

Callas Gold

Maria in a nutshell

da <http://sites.thestar.com.my/audio/story.asp?file=/1997/1/30opra>

Long before the pretenders arrived, there was Callas, the voice that sang for the Gods. Now, the inimitable La Divina sings again for none other than SHAHRIZA HUSSEIN

For a while, Sonus faber ruled the Italianate roost. And what a fabulous range of loudspeakers! Finely crafted furniture with a seductive sound, culminating in the Extrema. The Latins certainly know their hi-fi, if in their peculiarly passionate way.

But before you think bolognese is the only sauce worth splashing on your spaghetti, look again. Another Italian speaker brand has popped up, bearing the somewhat presumptuous name of Opera and the individual models suffixed with the names of famous tenors and sopranos.

The Opera pair that came in for review was the Callas Gold. *Impudent!* was my first reaction. La Divina reincarnated as a box? But I was mollified when I unpacked the little rascals and saw the red cloth coverlets. The last item that came as elegantly clothed was my Dunhill pipe, bought when I had more surplus pounds than sense.



Features

Hefted the speaker. Heavy. As elaborately constructed as Sonus fabers although, judging from the use of large pieces of solid walnut instead of fillets, more expensively. Knock the sides of a small Sonus faber and you get a woody thud. Do the same with the Callas and you'd think you were knocking on concrete.

Another plus point -- the Callas is not a plain box. The edges are much rounded and the top of the front is further apexed, probably to reduce diffraction. And the back is downward sloped, giving the speakers the aspect of a Soviet T34 tank turret.

And of course the speakers come in high-gloss finish, the grain of the wood shown to maximum advantage. The colour, though, is not walnut, but a rather sickly yellow (oak suffering from jaundice?).

At the business end are two drivers, a 125mm polymer cone woofer/midrange and a 19mm soft dome tweeter. The system is bass-reflex, with the circular port located at the rear. Here again, it's all wood, no plastic, the flare of the port mouth lovingly carved out.

The Callas invite bi-wiring; indeed, they came without links for the two pairs of binding posts. And the latter are oversized screw-type terminals that, fortunately, also accept banana plugs.

As these speakers are not much more than a cubic foot each, they obviously require stands to support them. And because they look so sumptuous, I suspect they do have dedicated stands (*They do indeed.* -- A.L.), if for no other reason than cosmetics. But as none came with the units, I had to make do with my own rather plain-looking 24-inch steel stands -- a pity, because I suspect the speakers would have given a better account of themselves if better supported.

Connecting up was a simple matter of disconnecting my Thiels and inserting the Callas into the audio chain -- bi-wired, of course. Much later, towards the end of the review, my Luxman L570Xs temporarily gave way to a McCormack TLC-1/DNA-0.5 pre/power combination.

Less simple was the matter of positioning. The Callas' require careful siting, well away from vertical surfaces, as otherwise they refuse to open up, sometimes sounding downright nasty. Aptly named, these speakers; real prima donnas.

Sound

Because of the name and my initial indignation about its use, I fed the speakers a massive dose of soprano, including, naturally, both volumes of *La Divina. Hors d'oeuvres* included Joan Sutherland, Mirella Freni, Renata Scottò, Kiri Te Kanawa, Kathleen Battle, Cecilia Bartolli and Jessye Norman. The Callas dealt with them with aplomb, even disdain after having been burned in for some 30 hours.

These speakers' way of dealing with the human voice harks to the midrange Sonus fabers, but with a little more open top end. There is an airiness in the treble, revealing breath tones to advantage, while the midrange makes voices sound quite engaging.

I'm reluctant to use the term "natural" for the sound because, impressive though the Callas may be with voices, the quality is not in the same league as, say, the Rogers LS3/5A or the Quad electrostatic. There is an overlay of richness (in Malay, we call it *lemak*) which suggests a design tweaked to give an extra prominence to vocals. This impression is borne out by the slight chestiness in male voices and the extra forward location of the singer in the soundstage, even in recordings known to present the singer a little further back.

This brand of sound may be technically flawed to the purist, but it makes for pleasant listening, especially to the kind of music the Callas is supposedly dedicated to: opera and classics. Indeed, purely instrumental works come through nicely, with an added zest that in stringently 'neutral' speakers would be missing. Musicality -- however you want to define it -- is enhanced.

Further to the Callas' credit, they can handle large scale works, although here the speakers' handicap is size. Low bass is understandably missing and because of that, symphonies and even some chamber works emerge without the expected stupendousness. There's no point playing with speaker positioning to extract low bass because chances are, what you'll get is doubling and a wrecked sonic balance further up the frequency range. The Callas will go down cleanly to about 60Hz and that's what you have to be satisfied with.

I find little to complain about as regards the soundstaging, though here again the Callas' are at their best with smaller scale music up to operatic arias and mid-sized chamber works. With these, there is impressive resolution and steady imaging -- for instance, the horn ensemble playing Pachelbel's *Canon* (*Brass in Berlin* album) emerged with fine detail and impressive separation of the instruments. But throw at the Callas big-orchestra works like a Dvorak symphony or a Prokofiev piano concerto and the sound assumes a little fuzziness.

And so how do the Callas' fare with pop and rock? True to form, they do justice to folk, MOR and C&W pop, light instrumentals (beautiful voicing with Kenny G, too) and the like. Rock -- anything from U2 and Guns N' Roses up -- will pose problems. But that's academic, really, as I don't see the dedicated rocker even bothering to audition speakers like the Callas (will a Denim finish help?).

Conclusion

I would categorise the Opera Callas Gold as a purpose-designed instrument with a somewhat more stringent set of requirements than average. It's best with classics, and smaller sized works at that -- opera, baroque, lieder, chamber. It's as good with similar-scaled popular music and tolerant of soft rock. But you really need something larger and less specialised, if your musical diet extends further.

Model: Opera Callas Gold loudspeaker

Price: RM5,998 per pair

Review sample courtesy of TONG LEE COMPANY (03-691-1049), 13/14 Jalan Lekir, Kampung Koh, 32000 Sitiawan, Perak.

Verdict

For: Fine-detailed sound with good focus; impressive with voice; excellent craftsmanship. Overall, highly musical.

Against: Deficient in low bass; fussy about partners and positioning; uncomfortable with 'big' music; pricey