

“...AMAZING...”



Opera Platea Loudspeakers Reviewed



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It's not just sound which comes in waves: hardware trends seem to as well. With domestic congestion, urban dwelling and bitch-wives* from hell deeming with increasing vehemence that any speaker larger than a loaf of bread is an intrusion, it looked like the floor-standing speaker was heading the way of the turntable - into cultdom. Then the backlash hit. The first-ever tower from Sonus Faber, brand-new floorstanders from B&W at both ends of the catalogue, the re-launch of the Kelly name with a vertically challenged design and enough others suggest that audiophiles are tiring of the compromises. And now Opera has a new entry-level floorstander, bringing the cost of Italian towers way down. And, no, it doesn't lean.

But let's not be too pleased with ourselves just yet; huge speakers are still the exception. The returns of either the 6ft tall dynamic behemoth or the huge dipole panel are not nigh, and people aren't buying as many horn systems (none of which are tiny) as certain zealots would have you believe. Amusingly, a typical modern floorstanding speaker occupies the same amount of space as a tiny

monitor on a 24in support; the difference is that a cabinet measuring 950mm tall with a 200x200 footprint simply more intrusive to a pain-in-the-ass interior decorator than a 350x200x200 speaker on a 600mm pillar. So, given that it's all down to psychology and to people only seeing or believing what they want, it's more a case of coincidence than design which makes the Opera Platea seem like an Opera Duetto which just happens to sport an integral stand in the form of a larger enclosure.

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Opera's budget two-way Duetto impressed me enough to make it my fave speaker at around the £400 mark, even though its bass performance is typically small speaker-ish. When it was announced that Opera had a floorstanding version in the works, well, I just had to hear it. Keeping in mind that the Duetto is easy to drive, smooth-sounding and capable of imaging to a level of near-LS3/5A competency, all a "Duetto-Plus" has to do is add more bass and sport a price at a sensible level.

Let's deal with the last part first. At £795 per pair, Opera has certainly maintained the price relationship with the Duetto, located centrally in Bargain City. Just look at what's on offer:

The Platea's 190x900x200mm (WHD) cabinet is, like every Opera model, made from solid, 25mm-thick, interlocking hardwood sections, with extensive internal bracing. Each cabinet is hand-polished with five coats of lacquer to protect and enhance the natural wood finish, with mahogany as standard and American Cherry announced as an extra-cost option, Opera's US importer probably having something to do with this. As is the Italian wont, all of the enclosure's edges are rounded to eliminate the possibility of diffraction problems (while enhancing the looks), and the rear-firing, flared port "...allows good breathing at high volume levels". Actually, that should read 'no breathing', because the bass is whoosh- and woofle-free. The cabinet's lower cavity can be filled

with lead shot or sand for additional mass loading, and supplied as standard with the Platea is a separate, solid hardwood plinth and solid brass cones. Opera can also provide as an option a 3cm

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thick marble plinth stand, as seen in the UKD room at the Hi-Fi Show.

The Platea is fitted with the same 19mm doped silk dome, three-fixing SEAS tweeter specified to Opera's requirements and now found in the Duetto. Below it and crossing over at 2.8kHz is an ATD-made 130mm bass/midrange driver with copolymer cone and hefty chassis/magnet construction, specially developed to provide the extra damping demanded by a larger enclosure. The crossovers, hand-made and tested by Opera, use audiophile-grade components including high-saturation, self-cementing inductors and close-tolerance non-polarising capacitors. Drive-wise, this system is as easy and amp-friendly as the Duetto, with a nominal 6 ohm impedance, sensitivity of 89dB/1W/1m and recommended amplifiers including valve amps of 12W or more, or solid-state amplifiers of between 30W and 80w.

Like the cones, Opera makes the 24k-gold-plated brass terminals found on the back of the speaker. Shock! Horror! Some might cry upon seeing that it's not bi-wirable. But the reason is a good one: the cross-over network design is deliberately simple - for sonic and cost reasons - and it doesn't allow for bi-wiring. Which is kind of amusing when you learn that Opera will be launching its own range of cables next year: the single-wiring set-up just cost Opera a bunch of extra cable sales. Not to worry: you can use the money you saved on an extra set of cables to pay for the marble plinth.

Opera wasn't overstating the ease-of-use. With the exception of the NVA Personal, which wasn't really designed to drive speakers much hungrier than yer basic high-sensitivity £150-per-pair starter speaker, I couldn't find anything in my arsenal which wouldn't drive the Plateas gracefully and with ample power in reserve. As I had the Plateas for a couple of months, I was able to try them with Musical Fidelity's XA-50 monoblocks (£500 per pair), the Roksan Caspian (£695), the Unison Research Simply 845 (£2995, single-ended and not exactly oozing wattage), the Audio Analogue Bellini/Donizetti pre/power combination (£1050), Quad IIs and assorted others. Joyously, the Plateas favoured neither tube nor tranny, their transparency allowing you to hear the differences with such revelatory clarity that you'll make the choice precisely for the right reason: your own personal preference.

In addition to stints with the above amplifiers, the Plateas were heard with the Marantz CD63SE and Krell KAV300cd CD players, the Simon Yorke Designs S7 Precision Analogue Disc Transcription

System (what a mouthful...), the EAR 834P phono amp and the Crown jewel m-c cartridge. Speaker wires included Harmonix, A.R.T. and Shinpy Big Bang, the latter now imported from Italy by Audiophile Club and selling for an utterly insane £4250 per 3m pair. Yeah, I thought the '4250' meant lire, too.

One curious aspect of Platea set-up is the way the speaker responds to toe-in; I'm at a loss to discover why one set-up - either firing straight ahead or angled at the listener - didn't slaughter the other. It was a form of responsiveness I've only experience once before, and that was the first time I witnessed a Wilson Audio employee tuning a WATT/Puppy set-up, each centimetre of adjustment altering the size, shape and depth of the soundstage. With the Platea, the effect is similar, if not quite so surgically precise.

What happens is a classic result: firing straight ahead, the Plateas provide a wide, if shallow soundstage. Angled at the listener, as per Sonus Fabers or WATTs, the Plateas produce a deeper soundstage with minor sacrifices of stage width. What I found so remarkable was the way that the tonal balance altered hardly at all, with - of course - one proviso: these remarks apply only if the Plateas are far enough away from the walls to have their toe-in or toe out not affect the bass. While that might strike you as obvious, experience shows that varying toe-in affects more than just the dimensional and positional qualities of the sound; what was so nice about the Platea is the way it allows you to experiment with soundstage shaping without worrying too much about upsetting the tonal integrity.

Sitting two metres from the line of the speakers, I found that they produced the most convincing soundstage with the speakers angled so the inside panels were visible. Positioning them so that only the front baffle is visible increased the stage depth, but 'narrowed' the image. At two metres and with them firing straight ahead, the image was in line with the speakers, but there was enough depth to create a truly convincing sense of three-dimensionality. At three metres, though, the perception changed. Without wishing to suggest a feature on such phenomena, or the formation of a toe-in cult, I would like more people to consider the distance between the listener and the speaker, and the effects of angling the enclosures before they plunk down their cash. Especially if one's listening room limits the possibilities.

Anyway, once I'd settled on the angles, the concentrated listening involved the Audio Analogue amplification and the Krell CD player, with A.R.T. speaker wire and Transparent interconnects. And the overall 'vibe' was one of richness and smoothness, a warm, fat Mediterranean sound with just a

touch of spice at the top end. Not Ginger, not Scary, but Bambina Spice - light, fast and playful, underscored by that richer bottom.

Before I start likening this to a perfect tiramisu, let me reel in the superlatives and the analogies and put it into more succinct terms. Set up as described, the Plateas create a sound with a lot more weight and impact than the Duetto while retaining the light touch and speed. And, because of the larger enclosure and a slightly different bass driver, the Platea has more bass to call upon, without acting like a filter in the manner of the Duetto (and the WATT, the LS3/5a and other 'clever' minis). The slightly plump lower registers of the Duetto, which fool the ear into thinking that there's more down below than there really might be, have been replaced with a more extended, leaner and more accurate bottom octave or two. Fortunately, the concept of modern synthetic bass is anathema to Opera, so it's still well-rounded and non-aggressive, but there's enough damping to ensure that the Plateas can cope with rap, techno et al.

But the Platea's forte is acoustic music, well-recorded vocals, mellow jazz and other forms which can exploit its way with subtle harmonics and textures. The dynamics of the speaker are such that it will not crack under the strain of excessive levels and it can just about cope with the speed of the transitions present in the choppy, noisier depths of Prodigy recordings and other Intel-inspired cacca. If anything, the Plateas are not clinical enough to respond properly to technoid sounds, a trait some might classify as a lack of absolute refinement. But feed the Platea a diet of music with high emotional content and they almost glow.

The message is one of involvement, of music embracing the listener. And the Opera Plateas will stick you right in front of the performance, with a room-filling display. So maybe it's no mystery why Opera called this little beauty the Platea. Because 'platea' is Italian for the stalls in a theatre. Which is exactly where this speaker will place you.

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