

# HI-FI CHOICE

SPECIAL EDITION

## *The Collection*

EXPERT REVIEWS OF THE WORLD'S FINEST HI-FI



THE COLLECTION 2009



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# The Collection 2009

**W**elcome to a very special issue of *Hi-Fi Choice*, *The Collection 2009*. Inside this heavyweight edition you'll discover some of the finest hi-fi equipment money can buy. You'll have the opportunity to read comprehensive, expert reviews on the best-sounding audio products in the world and learn about our favourite high-end products of the last 12 months.

*The Collection* has a long history. The special issue was launched back in the 1980s and continued to celebrate the high-end right through until the early 1990s. It came back with a bang in 2004 and is now a familiar part of the *Hi-Fi Choice* schedule, each year sitting alongside the regular monthly magazine in the run up to Christmas.

For our expert writers, *The Collection* is something to get enthused about: it's not everyday we get to review a six-figure pair of speakers, after all! We make no excuses for the occasionally astronomical price tags you'll find in these review pages. Our goal is to simply bring you the best of the best, regardless of price.

Inside you'll find 22 brand new, in-depth reviews, plus a look back at some of our favourite high-end products of 2008/2009. We hope you enjoy reading *The Collection* as much as we enjoyed making it and refer back to this exceptional high-end guide for many years to come.

*Dan*  
Dan George Editor



# OPERA MALEBRAN

*Crank up the volume and let this Opera star sing its heart out*

PRICE £19,500 per pair CONTACT UKD 01753 652669 www.operaloudspeakers.com

The heavyweight Opera Malebran first broke cover a couple of months back at a press launch in Italy and this review marks its first outing in print. Like many an opera diva, it certainly makes a larger than life impression, both in terms of size and – more pleasingly – sonic prowess.

Arriving in enormous wooden packing crates, each speaker may weigh 130kg, but this isn't a burden once out of the box. The smoothly rounded shape and the superb finish (leather baffle and gorgeous gloss-finished cherry wood carcass) means it is stylish and unobtrusive once unpacked in our listening room.

Opera only specifies that the speaker should be 30cm or more than the back wall and not close to corners. Something about their design means they are not as fussy about positioning as some loudspeakers. They do interact with the listening room, but in a rather lazy way: large changes in position are necessary to have an appreciable effect on voicing. Just make sure that the bass drive units face inwards.

The Malebran is a downscale model based on the flagship Carouso (the first under the Opera name). It has a smaller enclosure, but offers an improved bass response and is based on a 146-litre enclosure measuring 136x44x80cm (HxWxD). The rated, but not properly qualified, frequency response is 20Hz–20kHz.

This is a four-way system which uses 12 drive units to deliver sound that's reflected from walls to produce a reverberant soundfield. On the front baffle are four midrange drivers in a vertical array and a silk-dome ScanSpeak 9700 tweeter. Three 25cm bass units are fitted to the inside baffle. On the back panel is another array of four tweeters similar to the front-facing unit. This so-called CLD array is filtered at 2kHz.

The driver configuration is all about task-sharing. The bass drivers are from SEAS and have aluminium diaphragms. As Opera points out, although you could use a single driver in a vented box, using three very long-throw units, each in its own sealed sub enclosure, will move a tremendous volume of air if called for. Not only that, it will also reduce harmonic and intermodulation distortion because each unit has minimal diaphragm displacement at normal levels. Sealed box bass alignment means a gentler roll-off at the low frequency extreme, better diaphragm control and, ultimately, a deeper bass. Similarly, four 125mm midrange drivers are fitted with cast magnesium cones.

The enclosure is made from veneered ply over MDF and the leather

trimmed baffle helps reduce secondary radiation. Internally, the speaker is divided into separate sealed spaces for each bass driver and for each midrange driver pair, a secondary effect of which is to brace the enclosure.

## SOUND QUALITY

Experiencing the Malebran in two listening rooms, our own and the one provided by the manufacturer in Italy, it's apparent that there are common factors. First, this is a wide bandwidth, wide dynamic range transducer. It goes loud – just about as loud as you like or your neighbours can stand. The makers also point to its suitability for use with valve amplifiers.

Crunching the numbers, sensitivity is relatively high at 89dB, impedance bottoms out at 3.2ohms and suggested amplifier power starts at 10–15 watts. But, most people will be looking at the other vital statistics – maximum continuous power, for example, is an awesome 750 watts IEC.

We didn't try the speaker with a valve amp, but it positively sings with solid-state designs of 50–200 watts and it is always very relaxed and easy on the ear when doing so. One reason was its ability to scale the playback to suit the room and the listener: the music ebbs and swells in a realistic fashion. Another is its relatively reverberant character. It can be set to play at unfeasibly high volume levels, without any hint of aggression or simple change in sound as it did so. Because it was radiating over a much broader arc than usual at most frequencies, it was much less of a point-source than usual. Indeed, it thrives in big rooms, but you need some distance to give it the required perspective.

The sound from this speaker is always on the ripe and full side, with a powerful bass and upper bass and a sweet, open treble. This holds up when listening from well off-axis or even when simply walking around the listening room. It was also noted that it tends to draw the listener in, providing a real sense of involvement.

One final point worth making is that, expensive as it is, in material terms, the Malebran appears to offer better value for money than the majority of its peers. In

those terms, it is a hell of a lot of loudspeaker for a

relatively reasonable outlay. ■■

*Alvin Gold*

