

S P E A K E R S



CARVER AMAZING – SILVER EDITION

MANUFACTURER: Carver Corporation, PO Box 1237, Lynnwood, WA 98046

PRICE: \$2,195

SOURCE: Manufacturer's loan

The Silver Edition of Carver's "Amazing Loudspeaker" is different in several respects from the original ver-

sion, which has been discontinued. First of all, the Silver Edition is about a foot shorter, with three 12-inch woofers instead of the four woofers in the original version, and a single 4-foot pleated ribbon driver replacing the two shorter, non-pleated ribbons used in the original. The Silver Edition is more efficient than the original version (the low efficiency of the original speaker

was perhaps its major practical drawback), meaning that it can be driven by a wider range of amplifiers. Also, the Silver Edition comes with a loudspeaker control box that can be installed between the amp and preamp or in a tape monitor or external processor loop. This control box includes a number of useful features – including Carver's sonic holography circuitry – that were not included with the original Amazing loudspeaker.

Because this is such a unique loudspeaker, it is difficult to decide where to begin in reviewing its features and performance. Perhaps it would be best to start with a quick description of the design, and then move on to talking about its performance, picking up other unique aspects of the design as they apply to the speaker's performance capabilities.

The Amazing loudspeaker is essentially a two-way design. The ribbon driver actually works down into the bass frequencies, but the majority of the bass spectrum below 100 Hz is reproduced by the three woofers. These woofers operate in dipole fashion, but not in the way one might expect. What Carver has done is to optimize the Q of the woofer drivers, deliberately selecting woofers with small magnets and a high Q, in order to complement the low Q of the panel design. All things being equal, the size and shape of the baffle would give a rolled-off bass response with a low Q, while the woofers (if used in a normal box) would have a bumped-up response and a high Q. By tuning the woofers to the baffle, Carver is able to come up with a bass system that has excellent extension (-3 dB point of 23 Hz), power handling, and reasonable damping (Carver sets the speaker up for a nominal Q of 1, a little loose in my opinion, but the control box enables the Q to be lowered or raised electrically from .3 to jukebox levels) without requiring a large, heavy, expensive enclosure. Of course, the design works in part because of acoustic cancellation at the listening position: if you get close to

the speakers, the bass can start to sound too heavy, but back at the listening position, the bass sound is full but controlled.

Aha! I have started to discuss the sound of the speaker! But before I go on, let me offer a few caveats. First, Carver makes it quite clear in his literature that the speaker must be broken in before the woofers will sound right. Now, many speakers need to be broken in before they sound their best, but the Carver Amazing needs to be broken in before you really seriously audition it. Right out of the box, the bottom end is simply overpowering, no matter how you set the Q control. Carver recommends 50 hours of break-in, and that seems about right. If you want to play the blues, you've got to pay your dues . . . Also, the literature is quite clear in stating that the speakers should not be toed in. Not surprisingly, unfortunately, some of the setups I am aware of at Carver dealers have featured toed-in speakers that were probably not broken in.

On the other hand, the imaging and coherence of the ribbons is evident right out of the box, and these speakers can be enjoyed for those attributes as soon as you set them up. In this respect, the Carvers are much like electrostatic and magnetic planar loudspeakers, but with a couple of critical advantages. First, the ribbon drivers in the Carvers seem to be free of the "plastic" sound that seems to plague so many panel speakers. Second, the ribbon drivers are less beamy than electrostatic panels, so the sound does not go to pot with a slight move of the listener's head.

I have always enjoyed the imaging and coherent sound of panel speakers, but I have never been able to listen past their drawbacks – plastic coloration, lack of bass, limited power-handling capability, extreme sensitivity to placement, etc. The Carver, however, not only offers the imaging and coherence of the better planar speakers, but it adds bass performance and power handling that equals or betters many

dynamic loudspeakers. Yes, this sounds too good to be true, and yes, I was quite skeptical of these speakers when I first set them up, but after living with them for several months, I am loathe to let them out of my listening room.

The image on these speakers is deep, wide, coherent, and precise. And that is without the hologram generator being switched in. With the hologram generator, the image can become – depending on the recording – deeper, wider, but still precise and coherent. Carver has refined the hologram circuit over the years, and the version included in the speaker control box represents his latest thinking. Whereas earlier versions tended to create wide staging at the expense of the center image, the latest version is set up to provide a solid center image.

I must confess that I looked upon the inclusion of the hologram circuitry as a marketing gimmick. After hearing how well the speakers created a soundstage without the hologram circuitry, I figured that the hologram could only add artificial effects that would soon wear thin, and that I would only push the hologram button when I wanted some sort of cheap sonic thrill.

Wrong! I find that the hologram button is almost always pushed in, because it enhances my musical enjoyment from nearly all records and CDs. Occasionally, especially on some older jazz recordings (e.g., Miles Davis' "Kind of Blue"), the hologram produces some unsettling spatial effects, but on most of my recordings, it adds a nice sense of depth and ambience that can make studio recordings sound more life-like, and fine hall recordings sound even finer. One quick example of the benefits of the holographic image is "Deja Vu" by Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young, an album that has deep sentimental meaning to my wife and me. I thought I knew this music completely, and hearing it through the Carvers was revealing and enjoyable, but hearing through the Carvers with the hologram made it sound so fresh

and alive that it was like "Deja Vu" all over again (Ouch!). Joni Mitchell's "Blue" album was another oldie revived by holography, along with "Music from Big Pink" by the Band.

And no, it was not just music from the 60s that was enhanced by the holograph. Roger Norrington's revelatory reading of the Berlioz "Symphonie Fantastique" (FLASH!! We interrupt this loudspeaker review to bring you this special bulletin – Norrington's new EMI Berlioz recording is a *killer*, the first one in many years worthy to be put on the same shelf as Beecham's) sounds just fine and dandy through the holography circuit, for example, as does Was (Not Was)' "What Up, Dog?", to mention just a couple of disparate examples of contemporary recordings. OK, maybe you still think that old KWN has finally flipped his lid – but doggone it, if you don't like the hologram circuitry, you don't have to use it.

Yes, orchestral recordings can really benefit from the hologram circuitry, but even without it, the imaging of the ribbons is so good that the speakers can produce a believable rendition of the concert-hall experience. What also helps to recreate the concert-hall experience is the bass performance of the speakers. Not only is there extension, but there is also a feeling of ease that adds the weight of a live performance to the recorded sound. Some might find the bass of the Carvers a bit too full, especially on plucked bass notes, but overall, I find that with the Q control set at .7 or so, the bottom end is full without being flabby.

On test notes – but never on music, so far – the grill assembly can be made to flap from the energy of the woofers. This happened when driving the speakers hard on the lowest bass note of the Denon test CD (21.5 Hz, as I recall), but has not happened on any music that I have played through the speakers.

Through the midrange and treble, the ribbons are quite clean and transparent. The best part of the sound is

the coherency – instruments and voices sound more lifelike. Percussion has snap and sparkle, but the decays seem to take place as fast as the attacks, making each note stand out from other notes, and each instrument stand out from the crowd. The “Still Life (Talking)” CD by the Pat Metheny Group, for example, sounds particularly lifelike through the Carvers, with clean percussion, authoritative bass, and a general sense of ease and openness that I cannot quite get from other fine speakers such as my vintage pair of JSE Model 2s.

For fine tuning of the response of the ribbon, the control box includes a variable adjustment for the midrange/treble level. Thus far, I have been quite content to leave it at its nominal setting, although I have noted that it can take some of the edge off some of my sons’ rock recordings.

Another useful control on speaker control box is an on/off button that can introduce a “Gundry Perspective” EQ into the system. This is apparently based on some BBC-inspired research that suggests that introducing this subtle frequency shading can make the image seem to move back from the speakers. Carver recommends that this control be left in the “on” position at all times (in fact, the original version of the Amazing loudspeaker had this perspective wired into its crossover). I have found that on most recordings, the effect is subtle but generally welcome, especially without the holography circuit being engaged. Now that I tend to listen with the holography circuit engaged, I usually leave the Gundry switch off. Again, this is a circuit that many people may enjoy, but if they do not, they do not have to use it.

The final switch on the control box is the sub-bass on/off switch. Engaging this switch causes the control box to inject bass notes an octave lower than what is on the source into the signal going to the speakers. Try as I might to enjoy this circuit, I never could stand listening for more than a few seconds with this control engaged. Early units

(mine was among them) were shipped from the factory with an internal trim pot set too high, thus adding way too much bass. On Carver’s advice, I turned the pot all the way down, but found that although the quantitative effect was much less offensive, the quality still did not do much for me. (One useful aspect of this control: it can help you to break in the woofers!)

Because of all the controls and unusual features of the Carver Amazing loudspeakers, I feel as though I have spent paragraph after paragraph describing trees but never offering an overview of the forest. Overall, the Carvers are the most musically satisfying speakers I have lived with. Even without the hologram circuitry, their imaging truly is amazing, and with the hologram circuit engaged, many recordings take on added dimensions of musical enjoyment. The bass response is outstanding, although I believe that some might find it a bit rich for their blood. And as I mentioned above, the coherence of the ribbons provides sonic realism that cones and domes – and especially crossovers – cannot quite match.

In contrast, the JSE 2s sound perhaps flatter in overall frequency response, a bit tighter in the bass, and may in some ways be a better reviewing tool. But the JSEs cannot match the imaging and coherency of the Carvers, and thus are not quite as musically convincing, at least to these ears. Both, however, are very fine speakers, and choosing between them would be largely a matter of taste (in terms of both sonic and visual aesthetics) and room interaction considerations.

A few final thoughts: Carver recommends amps from 60 to 1200 watts. I drove the speakers with the Carver M-4.0t (375 watts), AVA Transcendence 280 (150 watts) and AVA MOSFET 240D (120 watts, but 1/3 the output stage of the Transcendence). All were able to drive the speakers successfully. Should I get in a 60-watt for review, I will put it to the test and report in a future issue. I tend to think that with a

speaker with these capabilities for power handling, most listeners will opt for a large amp, especially with the Carver amp being so good for relatively little money.

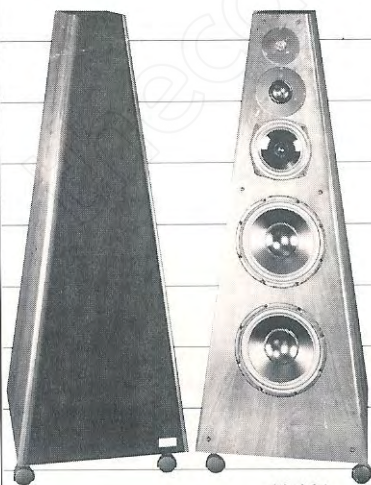
There is now on the market a larger version of the Amazing loudspeaker – the Platinum Edition, with four 12-inch woofers and a five-foot ribbon. It is 1 dB more efficient and will handle 25% more power than the Silver Edition, and will cost about \$2,595 per pair. Carver also plans to introduce a less costly (around \$1,800 per pair) version of the Silver Edition that will come without a control box and with an oak finish rather than black lacquer. By the time you read this, both these versions should be on the market. As much as I enjoy the hologram circuit, and given that I find it advisable to cut the bass Q from the factory setting, my tendency would be to recommend the Silver Edition over its cheaper stable-

mate, even at the higher price.

The Carver Amazing loudspeaker hurls quite a challenge at the makers of electrostatic, planar-magnetic, ribbon, and dynamic loudspeakers, because the Carver Amazing loudspeaker seems to combine the sonic strengths of these designs without the sonic or practical drawbacks. Aside from an occasional thought that maybe the bass or the imaging is too good to be true (and must thus be "inaccurate") – which is soon dispelled by musical enjoyment – I have lived with these speakers for several months, and still feel as though I am getting to know them better all the time, and to appreciate them more and more. They may not be the speaker for everyone, but they are a speaker that everyone ought to be able to audition – but good luck in finding a properly set up pair.

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