

WLM La Scala Monitor Loudspeakers

By Marc Phillips

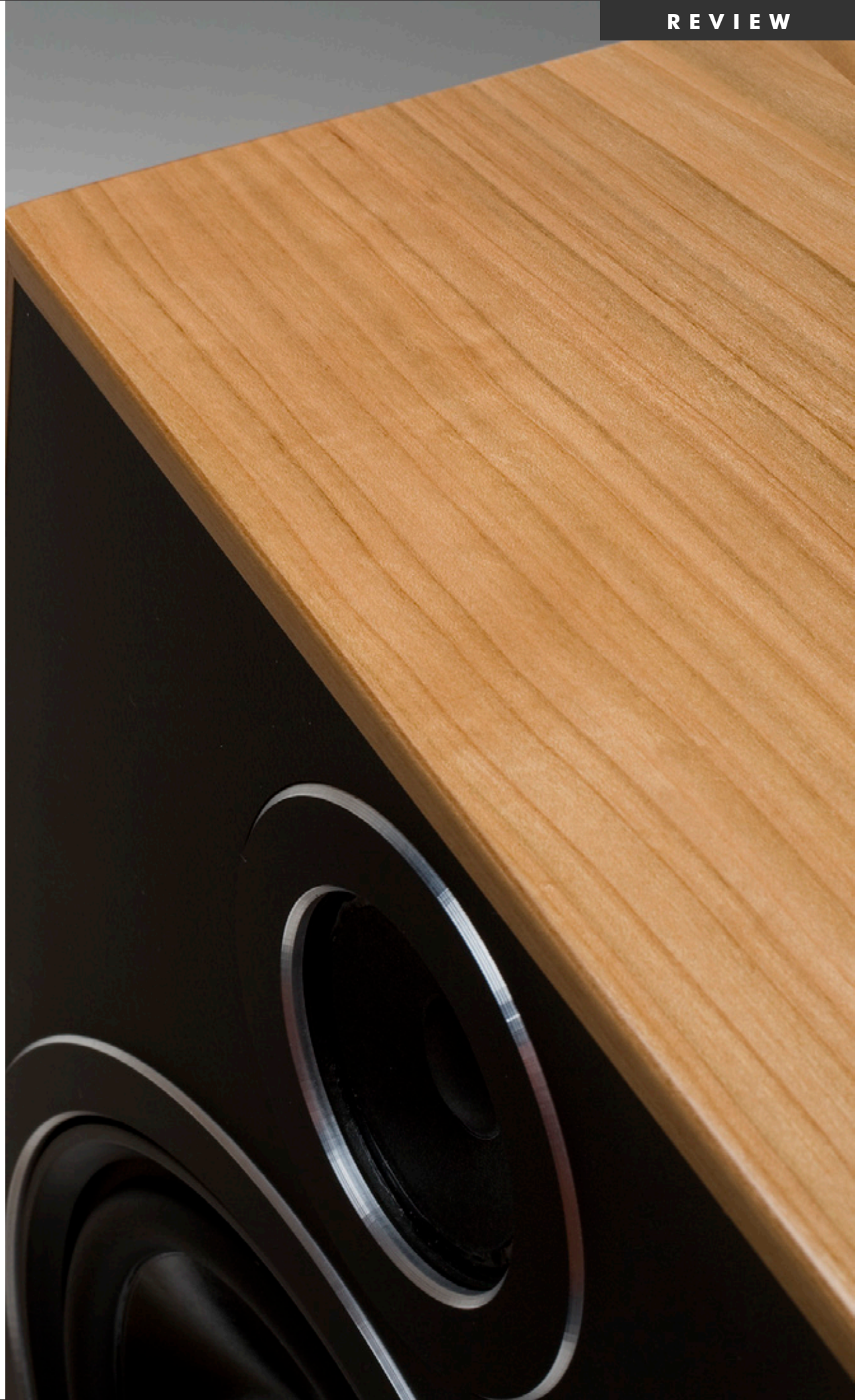
La Scala

I have known about the Austrian audio manufacturer WLM ever since my SET days when I was constantly on the hunt for speakers that would work well with my Yamamoto A-08S 45 amplifier. The first WLM stand-mounted monitors I heard were costly, but they sounded amazingly warm, yet detailed and enveloping. I asked the North American distributor at the time if they were efficient, and he smiled knowingly and said, “Oh, yes.” I told him I only had two watts per channel. He whispered, “That’s enough.”

I haven’t heard much about WLM (Weiner Lautsprecher Manufaktur) in the past couple of years, but that’s about to change. Vinnie Rossi of Red Wine Audio is now distributing this brand in the US, and I almost wet myself when he asked if I’d like to review a pair of the entry-level LaScala Monitors. While I no longer have the Yamamoto (yes, I do miss it), I remembered my first experience with that other pair and hoped that history would repeat itself.

Not your average stand-mounted monitors

The La Scala Monitors are a bit different in design than other WLM speakers. They don’t feature that concentric woofer and tweeter configuration that may fool you into thinking they’re a single-driver high-efficiency loudspeaker. The La Scalas sport a rather conventional 8-inch paper-cone woofer that is unusually stiff (not to mention shiny). While the tweeter isn’t hiding behind the dust cap of the woofer like the more expensive models, it is fairly unconventional. WLM has chosen a 2.5-inch paper-cone tweeter that will remind you of loudspeakers from the ‘70s from brands such as JBL or Altec-Lansing. In fact, this driver may be the first thing you notice about the otherwise conventional appearance of the La Scalas. *(continued)*



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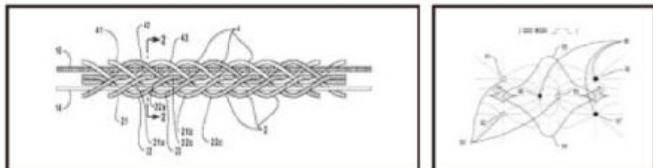
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The last time I saw a cone tweeter on a new speaker, it was on the Spica SC-30. While that was an impressive little speaker for \$330 a pair, the cone tweeter was used as a cost-cutting measure. (To paraphrase an old Subaru slogan, it was inexpensive and built to look that way.) This WLM cone tweeter, however, is a completely different animal. It doesn't look cheap at all. It was chosen because the cone material matched the woofer, providing a seamless top-to-bottom sound that was more consistent with the other models in the WLM line. The cone tweeter also goes up to 25 kHz, so there's no worry about high-frequency limitations.

At first glance, the La Scalas may not seem like a \$4,500 pair of small stand-mounted monitors.

They're not lavishly-designed nor do they feature provocative angles or seductive curves. For the most part, they're conventional boxes outside of those mysterious cone tweeters. They are only available in European cherry and do not include grills—both of these decisions were made to keep the costs low. Upon closer inspection, however, you'll notice an understated quality to these speakers. That cherry veneer is absolutely gorgeous up close. The fit and finish of the enclosure is exquisite. Even the cone of the woofer shines with the same intensity of the finest piano black lacquer.

Setup and Listening

I used a couple of different types of speaker stands with the La Scalas. (continued)



Vinnie Rossi sent along the wonderful and affordable Skylan stands that have found favor with Harbeth enthusiasts of late. I also had a pair of 19-inch Sound Anchors as well. The only reason the Sound Anchors were put into use was that the Skylans needed to be filled with sand, and the first couple of weeks with the La Scalas were accompanied by the worst winter storm in the Pacific Northwest in 30 years. The sand would have to wait until two feet of snow melted away.

I also tried three sets of amplification with the La Scalas. First, I used my current reference, the SimAudio Moon I-7 integrated. The Moon is powerful, flexible, offers a wide variety of features and never fails to sound exciting yet controlled. I also used the WLMs with the new Conrad-Johnson LP66s power amplifier and Classic preamplifier combination to see how the speakers would react to a less-powerful (60 wpc) tube design.

Finally, I used the Red Wine Audio Signature 30.2 power amplifier and Isabella preamplifier. Vinnie Rossi chose to represent the Austrian company due to the synergy their two product lines create, so it made perfect sense to investigate.

At 91 dB and a steady 8-ohm impedance, the La Scalas aren't the most efficient speakers I've had in my listening room; the other models in the WLM line tend to gravitate toward 96 to 98 dB sensitivity. But they do react quickly to changes in volume, and I found myself pulling on the reins of attenuation more frequently than with other speakers of their size. This was especially noticeable on more powerful amplifiers such as the 150wpc SimAudio, where I'd change records and have to immediately lunge for the remote because I was getting blasted. This is where the Red Wine Audio Signature 30.2/Isabella combination beat out the other two amplification sources. With its relatively modest power rating, the RWA gear provided a more gradual and predictable way to control unexpected shifts in output levels from recording to recording.

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The La Scalas also feature a control on the back that adjusts tweeter response from a 3db boost or cut, allowing the listener to compensate for the room, source material and associated components. While I had a bit of fun trying out different settings, my room is tuned fairly well and I always wound up pretty close to the 0 dB mark on most recordings. Still, this is an extremely useful feature for blending the La Scalas into almost any room.

With A Little Help From My La Scalas

My first impression of the La Scalas was that they offered a more forward presentation than other monitors I've had in my room. Rather than present a soundstage located distinctly behind the rear plane of the loudspeakers, the WLMs seemed to actually provide spatial cues and musical information that existed in front of the speakers. While the presentation was not right in my lap, it was never aggressive and provided greater soundstage depth. I felt this was more effective at capturing a more thorough sense of space of the original recording venue. *(continued)*

This may have been the result of the cone tweeter, which has a very wide dispersion pattern. Vinnie Rossi told me that the La Scalas were one of his favorite speakers in the world due to the open and spacious quality of that cone driver, and I'd have to agree. The La Scalas are an instrument for looking deep into a recording, almost like a fine pair of headphones. They are not an instrument for reproducing the same sonic perspective you get from your usual 20th row seats at your local symphony hall.

Bass performance was solid, though not subterranean. If I had to pick one single way in which to improve these speakers, I'd add about 10 Hz to the bottom end. Surprisingly enough, the La Scalas are available in a floor-standing version for \$5,400, and these do just that, going down to 30hz where the stand mount speakers only go down to 40hz. But with just a few exceptions, the quality and depth of the lower bass was the equal to some floor-standing speakers I've had in my listening room during the past year.

The La Scalas excelled at conveying emotional content. I pulled out my beloved UK Parlophone stereo pressing of *Sgt. Pepper*, the same one I received on my 15th birthday. Fortunately, this has been the Dorian Gray in my LP collection, remaining pristine and without surface noise despite at least 100 plays. I usually retrieve this LP to hear Paul's ripe and musical bass in "With a Little Help From My Friends," but I was struck by the child-like innocence in John's voice in "Lucy in the Sky With Diamonds." His voice hung so clearly and plaintively in the space between the La Scalas that I could feel what kind of mood he was in when sang those words. This level of intimacy literally sent chills down my spine.

Just Close Your Eyes

I'm definitely smitten with the WLM La Scala Monitors. You're probably tired of hearing about small speakers that sound much bigger than they are, and you're not alone. Let's face it, most small speakers need to earn that compliment before they're even allowed to see the marketplace these days. But the La Scalas do more than sound big for their size. They project a sound that can easily be mistaken for that of a much more expensive and ambitious design.

I've had several larger speakers in my listening room during the past two years, with at least half of them costing more than a thousand dollars more per pair than the WLMs. The La Scalas exhibited the same level of size, scope and presence.

When evaluating the LaScalas objectively, you have to close your eyes. Don't think about the fact that they're fairly expensive for a medium-sized monitor. Think instead about the fact that the cabinets are assembled by meticulous craftsmen who believe in Old World standards. Then open your eyes. Go up to the La Scalas and examine them closely. You'll see the quality immediately in every aspect of the design.

The La Scalas do more than sound big for their size. They project a sound that can easily be mistaken for that of a much more expensive and ambitious design.

Now put on your favorite record, go back to your listening chair and close your eyes again. Forget about everything but the music. The WLM La Scala is *that* kind of loudspeaker. ●





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Digital Source: Shanling
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Phono Preamp:
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Preamp: Conrad
Johnson Classic, Red Wine
Audio Isabella

Power Amplifier: Conrad
Johnson LP66S, Red Wine
Audio Signature 30.2, Sim
Audio Moon I-7 (as integrated)

Speakers: DeVore
Fidelity Gibbon Nines

Interconnects: Audience
Conductor, DH Labs
Relation, Cardas Golden
Reference

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