



Coup de Foudre...

The Avantgarde Duo gets active (and finally comes of age)!

by Roy Gregory

One minute and 56 seconds. That's how long it should take you to realise that this is an exceptional speaker delivering an exceptional experience. That's how long it takes David Amadio to play the *3rd Movement* of Vivaldi's *Cello Concerto in A major RV. 419 (Vivaldi In Venice, VALLP008)*.

Or two minutes and 38 seconds if you are listening to Elvis Costello's 'Little Triggers'; three minutes and 57 seconds if you are playing Natalie Merchant's 'San Andreas Fault'; or two minutes and 59 seconds to learn that Billie Holliday can 'Get Along Without You Very Well'.

One track - actually, way less than a whole track - is all it takes to realise that the latest version of Avantgarde's long-running and popular Duo model hasn't so much shifted the goal posts as started a whole new game.

But let's be clear: when I say that this speaker is exceptional, that's exactly what I mean. Put the Avantgarde Duo GT next to any of its popular price peers and it performs as differently as it looks - and

that's before you get to the whole question of where it fits into the market and the whole issue of price points and comparative value. The Duo GT doesn't just look different and sound different, it's pretty much different from the ground up. It breaks the accepted rules, it ignores conventional wisdom and believe me when I say that it's going to challenge your assumptions. This speaker is exceptional in that it stands apart. Yes, it offers exceptional performance, but it is also the exception to so many rules that it's a challenge knowing where to start.

So let's start with the music and David Amadio's cello - a cello that exists, full sized, full throated and full of vibrant energy and colour; right in front of me. This isn't an image, or dimensionality; it's a presence, a woody volume, rich in tone and character; with tension in its strings and a latent energy just waiting to burst out. And it's not just the cello that's vital and vibrant. Its response to input, the texture of the notes, the sense of the bow sawing at the strings, the



▶ energy and purpose in the playing means that you can almost see the motion of Amadio as he plays. He attacks the closing *allegro* with such vigorous intent that there's an almost percussive quality to the bowing, an explosive suddenness to the *pizzicato* passages. The body and presence of the solo instrument is matched by the density and intensity of the small ensemble accompaniment, the explosive enthusiasm of the applause. This is one of those recordings that really

(Feldmann, Kantorow, OPR de Liege - Alpha 357) and the layered orchestration builds its density in carefully delineated dynamic steps, without an apparent upper limit. The sudden, sharply contrasting tonality of the instrumental interjections, their relationship to the solo instrument and the measured development of the Rautavaara's slow, opening movement as a whole are beautifully clear and explicit. There's no sense of confusion and none of distance, beyond the depth



capture an event. In one sense, what these speakers do is bring the creative tension and magic of that event to your room. But what they really do is take you to the event. It's an important distinction, a bridge that is both critical and a bottleneck on the path to serious high-end performance. It marks the difference between a scale facsimile of the performance and the sense of connection that comes with actually being there.

Getting physical...

More importantly, this almost physical quality isn't limited to small-scale acoustic recordings. Reach for something larger and the scale and musical energy increase proportionally. Play the recent Alpha Classics disc of Rautavaara and Sibelius *Violin Concertos*

of the stage itself. It makes you realise just how easily we accept the scaling and dynamic compression that shrink the musical projection on most systems. Here, Feldmann's violin is positioned, solid and purposeful, front and centre, the instrumental conversations taking place in the same space as you, around and beyond the standing soloist.

Step up again (in terms of density) to the pre-*Gladiator* Hans Zimmer OST for *Thin Red Line* (RCA 09026 63382) and the track 'Journey To The Line'. The Duos revel in the massive scale of the music, swelling strings underpinned by deep bass pulses as more and more instruments join the arrangement, climbing towards a towering crescendo - yet all the time, set against the insistent ticking of the clock. Zimmer follows ▶▶

▶▶ the tradition of great film music in gleefully rifling the classical canon and here it's the shimmering strings and golden hues of Copland that emerge from that first, massive peak. In this case it's all about scale - the landscape, the sky, the ant-like role of humanity set against the context of war. The Duos have that sense of limitless headroom, the ability to breathe deeper and see further. It's about unconstrained energy, musical impact and power. This is a speaker that does big and does small with equal grace.

know a single speaker at this price (let alone an amp/speaker pairing) that can match its sense of energy and presence, dynamics and headroom, its sheer musical exuberance. That's no idle, throwaway comment. There are sound reasons why the Duo GT stands unmatched in certain performance parameters. They're to do with the technologies employed and the topology they impose. Remember that I said this speaker breaks the rules? Well, this is where it starts. Look at the price



You'd be right to conclude that the Duo GTs deliver a musical experience that's as impressive as it is beyond the ordinary. Of course, the Trio G3 does a similar job, even better – at a price. What makes the Duo GT such a startling addition to the Avantgarde range is that it delivers so many of the qualities that make the Trio so impressive, even when that speaker is compared to speaker systems that cost several times its price, at a fraction of the flagship's cost. So how do they do it (and why doesn't everybody simply follow suit)?

It's a question of substance and immediacy - and like all things, its relative. The Duo GT costs €64,500 across Europe, which isn't exactly pocket change. But I don't

list and you'll see that the Duo GT cabinets will set you back €42,280 plus sales tax. To those you'll need to add either a passive crossover (at €2190) or the active iTron crossover and amplifier package (€11,480), also plus tax. Given price differential and the startling capabilities of the iTron current amplifiers, that's a no brainer - especially given that the active option renders your existing amplifier redundant (meaning it can be liquidated to subsidise the cost). So that's two rules the Duo GT has broken already: the market is resistant to active speakers and dealers are resistant to pointing out to their customers that this new amplification outperforms the (far more expensive) amplifier they've just sold them.



▶▶ Let's take those broken rules in turn... While active speaker systems have always struggled for acceptance in the high-end arena, Avantgarde have taken the decision to go active because, in their estimation, the opportunities that the approach creates will (demonstrably) outweigh the initial barrier to sale. Well, when it comes to the 'demonstrable' part, they ain't wrong! The company offers the ability for dealers and reviewers to switch directly from passive drive (with any chosen amplifier) to active operation. The active Duo GT crushes the performance of the passive version (irrespective of partnering amplifier), even more convincingly than the active Trio G3 demolishes its passive sibling, not least because the cost differential is so much smaller. Why is the active version so superior? That's down to the iTron amplification, a technology that both demands and fully exploits the active approach. Now just ask yourself this: this iTron amplifier will ONLY work with this loudspeaker, but where else are you going to get a genuinely cutting edge amplifier for less than 15K? Or a speaker system with this bandwidth and dynamic range for this sort of money?

Getting real...

Outrageous technological claims are far from a novelty in the world of audio. So much so that hardened audiophiles often dismiss them out of hand. "The proof of the pudding is in the listening", they'll say. Yet given a compelling demonstration, the natural suspicion seems

to be that the demonstration itself is somehow 'rigged' in order to favour the 'miracle' product. Which is all a bit unfortunate, because not only are Avantgarde's claims far from outrageous, but they really do produce stunningly superior results – a performance that is in

several important ways, closer to live.

The astonishing step up in the Duo GT's performance owes itself to many factors and refinements, but it is centred on the application of Avantgarde's iTron current drive amplification. Nearly all audio systems are built around voltage amplifiers. Yet it is current that actually drives loudspeaker and makes the noise. We all rely on the simple fact that $V=IR$ - meaning that if we increase or amplify voltage, that increase will be tracked by current. But that tracking comes with a degree of lag and disconnection, discernable rise times on leading edge response and overshoot on peaks. In

contrast, a current amplifier operates like a tap, simply responding to signal demand by asking "how much and when?" Current amplifiers trace signal input far more accurately, respond more quickly and with less overshoot than their voltage driven cousins. Which is why they are so widely used in control and instrumentation applications. That exactly machined faceplate on your amplifier or DAC - it was almost certainly cut on a CNC machine and the cutter head was almost certainly controlled by a current amplifier. This is not some strange, mystical or barely



►► understood new amplifier technology. It and its results are all around you.

But if current amplification is so accurate in operation, why don't all audio amplifiers employ it? Because it comes with two limiting factors that make that impossible. The filter networks that form the crossover in conventional passive speakers operate on voltage input. They are effectively invisible to a current drive - making current amplifiers incompatible with the vast majority of speakers on the market. In order to work, current drive mandates an active crossover:

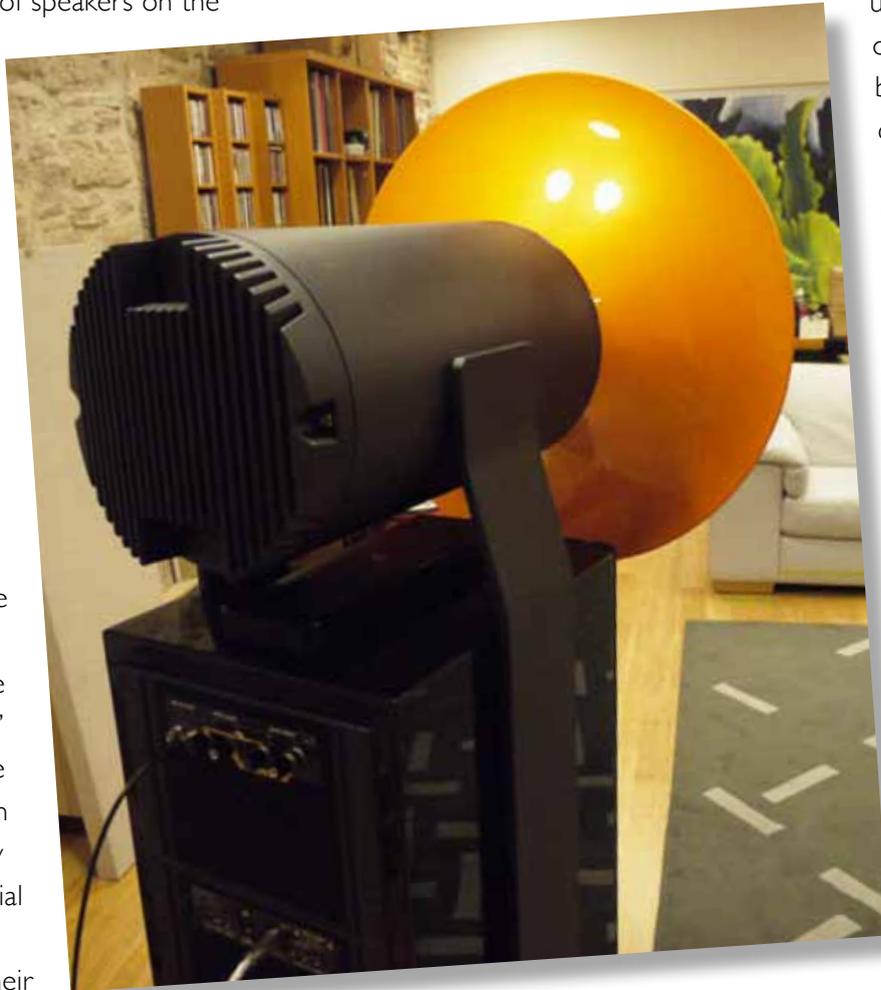
The second (potentially catastrophic) limitation that disqualifies current drive from general audio applications is that you cannot let it see a driver's fundamental resonance - otherwise that resonance answers the question "How much?" with the answer, "More than you've got!" Given that the low-frequency output of all commercial loudspeakers depends on extending below their bass drivers' fundamental resonance - often exploiting that resonance in the process - and it is impossible to generate serious low frequency output using a current amplifier:

But Avantgarde found itself in a unique situation. Not only did the extraordinary efficiency of their horn-loaded speaker systems make them ideally suited to exploiting the speed of response that comes with current amplification, their speakers already employed active bass. So, for all those asking, if current amplification is so wonderful, why don't more companies use it, the answer is, because they can't. In fact, the remarkable audio performance of current amplification is pretty

much limited to this one, specific situation. Does the iTron amplifier package on the Duo GT trounce the performance of something like the Ongaku? Absolutely. Exactly the same as it's going to trounce pretty much any other conventional, voltage amplifier - with this speaker! So for dealers and end-users, it's not so much a case of this affordable amplifier buries the expensive one you own/I just sold you. It's simply that this particular speaker, along with the Trio G3, has emerged to offer a

unique solution - an opportunity you'd be well advised to consider seriously.

But there's more to the Duo GT's performance than iTron. The active amplification has imposed its own demands on the rest of the system, demands that have led to improvements in the drive-units (especially their motors) and the geometry of the high-frequency horn. However, the biggest evolution has occurred in



the bass cabinet. The Uno was the first model to extend the bass enclosure up to the tweeter, with subsequent designs going further still, enveloping the tweeter entirely and visually extending up to the lower arc of the top-mounted midrange driver. The Duo GT takes that approach to its logical extreme, with a cabinet that's fully 110cm tall and 45cm deep (43" x 18"). The horn drivers take advantage of this revised structure to assume a coplanar arrangement, while I also suspect that the advanced location of the main baffle helps overcome any latency in the low-frequency DSP. The active electronics are contained in a separate, shallow 'tray' in the rear of the cabinet, but that still leaves



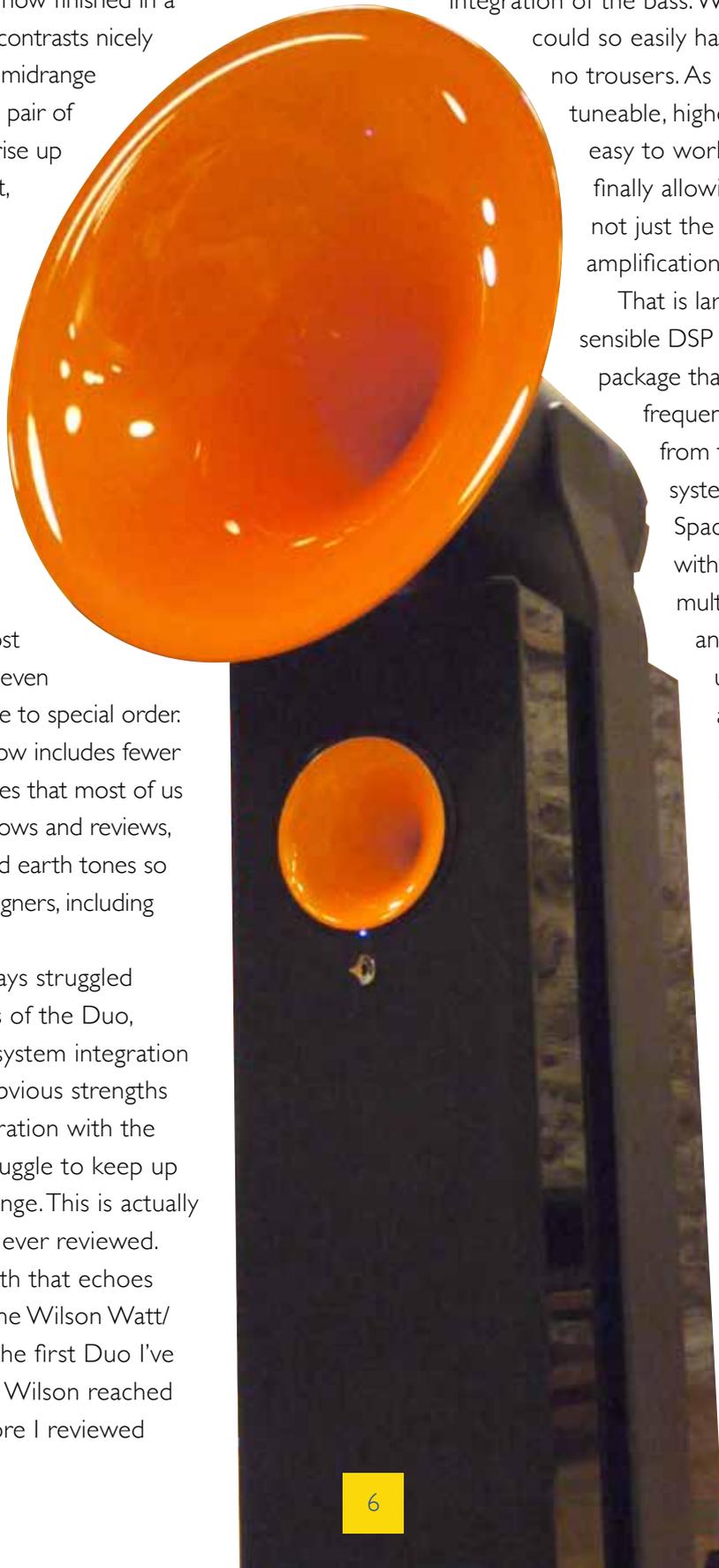
▶▶ a considerable volume available to load the twin 12" bass drivers, which with their massive voice-coils and motors, downward firing reflex port and 500 Watts of Class D amplifier per driver makes for a potentially potent bottom end. Of course, you can have too much of a good thing and with actively equalised bass output quality is always more of an issue than quantity.

The main cabinet is now finished in a high-gloss lacquer that contrasts nicely with the trumpets. The midrange horn is supported on a pair of substantial blades that rise up each side of the cabinet, echoing the bladed support for the Trio G3's 'flying' tweeter. It's a neat, stylish and less 'industrial' arrangement than the space-frame that have graced previous Duos. The trumpets, so much an Avantgarde trademark, are still available in a host of standard colours, or even any specified RAL shade to special order. The standard palette now includes fewer of the bold, bright shades that most of us will remember from shows and reviews, with more of the muted earth tones so beloved of interior designers, including matte finishes.

In the past I've always struggled with previous versions of the Duo, ultimately finding the system integration too flawed for their obvious strengths to overcome my frustration with the low-end's constant struggle to keep up with the rest of the range. This is actually the first Duo that I've ever reviewed. In a developmental path that echoes my relationship with the Wilson Watt/Puppy series, it's also the first Duo I've wanted to review. The Wilson reached its tenth iteration before I reviewed

it, the eleventh before I bought it. The Duo has got there quicker in terms of model evolution but not that much quicker in terms of elapsed time! The breakthrough isn't just down to the iTron. What has really transformed this speaker from an impressive but frustratingly uneven performer into a balanced and exceptionally capable system is the successful integration of the bass. Without that, the Duo GT could so easily have been all mouth and no trousers. As it is, the bass is more tuneable, higher quality and more easy to work with than ever before, finally allowing it to keep pace with not just the horns but the current amplification driving them.

That is largely down to the sensible DSP graphic equalisation package that controls the low-frequency output. Derived from the incredibly complex system employed on the Spacehorn subs that pair with the Trio G3, with their multiple pre-set profiles and adjustments, the Duo uses a far simpler and as a result, a far easier to optimise arrangement. A single, easily modified bass profile is supplied, accessed via an RJ45 connector on the rear of the speaker and adjusted via a simple graphic display on a PC screen. It's as easy to use as it is effective and, together with the increased quality of the components and cabinet that constitute the Duo's bass end, accounts for the effective system integration that is now possible. ▶▶



►► Gettin' down and getting dirty...

There are a bunch of practical improvements too. The active input panel is equipped with two rows of three-position dipswitches that allow you to adjust system sensitivity (to adjust for the noise performance of the driving pre-amp) and the driver output levels (in 1.5dB steps). I ran system gain at the lowest level, despite the ghostly quiet output of the LI/XI. Each speaker requires two IEC power cords, one for the iTron and one for the bass amp. It also requires a balanced interconnect that is plugged into the iTron control panel, some three feet off of the floor, so make sure that your leads are long enough. Avantgarde supply a balanced cable 0.8m/30" long to run between the iTron module and the bass amp. Replacing this with the same interconnect as was feeding the iTron brought a substantial improvement in bass tonality, texture, speed and dynamic range, allowing the bass to breathe and better integrate - a process that was completed once we'd also disconnected the PC controlling the bass EQ.

There's also a warm-up or settling in period to take into account. Unusually this doesn't seem to affect bass weight or depth and is much more about the character and articulation of the bottom end. It may be transport related, a case of the bass drivers' suspension getting over their travel shock, but it's well worth bearing in mind when auditioning or setting the speakers up. Give the speakers two days of use and the bottom-end fills out appreciably. It gains texture, shape, power and authority. Back to *Thin Red Line* and no single cabinet speaker system I've had in my room(s) at this or even twice this price has had the sort of bass depth, weight

and impact from this powerful soundtrack that the Duo delivers, without apparent effort or strain. The subterranean rumbles that fill out the track 'Silence' have real room filling capability, while the huge drum beats on 'Air' have the pulse of the initial impact, the

texture of the skin and the massive volume behind it. The weight of the note pushes off of the face of the instrument and rolls through the room. That low-frequency feel and generosity, the ability to let large-scale music really breathe comes after several days of constant operation - at which point the rear panel heat sinks will be nicely warm to the touch.

The Duo GT is mounted on four outriggers, each equipped with a large diameter, threaded shaft that is adjustable using the domed top-cap. In addition, the angle of each outrigger is adjustable, which is handy if you need to fit the speakers around existing furniture or obstructions. The bottom of each

adjustable shaft has an internal M8 thread that can accept either a blunt, nylon-tipped 'skate' (ideal for initial positioning, or a shallow, spiked tip ideal for use on hard floors or with footers. If I was running the Duos in a carpeted room, I'd fit a set of Track Audio spikes instead, but the real point here is that the feet fitted to the Duo GT are adaptable to circumstance, beautifully executed and allow easy and really precise adjustment of the speaker's attitude, especially the super-critical rake angle. It's yet another factor that contributes directly to the Duo finally delivering on its potential.

Other set up niceties? Before starting the set up process, ensure that the tweeter (and midrange) trumpets are really tight in their threads. The speakers



▶▶ will normally be delivered with the midrange trumpets packed separately, so getting those tight should be a matter of course but it is easy to overlook the tweeter trumpets. Again, this is probably down to transport, but I managed to get nearly a whole clockwise turn on each of the smaller horns. Listening to the speakers before tightening those horns demonstrates just how critical the driver diaphragm/horn mouth interface is, if you are going to avoid tonal colouration and 'horn-y' exaggeration. But get everything tight and just like the Trio G3, the tonal balance will be extremely natural - surprisingly so for all those with jaundiced views of horn speakers in general and their colouration levels in particular.

Each speaker has a ground post on the bass amp. Connecting these to Qkore QKIs delivered a worthwhile reduction in grain with a corresponding improvement in tonal colour and separation. Placing HRS damping plates on the top of the cabinet, hidden behind the midrange trumpet, also tightened up bass definition and the air around bass notes. Beyond that, the Duo's seemed largely impervious to tweakery in general, responding more readily to care and attention lavished on precise placement and attitude adjustments. You will need to get these speakers set up exactly (and I do mean exactly) the same distance from your ears and with exactly the same toe-in and rake angle - the latter being particularly critical if you are going to achieve the correct tonal balance. You MUST be on axis with the tweeter. Too low (too high or off to one side - it's a spherical horn after all) and you will suffer glare and shrillness. But get everything right and you simply get vivid, extended treble energy and colour. Getting it right means using a digital level and a laser range finder. It's worth the effort! Besides which, assuming you are buying through a dealer, this is exactly what you are paying them for.

Just plain old gettin' down...

I've already alluded to what these speakers do in musical terms that sets them apart from not just the crowd, but the vast majority of other domestic speaker systems. The speakers that can challenge the performance strengths of the Duo GT are invariably sensitive. At a claimed 107dB efficiency, the Avantgardes certainly qualify as high sensitivity - but the rise time and sudden leading edge response of the

iTron amplification takes the musical presentation to a whole new level of presence and immediacy. You can talk about speakers and systems that deliver a mid-hall balance, or ones that seat you further forward. In the best instances, those speakers also create the impression of the performers and the performance being in your room - or at least, in an extension of your room. With a single voice or small ensemble that can be incredibly convincing, but move up in musical scale and you inevitably end up diminishing the dimensions and scale the band, until you have a facsimile, almost a model of the original performance, that you are looking in upon.

When I said earlier that the Duo GT "takes you there" I wasn't kidding - and it's an important distinction. The Duo GT (and the Trio G3) put you in the same space as the original musicians, irrespective of how big or small the band might be. This isn't row M or row G. This is a much more direct connection than that. This is almost a Mic's-eye view and it's down to the absence of familiar losses - the lack of lost energy. What defines distance in a concert hall or other music venue? The spread, the loss of direct and the addition of reflected, musical energy. The very nature of the Duo GT, with its high-sensitivity and rapid response to input, preserves more of the energy in the recording, literally moving you closer to the original. That doesn't mean that you are sat on the conductor's podium or stood in front of the vocalist. What it means is that it mirrors the musical presence and immediacy of live performance - that sense that there's nothing between you and the musicians; that sense that the vast majority of audio systems really struggle to convey. A bit like stereo in general, it might be a psychoacoustic trick, but just like stereo, I like it!

Jordi Savall is recognised for his vivacious and energetic performances, generally with Le Concert des Nations, his small, original instruments orchestra. Their recording of Bach's *Brandenburg Concertos* is no exception (AliaVox AVSA 9871 A+B). I played these discs on my first introduction to the Duo GT at the Avantgarde listening room. Playing them again at home, with considerable effort expended on set up and with superior source components (the Wadax Reference units) brought home not only just how responsive these speakers are to precise set up, but how musically ▶▶

▶▶ infectious that combination of immediacy and unfettered dynamic response really is. A fellow listener once remarked about Savall (about his Beethoven Symphonies as it happens) that, "The thing about Jordi is that he gets all the jokes": The Duo GTs delight in that musical insouciance and vitality, revealing the sheer joy in the playing, communicating it undiluted and enthusiastically to the listener.

And when things get more serious? Play Górecki's *III Symphonia* (the composer conducting the National Polish Radio S.O. – Polskie Radio PR SACD 2) and the Duos capture the muted pathos of the slow, stately, bowed bass opening. As the piece builds, the layering of the split sections, the interleaved melodic lines and the slow but inevitable increase in power and density create an increasing emotional intensity, just as the piece does live. The first, towering crescendo gives way to the poised calm before the soprano sings, the music (and the Avantgardes) leading you naturally

into the resurgent emotional maelstrom that is, after all, subtitled the *Symphony Of Sorrowful Songs*. It's a massive piece of music, three slow movements, each that builds and builds to embrace every facet of the orchestra to project the intensity and pain of death and loss. The Duo GT not only matches the dynamic scale and emotional range of the piece, it does it without the strain or glare that so often afflicts even the best systems struggling to play this intense and powerful music. Perhaps most notable of all is the absence of brightness or ringing on the loudest passages behind

the soprano voice. Just when you expect the Duos to reveal their horn DNA, they sail through the peaks with grace and power to spare. One thing the Avantgardes aren't short of is headroom.

Not surprisingly, the opening fanfare of Mahler's *5th Symphony* (Barbirolli and the NPO – EMI SLS 785) is meat and drink to the Duo's sheer body and presence.

But what is far more impressive is the measured poise and natural instrumental tonality they bring to the slowly evolving and deeply reflective *Funeral March* that follows. The sense of space and interwoven instrumental interjections, so central to both Barbirolli and Mahler, is beautifully presented, with an effortless sense of musical and dynamic coherence. On a lighter note, the jaunty woodwind, bass and bass drum opening to Shostakovich's *First Symphony* (Masur and the LPO – LPO 0001) is another example of this speaker's



effortless musical grasp, instruments natural, solid, instantly placed and identifiable within the orchestral fabric, adding to the substance and presence, the sense of a live event.

In the same way, the cash register that opens Pink Floyd's 'Money' has a greater sense of solid crunch and rattle, a more insistent rhythmic drive and impetus. The shipyard soundscape on Jackie Leven's 'Defending Ancient Springs', all welding torches, rivets being beaten, ship's hooters and shouted imprecations, is more varied but also more ordered, establishing the pattern over ▶▶

▶▶ which the slashing guitar riffs and vocal are laid. The drums match the striking impact of the hammers, while at the same time the mandolin still maintains a tinkling delicacy. It's indicative of the freshness that the Duo GT brings to even the most familiar tracks. This isn't that audio cliché, hearing things that you never heard before. This is hearing the same things, but in a way that you never heard them before.

You can't always get what you want...

Part of this is where many a seasoned audiophile is going to diverge from Avantgarde's musical vision. The Duo GTs definitely favour direct sound over reflected energy. The first half of 'The Road' from Jackson Browne's *Running On Empty* (Asylum 6E-113) was recorded with the voice, guitar and fiddle in a motel room. If I play the track on the Sasha DAW/VTL S-400 set-up, I hear a clear relationship between the seated Browne's voice and the guitar in his lap. David Lindley's fiddle is positioned higher as he stands to one side. When the vocal starts, it brings with it a sense of the small space in which the recording was made. Play the same track on the Duos and the musical relationship between the two instruments is even more connected in musical terms, the accents and phrasing of the lyric even more direct and explicit - but the spatial relationship between the three is absent. Likewise, when the track opens up after the second chorus, folding into the live concert performance, the Duos capture the expansion in the surrounding space, the increase in the volume, but they don't capture the overall acoustic, the boundaries of the venue. The Duos are about the direct connection with the voice and instruments, rather than the holistic sense of an enveloping acoustic space. It doesn't mean that they don't image or that they don't separate images across the stage. Individual images are both distinct and dimensional. But they lack the sense of natural perspective and spatial continuity - the spaces between and around players - that the Trios (with their full-range horn output) deliver so spectacularly - and that is considered *de rigueur* for more conventional high-end speaker designs. In part, it comes back to that question of distance: sit closer to a band and the direct/reflected ratio alters, the impact of the surrounding space recedes. There's also no doubt

that on all but the most minimalist recordings, the acoustic is a synthetic construct - and the Duo may well be guilty of telling you too much. Indeed, play a stereo extravaganza and the Duo delivers in spades, it's just that not too many recordings fit that category. Ultimately I suspect that we are running up against the limits of the speaker's bottom end transparency and integration. The Spacehorns offer seamless continuity with the Trio G3. As good as the subs on the Duo GT are, they're not in the Spacehorn's league (or price bracket).

Instead, the Duo GT seeks to trump such 'cosmetic niceties' with its sheer presence and musical substance. Recreate the original event? Why bother when you can re-live it? In a fit of nostalgia I pulled out the PG-era Genesis masterwork Foxtrot and the track 'Supper's Ready'. The murky mix and multi-layered pomp-rock sprawl is a challenge to any system, but it's a challenge that the Duos met with a majestic display of power and grace. So much so that I couldn't resist simply flipping the disc and playing the first side, before repeating the second once again. Which is kind of the whole point. It's no surprise that so many of the musical examples I have cited here are live or concert performances - or discs which preserve that sense of performance. What this speaker demands of its listeners is a clear sense of musical priorities. Are you in this for the gear or the music? If it's the gear, then the Duo will likely prove a frustrating choice. But if you want musical access - and musical access to the widest possible range of recordings, from modern audiophile discs to collectible original pressings, from discs you've just discovered to the ones that you partied at college - then I can't propose a more musically or cost effective solution at anything like this price level than the Duo GT.

This latest evolution of a design that originated 30-years ago is a powerful advocate for the targeted application of technological solutions. It takes its spherical horns and active bass and binds them together with thoughtful refinements and a radical electronics solution (the iTron current drive) to create a whole that's even greater than the considerable sum of its parts. To combine these technologies and deliver this level of performance at this price is a remarkable achievement, the result of clarity of purpose and



▶▶ innovative thinking married to engineering excellence. You'd think that it would be a slam-dunk success – but this is the world of audio, where conservative is spelt with a lower-case c (but all the other letters are capitals). The Duo GT challenges convention and slays it convincingly, but just like the dragons of old, those conventions linger long in the collective memory – and longer still in terms of market inertia.

There are few arguments to counter the theoretical and demonstrable superiority of a well-executed active crossover. Passive networks are subtractive by their very nature. They place a barrier between the amplifier and the drive-units it's trying to control, and risk a corresponding barrier between the listener and the original event. Embrace the complexity (and cost) of an active crossover and the multiple amplifiers that go with it and you end up with a superior signal path, as well as sidestepping the most critical (amplifier/speaker) interface in the system. To add to the advantages of direct coupling your amplifiers to your drivers, the Duo GT offers the added advantages of high sensitivity and the superior dynamic tracking and accuracy of current drive. It's really no surprise that the complete package redefines wide-bandwidth dynamic capabilities and micro-dynamic definition at anything even close to its price.

But therein lies the challenge. Active systems have struggled for market acceptance, especially those that integrate the electronics and the speaker cabinet. Traditional systems comprise a number of discrete elements – source, pre-amp, power amp, speakers. In theory, traditional audiophiles shuffle those components, mixing and matching them to achieve their own, specific goals. In practice, it's a process that is significantly

less successful than we tell ourselves – although each subsequent disappointment simply leads to another round of 'upgrades'. By combining the amplifier and speakers into a single 'block', active systems are perceived as limiting choice and flexibility, locking customers into a single solution. This despite their easily demonstrable performance benefits.

You don't always want what you need...

In one sense, the Duo GT takes that argument and doubles down. It does lock owners into a single solution, but not for the reasons traditionally cited. Given the way in which the iTron amplifier and the Duo drivers dovetail, given the way in which the improved subs integrate with the rest of the range, the notion of 'improving' or 'shaping' the sound by using a different or 'better'

or preferred amplifier is nonsense. Given the unique situation presented by the Duo's hybrid horn topology, there IS no amplifier that will match or better the iTron's strengths in this situation. Instead, the challenge faced by any Duo GT owner is where do you go



▶▶ from here? Yes, there are amplifier/speaker systems that can outperform the Duo GT – not least Avantgarde's own Trio set up. But they are all bigger, more complex and vastly more expensive. In fact, the Trio G3 at around three times the price of the Duo GT is arguably the most affordable, viable alternative. As I've already pointed out, whatever it's apparent advantages, anything more affordable than that is simply going to be crushed by the Duo's combination of bandwidth and dynamic range.

What that does is make the Duo GT an endgame product – a *system cul-de-sac*. This is a speaker that you buy to live with. Not one that you buy as a stepping-stone on some endless quest for audio nirvana. In turn, that defines the potential customer. While we all pay lip service to the primacy of musical performance, for some the equipment and the process, its acquisition and application is at least as important - and there's nothing whatsoever wrong with that. We just need to be honest about where our interests lie. The Duo GT is demanding of set up and rewarding of effort, but thereafter it's a done deal. The opportunities it offers for switching or churning partnering equipment are strictly limited to source components. The demands it places on the noise performance of the pre-amp are such that even there the choices are strictly limited.

If you really are in this for the music; if your goal is to get as close as you can to the original performance; if your response is as much emotional as it is cerebral – I doubt you'll find a more satisfying speaker than

this. If you approach your audio system as a one-time purchase – as opposed to an ongoing odyssey – I can't think of a better investment than the Duo GT. If your goal is simply to access the energy and emotional intensity of great musical performances, look no further than this Avantgarde. As such this may not be every audiophile's cup of tea, but like other products that break new ground it is a product that every audiophile should hear, if only to appreciate what's possible. It isn't – and will never be – all things to all men. But to the right man, it will be hard to resist – love at first listen! And before I get branded as sexist, I used the term 'man' intentionally. In my experience, every woman who has seen or heard the Duo GT has got it instantly. Maybe - just maybe - that's the most telling observation of all... 

Avantgarde Acoustic GmbH
Lautertal, Germany
www.avantgarde-acoustic.de

Prices:

Avantgarde Duo GT Enclosures (+sales tax)/pair	€42,280
Duo GT iTron Modules (+sales tax)/pair	€11,480