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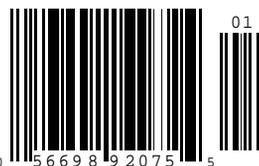
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WINTER 1999 VOL.3 NO.1

A Heavy-Hitter in the Ultimate Speaker Sweepstakes, Part I

Nova Evolution II Speaker System

BY CURTIS LEEDS

In every way, the Nova Evolution II speakers are a big speaker system. They are big in height, they are big in weight, they are big in price and—when properly set up—they are big in performance. They are also big in what they demand of its room and user; if I'm to do a fair job in reviewing them for you, they are going to require a big review. So this is just the first of two installments about a remarkable product.



Since this is a two part review, the reader can't skip ahead to discover my "bottom-line" opinion about the system—for that you'll have to wait for the next issue of *Ultimate Audio*. As a long-time reader of audio journals, I'm genuinely sympathetic to the frustration this will cause some of you, so I'll spare you the agony by revealing my general sense of the Nova right here: This is a great speaker system. But the journey to greatness is as much fun—and probably more educational—than the destination itself. So let's begin.

SIZING UP

While your journey with the Novas might begin at your dealer, for a reviewer the experience begins with the delivery. And at the time of delivery you'll learn just how much of a man your dealer really is. The Evolutions are shipped one speaker to a crate, and that's because each speaker weighs about 600 pounds. Add another 175 pounds for the wood crate, and you've got a package that's the Haystack Calhoun of loudspeakers. And only a fool (or the clowns that the delivery service sent with the truck to my house) would attempt to handle these with just one or two people. Your dealer will need to send at least three people to unload these, and four wouldn't be overkill at all. In the crate, these speakers are a giant dead weight. They are unwieldy in the extreme. Once uncrated and in the room, it's actually possible for one person to "walk" them about for fine-tuning of position. But to actually move them from truck to room or from here to there, you'll need a three- or four-person crew. (The two people who attempted to uncrate my Evolutions slipped and damaged a cabinet in the process.) So be a swell guy and stock up on your crew's favorite beverage to reward them after they've finished the task of delivery and uncrating, because the Evolutions render new meaning to the specification "speaker load," and this one isn't friendly.

WEIGHING IN

When Myles Astor first proposed that I write for *Ultimate Audio*, the magazine was just a sparkle in his eye. At that time, my wife and I discussed at length all of the advantages and disadvantages that we could imagine accompanying the job. Part of that conversation went like this:

Curtis: Well, at least I'll never have to mess

around with big, bulky speaker systems.

Loving Wife: Why do you say that, dear?

Curtis: It would be neither fair nor practical. First of all, very few speakers could compare with the abilities of our Infinity IRS Beta system.

LW: What about Infinity's newest speakers, Curtis?

Curtis: Oh, they're just nowhere near as good as the Betas. Once Arnie Nudell left the company, Infinity's flagship products have lost luster. And besides, if I ever reviewed another big speaker, where would I put the Infinities in the interim?

LW: Well, maybe Myles will send you a nice compact speaker to review, dear. You know, like I used to have before we were married. You know, like I wish we could get for our music room instead of those Infinity behemoths that you bought after only just barely consulting me.

Curtis: I hate small speakers. I hate minimonitors.

LW: The minimonitors at the radio station don't sound bad, dear.

Curtis: They don't sound bad for minimonitors, but they sound small. C'mon, dear, you know that they don't cook with Springsteen or Wagner the way that the Betas do.

LW: But they're cute and they're discreet and people don't ask questions about them the way they do with our big speakers.

Curtis: I hate minimonitors, dear.

This may explain why Myles asked me to review the Novas. These are not the speakers for people with small rooms or small budgets, or who prefer the more intimate, up-close sound that you can get with the best small systems. They are not for listeners who must heed the wishes of a significant other when it comes to speaker selection. The SAF (Spousal Acceptance Factor) of the Evolutions is somewhere between 0 and 0.00005.

THIRD AND FOURTH FIFTH IMPRESSIONS

Anyone's first impression of these speakers would be their size, of course. The second impression would be their weight. The third impression—for those of us who actually read owner's manuals—would be, "These should be a snap to set up!" Yet the tiny, simple "manual" gives only the most elemental information about connecting these to your system; there is a brief mention of biwiring (of which I've always been

THE TWO-PART SPEAKER REVIEW

One thing I noticed even before I ever wrote about audio equipment was that equipment reviews in the major audio magazines rarely varied in length. If a publication typically has three-page reviews, it's unusual to see a review in that magazine that's longer or shorter than that. I always assumed that reflected the realities of publishing. After all, each issue is planned months in advance. Oftentimes, the editors have not seen each review in total; instead they simply allot a given amount of space to it. Later, the review is "plugged in" to that physical space.

Politicians often make the same mistake. They choose a proper length of time for a speech, and then they fill the time with as many words as required. The wisdom of Lincoln—who made speeches of remarkable brevity and significant length with less regard to import than the success in conveying the message—is lost on them.

As a reader, you should recognize that you are fortunate that *Ultimate Audio* does not commit that sin. While I don't think Myles Astor was exactly excited when I discussed with him the expected length of this review, he was also not obviously upset by it. Clearly, *Ultimate Audio* and I share common goals for equipment reviews. Each review must be fair, interesting and helpful. It should assist a potential buyer in making a purchasing decision, and it should ideally help a current owner obtain the best performance from the product. And for those who will never even consider the purchase of a given piece (perhaps because of price, or space, or other preference), a good review can still help them to understand other aspects of audio in general, or that reviewer in particular. In this case, a successful review of the Nova Evolutions demanded more space for me to successfully convey their true nature.

What this means to you goes beyond just this one review. It also means that when you read a review in these pages that is of the typical length (for us), you are reading a complete, thorough review. When the component demands more space to tell the whole story, *Ultimate Audio* will commit that space. That is a very precious bit of knowledge. It's a claim many magazines (and television news programs, and radio talk shows, etc.) cannot honestly make.

suspicious) and precious little else. Perhaps Nova assumes that your dealer will guide you with respect to set-up, or perhaps they assume that the process is largely intuitive, but these are both likely to be mistaken assumptions. And the inadequate manual is to blame for the fourth impression, where we answer the question, "What do these sound like?"

I'm learning quickly that an audio reviewer's life is not an easy one. When the editor phoned to ask about my first impression of these speakers, I muttered something about how they are remarkably non-resonant, and that was about the only positive thing I could say about them. They were absolutely "dead." The cabinets were as solid as bricks. There were no rattles, no vibrations, nothing unmusical about the sound. And there was also no bloody bass.

Please forgive me if my perspective strikes you as single-minded, but for

\$32,000, I expect to be able to purchase a genuine full-range speaker system. And by "full-range" I mean a system that requires no subwoofer or special equalization to reproduce all the sounds of both the orchestra and the Stones. So my initial reaction to the Novas was that this was a great little \$2,500 speaker that somehow had been inexplicably mounted within the largest cabinet that the Houston company could fabricate. Yup, they were efficient. But they sounded like the biggest pair of minimonitors I had ever heard.

The only glimmer of hope for these was the cautionary words that Nova's sales rep, Jack, had offered. He was emphatic that the Novas require an unusually long break-in period. He mentioned that 50 hours was a minimum amount to allow for break-in, but that 100 hours was preferable. And I was v-e-r-y skeptical as to the value of the suggestion. After all, what is there in a

Nova Audio

speaker system that will perform differently a week from now than when it left the factory? Why aren't drivers and crossover components "burned-in" at the factory, where they can be measured for proper specification prior to shipment? While I can't pretend to answer those questions, I can verify the truth of Jack's advice. These speakers must be played, and they must be played loudly, before they will begin to show their capabilities.

NEW WEIGHTY TRUTHS

Quite honestly, I wasn't particularly happy that the Evolutions had dispelled my belief that speaker break-in was a myth. What I didn't know at the time was that they demand reconsideration of a number of other audio "truths." For even after the break-in period, the so-so performance of these required constant re-evaluation of every aspect of setup. Do you think most speaker systems sound best following the "Rule of Thirds," where the system is placed one-third of the way into the room? Me too. Do you tend to think that simply "biwiring" a speaker is unlikely to reward

the extra expense of cable? Me too. Do you think that most extreme ultra-exotic cables are overkill? Me too. Do you think that after you've been around audio for long enough you can satisfactorily set up your own speakers in fairly short order? Me too. And I was wrong on every single count.

So I fiddled and I fussed and I sweated. After all, moving around anything weighing 600 pounds is no minor feat. Although every change I introduced did indeed alter the sound, most of the changes seemed minor until the speakers were moved closer to the rear wall. This put them less than one-quarter into the room, but it reinforced the bass to the extent that (at the very least) it became obvious that they were truly able to provide low bass. The bass was still too low in level, and the balance was still too tipped-up. But finally they began to hint that perhaps the asking price for these was not unreasonable. We were making progress.

GETTING CONNECTED

Up until this point, I had single-wired the Evolutions. I had tried a number of differ-

ent speaker cables, and settled on Monster's M1's as offering a good balance. Just as I began experimenting with different amplifiers—in the hope of wringing more out of these buggers—George Cardas shipped me a set of his new Neutral Reference speaker cables. Since this is a speaker review and not a cable review, and because I have still only heard these new cables on this one system, I must resist the temptation to declare these a new standard in neutrality. But I won't hide from you my observation that the Neutral Reference cables elevated the performance of the speakers from just okay to the point where excitement now became part of the listening experience. Although I still had a nagging sensation that the Novas were capable of more than I was hearing, the sound began to "jell." There was a continuity, a uniformity to the sound that engages adjectives more typically applied to electronics than speaker systems. Words such as "neutral" and "natural" began to enter into my listening notes. Even on recordings that weren't themselves neutral—indeed, perhaps because they weren't completely

THESE ARE NOT THE SPEAKERS FOR PEOPLE WITH SMALL ROOMS OR SMALL BUDGETS, OR WHO PREFER THE MORE INTIMATE, UP-CLOSE SOUND THAT YOU CAN GET WITH THE BEST SMALL SYSTEMS.

neutral—I was beginning to sense that what I had previously assumed were flaws inherent in the recording were really flaws in previous playback of these LP's.

At this point, all the effort I'd expended (experimenting with placement, experimenting with wires, experimenting with amplifiers) hadn't left me satisfied. I was suffering a severe case of "Is That All There Is? Syndrome," and I was beginning to get impatient. Editors have timetables, you know, and manufacturers eventually want product returned to them. And I wanted to return to listening with my Infinity Beta system. Yes, by now I'd discovered biwiring the Evolutions with the new Cardas cables, and that had brought another incremental improvement, but the speakers still didn't cook. The bass was lean and the presenta-

tion left me feeling that something was missing. These speakers sounded "flat" in every way. They were flat in the sense that there was no apparent peak or valley in their frequency response. And they were flat in the same sense as an old can of Coke—all the flavor was there, but something was missing just the same. I really missed the set-up flexibility of the Betas: Separate level adjustment of the woofers, and flexibility that resulted from being able to place the Betas' separate woofer towers where they sounded best, while still leaving the midrange panels well away from walls and into the room. Ahhh, for the advantages of biamplification.

I had long ago discussed biamping the Evolutions with Nova's sales rep, and he seemed cool to the idea. Not many of the

company's customers feel the need, he claimed, probably because Evolutions are so efficient. Yes, they are capable of biamping, but isn't one really good amp better than two lesser amplifiers, he reasoned?

And the answer is... In the next issue of *Ultimate Audio*.

► **Nova Evolution II, Nova Audio, Inc., PO Box 40569, Houston, TX 77240. Tel.: (713) 466-1880. Fax: (713) 856-0256. Designer: Kevin Lee. Speaker Type: Three-way dynamic ported. Frequency response: 18 to 20,000 Hz (±3 dB). Sensitivity: 88 dB. Impedance (Nominal/Minimum): 4/3.2 ohms. Crossover points: 100, 2000 Hz. Minimum recommended power: 100 watts. Size: 70" x 16" x 35" (height x width x depth). Weight: 600 lbs. Price: \$32,000.**
