



Revel Ultima Salon loudspeaker

by Chris Binns

It's nearly official. I will soon be moving house – this scary prospect is about to come to realisation and I'm looking forward to it about as much as a pile up on the M25. As to where I end up...well, I don't entirely know yet, but you can be sure that high on my list of priorities will be somewhere that I can indulge myself with music, whether it be the recording or playing of it. And now that the time has come, I have become acutely, no, damn it, painfully aware of just how lucky I have been for the past ten years. Atypical of the average British living room, I have been able to accommodate all but the very largest of loudspeakers and listen to them at frankly abusive levels whenever the mood has taken me. So I guess that I might well have to become a more socially responsible person from now on...hard though it will be. Add to that the entertainment of looking out over the river Avon (and all the associated wildlife) while playing music and it becomes a hard act to follow, particularly as far as reviewing loudspeakers is concerned.

So the Revel Salon might well be the last large loudspeaker that I review for a while (although there is a cunning plan afoot to arrange for something monstrously, ridiculously big for the leaving party; but that's another story, or possibly a review - and if you live anywhere near Salisbury you'll probably hear it).

Actually, to say that the room comfortably accommodates large loudspeakers is not strictly true, as due to the geometry some of the very big units I have used have tended to overpower the room with bass, resulting in a bloated performance that was less than flattering. Which is why I was a little nervous about getting the Revel Salons

for review. Make no mistake, these are big loudspeakers, and bloody heavy – over 250 pounds per unit, so unpacking and positioning was very much a team effort involving much tea, cursing and swearing. They also come with a reputation for having a genuinely wide bandwidth – I had been warned.

With all the various people on hand for moving the Salons, opinions of their aesthetic were quick to come, none of which I'm afraid to say were particularly flattering. At best, one can say that for such a large loudspeaker the curvaceous organic contours mean that it is not as imposing as many other more 'square' designs, but hey, one mans meat...For me, the real wood veneered sides with their black edge reminded me far too much off really naff caravan tables circa 1973. Which is a shame, as there has been obvious effort on the part of the designers to come up with something a bit different, a sentiment that I wholeheartedly endorse. But, there are a number of different finishes available, and for me the more high tech aluminium finish is eminently preferable.*

Having been so unkind about the way they look, I am glad to say that the

Salons performance allows me to be considerably more positive. Fact - they are the first loudspeakers I have ever used that have got a unanimous thumbs up from everyone who has heard them. Over the last month and a bit, that's a lot of people, with an incredibly wide range of musical tastes and differing interest in hi-fi. No one was less than complimentary about what they heard, so I figure the

Revels must be doing something right.

The man behind the team responsible for the Revel loudspeakers is Kevin Voecks, and like many designers he was drawn into loudspeaker manufacturing by a general dissatisfaction with what he heard while working in retail. I first heard his name in connection with the Snell loudspeakers, where he spent a considerable amount of time working in conjunction with Canada's National Research Council's Audio Laboratory to investigate and correlate measurement techniques with real world performance.

With the incentive of a virtually unlimited budget specifically for designing better high-end loudspeakers beckoning, Kevin joined Revel some six years ago. In practice, this meant a genuinely no compromise approach to the project, with state of the art ►



► research and development facilities plus the luxury of being able to design drive units from scratch. Throughout the gestation every aspect of performance has been painstakingly evaluated, while listening tests have been some of the most rigorous and controlled ever, with participants having to go through a three stage computer aided instruction and testing program as part of a vetting process, before even qualifying for the panel.

The Salon is the largest loudspeaker in the Revel range; all are characterised by a similar aesthetic, which as I have already described is certainly eye catching. A four-way design, it uses no less than seven drive units, housed in a two part cabinet of substantial dimensions. Three 8" woofers with mica and carbon filled domes occupy the lower part of the cabinet, coupled with a 6.5" mid bass unit of similar construction, bass loading is via a flared rear firing port of enormous dimensions. The multiple bass drivers are said to have greater power handling than a single 15" unit, as heat build up in the motor assembly is spread over six voice coils rather than two, minimising compression at high power levels. (As an aside, one of the benefits of being part of the Harman organisation is the ability to pull in the expertise of a sister company, in this case JBL, when required. The two companies worked together on the low frequency alignment of the Salon. JBL lending a hand with bass? Now that is scary.)

The upper section of the cabinet houses the mid-range and tweeters, the 1.1" aluminium domed unit complemented by a smaller unit of similar design firing from the rear, this is claimed to flatten the in room response at the top end. The upper cabinet is contoured to minimise diffraction and enhance the high frequency response. There is not room here to discuss the drive units individually in detail, but they all incorporate some pretty high tech engineering as part of the ongoing

research project.

The back panel has two sets of binding posts to facilitate bi-wiring, while there are controls that provide adjustment in 2dB increments for low frequency compensation (centred about 43.9 Hz) and level adjustment of the front and rear tweeters. Small though the adjustments might seem on paper, do not underestimate the differences they make in practice – it is worth spending time playing with them.



The Salon gives off the air of a product in which every last detail has been thoroughly considered, from the advanced technology of the drive units and the superb finish of the cabinets, down to the effective spikes with caps for hard floors.

The Salons that I had for review had seen considerable use, and I was not anticipating having to run them in, but a quick listen suggested otherwise. Much heaving and grunting got them into what sounded like a favourable position in my room, but the mid and

top had a 'knife edge' quality inconsistent with the rest of the audio band. A few days later this had all but disappeared, and although I was aware that the mid range units had recently been replaced, they had not been subsequently used. That was exactly what I heard – a lack of integration with the rest of the loudspeaker. For a large loudspeaker, the Salons are not overly efficient, although they do not represent a particularly difficult load to the amplifier. The resident Primary valve amps at 300 Watts per channel would appear to be fine on paper at least, and I guessed I was about to find out just how capable they are at the bottom end.

When a product first arrives for review, I tend to find that I select music to demonstrate certain qualities where you think the systems strengths lie, or conversely, fall short. Tell me you have never selected your music to show off the system when you have interested guests in your house, and I won't believe you. For me, it also acts as an anchor to further evaluate, and discover the limits if you like, of what a system can do. With the Salons, I simply could not be bothered, instead going for whatever music I wanted to listen to at the time. Forget the demo discs, you won't need them, as the Revels seem to make the most of whatever you feed them, regardless of its origin. They also do the same thing with partnering equipment, by not drawing your attention to its lesser attributes (for example, the slight lack of bottom end control with the valve amps). The fears that I had regarding the Salons' match with equipment and room proved to be unfounded. Extended, yes, overblown, no. They singularly failed to excite any of the room resonances that I know exist, and have seriously made me reevaluate just what is achievable in my present domestic situation. While listening to music, there were no indications as to the size of the loudspeakers, as the image that

► they presented appeared to be totally divorced from the cabinets, a feat they managed without having to sit yourself dead in the middle. String quartets were thus presented with a scale commensurate with the performers, while an orchestra filled the room, and rock music did whatever the engineer wanted. Either way, the Salons behaved like a small precision monitor, until some deep bass was present, and you were reminded of the fact that there were no apparent limitations to the bottom end extension. A few quick measurements indicated that the in room bass output extended well below 20 Hz, but at no point did it ever sound uncomfortable. Reproduction of drums and percussion was fast, detailed and devastatingly dynamic, and bear in mind this was with the Primary valve amps, which while offering plenty of power, are not capable of the absolute precision of something like, say, the bigger Levinsons or the Bryston 14B ST. The salons never forced themselves on you, and at no point did I ever feel overwhelmed by a large loudspeaker, only the music.

The Salons can go awesomely loud. There is certainly no shortage of headroom, and even at ridiculously high levels I could not detect any compression or flattening of musical dynamics, as far as the six hundred watts of amplification would allow. While I had a lot of fun listening at high levels, the Revels are mercifully free of

a volume threshold when it comes to musical satisfaction. Playing music at quiet, gentle volumes proved just as rewarding, with no loss of dynamics or detail, something that has been a problem with other high-end designs I have listened to. Perhaps helped by the minimal 'bloating' at the bottom end, I found the mid and top to be highly informative and precise, and often heard detail in recordings that I had previously missed, not that I was particularly looking out for it. That for me was one of the great attractions of listening to the Revels – this kind of thing occurred frequently and only served to enhance the music, rather than be reduced to a train-spotterish fetish about information retrieval. In other words, the Salons achieve this without dissecting the music and reducing listening to an academic process, quite often the price you pay for high resolution.

As I come toward the end of this review, I must say that it isn't really over yet. I would desperately like to try the Salons with some different amplification, such as the Bryston 14B, to further explore their capabilities, so watch this space.

You will probably think I am mad, but I am going to suggest that the Revel Salons are something of a bargain. I can think of no other loudspeaker that offers this level of all round engineering, finish and above all performance at this kind of price, or even near it. There are also plenty at far higher prices that stand to be severely embarrassed by the comparison, but that's another story.

But for me, the most memorable

achievement is their ability to be expressive with all kinds of material in a way that I have rarely heard with recorded music. I have been heard to grumble that it sometimes appears as though loudspeaker design hasn't really progressed much in the last thirty years. The Salons have not only shut me up, they have restored my faith in just what can be achieved with present loudspeaker technology. They are a truly great loudspeaker.

* A final word on the aesthetics – maybe I have just got used to it, maybe I am now biased by their performance, but I could live with them. No, really.



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Drive units:	28mm tweeter 19mm rear tweeter 102mm mid range 185mm mid bass 3 x 210mm bass units
Frequency response:	25Hz – 20 KHz (-3dB @ 24 Hz)
Nominal impedance:	6 Ohms (3 Ohms minimum)
Sensitivity:	86dB/W/m
Dimensions (HxWxD):	1294 X 342.9 X 674.7
Weight:	108.9 Kg
Finishes:	Main body in matt black or gloss finishes. Side panels in aluminium, Rosewood, Light Oak or Black Ash.
Price:	£13495 - £14995

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Manufacturer:

Revel
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