

This article appeared in the latest issue of "Audiophile", the leading German High-End magazine

Isophon Multi-Channel-System Europa, Solaris, Comet and Stonehenge

Forget everything you have ever heard from multi-channel loudspeaker systems! There are so many highly-engineered decoders and processors but the good sound is lost on the way. Why? Obviously the lack of loudspeaker systems which fulfil highest sophistication is the reason that high-enders avoid this subject like the devil the holy water. I even join them. But multi-channel sound can be so great, however!

There was one experience which reaches back some time now that I have never forgotten. It was on a dealer show when Dr. Roland Gauder, boss and mastermind of Isophon from the southern region of Germany presented his prototype of centerspeaker called "Solaris". In connection with the frontspeakers "Isophon Europa" and a pair of "Isophon Enigma" as rearspeakers I really got breathless! I was amazed and impressed. Even with multi-channel SACDs, a hard measure for a loudspeaker set, Gauder's quintet didn't show any problems. Fed with brutal Hollywood movies this system made such a speed and dynamics that I nearly needed a doctor. To make a long story short: multi-channel sound as I had never heard before. Gauder, Doctor of physics, knows the remedy for the multi-channel problematics. In principle the reproduction by five speakers is exciting a room more even than two. Why then can there be so many failures with multi-channel?

There are so many traps on the way to a good sound. Some manufacturers don't pay their attention to center- and rearspeakers as they do for stereo-speakers. That's a mistake. Gauder dedicated his efforts to all speakers of the set evenly. Primary aim: the set has to play as one in all kinds of situations. From the smoothest pianissimo to the most outrageous bass attacks. And if you have ever heard a "Europa", the biggest speaker of Gauder's loudspeaker portfolio then you will now breath deep. For this speaker doesn't need to hide from any speaker in the world!

In multi-channel sound the centerspeaker plays the most important part. The "Solaris" is big, really big. It has to be big! Many centerspeakers cannot cope with their frontspeaker partners concerning dynamics. At high levels they sound compressed, simply awful. Therefore Gauder's claims were: optimum radiation without diffraction losses, tonal balance and maximum power capability. Respect! So, you need a big volume and the corresponding drivers. In the interior of the "Solaris" two woofers work into a bandpass enclosure.

To obtain a perfect radiation behavior Isophon undertook great efforts. According to Gauder's explanations many competitors make bad mistakes concerning this subject. In most cases the tweeter is placed in the middle between two bass-midrange drivers thus leading to a cancellation of sound under 30-45 degrees as is shown by many frequency response measurements. Exactly for those the centerspeaker is made for – listeners sitting left and right to the sweet spot – it doesn't do its job. Normally being wider than higher a center often has a frequency response step at 800 Hz. A sophisticated designed resonance circuit shall bring the 66 cm (26") wide front down acoustically to the only 25 cm (10") wide front baffle of the "Europa". Moreover, two of the three midrange drivers are cut out 400 Hz leading to a very small acoustical center - ideal for perfect spaciousness.

The tweeter got an effective time-correction circuitry just like all other Isophon speakers. The frequency crossover is divided into three separate units to eliminate bad interactions. That is all solved perfectly! If you ever have the chance to listen to this set also listen to the "Solaris" solo. I don't know any better centerspeaker.

What makes the set round is the rearspeaker "Comet" and the subwoofer "Stonehenge". Ideal rearspeakers have to fulfil contradictory requirements: direct radiators, bipole (in phase),

dipole (out of phase). Many surround fans prefer the reproduction of the rear channels via direct radiators. With music many details sound precise and the space is clearly structured. On the other hand with movies sound effects like rain or whistling winds have a special meaning and it sounds more natural if the sound cannot be assigned to definite sources. Dipole radiators are then better suited as they generate a diffuse sound field. But they have some faults at deep frequencies. There the two units cancel themselves because the wavelengths are long enough to diffract around the enclosure. A difficult problem. Actually you need a speaker which is able to play in each type.

What has never been achieved by a manufacturer up to now Doc Gauder and his team managed to fulfil all aspects. They invented a speaker which is working as a bipole at low frequencies converting steplessly to a dipole at higher frequencies. Any requests else? I forgot, just turn the switch on the back and the “Comet” is converted into a direct radiator. This all is provided by more than 30 high-quality components on three crossovers.

Up to now a subwoofer wasn't in the program of Isophon. There was no need. If you know the abilities of a “Europa” a lack in bass was a foreign word. Nevertheless, a subwoofer makes sense. Yes, I am pleading for two of them. Moreover, as Gauder designed his “Stonehenge” in such a chic shape that it can be placed on many sites in a room.

Now enough with details and technical features. They all are just means for purpose and vanish when the first tones are coming out. It was a long-lasting and fantastic listening session and two attributes burnt themselves in my brain: dramatic and thrilling. No matter what software I used whether brutal piano attacks just as with Tchaikovsky's piano concerto No. 1 conducted by Zubin Mehta or the fine harp play of Andreas Vollenweider: the whole system managed any challenge with daring and bravery. The more complex the higher the requirements for dynamics the more inspired the performance. A perfectly modeled stage stable to any side – which multi-channel system is able to reproduce that? I don't know any set whose speech intelligibility is clearer, whose colorful response is more realistic and whose musicality can catch up with the Isophon set.

I am just now overthinking my prejudices against multi-channel. We all should do that. And we should think of the following: if high-tech and high-end is united to a genius connection we just have to have a look over to Renningen, Germany, the home of Isophon.