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Audio Products International Athena S3 Loudspeakers and P3 Subwoofers

George Graves



MOTIVATED BY THE NEED to separate my "home theater" from my stereo system which had been serving double duty as my reference system and the front channels of my home theater's surround system, I recently acquired a set of Athena loudspeakers from one of Canada's foremost speaker manufacturers, Audio Products International. Makers of both the Mirage and Energy brands of loudspeakers, Audio Products recently launched the Athena line as, obviously, a line oriented toward the burgeoning home theater market. Now, before you skip the rest of this review, let me say that my interest in these speakers, while geared toward my HT system, surely, was piqued because an audiophile friend of mine in the Pacific Northwest, whose ears I trust, heard a pair and raved about them. Not as theater speakers, but in a music-only sound system. Good enough a recommendation for me to give these a serious listen.

Now, it occurs to me that my home theater system, while put together for me to watch High-Definition TV and progressive-scan DVDs, is just the sort of system that many music lovers are buying these days and which get pressed into double duty as both a home the-

ater system and a music system. This is also just the type of system that can be used to play the multi-channel DVD-A's and SACD that were so much in evidence at the recent Las Vegas CES. This epiphany has caused me to rename (for audio writing purposes) the audio portion of this system as "System Number 2." (Gee, I feel more like Harry Pearson every day!). And since, this is an *audiophile* Magazine and not a video magazine (and gratefully, not likely to become one either!), I will (mostly) ignore the video-only aspects of this setup in describing it to you and concentrate *only* on those portions of the system which lend themselves to the music-making aspects of it.

The electronics centerpiece of "System Number 2" is a Harman-Kardon AVR-7000 A/V receiver. This top-of-the-line unit puts out 110 watts per channel in each five of its channels and can provide ± 75 amperes of current to any of its output channels on an instantaneous basis. Receivers, once laughed at by serious audio enthusiasts, have gained new respect with the advent of home theater. It seems that the need for complete audio and video switching, the required decoding for various surround schemes, and the need for at least five channels

of high-power amplification, have made these one-box space-saving devices at least somewhat respectable, if not a simple necessity. Most modern receivers of this type, while perhaps not high-end, can offer some good sound for the money, and to my ears the H-K AVR-7000 sounds better than any other receiver currently on the market. (I auditioned about five with the best reputations before settling on the H-K.) I don't think you could do better electronics-wise for twice the \$1,800.00 street price of this device.

My main signal source for an H-T system is a DVD player, and the major characteristic that I am interested in a DVD player is its ability to double as a competent CD player. Able to play standard 16/44.1 CDs as well as 24/96 AC-3 and DTS DVD sound, these players either have a built-in 24-bit, 96-kHz digital-to-analog converters or they can feed the digital signal to the receiver which incorporates these things. In my system, the DVD and CD chores are handled by a Toshiba SD-5901 player feeding signal into the 24-bit, 96-kHz sampling rate D/A converter in my H-K AVR-7000 via a coaxial cable.

Many people today have satellite systems feeding their home theaters. Both of the two available U.S. small dish systems as well as many cable companies offer essentially the same digital music "channels" to their subscribers. The number of channels, catering to every conceivable taste in music, is staggering, and while I do not have a small

satellite dish or cable TV system, I do have a C-Band system (big dish) with a 4DTV digital satellite receiver. This receiver makes available all of the current digital music services at no charge (including DMX) to its owners. Since the services are the same, I feel that it is not cheating to use 4DTV-fed digital music as another viable source of program material for "System Number 2."

API intends their Athena range primarily for home theater, but they do a fine job in standard stereo use.

The Athena Speaker Concept

API's Athena speakers is a series of three more-or-less full-range systems, covering several price points (all of them very reasonable) together with a group of powered subwoofers that serve double duty as stands for the full-range speakers. All of the speakers have been carefully voiced so that they all have, more or less, the same sonic character or timbre and thus can be mixed and matched, subwoofer to full-range. A trip to Athena's novel website shows one the various combinations of mix-and-match available.

For this review, I will concentrate on the top-of-the-line S3 units that I used as right- and left-front speakers. These attractive full-range, three-way units have a 1-inch, soft-dome tweeter, a 5-inch midrange unit, and an 8-inch woofer. The box is covered in a very nice simulated

cherry wood vinyl finish, and the front of the cabinet is a black ABS-like curved plastic. The removable grilles are black and they cover *only* each individual driver rather than the entire front face. The S3 is a ported design, and Athena specs' the frequency response as being within ± 3 dB from 40 Hz to 20 KHz.

I placed these two speakers atop a pair of the Athena P3 subwoofers, thus using them as stands for the main speakers. There is both a mechanical and an electrical connection between the S3 full-range speakers and the P3 subs. All of the Athena full-range speakers have a pair of metal rails on their bottoms and the subs all have a mating set of metal rails on their top. To do this coupling, one simply lines up the rails and slides those on the main cabinet onto the rails in the subwoofer. The only additional connection required was hooking up speaker cable from the receiver to the subwoofer. The main five-way binding posts on the back of the main full-range speaker are used only if they are run without the subs.

The P3 subwoofers are a ported design with the 10-inch cone firing downward at the floor. They are powered with their own 150-watt MOS-FET amplifiers and need connection to the house a.c. line for power via a standard, but good-quality IEC-type cable.

The P3 subs are designed to be very flexible. As they come, the rails are covered by a plastic cap so that the subs might be used with speakers other than the Athenas. When the subs are mated with Athena full-range models in the docking arrangement, these rail covers double as covers for the subwoofer controls on the front of the cabinets; very clever. API spec's the P3 subwoofers as having a frequency response of 20 Hz to 150 Hz ± 3 dB.

The controls on the front of the subwoofers allow for a certain amount of flexibility and adaptability to speakers other than those from Athena, and they consist of two potentiometers and two toggle switches. The switches allow you to select either the S2 or the S3 main speakers or to select a sub setting if the p3 sub is used with speakers other than Athena's S2 or S3. It also sets the slope of the sub to properly

N O T E S

Audio Products International Athena S3 Loudspeakers, \$600.00 per pair, and **P3 Subwoofers**, \$600.00 each. Audio Products International, 3641 McNicoll Ave., Scarborough, Ontario, Canada M1X 1G5, phone 416/321-1800, fax 416/321-1500, e-mail joef@apic.ca, website www.miragespeakers.com.

Associated Equipment

In System 2: Harman-Kardon AVR-7000 receiver, Toshiba SD-5109 DVD/CD player, General Instruments 4DTV digital C/Ku band satellite receiver, Panasonic High Definition TV tuner, Panasonic HD-1000 High-Definition Digital VHS VCR, Magneplanar MG-IIIc speakers (borrowed from System 1), AudioQuest "tan" speaker cable, Monster M-1000 interconnects for audio.

blend with the selected main speaker which is always run full-range. The design uses a "subtractive filter" in the sub that subtracts the main speaker's response from "flat," leaving the desired subwoofer slope.

The second or "Blend" switch apparently works when the mode switch is in its center position for use with external sources, either low-level ones from a pre-amp or surround decoder or high-level ones for parallel-powering of main speakers from other makers than Athena. This switch cuts in the "Bass Range" control, a potentiometer that varies the low-pass filter crossover point between 50 and 150 Hz for flexibility in blending with speakers other than the Athena S2 or S3. control is *not* used when either an Athena S2 or an S3 full-range speaker is mated to the sub. The other pot controls the bass level, varying the volume of the subwoofer and setting it is pretty much a question of trial and error. I started with the control at the 9:00 position and advanced it one "hour" at a time until I was in the ballpark, and then used more subtle adjustments to blend it. A good sound pressure level meter like the excellent ones from Radio Shack and a CD with a bunch of test tones is very helpful here, otherwise you'll have to trust your ears.

The next speaker in my ensemble is the C1 center speaker. To a casual eye, this small box looks like it has the same driver complement as the S3 main speakers, a 6-inch woofer, a 5-inch midrange and a centrally located 1-inch soft-dome tweeter. This is somewhat misleading, as the larger of the two drivers, the 6-inch, is actu-

ally a passive radiator and has no voice coil or magnet assembly. This box is small compared to the S3s so it sits quite comfortably atop the H-K receiver. It's shallow enough not to cover the ventilation holes in the H-K receiver's top and is physically well-designed for its duties as a center-channel speaker.

Rounding out this Athena set is a small pair of the S1 full-range units for surround. These speakers are styled just like S3s with the same high-quality faux-cherry finish and black plastic front and use the same 1-inch soft-dome tweeter and 5-inch woofer. Specified frequency response of 60 Hz to 20 kHz ± 3 dB.

Setup

After unpacking all seven speakers (the S3s were packed as a pair as were the S1s), I placed two S3s on their subwoofer pedestals, sliding the rails of the S3s into the matching rails of the P3 subs. This almost made them into a single monolithic floor-standing mini tower, but I'd like to see Athena offer some kind of soft plastic "gasket" to place between the two units. It would look better to me and would make for a more positive coupling between these speakers.) I placed the C1 center unit on top of my TV, and then I mounted the two surround speakers in my adjustable May Audio wall mounts in the back of the listening room. The S3 and P3 combos were connected using some AudioQuest "Tan" speaker wire and the subs and surrounds by 12-gauge Phillips Magnavox OFC speaker cable. Monster's expandable banana plugs were used for all speaker and

The Athena S3 paints a very convincing image with flat response through most of the spectrum.

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amplifier connections. Following instructions from Athena's Jeff Percy, I let the speakers "work-in" for several weeks of almost constant play before attempting to do any critical listening.

Two-Channel Listening

Early one Saturday morning, I got down to some serious listening with these speakers connected to "System Number Two." I approached the formidable front panel of the mighty Harman-Kardon AV-7000 receiver and switched the on-board Lexicon surround processor to "off." I then selected the Toshiba DVD player as my CD source, dropped-in JVC XRCD-0035-2, a CD re-mastering of Coleman Hawkins' *Good Old Broadway*, and went back to my listening chair.

Now, I'm not going to say that I was *totally* blown away by what I heard. After all, I'd had these speakers on for weeks as background, and while I always try to avoid making any judgments while in this warm-up mode, truly speaking, it's fairly neigh impossible to do this. Indeed, I must say that I had, by this time, formed some pretty solid overall impressions.

The two-channel presentation of the Athenas is just excellent. These are not the current state-of-the-art speakers by any stretch of the imagination, but they are better in most respects than many so-called state-of-the-art speakers of just a few short years ago. They are solid, have a good bottom-end foundation, and a very flat frequency response through most of the spectrum. I have no way, other than my ears, to corroborate Athena's published specifications for these speakers, but my ears tell me that apart from a minor hump in the upper bass region, centered around 80 Hz, that they are very neutral and extended sounding speakers. I'm not going to hit this upper bass hump too hard, because I believe that it's the possible interaction between the two subs setting-up standing waves and causing a bit of a "bloom" at my listening position. Moving around the room changed this characteristic quite a bit, and I think that someone with a more flexible setup than I have (with the speakers relegated, as it were, on either side of the big Pioneer TV) would be able to tame it. At any rate, it's a minor thing and only really noticeable on direct comparison with my reference speakers on sounds like male radio or TV announcers (it makes them "chesty").

The midrange on this ensemble really shines. Horns, such as Doc Severinsen's trumpet on the cut "You Made Me Love You," (*Big Band Parade*, Telarc CD-80177), have just the right foundation. Not too forward, but with that big brass bite for which Doc's playing is so famous. Having heard Severinsen live many times, I certainly know when his trumpet sounds "right," and right it is through the Athena P3s.

Listening to Pavarotti sing "Nessun Dorma" elicited a similar response from me. Just the right amount of tenor chest for this glorious voice, neither too thin and recessed nor too "chesty." This was without the subs; with them, that 80-Hz hump the Great Man had a bit of a cold. With midrange voicing this good, the rest is icing on the cake. These Athena speakers really deliver the goods in this all too important range.

The top end on these speakers is quite interesting. At first, I suspected that they were a bit rolled-off in the uppermost octave, so I tried an experiment. I played the "Troika" from Prokofiev's *Lt. Kije Suite* (Reiner, Chicago Symphony, RCA 5605-2-RC) The sleigh bells (really just

a triangle and glockenspiel) in this piece have tremendous energy, and I figured that they would tell the tale about the Athena's top end better than anything else. I played this CD first on my reference speakers (Magneplanar MG-IIIc's) with their magnificent ribbon tweeters, then on the Athenas. For this test, I connected both the Maggies and the Athenas to the H-K in order to minimize the interaction of other variables. The sleigh bells in the "Troika" didn't sound rolled off in direct comparison to my reference speakers, but they do sound different. The exact nature of this is hard to explain. On the Maggies, the bells have this metallic quality that I perceive as a combination of sharp transient attack and quick decay. The bells on the Athenas, on the other hand, have less of this metallic quality, as if someone had moved a very thin curtain between the source and my ears. This is not all that apparent on extended listening and could be quite beneficial on CDs that have percussion miked too-closely.

Strings are smooth and extended. The instruments have lots of air around them, which is not a quality I associate with a rolled-off top end. If one is used to the sound afforded by the metal-dome tweeters that have been popular (especially in British designs) for the past decade or so, the Athena's tweeter will probably sound rolled-off by comparison. Which is right? That's not the proper question. The question is which sounds more like real music. The metallic tweeter sound (and indeed the more neutral but very quick Maggie ribbon) is more front-row center, while the soft dome is more like sixth to ninth row. Neither is bad, just different.

Imaging

The Athena S3 throws a very convincing image. While not as pin-point accurate as some of the very tiny "mini-monitors" around, they nonetheless give a fairly accurate sonic picture of the performance. For imaging tests, I use CDs cut from master tapes of a major symphony orchestra that I have recorded. I know these tapes intimately and since they were recorded using a simple X-Y microphone placement scheme, have imaging and soundstage characteristics that are about as precise as they come.

The Athena S3s paint a broad soundstage that stretches beyond the limits of the speaker cabinets. The stage is deep as it is wide, with only minimal foreshortening at the extreme edges. Image specificity is very good, astounding really, when one considers the price. Instruments are easy to identify as to placement and the positions are solid. The specificity of image placement, while certainly not in the same league as the legendary Rogers LS3/5 is very good both laterally and front to back. The piano in my recording of the Rachmaninoff *Third Piano Concerto* was not specially miked or augmented in any way. It sits just to the left of the conductor's podium, in front of and just to the right of the first strings. The lid is opened toward the audience, and consequently right at my pair of Sony C-37P big capsule condenser mikes hanging about seven feet over the conductors head and about 10 feet behind him. The result is a realistic soundfield representation of a piano playing *in concert* with a symphony orchestra. The result, on good speakers, is a fascinatingly real soundstage presentation that one does not get when the piano is miked separately or spotlighted. The Athenas convey this sense of cohesion with the orchestra, and yet, at the same

time allow the listener to hear the piano in its proper place in the scheme of things. A more pin-point source would have reduced the size of the piano to its actual sonic size, as the Athenas make it seem just a bit bigger than real, but in no way does the listener feel that h'is listening to anything other than a piano being played on stage with the orchestra, not some wall-to wall monstrosity overlaid on the orchestral recording in an afterthought.

From the top to the bottom, the Athena S3/P3 combo are a remarkable achievement. They show what good, modern computer modeling can do in the way of producing a very good speaker for very little money. Only a short time ago, this kind of performance would have cost many thousands of dollars. If this is the future of speaker design, then we all have much to look forward to.

Surround Listening

I would be remiss if failed to mention the Athenas as a surround system. For the purposes of this review (as well as for my own curiosity), I picked up a copy of the DTS surround CD of the *Titanic* soundtrack (DTS Entertain-

ment/Sony 71021-51026-2-7). Using the D/A and Lexicon DTS decoding circuitry in the Harman-Kardon AVR-7000, I was fairly impressed with the sense of space that the 5.1 channels gave. Unfortunately, the digital compression was all too apparent to me and I feel that we need to wait for full-bandwidth, six-channel recordings (ala SACD or DVD-A) before this is a truly viable option for most music lovers/audiophiles.

My reaction was somewhat kinder to my local PBS outlet's High-Definition television broadcast of the finale of conductor Christoph Eschenbach's last concert season with the Houston Symphony titled "A Maestro's Farewell" in. Here, the accompanying 5.1 Dolby Digital sound worked wonders on Bartok's *Concerto for Orchestra*. So, I guess its true that the eye takes precedence over the ear. Anyway, I noted nothing out of the ordinary from normal PBS concert sound (except for the discrete multi-channel) and was just bathed in the sound of the Houston Symphony's performance venue.

There is one final criticism that I have saved for this section of the review because it mostly affects

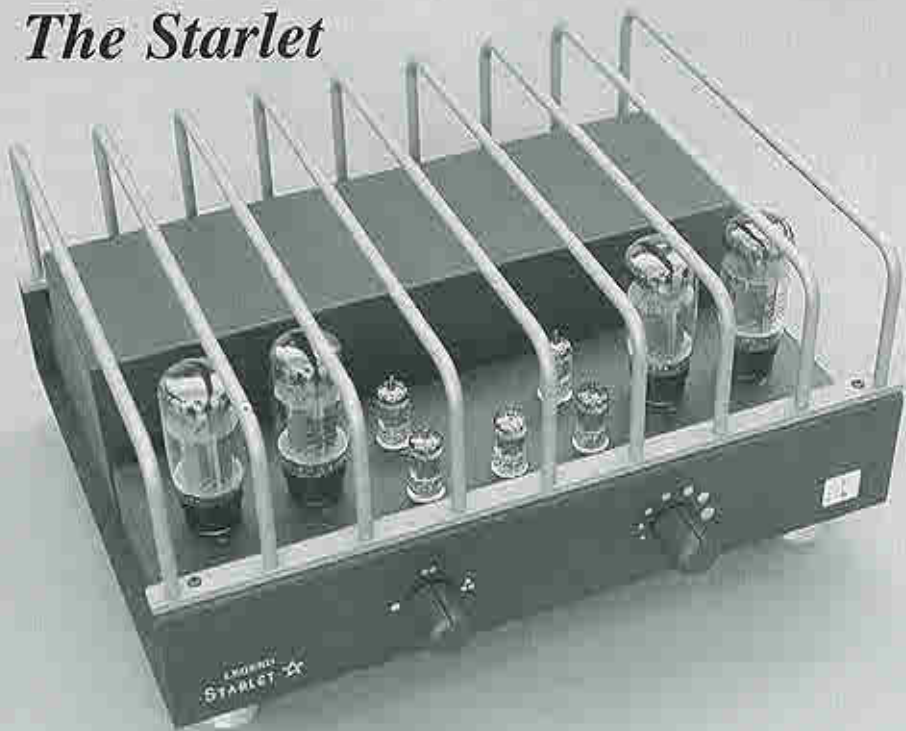
movie and TV watching. The center-channel speaker in the Athena ensemble sounds relatively poor. It does not match the sound of either the S3s in front or the S1s in back, in spite of having the same tweeter and midrange driver. I would suggest that one purchase an extra S1 or to use as a middle channel system and bypass the Athena C-1 except for the fact that the entire P line is only sold in pairs. I would like to see Athena rethink these questions.

Conclusion

All in all, this is a terrific inexpensive speaker system. Whether you purchase only two S3s and two P3s for stereo only, or if you go for the whole surround ball of wax, you can't get better without spending a heck of a lot more money. This is the perfect system for that second home, for the neophyte audiophile on a budget, the teenager's system or for that new home theater. Many people do use their home theater for both their stereo systems and for TV watching as well as their DVD-based movie theater.

The Athenas fill all of these tasks more than ably. Highly recommended.

The Starlet



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