



The JAS Orsa Loudspeaker

by Chris Thomas

I have been expecting this product to arrive for a while now. Not this exact one you understand, but one very, very like it. Over the past couple of years it has become increasingly obvious that the Chinese have both the technology and the financial clout, due in part to cheap labour costs, to start making some serious inroads into the cosy audio markets dominated by Europe, Japan and the US. Their problem has been that, although the products have always looked good and the pricing has been ultra competitive, they just have not been up to it sonically: Almost – but not quite.

Bear in mind though that here I am talking about those components designed and built by Chinese companies and marketed as such and not those built in China for UK or European-based outfits, of which there are more and more. When I reviewed the Aurum Cantus loudspeaker about a year ago I was left feeling that, sound wise, it was very close to being right and when the Chinese companies did finally crack it there would be a few worried looks on the faces of the directors of companies who designed and built their products here. Put simply, the overall quality and finish of the Chinese goods are exemplary and very hard, if not impossible, for any existing market to compete with price-wise. As soon as the JAS Orsa emerged from its box I wondered if this would be the speaker that would finally convince me that the Chinese could build a truly excellent sounding product. It has all the credentials.

JAS were founded back in 2002 in Hong Kong by a group of audio enthusiasts who wanted to build high-end products for budget prices. Heard it before? Of course we have. In the UK it is a pipedream as has been proved over and over. But in China, armed with such low production costs, it had a chance of becoming reality and now, only three-years later, it might well have done so. The Orsa is one of a series of loudspeakers and tube amplifiers from JAS that are now being imported into the UK.

The first thing that hits you when you extract them from the impressive packaging is the sheer amount of lacquer that the Chinese consistently and liberally apply to their loudspeaker cabinets. To me the review samples look like a birds-eye maple, the kind of finish you might well see on a Japanese electric guitar of the 80's. Furniture guitars I call them and with such lustrous depth of shine the Orsas do carry more than a hint of furniture about them. There are of course other rather less obvious finishes available and of those I have seen in pictures, the rosewood looks a more restrained option. But I have to say here that, despite my personal reservations, others loved their piano-like glossy boldness. I wonder if they offer a plain matt black?

This is an unusual two-way stand-mount design that provides each driver with its own cabinet, bolted together and separated by 4 half-inch spacers. To my eyes these should be black but, in keeping with the statement made by the gleaming finish, are in a rather garish gold. Thankfully they are not too obvious. The lower, larger cabinet houses a 6-inch treated paper-coned Morel bass/mid driver on its angled

front baffle, while tapered, bevelled edging lightens its appearance considerably. The

top box carries the unit that totally defines the quality of the Orsa, a deep-throated aluminium LCY twin-ribbon tweeter. Unusually and possibly uniquely, both cabinets are vented by opposing ports firing into the slot

between them. This seems to help when it comes to the positioning of the speaker near room boundaries and may go some way to explaining the excellent, broad dispersion of the ribbon which is the first I have heard that has both real high frequency extension and “air” yet does not beam in the horizontal or the vertical.

To the rear there are a pair of quite excellent gold-plated WBT-type connectors, which allow for the connection of just about any cable configuration with any termination while internally the wiring is solid silver. Rather more surprising is the presence of a switch, operated by a key, ▶



▶ which allows the speakers to be set in either Reference or Dynamic mode. Even more intriguing is the fact that no mention of this is made in the manual. A little investigation revealed that while Reference is the standard setting, Dynamic reduces the impedance between 2-3.5Khz giving a more forward shape to the sound



and apparently, lower noise. Having switched between them many times and noted the subtlety of the changes I'm not sure that this is a necessary inclusion. I left them in Reference mode and found that there was more variation and reward to be found in their positioning than in this switch.

No stands were supplied but they are a perfect fit on the JM Labs Micro-Utopia Be stands. In fact their dimensions and general size are very close to the Micros and their tonal balance and efficiency are both very similar too and as the JM's are my home speaker it was perhaps inevitable that, despite the large price differential, comparisons were made: But more of that later. The amplifiers I chose to drive them with were the solid-state Moon i-5, which has become something of a reference product for me and the sweet little

Pathos Classic hybrid though, judging by their catalogue, I believe that the JAS designers probably envisaged them being used with an all tube integrated design.

Siting them is fairly straightforward. I used them about two and a half feet from the rear

wall although they will work with as little as a foot if space is tight, but the distance between them is critical. In my room they liked to be closer together than the Micros with less toe-in and I would urge lots of experimentation. Very small changes bring huge differences in the clarity of the sound-stage, but once you get them right the whole left and right of the picture clicks into coherent focus. But too close and they become congested through the mid-band.

The manual recommends a 200-hour burn-in period so when you first fire them up don't be surprised that there is very little bass. But that tweeter leaves you in no doubt that when the bass finally does get going you are going to be listening to something a bit special. This is a great little driver by any standards and has much more in common with the superb beryllium unit in the JMLabs Utopia Be range than any tweeter you are likely to find in other comparatively priced speakers. It too will grow both looser and more refined with use but it has such open and expansive clarity and so little compressive

harshness, even from new, that it literally breathes life into the sound. In fact the Orsa will need all of the recommended run-in time to really come up to full bandwidth strength and speed and even then they always seem balanced slightly on the light side. But this again is likely due to the impressive amounts of detail, uncompressed energy and pure high frequency extension that this tweeter excels at.

I have always liked Fourplay and though their studio recordings are mite over-produced there are few bands that can move so effortlessly through a technically demanding piece with quite the same sense of calm. *Heartfelt* (BMG 63916-2) is not the easiest of discs for most mid-priced systems to cope with.

It often sounds far too processed with the top of the drum kit in particular sounding thin and splashy. The title track is a mood piece that moves very gently through a number of subtle tempo shifts and features some great understated playing.



The Orsa allows so much space between the instruments and so much insight into where and when each player contributes. Liberal amounts of digital reverb enhances the broad, deep soundstage while at the same time removing any semblance ▶

► of a natural acoustic. But this only adds to the atmosphere. There is delicacy, tonality and texture to the guitar, piano and cymbals and though the time changes are low tempo you will notice with the Orsa that they are often accompanied by very gentle instrumental pushes or just a slight increase in playing pressure from a band member.

I was slightly disappointed with the bass which I thought was a mite too soft at times and this could rob the music of its foundation. Because, although the Orsa has decent low frequency extension for its cabinet size and is generally fine through the lower mid-band it just needs that bit more shape and control in the low bass. This, plus the fact that it is so very good at the opposite frequency extreme tends to throw this into sharp relief more often. But, having said this, I am also mindful that the review pair are still relatively new and may well improve in this area over the coming months.

I normally end up with an Alison Krauss CD playing before too long and her collaboration with Union Station on *Lonely Runs Both Ways* (RRCD-525) will give any system a severe workout. This is another studio album but with big, booming acoustic guitar chords, string bass, close vocals and the Dobro of Jerry Douglas pushing into the room. The Orsa was startlingly good on the opening track as, after her vocal intro over some lovely guitar picking, the band kicks in and the drummer strikes that first cymbal. It should breathe a sustained open-mouthed metallic shimmer and not just sizzle as I hear from so many speakers. Here it was very impressive, right from initial impact and through its

natural decay. And it has a feeling of complete independence and clarity that extends well down and gives the Orsa an enviable sense of vocal and instrumental articulation, helped by the tight and focussed soundstage. It also helps with its rhythmic agility too, which is generally very composed. But there are a couple of areas that this CD highlights the Orsa's limitations. Pump too much high tempo

mid-band information through them and there is some confusion and they slightly lose that rhythmic focus that, on less demanding music, seems so solid. It seems to occur though in quite a narrow frequency band.

I also noticed it on other material, particularly close-miked recordings, where you could lose track of some musical threads as the complexity of the arrangement grew.

But I really don't want to make too much of this. The Orsa is such a good all round speaker that I often found myself comparing it with my Micro Utopias Be's which is both totally unfair given the large price disparity yet still a compliment. But, in so many ways, they do remind me of the JM's. Their tonal balance, sensitivity and general bandwidth is very similar and they both have superb, open, textural tweeters. The JM is much more refined of course, has considerably more top to bottom body and strength and harmonic development is quite a bit better. But, put the price differential into the equation and the Orsa begins to look pretty awesome value for money.

In some ways it always feels more rewarding to review a product that punches above its weight and this is



a special little speaker that sets a price/performance yardstick that is hard to beat. That tweeter really defines them and sets them apart and although they work extremely well with this Morel bass/mid driver I could easily imagine this ribbon finding its way into speakers costing thousand of pounds more than this one. It gives the Orsa a real sense of class and means that they can operate successfully on the end of a much better source and amplification set-up. At the end of this review I hooked them up with a very high quality pre/power combination and was very impressed with the way they responded. The speaker easily accommodated the mega increase in dynamic information and some of my criticisms lessened, sorting the mid-band and tightening the bass a little. No, the Orsa isn't perfect, but find me a speaker, at anywhere near the price, that doesn't have even starker limitations.



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Stand mounted, 2-way, 2 box reflex loaded
Drivers:	11cm Aluminium twin ribbon tweeter. 16cm Treated paper cone bass mid driver.
Sensitivity:	88db
Impedance:	8ohm nominal.
Connections:	2 gold plated 4mm/binding posts.
Crossover:	2400Hz.
Dimensions (HxWxD):	42x23x34cm.
Finishes available:	Check with importer.
Price:	£1399 per pair.

UK Distributor:

Shadow Audio.
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Manufacturer:

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