

# Glorious reflections

Most speakers are tuned for ideal acoustic conditions, but Larsen takes a real-world approach. **Chris Ward** takes a look

**T**hese extraordinary, Swedish speakers may look highly futuristic, but their design pays homage to 'Sonab' designs of the seventies from the legendary and lamented Stig Carlsson. John Larsen and Carlsson worked together for 16 years, refining their core ethos around the 'ortho-acoustics' of sound; appreciating the perceived performance of speakers in 'real-world' rooms. Almost every 'traditional' speaker is designed and calibrated to deliver near-perfect results in an anechoic chamber, but

## The Larsen 8 is an unfussy load that's extremely forgiving in any listening room

this design helpfully recognises that we don't live in fathomless rooms without reflections. Smarter still, the design actually embraces the fact that they will be used in a domestic space. Larsen may have had a gifted partner back then, but these new speakers take the story forward considerably.

Part of the appeal of the speaker is that it is designed to be placed unobtrusively in the home. Available in white and black lacquer or a range of wood veneers, it strikes the perfect balance between 'look at me' and disappearing into your room's décor. Finish and build is simple and understated. A casual glance suggests this is a squarish-section, veneered MDF box, truncated in a curious way to house a fabric dome tweeter and 177mm midrange driver facing up and into the room at a jaunty angle. Further investigation reveals things are far more complex. The tweeter sits partially within a folded steel baffle and drivers are flanked by vertical and horizontal absorption pads. Below the horizontal pad, two

more tweeters fire vertically through the damping material. These are attenuated and out of phase with the primary drivers. Lastly, in the base of the discreetly side-ported cabinet is a further 177mm driver optimised for pure bass duties below 300Hz, claimed to reach down to 23Hz. Each speaker is distinctly left or right and can be fitted with an asymmetric speaker grille. Around the back, two pairs of sturdy speaker connectors enable bi-wiring if desired.

I place the Larsen 8 about 10cm from a solid rear wall, but away from room corners and hook up Black Rhodium Foxtrot speaker cable (HFC 412) to a Hegel Röst integrated amplifier (HFC 418) fed by a Shanling CD-T100 HDCD player via Chord Company Shawline RCA interconnects (HFC 412)

## Sound quality

Opening with Ben Harper's *Gold To Me*, even the opening high hat is noteworthy. Some speakers struggle to reproduce cymbals without harshness or fatigue, but the Larsen 8 creates a very realistic metallic tone

## DETAILS

### PRODUCT

Larsen 8

### ORIGIN

Sweden

### TYPE

2.5-way  
floorstanding  
loudspeaker

### WEIGHT

25kg

### DIMENSIONS

(WxHxD)  
278 x 916 x 328mm

### FEATURES

- 3x 25mm ScanSpeak soft dome tweeters
- 2x 177mm ScanSpeak mid/bass drivers
- Quoted sensitivity: 88dB/1W/1m (Bohm)

### DISTRIBUTOR

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that somehow has real airiness alongside plenty of body and richness. There is something about the way it propagates high frequencies that is extended, sweet and clean, yet very solid and rich at the same time. Similarly, Harper's vocals carry lots of tiny, expressive detail alongside a very human warmth, creating a truly lifelike presentation. The bass line kicks in with properly deep extension and surprising agility, yet absolutely no sense of fluster or strain from such a modest box. If you think you need a dedicated subwoofer or monster speakers to create quality bass, think again. As this funky, soulful song fills out with drums, hand chimes, guitars and tambourine, one appreciates that this is one extraordinary speaker.

Everything is in its place and supremely natural. Frequencies seamlessly flow without glare or flab, with timing that feels ultra fast, yet effortless and unhurried. The soundstage feels extremely wide and tall but relaxed, if slightly diffuse. Other speakers will create more pinpoint imaging at a small sweet spot listening position, but the Larsen 8 presents a sonic picture that feels larger and far more natural, more akin to live music and enjoyable from almost any position in the listening room.

Playing *The Grid* from *Koyaanisqatsi* by Philip Glass, the opening, sustained brass notes from trombone and tuba have a delightfully rich and mellifluous quality that sits underneath the more insistent staccato muted trumpets that repeat delicious rasps that cut through but never sound harsh. A synthesiser layers fast ostinato arpeggios of triangle-like highs alongside fast pulsing deep bass. Some speakers can fatigue you with grating treble while ▶

**Two drivers are on show, but each speaker has no less than five drivers**



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## Q&amp;A

John Larsen  
Designer, Larsen

**CW:** Can you walk us through the speaker's unique design?

**JL:** The Larsen 8 is basically a 2.5-way system with the two bass units in series in separate 23-litre chambers, tuned to 26Hz each. The lower driver is dedicated below 300Hz while the upper driver, tilting 36° backwards and turned 36° into the room meets the tweeter around 2.5kHz in the same phase. The two ambience tweeters are in series, but out of phase at a level around 10dB under the main speakers. The choice of drivers, materials and their specific configuration is clever but some of the magic is in the crossover unit.

**Can you tell us more about your design philosophy?**

This design builds on Carlsson's Ortho-Acoustic principles - using sound reflected off listening room boundary surfaces to enhance the quality of musical reproduction rather than degrading it. Basically, playing with the room not against it. The wall behind the speaker is integrated into the design to tune the bass reflex much lower than would be expected for such a small cabinet. Conversely, we employ special absorption techniques and materials to reduce higher frequencies reflecting in ways that could interfere with the sound. All manufacturing is undertaken by us in Sweden.

**What do you recommend when it comes to room placement?**

Simply place the Larsens against a wall, ideally 50cm or more from sidewalls. The long wall is preferable, but they are flexible. The soundstage from 'normal' speakers is often limited by the placement of the speakers, but our design philosophy means it is possible to create a bigger and more convincing soundstage across a wider range of music.

You can adjust the soundstage by increasing the distance between the speakers and you rarely need extra room treatments. I have played with Larsen 8 in a 15m<sup>2</sup> room and I have played with Larsen 6 in a 60m<sup>2</sup> space. Getting the perfect balance is possibly more about amplification.

**HOW IT COMPARES**

The Larsen 8 shares many of the qualities of the similarly unique German Physika HR5-130 (HFC 418), but for a fraction of its £14,500 cost, and a far easier amplifier load.

Sonically, the Larsen 8 reminds me strongly of the legendary Small Acoustics Type A/BII speakers that ceased production in the late eighties. You'll need good luck and deep pockets finding a good used pair of those outside the USA, but Audio Note's current AN-E/5Pc speakers (circa £5,195) deliver a similar character of natural, room-loaded bass with very fast transient response and a lightness of touch around a highly musical and very expansive soundstage.

## IN SIGHT



- 1 177mm ScanSpeak paper/carbon fibre driver
- 2 25mm ScanSpeak soft dome tweeter in metal baffle
- 3 Twin upwards-firing ambient tweeter
- 4 Bi-wireable speaker binding posts
- 5 Bass driver and port

slurring the deeper motif, but the Larsen 8 instead creates a cascade of cycling, sweet chimes while preserving deep leading edges, starting and stopping bass notes with real control. The choir joins the ensemble and the performance becomes even richer and more nuanced. This is a highly complex and challenging piece of music for speakers to convey and the Larsen 8 does an incredible job for such a compact design. Again the musical image is very compelling and large, but possibly not as deep as more traditional designs. What you lose in depth, you make up for in sheer top-to-bottom natural coherence without flat spots or nasty room mode aggravations. Playing the organ drones at the start of the piece, the Larsen reproduces the deepest notes with luscious power and substance that's rich in the detail that defines the acoustic space. Mighty impressive.

**Conclusion**

This is a masterpiece of design, rooted in understanding empirical sound qualities and refined from detailed listening in real-world rooms rather than simply nodding to the received wisdom around drivers beaming you the right notes in the right order. Aesthetics and finish are possibly

function before form, but build quality is decent and I have grown to love the understated 'Q-car' looks. Placed against a wall with sympathetic furniture it does an amazing job of disappearing, until it produces such sweet music that heads turn. Most speakers excel in doing many things well with ideal amplification, but will usually exhibit foibles when not in an ideal room position, be it setting off room modes or creating unwanted early reflections. The Larsen 8 is an unfussy load that's extremely forgiving in any room, delivering huge images and highly dynamic, musical sonics without ever being wrong footed ●

**HIFIChoice****OUR VERDICT**

SOUND QUALITY



★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY



★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY



★★★★☆

EASE OF DRIVE



★★★★★

OVERALL



★★★★★

**LIKE:** Room-friendly, expansive soundstage, rich tactile dynamic bass

**DISLIKE:** Looks may not appeal to all

**WE SAY:** Unique design and addictive musical presentation that's a joy to live with