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SPRING 1999 VOL. 3 NO. 1

Nova Evolution II Speaker System, Pt. II

A Heavy-Hitter in the Ultimate Speaker Sweepstakes

BY CURTIS LEEDS

When last we visited the Nova Evolution II speaker system, your erstwhile speaker expert and hard-toiling reviewer had nearly exhausted his Bag o' Set-Up Tricks to wring from this system the sort of performance that would justify the price of admission. He'd tried unusual room placement, substitution of wires (eventually settling into the Cardas Neutral Reference) and his introduction into the world of biwiring. However, although it became obvious that the Evolutions are very solid boxes, capable of flat performance, some of the excitement still seemed to be missing.

When I speak of the "excitement" of a speaker system, I'm not referring to the sort of hyped-up sound that so often passes for high-fidelity. For me, there are three components of excitement in a speaker system. First, the enclosure must be non-resonant, because otherwise the speakers call attention to themselves. Second, they must be reasonably neutral and free of obvious emphasis of any part of the spectrum. When these two criteria are met, the third aspect of the speaker's sound can be evaluated. Do the speakers sound like music? Does the simple act of listening to music introduce a sense of surprise, of anticipation, of musical exploration? Does the speaker have a genuine "goose bump factor"? These are the rewards of a first-class music system. These rewards explain why today's best systems can deliver such potent musical and even artistic satisfaction—even though they fail to sound like live music.

Having experimented with every set-up parameter imaginable, only one significant option remained: Bi-amplification. I've long felt that the principal benefit from such an arrangement isn't the increase in power that it makes possible, or the prevention of distortion that can result from heavy bass demands. Rather, biamping permits the woofer and midrange/tweeter levels to be independently adjustable. The advantage is that a speaker's optimum position within the listening room is rarely the same for best bass performance and flattest

response over the remainder of the frequency band. And this was in large part the difficulty I was experiencing with the Novas. And although I've been using bi-amplification for years (it's a requirement for the Infinity Beta speakers that I normally use, and for the RS1B system from Infinity that preceded it), I simply was not prepared for the result with the speakers under review here.

In a word: I was stunned.

SOME HEAVY METAL

Bi-amplification resulted in much, much more than just securing independent level control of woofers and mids/highs. In one fell swoop, the entire system sprang to new life. Oddly enough, both the lows and the highs had a sense that they'd been liberated, and as a result, the sound developed a sense of transparency that one does not



TECHNICAL HIGHLIGHTS

expect from a speaker. One of my personal favorite albums is the first from Chicago Transit Authority. Never mind that this group has produced some of the most idiotic pap ever recorded, and that they've managed this for each of the last four decades. This first release (and one of Mobile Fidelity's best efforts on MFSL 2-128) still sounds fresh and daring. Of course it's a multitracked affair, but the result is musical. The Evolutions lay bare some of the noise gating and other studio artifacts (particularly evident on "Only the Beginning"), but none of it diminishes the groundbreaking interplay between vocal, trumpet, trombone, percussion and guitar. Prior to 1969, no one had ever heard music quite like this; prior to the Nova Evolution II's, this music never sounded so alive.

It is the challenge of getting all the musical sounds correct all at the same time that trips up so many audio components. One of my "acid test" LP's for just that is Andre Previn's interpretation of Holst's *The Planets*, which he recorded with the London Symphony Orchestra. The Japanese pressing is a wee bit bright (Angel ALF-99002-3), but the album conveys at once sounds both subtle and alarming, which I suspect was precisely what Holst intended. You can hear this clearly on the "Uranus and Neptune" sequence. The sense of space is real and believable (I'll resist applying the cliché "palpable"), and the instruments appear and disappear with the quality of the real thing: Tympani that starts, then startles, then ends and evaporates into space.

A more recent LP acquisition of mine is the famous *Balalaika Favorites* (Mercury 90310). Longtime *Ultimate Audio* readers may recall my prior mention that this is my hands-down favorite compact disc; *Ultimate's* own Richard S. Foster—while on a record hunt in Manhattan with Sid Marks—discovered a copy, which he subsequently sent to me. The LP reveals that the master tape used for the CD has clearly aged and suffered some loss over time. On the LP, the noise floor is actually lower than on the CD, and it is also more dynamic. On this LP as on others, the Evolutions take on one of the ultimate hallmarks of the high end: Authority. The sound is so free of strain and restriction at the frequency and dynamic extremes that it just sounds right. This frees the listener to hear only the music and its message, rather than spend energy concentrating on audiophile-type

Elsewhere in this very review, I've told you of the failure of numbers to tell the whole story of how an audio component will sound. No matter! It's hard to imagine that anyone considering the acquisition of a system as serious and lofty as the Evolution II's from Nova would be disinterested in such detail.

When audiophiles conjure an image of genuine state-of-the-art speaker systems, the first thoughts are probably of (relatively) more common products such as those from Infinity, Genesis, Wilson or Martin-Logan. Perhaps this is because Texas-based Nova Audio has been in business only since 1994. Its premier product line bore the "FirstAudio" badge; evidently, these have had some success in the international marketplace. It wasn't until 1995 that Nova set its sights on the domestic market, and the original Evolution model was its attempt to claim a slice of that pie.

The Evolution II's stand 70 inches high and 16 inches wide, but it's the 35-inch depth that lends them such a quality of "big". Since in my room they sounded best just slightly toed-in toward the listener, it was always visually evident that this is a big system. (Only extinguishing the lights would negate that observation.) This is actually a rather simple three-way vented system, with a pair of 10-inch woofers, a pair of seven-inch "mid woofers" and a high quality one-inch soft dome tweeter. They're delivered in a lovely rosewood finish of exquisite execution, and are biwireable/biampable right out of the box. The manufacturer specifies that this as a 4 ohm system of 88 dB (one watt/one meter) efficiency that can be driven with a (minimum) amplifier of 100 watts.

Nova has gone to great length to fabricate a no-compromise crossover network. And they didn't end the job with the polypropylene capacitors or the custom-wound air core inductors. Each crossover is mounted within the speaker in an isolated chamber to reduce resonance and mechanical vibration. The system sounds as though perhaps more speaker manufacturers should pay attention to this detail.

The Evolutions are delivered with a set of four spikes for each speaker. In the past, I have found such spikes (commonly called "Tip Toes") to be beneficial for good speakers. Usually, an improvement in low frequency response or definition results. I was unable to get any audible improvement with them in this case, however; I can only guess that the explanation for this lies in a combination of my listening room's concrete floor and the extreme weight of these speakers.

This speaker exudes no-compromise design. It's obviously not a speaker designed by a committee. Instead, it uses nothing but high-quality parts, which are assembled into a finished product that makes no concession to sheer practicality or the limitations of any speaker system that came before it.

Frankly, the amplifier recommendation has all the optimism of the annual mail-order seed and garden catalogs. Given the sheer physical size of the system, it's highly unlikely that they'll ever be used in a room where such little power will suffice. Perhaps Nova should be excused for this since it is not alone in the high-end in committing this mistake. However, it absolutely confounds me that they are not more keenly aware of the immediate benefits of biamplification.

things such as coloration or distortion or imaging. This is the justification for the high-end.

And the Evolutions can cook! Another of my favorite CD's is *People Get Ready: A Tribute to Curtis Mayfield* (Shanachie 9004). This is not a sonic audiophile masterpiece. Rather, it's just an excellent collection of contemporary interpretations of the best of Curtis Mayfield. However, the "rap" bridge in the middle of Jerry Butler's "Choice of Colors" is a genuine woofer-buster at realis-

tic levels. To be honest, I customarily back off the volume a smidgen when I listen to this on my Infinities. No such precaution is required with the Evolutions although—and I don't mean to beat a dead horse here—the track is proof that the minimum amplifier power suggested by Nova doesn't do anyone justice. The Briston 4B that I used for a bass amp during most of this review clipped several times during this track. This, though, offers evidence of another advantage of biamping: The mids

Nova II

and highs remain strain-free even if the bass is being slightly lopped off.

However, in the end, it's not bombastic reproduction or incendiary delivery that makes this class of equipment so rewarding to own. It's the natural, believable, "authoritative" presentation that draws one into the music again and again. There are many examples of this, and one is Van Morrison's *Too Long In Exile* LP (Polydor 519-219-1). If you listen to the "Big Time Operators" track, you'll probably notice the near-perfect balance between all of the elements of this piece. The bass, the lead guitar, the percussion, Georgie Fame's Hammond organ and Van's voice all blend harmoniously, yet at the same time, they each stand on their own as the music demands it. Lesser systems lend a congealed characteristic to this style of music. The Evolutions simply reveal what is there. It's a rather uncanny thing. Each instrument sounds unique unto itself yet, simultaneously, each sounds like part of a much greater whole. You cannot get this effect from many speakers that have one sort of

bass, and another sort of midrange, and still another quality of high frequencies.

FINAL WEIGH-IN

It's difficult to give this review the sort of authoritative ring that the Nova Evolution II's themselves deliver routinely. There are so many variables involved in speaker performance, and not the least of them is listener preference. Accordingly, I can't tell you that I'm certain that these speakers are for you. They demand a sizable and "sound" room, and they deserve only the very best in associated equipment. In my installation, they absolutely demanded biamplification and the very best in cables. I can tell you that they are so demanding in terms of set-up that you are not particularly likely to hear them at their best at your local dealer.

It's quite possible that for many purchasers, part of the final decision to acquire these will be made on the faith that you will expend whatever is necessary to wring from them the best performance—and that such effort will be well rewarded. Clearly, the Evolutions belong in the very top class of audiophile speaker systems.

When you consider that I've long been prejudiced towards the open spacious presentation of the best planar dipole systems, that's a rather remarkable statement. Indeed, the Evolutions blur the common distinctions made between dipolar panel type systems and direct radiators. That's because the Evolutions have the best qualities of each.

If you're seriously in the market for a state-of-the-art speaker system, you actually have only a few products to audition. Your evaluation process will not have been complete if you do not consider the Evolutions. ●

► Nova Evolution II, Nova Audio, Inc., PO Box 40569, Houston, TX 77240.

Tel.: (713) 466-1880. Fax: (713) 856-0278.

Designer: Murray Zeligman, Nova Design

Team. Speaker Type: Three-way dynamic

ported. Frequency response: 18 to 20,000 Hz

(±3 dB). Sensitivity: 88dB. Impedance

(Nominal/Minimum): 4/3.2 ohms. Crossover

points: 100, 2000 Hz. Minimum recommend-

ed power: 100 watts. Size: 70" x 16" x 35"

(height x width x depth). Weight: 600 lbs.

Price: \$32,000