

origin live



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the Stereo Times

The Complete Audiophile Magazine

LUMINOUS AUDIO



Music



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Associated Equipment:

Analog Front End

Magnum Dynalab
FT-101a FM Tuner

Audio Note TT2
Turntable and
Tonearm

Audio Note AN-1
Cartridge

Audio Note Zero Tube
Phono Stage

Digital Front End

Electrocompaniet
EMC-1 CD Player

Amplification

Electrocompaniet
Nemo monoblocks

Loudspeakers

Talon Audio Peregrine
X

Dynaudio Contour
S5.4

Usher Audio AC-10

Cabling

Virtual Dynamics Nite
Interconnects (XLR
and RCA)

Virtual Dynamics Nite
Speaker Cables

Virtual Dynamics Nite
Power Cords

Golden Sound Blue
Power Cord

Soundstring Power
Cord

Soundstring Speaker
Cables

Power

Conditioning

APC Power
Conditioner (modified
by Talon Audio)

Accessories

DH Cones and Discs

Isophon Europa II and Vincent Audio SV-238 Integrated Amplifier

A Terrific Twosome

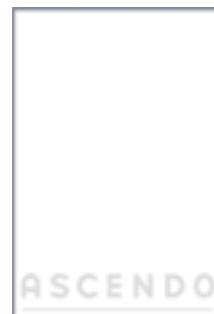
Specifications

Isophon Europa II

Driver Compliment: (1) 25mm tweeter, (3) 120mm midrange, (2) 225mm woofers
Bass Principle: Symmetrical Double Bandpass, single vented, high-pass filtering
Crossover Frequencies (Hz): 160/3200
Impedance: 6 Ohms
Sine Power: 300 W
Peak Power: 560 W
Dimensions: 122cm x 25cm x 46cm (hwd)
Weight: 56kg
Price: \$10,540/pair to \$13,020/pair depending on finish

Vincent Audio SV-238 Integrated Amplifier

Frequency Range: 20Hz - 22kHz +/- 0.5db
Nominal Output Power: 2 x 200 W
RMS into 8 Ohms
Nominal Output Power: 2 x 400 W
RMS into 4 Ohms
Nominal Output Power: > 700 W
RMS into 2 Ohms
Nominal Output Power Class A: 2 x 60 W RMS into 8 Ohms
Total Harmonic Distortion: < 0.01% max. (1kHz, 1W)
Input Sensitivity: 250 mV
Signal-to-Noise Ratio: > 95 db
Input Impedance: 47 kOhm
Input: 5 x RCA/1 x XLR
Mains Power Input: 230V/50Hz
Dimensions: 430 x 180 x 530 (whd)
Weight: 32kg
Price: \$4,197.00



Dave Thomas

7 October 2003

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We Met In San Francisco

Osiris Amplifier Stand

One of the most exciting aspects of attending a hi-fi show is that you get to see, touch, and hear equipment from new companies such as the two whose products are the subjects of this review: The Isophon Europa II and Vincent Audio SV-238 Integrated amplifier. The Isophon is designed and built in Germany while the Vincent, though actually built in China under the brand name Sheng Ya, is designed in Switzerland. Both of these companies represent fine audio engineering and craftsmanship. They are imported by Symcore Technologies out of Miami, Florida. Actually, the Isophon speakers aren't exactly new to the U.S. I first saw them advertised in *Stereophile* several years ago when they were being sold through a business called Jerry Raskin's Needle Doctor in Minneapolis, Minnesota. The ad showed a full picture of the sleek tower speaker and a cut-down-the-middle profile section of the speaker to show off the internal bracing, wiring, and driver arrangement. The Vincent Audio electronics, on the other hand, are completely unfamiliar to folks over here. That may change soon. The two companies' product lines were being demonstrated together at the Home Entertainment 2003 Show in San Francisco along with a wonderful flat panel television from Opti-Pure. I was so taken with the sound of this system that after repeated visits and pleading with Symcore's Peter Saenz, I managed to get this dynamic duo in for an audition.

America, meet Vincent

The Vincent Audio SV-238 is a rugged yet beautifully built integrated amplifier that offers way more power and flexibility than even its rather stiff price tag would suggest. Not only do you get 200 he-man watts of effortless power, but you also get five unbalanced line level inputs and one balanced input. The SV-238 also has balanced and unbalanced pre-amp outputs that can be used to drive a separate amplifier. My previous favorite integrated amp was the \$2495 Electrocompaniet ECI-3. It was comparable in flexibility and features to the Vincent but lacked the power to fill my rather large listening room the way that I felt that the Vincent would. But bear in mind that the ECI-3 only puts out 70 watts per channel. Also, Electrocompaniet now offers the beefier, 120 watt, \$3295 ECI-4. I have not heard this amp yet but knowing EC I would think it a serious competitor to the Vincent.

The build of the SV-238 is classic high-end. A thick, elegantly curved aluminum faceplate holds a digital display for the source selection and volume level. Eight, nice, soft-touch buttons surround a larger power button and allows the user to adjust volume and select one of the five unbalanced sources or the single balanced source manually or you can operate the SV-238 from a simple full-featured remote control. The top and sides are also made from thick, machined aluminum and have slots cut into them to help dissipate heat though the unit doesn't get very hot. The rear panel is completely idiot-proofed and makes taking advantage of all of the component's flexibility a breeze. There are two sets of excellent five-way binding posts on the left and right sides for bi-wire set-ups. Between them are the Pre-amp outputs. Beneath them, the five unbalanced (RCA) inputs are neatly laid out and labeled "1" thru "5" and the sixth input (XLR) is simply labeled "Balance" just as they are on the faceplate and remote. To avoid confusion, you'll want to make a note of which sources are plugged into which numbered inputs. A ground switch and detachable power cord receptacle complete the SV-238 features. One more thoughtful touch that should be more common amongst large amps is the use of a fifth foot on the center of the bottom of the amp that makes it easier to set the amp (which is about 20" long) on most amp stands. Nothing makes me crazier than a 20" long amp on a 15" long stand.

Eager to hear what this beast sounded like driving my reference Talon Peregrine X's, I pulled out a CD that was a favorite amongst many CES 2001 exhibitors, South African trumpeter Hugh Masekela's "Hope" [Triloka Records 7203-2]. The final track on this live disc titled Stimela (The Coal Train) features Masekela mimicking coal train engines and whistles with a loud piercing "woop-woooo!" His thick, raspy voice had texture coming from the SV-238 that I hadn't noticed previously from the ECI-3. Even his classic hit Grazin' In The Grass was rendered with realistic image space and detail. The Vincent-Talon combination sounded mighty fine but only heightened my expectations for the Isophons.

Isophon Europa II

The Isophon Europa II is a speaker that I have lusted for since I first saw it advertised in *Stereophile*. It is a gorgeous looking tower design that will make an attractive statement in any room while not overwhelming it ... well, at least not physically anyway. It's a six driver design that features two 9" woofers with a 2" long-throw voice coil and a heavy paper cone that are horizontally mounted. According to Isophon "... their horizontal mounting gravity adjusts them and no torque from the magnet acts on the basket." The woofers are mounted through a back wall and the inner-chamber behind them is damped with sheep's-wool and heavy foam. The front chambers are lightly damped by foam and the sound is radiated out by two Helmholtz-resonators or ports. These ports are covered by a front grill cloth, which is stretched to a specified length. Heavy-duty screws that run



into metal threads affix the woofers. The surfaces of the two ports are conservatively designed to a high opening area with low air speed even at high volume levels. The four woofer chambers divide the entire inner chamber into 4 smaller chambers thus reducing cavity resonances and enormously stiffening the whole cabinet." The Europa II's can be tri-wired and use WBT cable binding posts and silver-wired cable bridges.

The other drivers are arranged via what Isophon refers to as "Acoustical Hologram Technology" (AHT), which is the geometrical alignment and electrical circuitry of the three 4" midrange units and the 1" soft dome tweeter. The three midrange units divide the work when the signal crosses over at 150Hz. One of the midrange drivers is located on the side of the cabinet and is covered by a grill and the lower of two midrange units on the front of the cabinet only work from 150 – 300Hz and then smoothly rolls off. As it is important to have a small acoustic center, the upper midrange unit produces more than 90% of the radiated sound up to 800Hz. AHT also helps time alignment with special delay circuitry to match the tweeter and midrange driver. Internal wiring is done with Clearwater high-resolution cable and Isophon makes all of their own drivers.

The Europa II's just like the other Isophon designs come in many gorgeous veneers including: Beechwood, Cherry, Rosewood, High-gloss Piano black and a stunning ribbed aluminum. Isophon cabinets are built in Stuttgart, Germany where Daimler-Chrysler and Porsche are based.

Sonically Speaking

I set the SV-238 on a super-rigid Osiris amp stand connected it using Virtual Dynamics' Nite series cables and power cords, to the Europas and my ever-ready Electrocompaniet EMC-1 CD player. Recalling the music that I had been listening to in the Symcore Technologies room at HE 2003, I first listened to the Ray Brown Trio's Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man from "Summer Wind: Live at the Loa" [Concord Jazz CCD-4426]. This synergistic combo immediately strutted its powerful stuff. My 20' x 28' listening room was filled with a three-dimensional presence that at times felt somewhat overwhelming. Don't get me wrong, I don't mean overwhelming in the sense that the sound was too bright or bass heavy, I mean overwhelming as in a sense that subtle nuances of the recorded performance were now more immediate and sharply defined. Another disc that I played during HE 2003 was jazz vocalist Kurt Elling's "Live In Chicago". Track five of this disc is called Night Dream and it features a great drum solo by Michael Raynor. The Europa IIs portrayed this solo with such realism that I found myself playing "air drums" while I was being drawn into the music.

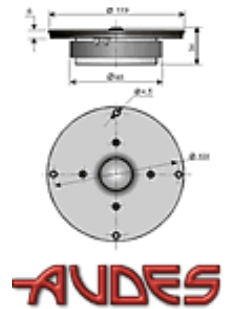
Kurt Elling's extensive vocal range is presented wonderfully through the unique AHT tweeter midrange configuration. The highs were detailed and extended while the midrange was slightly forward though not overly aggressive, but the bass provided the biggest surprise to me. I've heard other speaker designs that have attempted to use dual 9" woofers to cover the deep bass region with speed. But those designs usually leave me wanting just a bit more low-end realism. Not so with the Europa II. The internal chamber configuration allows the driver's speed to not only produce more detailed bass but it is extended as well. Brother Ray from David Sanborn's CD "Inside" is a downright bluesy instrumental that is saturated by Marcus Miller's synthesized bass and Ricky Peterson's Hammond B-3 organ. The Vincent-Isophon system combined to dig deep enough to make this song sound as musically enjoyable as I have ever heard it.

Conclusion

It has been a sheer joy to spend time with the Vincent Audio SV-238 integrated amp and Isophon Europa II loudspeakers. They epitomize fine audio engineering and offer high performance, a wealth of features and extremely high quality fit and finish. At a combined price of more than \$14,000 they are not cheap by any stretch. But they offer quality and convenience that should be enjoyed for decades and not become fatiguing. This is truly a system that you can simply set, forget, and enjoy.



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