

Aurum Cantus Volla Speakers

Review by Phil Gold

Chinese, amplifiers, Chinese CD players, and now Chinese speakers. The Vollas, from Aurum Cantus are the first Chinese speakers I have welcomed into my home. I saw them first at the Festival de Son et Image in Montreal a year ago. They were on static display, but the sounds emanating from a pair of their big brothers peaked my interest, and I asked if I might review the Vollas, a more appropriate size for my listening room. The Vollas took a long time to arrive, partly due to the destruction of one pair by suspicious customs agents, but the wait has been well worthwhile. These speakers have something very special to offer.

Aurum Cantus is a brand name for the Jinlang Audio Company of Shangdong. Jinlang also sells under the name Accentus Audio. Not sure where the Latin names come in, but both brands market speakers, Accentus being large floor standing monitors and the Aurum Cantus smaller in scale, but both using related in-house ribbon tweeters and drivers. And all come coated internally with AVM (Anti-Vibration Magic) a damping material applied in liquid form. It is this coating which apparently set off the sensors which led to the destruction of the Vollas at Canadian customs!

So what is so special about the Vollas? Not the shape, since so many speakers now feature the rounded sides that serve to prevent standing waves inside the cabinet. Not the price, since there are many other highly competent two-way speakers at this price point. Then it must be the sound. What these speakers have in spades is speed. These speakers offer lightning reflexes, like electrostatics. This is a familiar feature of ribbon tweeters, but what is unusual here is just how well integrated the tweeter is with the more conventional bass/midrange driver. The speed of the tweeter is maintained across the entire frequency spectrum. So let's take a closer look at that 6½" driver. A sandwich design, it features two outer layers of non-woven carbon fiber around an inner layer of 2mm cell material, and an aluminum voice coil with flat wire coils and a ferrite magnet.

The speed of these speakers gives an unusual transparency to the sound. Transient response is very clean, and this allows music to have the impact it should have, where many rivals round off the edges. Timing is excellent with these speakers. Many speakers sound fat in the mid-bass but here the bass response is clean and precise, although not especially weighty or extended. This is the trade off Aurum Cantus has made with this speaker – precision instead of weight or warmth. The beauty of this speaker shows not in the series of A/B comparisons that are the reviewer's stock in trade, but in the easy and natural way acoustic music emerges over the course of an extended opus. Coloration and overhang, which make many other speakers tiring to listen to over extended periods, is absent here. Extended listening is a rare pleasure. Music seems more alive and vital than usual, and over a wide range of volume levels. Imaging is very good. I could easily locate the chamber performers arrayed in front of me in both a Schubert Piano Trio and the jazz combos I so love. The image is absolutely stable as you move from side to side – no sweet spot here. But my one caveat is that you have to be seated to enjoy the Vollas at their best. The treble response falls off rapidly as you move from a sitting to a standing position.

Let's go back to that bass again. There is only so much a single 6½" driver can do. Many designers have arranged their ports and cabinetry to provide an extra peak in the low-end response of small speakers. Aurum Cantus have avoided that here, and in combination with the extremely fast response achieved, the Vollas may appear bass shy. If you are a bass lover, you should turn your attention elsewhere, or add a subwoofer to the system. Probably you would be well advised to pair the Vollas with amplification that extends well down into the lower octaves to avoid a double whammy. But you've heard this before, it's not quantity that counts, it's quality. The bass that does emerge is clear and punchy, never distorted or uneven. Talking of quantity, this is not the speaker for a large room or for head bangers. Turn the volume way up and the bass begins to break up. It reaches its maximum level then becomes bloated and less well defined without significantly increasing in volume. There are small speakers that can go a lot louder than these, but this should not be a concern if your room is less than say 20' by 16', and your tastes run to classical, jazz or folk music.

I plugged the Vollas into my system using Target stands, Soundstring biwire cable, Nordost Valhalla power cables and balanced interconnects and my trusty Meridian G08 CD player and Perreaux Radiance R200i integrated amplifier. To put the Vollas to a real test I compared them to the much more expensive Wilson Benesch Act 1s. The nod has to go to the Act 1s. Bolder, more dynamic, more relaxed and far lower reaching and also more balanced across the frequency range. But this was the first speaker I have tested for a long time that blew away the Act 1s at the top end of the spectrum, providing not just more treble detail but greater clarity and less grit, like a door being opened.

This ability to astound is most evident in Art Pepper's *New York Album* [Analog Productions APR 3012]. Percussion has never sounded better, imaging is superb and the midrange is clear and forward. The bass line however is merely hinted at and the piano, while delightfully fleet is just a little lacking in weight.

Bruckner's *Sixth Symphony* [EMI CDM 7633512] poses a severe test for any small speaker. Brass and woodwind have excellent clarity, color and focus, the depth and width of the image are good and there is a strong sense of scale, but again the deep bass is missing. But I've heard this sound before. Where was it? Ah yes, the superb AKG K1000 ear speakers (headphones to you and me) have an almost identical balance. Playing both simultaneously I can slip the headphones on and off and the sound stays much the same. That's high praise indeed, as the K1000s are superb instruments, finally going out of production last year after a very long run. The Vollas are rather less tilted up on top and smoother, resulting in a less prominent tape hiss. The Wilson Benesch add much more weight to the strings and a greater dynamic range, but the top end is not so clear or fast.

















I haven't stopped playing the African music on Lilison Di Kanara's *Bambatulu* [MUS2-1119] since I got it in 2000. This haunting music, beautifully recorded in Montreal, reveals a great deal about imaging. With the right setup you can place all the instruments precisely in a three dimensional space. The Vollas are certainly up to the challenge, with beautiful clean harmonics and a gentle deep and wide image. There's lots of detail here and the sound is just, how else can I say this, sexy. Lilison's voice has slightly less presence here than with the Act 1s, but that may in fact be an advantage, leading to a better overall balance. Deep bass is not fully realized, giving a very pleasing lightness of touch. The guitar is ideally reproduced. The timing here, as elsewhere, is exemplary, although long held notes tend to decay faster than the reference. The percussion again is a standout and I would set it against any speaker at any price in this regard. Dynamics are not the strong point of this speaker, and the image while stable and precise does not compete for depth and size with the Act 1s.

You might expect the Vollas would have a hard time with Leonard Cohen's deep voice, and you'd be right. *The Future* [Columbia CK 53226] disappoints. It's very easy to make out the words but the threat is missing. You'll need that subwoofer here.

If you have ever wanted to hear low level traffic noise beautifully reproduced, may I recommend the Vollas and the Quartetto Italiano's performance of Schubert's *Rosamunde* [Philips 446 163-2]. Not just any traffic, this is Swiss traffic, vintage 1976. I mention this since no other speaker has done such a superb job of bringing this traffic noise into my listening room, since it is usually

masked so well by the four string players. This says a lot about the excellent low level resolution of this speaker.

This is the best Chinese audio product I have reviewed to date. It really is an extraordinary animal. But don't take my word for it. You should try it yourself.

Tonality	
Sub-bass (10 Hz - 60 Hz)	
Mid-bass (80 Hz - 200 Hz)	
Midrange (200 Hz - 3,000 Hz)	
High-frequencies (3,000 Hz on up)	
Attack	
Decay	
Inner Resolution	
Soundscape width front	
Soundscape width rear	
Soundscape depth behind speakers	
Soundscape extension into the room	
Imaging	
Fit and Finish	
Self Noise	
Value for the Money	

Specifications

Speaker Design:

2-way stand mounted, rear-ported

Output power:	2 x 40 watts
Tweeter:	Aluminum ribbon fully shielded design
Midrange/woofer:	6½" AC165/50 C2C Carbon fiber Sandwich
Driver manufacturer:	Aurum Cantus
Internal Wiring:	SUPRA Cable
Connectors:	18mm bi-wire gold plated binding posts
Front Baffle:	50mm MDF
Side Baffle:	25mm Parabolic shaped MDF
Top and Bottom Baffle:	25mm MDF
Frequency response:	38Hz-40kHz
Sensitivity:	88dB (1 metre)
Crossover frequency:	1.9kHz
Crossover slope:	18dB woofer, 18dB tweeter
Impedance:	8 ohms (minimum 6.4 ohms)
Dimensions:	9½" x 18" x 15" (WHD)
Weight:	21 kg each
Price (Black Lacquer):	\$4590 Cdn, \$3699 US
Price (Sapele):	\$4300 Cdn
Price (Rosewood):	\$4200 Cdn, \$3499 US
Price (Maple):	\$4000 Cdn
Source of review sample:	Accentus Audio