



were to allow myself that particular luxury many of my reviews would last no more than a few lines. I guess that my own home music system exposes my particular prejudices more than words and I also have no doubt that those subliminal influences lie deep within and I will never be able to shake them completely, no matter how hard I try. We are all victims of our own tastes. There is always a period of adjustment for me when I

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Kontrast V speakers

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HiFi Plus Review

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I wonder to what extent my own personal taste influences me when I write about a product. It would be great to be able to come to each and every review with a mindset free of preconceptions and leanings toward a particular style of musical reproduction. In fact I am always intrigued when I speak to friends and they tell me they do or don't like a component or a system because they prefer this or that type of sound. If I



assemble a previously unheard system for a review as well as a new learning curve which helps me resolve what I am hearing with the need to wring every last drop of performance from the component in question and to feel satisfied that I understand what it is doing and that I have given it

every chance. The nice thing is that this involves listening to music throughout the process, initially to set the thing up and then to (hopefully) enjoy it. I am not really sure how other reviewers go through the process only that it seems obvious that some obviously take infinitely more care than others. Every experience offers the chance to listen and learn in a different way and from a new perspective.

What became clear, as soon as I plugged them in was that, being a fan and full-time user of Focal's remarkable Diablo, certainly meant that Audioplan's Kontrast V was going to need a period of readjustment at my end. The clarity and fine sense of musical resolution and transparent dynamism that the Diablo brings is coupled with delicacy of touch and given a suitable system (no small feat in itself), excellent involvement. It is like walking a tonal tightrope and never falling off. And it is certainly true that the beryllium tweeter and its low crossover point makes most speakers sound dull in comparison at first listening. So, substituting the Audioplan in essentially the same position as the Focals had occupied soon left me realising that a period of re-training



the good old ear/brain interface was going to be necessary and this is always best accomplished by sheer listening time. But, even from those initial sessions, I understood that this was a speaker with some very engaging qualities. As the days passed I delved deeper. They found themselves on end of the very excellent Vitus SS-010 integrated amplifier and Burmester CD-001 CD player all linked together with Vitus Andromeda cabling. Like many speakers the Kontrast V comes equipped with bi-wire connections capable of accepting 4mm or spade terminals. Unlike the majority of those designs though, these really do improve the sound and I would strongly recommend that you take advantage of them. I also had the opportunity to spend some time with Audioplan's own very interesting LS 16 Mk11 speaker cables in this configuration and they re-inforced the positive benefits that bi-wiring brings. I'll avoid that particular detour for the moment but intend to return for a more in-depth look at their cables and power conditioners in the near future. Audioplan have been ahead of the game with regard to cabling for many, many years and along with Naim Audio, were one of the first to extol the importance of consistency throughout the system.

The Kontrast V sounds an attractive proposition almost wherever you place it and because of this I can imagine many users just leaving them there, but there are huge benefits to be had by spending time to get their siting absolutely perfect.

Physically this is helped no end by the fact that Audioplan reject spikes in favour of the explicitly named anti-spikes which mount each corner on an adjustable (delrin?) fitting. Even if you think you have things optimised I would suggest

that, whenever you are setting up a pair of speakers or re-configuring your own system, you employ a tape measure and a friend's ear to measure the distances exactly and for toe-in a cheap laser is invaluable. Be precise! The Kontrast V must be absolutely level (in fact add a spirit level to the above list). I started with the equilateral triangle set-up but, so strong was the soundstage, I ended up using 1 to 1.1 where the distance between them was 10% greater than the distance from the tweeter to a centrally positioned ear. I also employed just a few degrees of toe-in. This, along with



the distance to the rear wall, is going to vary from room to room and will also be system-dependent, but I cannot emphasise strongly enough the huge benefits that this fastidious approach brings to this speaker as it moves the performance and musical focus to another level completely. There is a very useful chapter in the manual covering this as well.

This speaker is the result of constant evolution and has its ancestry in the Kontrast models of the early 80's. The latest version is a tall, slender, angle-shouldered bass/mid reflex cabinet with a separate, softly decoupled "floating" tweeter enclosure on top. Audioplan use a

modified Audax woofer unit with an amorphous membrane in the lower cabinet and designer Thomas Kuhn is very specific in his material choice here. Too light and you get speed but loose bass precision and too heavy and there is too much self-damping. It's a delicate but critical balance. There is also the question of integrating this unit with the modified 27mm fabric-domed Scanspeak tweeter, a design aim which has been admirably achieved I think. There is a lot of inner constructional detail in the bass cabinet. A separate resonance chamber is incorporated internally to shape the speaker's response, forming a

labyrinth aimed at passing bass energy at the correct level, while a slot port is mounted at the very bottom and as far from the driver as possible to optimise energy transfer into the room while. This cabinet within a cabinet also features varying damping panels, though Thomas always tries to use the least amount as possible. Deciding where to place the damping and in what quantities would seem to be the trick here if that thick, one-note, ponderous bass often found in large cabinet/small driver designs is to be avoided. Both cabinet's walls are 21 mm thick and each houses their individual crossover. Everything, from the gauge and shape of wire to the custom-made pots and capacitors are painstakingly selected and vibration isolation is also high on the list of priorities. Many components are also potted.

With over 20 years development behind it, the Kontrast V has the sound and feel of a thoroughly sorted design. Tonal balance is generally excellent, though perhaps a tad warm at times and the bandwidth is very impressive with much better top-to toe dynamic control than I was expecting. The feeling of low frequency presence and sheer air-moving power is so much a part of the attraction of these speakers. It brings a nice physicality and a good sense of scale to the music without ever impeding the overall speed. It can add and loose bass energy remarkably quickly but is also pitch coherent which further

illustrates just what a successful design that bass enclosure is. The Scanspeak tweeter is never going to have the ultra high frequency extension of a beryllium or diamond design and nor does it have the sparkling airiness either, but here it is extremely textured and tonally expansive and I reckon that overall integration was far higher on the designer's list of priorities anyway. In this it succeeds admirably and it remains one of the speaker's greatest attractions. The music rolls from it in a natural and wholesome way. There is no sense of the bandwidth being disassembled through individual drivers and fired into the room. This is a completely coherent design and the more you listen, the more it may just encourage you to re-evaluate what is important in a music system. I crave resolution and an explicit characterisation of instrumental nuance and tonal flavour and this is also one of the speaker's major strengths. The Kontrast V certainly lacks the impressive needlepoint focus and blinding impact speed of the Diablo and presents the musical picture entirely differently, but it is still extremely subtle and responsive to small dynamic shifts. It gives you a look at the heart of the musicianship but never slaps you round the face with it. But ask it to do some serious dynamic work and it you'll find you may have misjudged its slightly laid back nature. Anoushka Shankar's album Rise really hooked me and is a great example of how the Kontrast V maintains its

remarkable, independent, layered bass agility and rhythmic drive set against the delicacy and droning, shifting harmonic resonance of the Sitar with its unique spiky leading edge. It's almost as if the name Kontrast was borne from this ability and the Vitus amplifier is a willing and very able partner as it too is full of supple vitality while being able to drive with serious transient power from that still and quiet background.

Try as you may, regardless of the music you ask it to play, you won't shake this speaker's sense of composure nor its willingness to convey musical performance. It has an almost nonchalant character and this makes listening to it for hours very comfortable, but its tonal palette and overall expressive abilities just creep up on you and you certainly find your concentration being drawn toward different aspects of the music that you may not have considered before. In this way it is full of surprises. So, like all exceptional audio components, just when you think you understand where it can go and what it can do, you ask it another question and its answers will charm and even intrigue you. I noticed that I played a lot more acoustic music than usual through the Kontrasts, just to enjoy the organic sound of each instrument. I also particularly like the way that it captures the mood of each piece and this encourages a musical connection with the emotional part of our senses. It's that sensation that moves beyond

the sounds we are hearing and into the area of pure feeling and listener response. And I think that this is helped by the way it projects the picture into the room. Perhaps it is that low-slung slot port which makes the picture seem so tall, but the music disengages from the cabinet and the soundstage is wholesome, deep and very solid. The spaces and relationships between the instruments and vocalists are quite different to the portrayed by most speakers, but there is a certain naturalness to the presentation and this makes for an unreconstructed view of the recording that I have noticed before with many of those components that seem to stand out from the crowd. Of course, we must not ignore the contribution of the excellent Burmester CD player or the undoubted qualities of that Vitus amplifier and cabling, to say nothing of the other system-building attributes, like a decent support system. The Kontrast V cannot perform in a bubble and needs as much quality as you can surround it with. I was rather surprised to read in the spec sheet that it is only 86 dB efficiency because it felt higher than that to me. The SS-010, at only 25 watts output had enough power for me, but my advice is to look at an amplifier of quality rather than paper watts to drive this speaker. Valve or solid-state, I doubt that the Kontrast has a preference, as long as it is good.



This speaker is very well worth a serious listen and certainly a home demonstration where it should be installed with care and precision. In many ways it is an antidote to so many designs on the market as it does many things so differently. It took me a while to appreciate them but then I was completely won over by their musical attractions. The Kontrast V will not be for everybody I know, but neither are the Focals, B&Ws or Shehanians and there's really only one way to find out if they are for you isn't there?

SPECIFICATIONS.

Type:
Two box two-way bass reflex

Drivers:
Audax-based mid/bass driver,
Scanspeak soft-domed tweeter

Freq. response:
36 Hz – 28 kHz

Sensitivity:
86 dB (1 W/1M)

Impedance:
8 Ohm nominal

Dimensions:
990x210x310mm (HxWxD)

Weight: 33 kg

Finishes available:
Enquire with importer.
Wood and enamel finishes mainly.

Price: £6300-£7900.
Review pair in cherry wood - £6700

Manufacturer:

Audioplan. Germany.

Web:
www.audioplan.info

Importer:

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