

The New Boss: Kharma Ceramique Reference Monitor 3.2

Jonathan Valin

A few months ago I told you that the Rockport Hyperion loudspeakers (driven by the Tenor 75Wpc OTL amplifiers) were the closest I'd come to the absolute sound in three decades of listening. So why am I now about to tell you that my new reference speakers are *not* the fabulous Rockports but the Kharma Ceramique Reference Monitor 3.2s—smallish two-way floorstanders that, though expensive, cost about a fifth of what the mighty Rockports go for?

Well, there are three reasons. First, I can't afford the Hyperions, which cur-

below about 35Hz—quite remarkable extension for a two-way loudspeaker but still less than subterranean bass.

Given that the CRM 3.2s are priced at nearly \$20,000, this last may be a disqualifying factor for many. I've wrestled a bit with the deep-bass issue myself. But only a bit. You see, in every other way, the Reference Monitors are exceptional. In fact, they are the first and only small speakers I've auditioned that give you the big, expansive sound of large speakers, without taking up the sheer acreage of large speakers (or energizing all those nasty room modes). If you live in

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rently price out at well over \$90,000. Second, the Rockports are a mite too big for my room (though I could probably shoe-horn 'em back in if Rockport's Andy Payor ever decides to cut a demo pair loose). And third, I hadn't heard the Kharmas at the time that I wrote the Rockport review.

I'm not going to kid you. The Kharmas are not the equals of the Hyperions in certain respects. Among other things, they do not have the natural image height, the midrange/midbass richness and authority, or the deep bass fullness and liquidity of the Rockports. Moreover, the Kharmas are not truly full-range loudspeakers; they roll off gently (but audibly)

an apartment, a condo, or, like me, a house that does not have a 30-by-40-foot listening room with vaulted ceilings, this is very good news.

In the past, if you hankered for the soundstaging and power of the PipeDreams, the authority and gorgeousness of timbre of the Rockports, the low-level nuance and transient speed of the Sound Labs, or the air and presence of the Magnepans, but didn't have the space to house any of these monsters, you were out of luck. You had no choice but to



downsize, and with that reduction in size came inevitable sonic sacrifices. You could, for instance, give up large-scale dynamics, low-bass extension, natural image size, and wall-to-wall soundstaging and buy Quad ESLs. Or at even more of a penalty in dynamics, authority, image size, and frequency range (but considerably less of one in soundstaging), you could opt for a great two-way mini-monitor from a company like Spendor or Sonus Faber.

But for all you gave up with a smaller speaker, it is important to note that you gained things, too—beyond the reduction in size, bulk, and cost. All of the Big Boys (the Sound Labs excepted) are *multiway* loudspeakers that use separate woofers or subwoofers or both. In filling out those two bottom octaves of bass that the Quads and the Spondors (and the Kharmas, to a lesser degree) are missing, a big speaker also adds drivers and crossovers and larger boxes to house them—none of which are good things.

Putting aside the enclosure and room-mode issues, with a large multiway you are confronted with the problem of trying to make drivers of unequal size, mass, and material composition sound like one unit. Though crossovers are theoretically designed to do just that, anyone who has ever yoked subwoofers to an electrostat or a good mini-monitor can tell you that what's true in theory is not true in fact. Just listen critically to the midrange of *any* such speaker before and after you've added subs. I don't care what subwoofer it is or what slope or filter you apply; you're going to lose something in the way of soundstaging, transparency, dynamic speed and nuance, and inner detail—in short, you'll lose a significant amount of what you bought the speaker for. (Of course, you'll gain something, too, in the way of body, midbass authority, instrumental weight, and low-bass extension, but let's not pretend that these things don't come at a cost that some of us are unwilling to pay.)

The trouble with a big multiway speaker system, even the best of them like the Hyperion, is that at crossover frequencies, you're asking a basso and a

tenor (or a tenor and a soprano) to sing notes in unison that are outside their respective ranges. And when their voices crack under the strain, you can hear it as a darkening of timbres, or a planing down of nuance and texture, or a knife-edged sharpening of upper midrange tones and overtones, or a muddying of mid-to-lower octave lines, or a smearing of transients, or an overall veiling and constriction of the soundfield—or all of the above.

Next to a one-way loudspeaker, like an electrostat, a great two-way like the Kharma Ceramic Reference Monitor is inherently the lowest in such driver-and-crossover-related colorations, the most coherent top-to-bottom, the most “of a piece.” (It is also, because of its small size, the least room-sensitive and the lowest in “box colorations,” which

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are all reasons why two-ways are so often used as studio monitors, particularly for classical music.) However, if buying any good one- or two-way speaker were all it took to achieve audio Nirvana, there would be no reason to go beyond the Quads or Spondors. What makes the Kharmas stand so far apart that they're worth an extra 15 grand?

Let's start with soundstaging. Those of you who know my listening biases know that soundstaging is relatively far down on my priority list. I've always felt 'staging (as we typically hear it on discs) is more an artifact of the recording process than a musical value. However, there are occasions when a speaker throws a soundstage that is so wide, so deep, and so clearly and transparently layered in front-to-back and side-to-side perspective that the music itself benefits from the presentation—antiphonal effects, inner lines hidden by lesser loudspeakers, the size, power, textures, and individual contributions

of an orchestra or a chamber ensemble are clarified. In my past experience, the Nearfield Acoustic PipeDreams have reigned supreme in this regard. In fact, they've had no real competition (even from the Hyperions)—until now.

Imagine, if you will, a loudspeaker that isn't eight feet tall and four feet deep, that doesn't have 84 tweeters, 42 midrange drivers, and eight 18" subwoofers, but is instead three feet tall and a foot-and-a-half deep, has a scant two drivers—a 7" ceramic mid/bass, ported in back, and a 1.5" inverted-dome titanium tweeter—and yet throws a soundfield that is in every way (but one) not just the equal of the previously unrivaled PipeDreams but their superior. If you *can* imagine that, then you've just conjured up the Kharma CRM 3.2s.

These babies are the best soundstaging loudspeakers I've ever heard. On any source that has an exceptionally wide and deep stage—try the exuberant Argentina recording of Chabrier's exuberant *España* [Decca], or the charming, cosmopolitan Allegro of Menotti's Scarlatti *Concerto in F for Piano and Orchestra* [Vanguard]—and you will hear a breadth of stage that is breathtaking. And this is not a miniaturized stage, as is so often the case with mini-monitors or smaller electrostats or planars. Though the CRMs do not have all of the natural height of a large speaker, they come close—astonishingly so for a speaker of such modest dimensions.

And that is just the start of the good things. The Kharmas also bring unrivaled (even by 'stats or the Hyperions) order and clarity to this huge wall-to-wall-to-wall soundstage. I've never heard a speaker that is more articulate. From the thirds and fifths of bass and cello obbligatos to the ethereal overtones of violas and violins, you will never feel as if you are missing a note or an instrumental voice. Nor will you ever feel as if a musical detail is being smudged. The CRMs put layers of air between the sections of an orchestra, between the individual instruments of the sections, and between the notes they play, so that even when first

and second strings are playing in unison you can suss out the individual choirs (and the individual players within those choirs). Ditto with doublebasses and cellos. Indeed, if there is a more transparent loudspeaker on the market, I haven't heard it.

And there is more still. Though the CRMs are the most detailed loudspeakers I've heard, they are anything but clinical. These magical boxes produce string tone—instrumental timbres of all kinds—to die for. Just listen to the first and second violins in the aforementioned Menotti piece or in the great Mercury recording of Debussy's *Nocturnes for Orchestra*, and be ravished. Unlike their big brothers, the three-way Kharma Reference 1Bs, the CRMs do not pay for their transparency by brightening up or thinning out timbres. Though I wouldn't claim they have the full majesty of the huge Hyperions, they come, yet again, astonishingly close. Even in the bass, they hold rich color while maintaining clarity of line and pitch.

It should be obvious that these little speakers are champs at small-scale dynamics. What may come as a surprise is how good they are at the large-scale stuff. When the London Symphony Orchestra reaches its explosively festive peak on *España*, these little boxes rock the room, energizing every bit of space from wall to wall to wall, just as an orchestra does in a hall. Even timpani strikes send out waves of air that you can feel. Only in the deepest bass will you sense that anything is missing. But if you're thinking subwoofer, think again. Unless Kharma develops a sub of its own, even the best of the current subwoofer crop (I use the Krell Master Reference) involves a trade-off in soundstaging and midband transparency and, oddly enough, in bass cleanness and clarity. I'm afraid that you'll have to take the CRMs as they come.

Before I talk about compatibilities, let me list one more plus. Like their big brothers—in fact, even more so—these things utterly disappear into the soundfield. I'm sure this vanishing act is a function of their diminutive size, their artfully damped and ported


monocoque enclosures, their superb drivers (as I noted in my review of the larger Kharmas, that ceramic mid/woof is the best dynamic midrange I've heard and Kharma's superb inverted-dome titanium tweeter is a perfect match), designer Charles van Oosterum's elaborate silver-coil crossover. Other speakers disappear—the huge Hyperions to a surprising degree—but none that I've heard (including electrostats) vanish into the soundfield as completely as these do.

Finally, there is this. Though it's more a gestalt thing than a sum of audiophile plusses, the Kharma Ceramique Reference Monitor 3.2s are, well, the most fun to listen to of any speakers I've had in my home. For me and my listening panel, that huge, perfectly clear and orderly soundstage, filled with dense instrumental colors and sensational dynamics, produces a spine-tingling, goosebump-raising thrill every time we play a record—a thrill that other speakers, even great ones, haven't generated as consistently.

A speaker this good—this musical and discerning and fun to listen to—does not come along every day. At least, it doesn't at this size and price point. If you plan to purchase the CRMs—and you really should audition them if you have a small-to-moderately large space (and the requisite moolah)—you would be well served to listen through the best electronics. In my experience that means one of two options. In a smaller space, the Lamm ML-2 monoblock amplifier and Lamm L-2 preamplifier are untouchable—the most expensive, magically detailed sound I've ever heard from a small loudspeaker. In a larger room or for more SPLs, the Tenor 75Wpc amplifier and the ARC Reference 2MkII preamp are a killer combination—almost as detailed as the Lamm gear, with greater air and light, simply glorious timbres and dynamics, and every bit as large a soundfield.

The Kharmas also fare best with Kharma's own (marvelous) Enigma cable and interconnects, though they will also do fine with less expensive wire. They come with what Kharma calls its SDDS base—a handsome four-

pronged metal stand that bolts to a heavy plate on the bottom of the speaker, raising the speaker up an inch or so from the floor. Each of the SDDS's four feet is tapped for heavy-duty tiptoes that fit into dimpled metal discs. (Tiptoes and disc are supplied.) I strongly advise using this base.

Aside from the missing octave-and-a-half of low bass and the slight reduction in image height, I can think of no drawbacks to the Kharma Reference Monitor 3.2—even when it is pitted against the biggest, most sophisticated, and most expensive competition. And so far neither can anyone else. As of this writing, Kharma has sold every single pair of CRMs imported into this country. That and the fact that I've made them my new references, awarded them a Golden Ear, and nominated them for Loudspeaker of the Year should tell you all you need to know. 

SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Two-way floor-standing dynamic loudspeaker
 Drivers: 1.5" inverted-dome titanium tweeter, 7" concave ceramic mid/bass
 Power Handling: 100W
 Frequency Response: 35Hz–25kHz -3dB
 Crossover: 1.75kHz
 Sensitivity: 89dB (1W/1m)
 Impedance: 8 ohms
 Maximum SPL: 108dB
 Dimensions: 36" x 16" x 12"
 Weight: 70 pounds

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Walker Gold Proscenium Record Player; Clearaudio HarmonyMg; Lyra Helikon; Krell KPS25sc; Audio Research CD-3; Audio Research Reference 2MkII; Lamm L-2; Audio Research Reference Phono; Lamm ML-2; Tenor Wp75; Krell FPB600; Kharma Grand Reference/Enigma; Purist Audio Dominus

DISTRIBUTOR INFORMATION

GTT Audio/Video

356 Naughtright Rd.
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 www.gttgroup.com
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 Price: \$19,000

MANUFACTURERS' RESPONSES

Kharma Reference Monitor 3.2

It is the first time for my company to be granted a Golden Ear Award for one of our products [Issue 139], and I must admit that it does make one feel proud to be playing in this league. The designer's idea of the CRM 3.2 was exactly as JV describes it [in the review, this issue]: to create a small speaker that doesn't sound like a small speaker once properly set up. The challenges were many: extended bass enough to satisfy the critical high-end listener and a real life-sized image. To create that, we went to the bottom in terms of resolution; this is closely related to absence of coloration. To get to this, we used extreme components, and even more extremely treated to protect every part from resonances. High-content silver/gold alloys in the wiring and coils are, after being specially soldered, further subjected to several processes, among them, cryogenic treatment to minus 196°C of all related components. The result is an almost inaudible crossover and therefore maximum seamless blending of the units. About adding a subwoofer, JV makes an important point. It is almost impossible to add a subwoofer without degrading the reality and transparency of the

soundstaging. In fact, we have been working on a subwoofer for two years, and it will still take some thorough research before we reach our goal.

Charles van Oosterum

O.L.S. Audiotechnology & Kharma

Basis 1400 Turntable

It is indeed a challenge to offer the traditional Basis levels of extreme quality and precision at this price range. We will not and do not sacrifice our quality to extend into particular price ranges, and we are proud to be able to offer our legendary quality in the 1400.

I must point out that we have not gone the more traditional route of trying to mix in "compensating colorations" in the 1400 toward the expected use of a certain pick-up arm and the known colorations and limitations of that arm. Rather, the 1400 is directed toward delivering the most neutral sound possible, so that in the future an owner can upgrade to an arm more representing the state of the art without having limitations imposed by the turntable. I consider it a success that the 1400 can work well with the Rega arms yet still be able to ascend to stratospheric performance levels when used with our own Vector arm. The

sonic limitations cited in the review disappear when the Vector is used with the 1400. My point here is to clarify that, while the review refers to the sound of the 1400, we must remember that the sound is really that of the 1400 while being used with a budget arm.

We chuckled when we read the last paragraph of the review. So many references have been made, both in this review and reviews over the last 15 years, to the "years being numbered" for analog. Yet Basis stands and prospers after all of these years, and thousands of satisfied Basis owners enjoy spinning vinyl every night. Since 1986, we have been here to deliver musical, perfectionist analog products, to offer all updates to those products, and to offer service on anything we have ever sold. Perhaps it is time to stop speculating on the life of analog, and accept that the medium will be important to hundreds of thousands of us until our own demise. Until then, let's just enjoy the finest sounding playback medium we have!

A.J. Conti

President & Founder, Basis

Adcom GFP-710

For more than 20 years, Adcom products have been designed to offer high-end performance at "mid-fi" prices. As observed in Neil Gader's review, the GFP-710 builds on that tradition with solid performance that compares well to a competitive component that sells for multiples of the GFP-710's suggested retail price of \$499. We consider this "mission accomplished." We are proud of our legacy and are always looking for ways to make it financially easier to introduce consumers to the pleasures of high fidelity. After all, that's how most of us at Adcom first got interested in high-performance audio and why we, today, design and manufacture one of the broadest product lines available of high-performance audio and video products.

Thus, we very much appreciate Gader's review of the Adcom GFP-710. As audiophiles with monthly mortgage and car payments to make, we are particularly pleased that *The Absolute Sound*



remains committed to informing its readers about great-sounding products at all price points, understanding that in many ways it is more challenging to design a good-sounding preamplifier that can sell for \$499 than to design a good-sounding preamplifier that sells at many multiples of that price.

Douglas Klein
Adcom

Avantgarde Acoustic Solo Loudspeaker System

After several years of convincing audiophiles that our horn speakers did not “honk,” it was getting too easy. We needed another challenge. Hey, why not sell self-powered horn speakers? After all, very few self-powered speakers have enjoyed success in the marketplace.

And while we’re about it, let’s produce a sleek cylindrical model, with

styling that utterly defies the traditional angular wooden box. Now, there’s a real challenge!

Seriously, we’ve been pleasantly surprised at the reception the Avantgardes have received for their visual appeal. When we started three years ago, it never occurred to us that leading architects and designers would own and recommend the Avantgardes as much for their aesthetics as for their musical performance.

For additional information about the evolution of the Solo, readers should visit www.avantgarde-usa.com. As they’ll discover, we originally conceived of Solo as a center and surround speaker for serious home theaters, in conjunction with our existing models.

As the project evolved, we knew the Solo had to match the clarity, timbre, dynamics, and dispersion patterns of our Uno, Duo, and Trio. It was the only

way to produce a seamless soundfield whose dynamics and tonal balance would track various playback levels without image shift.

After achieving that goal, we ended up with a full-blooded (though smaller and lower priced) new Avantgarde. They’re not just for home theater either. Today, more Solos actually end up in two-channel systems!

Coincidentally, I’ve just been notified that the Avantgarde Acoustic Solo is a “CES Innovations 2003 Design & Engineering Showcase Honoree” (Audio Category). It’s quite an honor. Many are nominated, but few are chosen.

Wait a minute! Powered horn speakers chosen as the most Innovative Design? Please don’t tell me we already need to look for another challenge!

Jim Smith
Avantgarde USA