will need augmentation. Still, in its price range, there are few speakers that will have deeper or better bass than the IBX-R2s.

So are the IBX-R2s the perfect speaker? Of course not. There is no perfect loudspeaker. Even the cost-no-object \$250,000 speakers that I have heard are not perfect. The IBX-R2s are designed to a price point. Compromises had to be made. So the IBX-R2s do have a few of short comings:

Tonal Accuracy – If you never compare your reproduced music to the sound of live music you will never notice that the IBX -R2s are not 100% accurate in the reproduction of certain acoustic instruments. However, if you attend live music concerts and compare the sound of live instruments to the sound of those same instruments reproduced on the IBX -R2s you will notice that the reproduced instruments are a little softer, richer, and mellower in sound. The reproduced instruments sound more pleasing to the ear than the same instruments heard live. The three instruments that I am most familiar with and listen to in the concert hall are the clarinet, the trumpet and the tuba. If you have heard a live performance of a trumpeter blowing his brains out on a high note you will have noticed that the sound is not sweet and mellow. In fact, the sound can be a little brash and shrill sounding. The *Power of the Orchestra* recording that I used for my comparisons is multi -miked. It is spectacular to listen to, but it is not a natural sounding recording. However, because each instrument is highlighted when it has a solo part it is very easy to hear the tone and texture of each instrument. In *The Great Gate of Kiev* there are short but very nice solos for the clarinet, trumpet, and tuba. The sound of those instruments played through the RM30Cs and the IBX -R2s is different. I own the RM30Cs because they are a great analytical tool for hearing changes made up stream in the signal path. I have found the RM30Cs to be very accurate in tonal reproduction, sometimes ruthlessly so. The sounds of the clarinet, trumpet and tuba played through the RM30Cs sound, to my ears, like the sound of those three instruments that I hear at a live performance in the concert hall. The sound of these three instruments played through the IBX-R2s sound slightly richer in tone and there is no harshness to the sound when there should be. These differences are not night and day, but they are noticeable to a nit-picker like me.

Imaging – Some speakers are known for creating a three dimensional holographic image of each instrument. The IBX-R2s, while creating a very real image, do not create a holographic image. On the other hand, when I close my eyes in the concert hall I don't ever recall hearing anything that sounded like a 3D holographic image. I suppose that while audiophiles might think the IBX-R2s are deficient, most music lovers and attendees of live music will find the imaging of the IBX -R2s to be totally satisfactory.

Bass Reproduction – While the IBX-R2s have very deep, solid bass, in comparison to the RM30Cs the IBX-R2's bass could be a little tighter. It is not that the IBX-R2's bass is flabby. It is just that the RM30Cs, with its two six inch drivers (crossover at 280 Hz) and two tunable down firing passive radiators, have really excellent bass. The IBX-R2s has only three drivers (a Scanspeak Revelator high frequency unit and two highly modified Vifa 6" drivers in a D'Appolito array). With the 6" woofers being in a smaller cabinet and having to cover a much larger frequency range the quality of the IBX-R2's bass is amazing and most people will be quite happy with it. However, it could be better.

Transient Response/Detail – During the comparisons I noticed that the RM30Cs had slightly more detail and that the leading edges of initial transients were more of a square wave than the wave form of the IBX-R2s where the leading edge of the sound wave was a little more rounded. Again, this was not a big difference, but noticeable. I suspect that this difference is caused by the RM30Cs using three panel drivers from 280 – 8,000 Hz and a ribbon tweeter from 8,000 Hz on up. Panels and ribbons are known for their faster start and stop times and also for providing more detail.

Summary

So, what do I really think about the IBX-R2's? I love them and think they are a very good buy for the money. Every speaker built to a price point is a collection of compromises. In the case of my RM30Cs I acquired an analytical tool at the loss of some musicality. With the IBX-R2s there was no attempt to make them an analytical tool of any sort. All of the compromises appear to have been made to maximize the enjoyment of music. These speakers allow a music lover of any genre of music to turn on his stereo and be swept away by the emotion of the music. At the IBX-R2's price point I can't think of another speaker that provides as much musical enjoyment. If you listen to music so that you can be involved with the music, so that you can be swept away by the emotions of the music, you really need to hear the IBX-R2s. Very Highly Recommended. **Roger S. Gordon**

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