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YAMAHA SOAVO 1

Stunning new
loudspeaker...



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Grand Design

From the company whose name sits on some of the world's best concert grand pianos, studio monitoring equipment, speedboats and motorcycles, comes the brand new Soavo 1 floorstanding loudspeaker. David Price listens in...



respects they're still peerless even today; £14,000 Apogee Synergy 1.5s notwithstanding, there are no modern loudspeakers than can hold a candle to them in transient speed, in my opinion. So the £2,000 Soavo 1s, costing about one third of the classic NS1000M in real terms, have a serious scrap on their hands...

Just as Yamaha did with the 1974 TC-800GL, arguably the first ever high end cassette deck, the company has employed the services of an esteemed industrial designer to style the Soavos. This time, it's not Mario Bellini but Toshiyuki Kita, who has designed many successful products for German, Italian and Japanese manufacturers. You can see his work everywhere from the New York *Museum of Modern Art* to the *Centre Georges Pompidou* in Paris – plus my own front room, as he shaped the recent range of Sharp Aquos LCD TVs!

The Soavo 1s are beautifully presented, and the woodwork exemplary. The birch veneer cabinet (with Open-Pore finish) uses the same material as Yamaha's finest wood-grain pianos, and comes in a choice of dark brown birch, brown birch, natural birch and black birch finishes. To give you an idea, we're talking the sort of woodwork you used to get from Castle Acoustics.

The cabinets have non-parallel

Small specialist manufacturers have a great deal to offer. Their products are often more creative, more focused and more appropriate to the needs of a rapidly changing market. But big companies can do just as well, if not better, in other ways. Think of the vast engineering resources available to the giant multinational Yamaha brand, a name behind everything from the wood veneer on Lexus automobiles and luxury swimming pools to powerboats and high performance motorbikes.

A Yamaha design team can call upon engineering resources

unimaginable to the small specialists, but this alone doesn't guarantee a great product. At worst it could end up as a terribly fudged, designed-by-committee, lowest-common-denominator compromise, while at best it may turn out to be an engineering *tour de force* and a breathtaking, epoch-making design in its own right.

To be frank, Yamaha have done both over the years, so to gauge the Soavo 1 loudspeakers you see here, I thought it best to compare them to one of the company's highest ever watermarks – the classic nineteen seventies NS1000M monitor loudspeakers. In some

sides to reduce standing waves, and internally the woofer and midrange sections are divided by a slanted partition, and strengthened with large, vertical ladder-type bracing. The three-way mitred construction of the cabinet joints is said to ensure extremely tight joints so the entire cabinet behaves as a single unit, and diecast aluminium stands are fitted that provide the necessary solid floor contact.

The drive unit array doesn't look anything special, but looks can be deceptive. The 'Advanced Polymer

"these loudspeakers are just plain great at everything..."

injected Mica Diaphragm' midrange cones are said to be extremely light, rigid and sturdy, while the 'Poly-Methyl-Pentene' woofers are claimed to be lighter than either paper or polypropylene. The tweeter is a 3cm aluminium dome with a fully integrated diaphragm/voice coil structure that Yamaha calls the 'DC-Diaphragm'. Diecast aluminium baskets are claimed to ensure solid support for high stiffness, and the hand-carved wooden port aperture is shaped for optimum airflow. At the top of the front baffle, a diecast aluminium tweeter plate is used to isolate the tweeter from cabinet vibration. Edgewise-wound ribbon wire voice coils are used, and the spider is a high performance model from Kurt Müller.

The crossover is said to use the highest quality parts, including Solen metallised polypropylene capacitors and large hollow centre coils with carefully selected wire. No printed circuit boards are used, instead each connection is individually soldered on a thick wooden board, providing larger, shorter signal paths. The speakers are biwireable, but interestingly Yamaha optimised them to be monowired, and this is how they were used for this review. Vital statistics are 349x1,051x487mm, and 27kg apiece.

SOUND QUALITY

Having started the listening with the aforementioned NS1000Ms, which really do sound best when powered with a gutsy tube amplifier (as opposed to solid-state), I switched directly over to the Soavo 1s with my World Audio K5881 tube amplifier still glowing away in the corner. With a quoted sensitivity of 89dB [see MEASURED PERFORMANCE], I wasn't sure if its 20 watts would be enough, but I need not have worried

as they seemed louder than the NS1000Ms' 91dB quoted sensitivity!

First impressions were wholly positive. This is not a tale of how they magically came good after hours of fettling and warming up (so that's the first difference to the NS1000Ms, then!) – they sounded wonderfully alive from the word go. My 1979 pressing of The Crusaders 'Street Life' was cued up and I was instantly struck by their superb tonality. No quacky or honky midband drivers for the Soavos – Randy Crawford's vocals were deliciously carried

without a trace of nasal colouration. They were transparent in the best 'monitor' sense of the word – they just sounded natural.

Moving up to the treble region and the hi-hats were superb, almost as crystalline and pure as the NS1000Ms' Beryllium domes. There was a delightful metallic sheen, but they could almost have been ribbon tweeters, so smooth and clean were they. Down at the other end, there was a strong, fluid bass that didn't sound in the least bit 'out of puff' compared to the NS1000Ms' big twelve inch woofers. Most marked of all – and this thought stayed with me throughout my listening period – was the way the bass melted invisibly into the midband, which dissolved invisibly in to the treble. In other words, the Soavo 1s were brilliantly integrated.

This is the key to these new Yamahas – they have a lovely tone from top to toe. All the drivers present a highly united front, and it's not like listening to three speakers in one. The result is that you can switch recordings and hear dramatically different sounds. For example, UB40's 'King' was obviously recorded in a far rougher environment than the Crusaders' 'Street Life'. The Soavos were completely able to signpost the difference between the studio that a low budget Birmingham reggae album was born in, and the one a highly polished Los Angeles jazz-rock trio chose to record at - along with some of the best session men in the business. Amazingly though, the Soavos proved as enjoyable with the bad recording as the good one.

With tonality and integration already major plus points, the next feather in the Soavo 1s' cap was imaging – here they trounced the NS1000Ms fair and square. The new Yamahas threw out a wonderfully expansive stereo image, so much

so that when toed in slightly in my listening room, they pretty much disappeared into thin air. Again switching from one recording to another simply moved the walls of the recording studio around in the room, the newbies being so skilled at conveying the studio's recorded acoustic. So accomplished were they that I really didn't start hankering after my normal review reference, the Quad ESL-989s, which sure know a thing or two about recreating any given recording's room boundaries, as any electrostatic user will attest...

Anyone who knows LFO's

'Low Frequency Oscillation', a classic slice of early nineties electronica if ever there was one, will be aware of the bass frequencies contained therein.

With swathes of 35Hz sub-bass supplied by the now classic Roland TB-303 Bassline bass synthesiser dominating the song, it's a veritable torture track for any loudspeaker (or power amplifier for that matter). Yet it's not just the occasional boom-boom either - the US edition of the CD had a disclaimer printed on the 'longbox' with words to the effect of "this recording could seriously damage your equipment"! Here was something to see what the Soavos could do deep down...

For this little adventure, it was necessary to move to the 500W per channel of the Rotel RB-1092 – my poor old tube amp just wasn't going to supply the motive force. The NS1000Ms went on first, and their twelve inch bass units in massive sealed cabs shrugged off the challenge. Things started rattling in the kitchen and cracks appeared in the walls as the Rotel dutifully served up the grunt, and yours truly began to worry about a visit from the Environmental Health Officer. On went the Soavo 1s, and instead



of a weak-kneed, pale imitation of what I'd just heard, the new Yamahas duly did the business too. In truth, they were fraction less taut than the NS1000Ms' sealed boxes (but any reflex port loaded box will be, in my opinion), but seemed less constrained and even more relaxed about the vast amount of air they were being asked to move. Even at seriously high levels, there was not one jot of compression or strain, and the midband and treble remained totally unflustered by what the bass drivers were doing.

As I ran through my music collection, I was struck by how 'music independent' the Soavos were. Many say the NS1000Ms are 'the ultimate rock loudspeaker', whereas Quad's 989 really excel with classical, but the new Yamahas sang their hearts out

superb at microdynamics, capturing every last nuance of expression from the orchestra. The lack of compression, previously demonstrated by the LFO track, meant they caught the poignancy of the music's crescendos brilliantly. They were such a successful match for the Rotel RB-1092 that at times they sounded breathtaking.

Before the audition period, I hadn't expected to be writing a long paean of praise to a £2,000 loudspeaker design from a company that's been out of the serious hi-fi market (in the UK at least) for longer than I care to remember, but it's hard not to love them. Still, they are not perfect – no loudspeaker is – and their long-lost cousins were able to pinpoint a few foibles. First, although these speakers are very

a tad more bouncy and feel less constrained – I'm not sure if this is down to the NS1000M bass driver or the sound of the poor amplifier driving it huffing and puffing!

CONCLUSION

A tremendously capable loudspeaker then, and one I could happily live with even after serious exposure to the likes of Quad ESL-989s electrostatics

REFERENCE SYSTEM

- Michell GyroDec/TecnoArm/vdH The Frog turntable
- Noteworthy Audio PhoNote phonostage
- Marantz CD63 KI DP CD player
- MF Audio Passive Magnetic Preamplifier (silver)
- World Audio Design K5881 power amp (modified)
- Rotel RB-1092 power amplifier
- Yamaha NS1000M loudspeakers
- Black Rhodium interconnects/cables

"transparent in the best 'monitor' sense, they just sound natural..."


whatever I threw at them. One of the high points of the listening period was my Deutsche Grammophon vinyl pressing of Beethoven's 'Pastoral Symphony' (Karajan, Berlin Philharmonic), and the first side was a joy. Again, that wonderful seamless integration, super image articulation and sheer musical brio was very much in evidence, but the Soavo 1s' excellent midband really shone out as well. There was an awful lot of detail coming through; in some ways more so than the NS1000M, particularly in terms of low level atmospheric cues and a sense of spaciousness.

The Soavos are fun to listen to, and this certainly didn't change with classical programme material. Dynamics were excellent, these speakers having a rare ability to go from soft to loud at the drop of a hat, and they were also

fast by conventional moving coil standards, the NS1000Ms showed that they could be even faster still. The latter's Beryllium midrange domes transmit the very beginning of notes with disarming speed, and the big cones of the Soavos (very light though they are) just can't quite compete. Likewise, compared to the NS1000Ms, the midband has an only-just-noticeable dryness to it – it's the inevitable sound of a big cone moving air. Still, it is barely perceptible, being less conspicuous even than the Kevlar mid driver in the mighty £10,000 B&W 801Ds, for example.

At the frequency extremes, those aluminium domes are exceptionally accomplished performers, but lack that final few percent of silky transparency the NS1000Ms possess. Interestingly though, while the Soavos don't have that supernatural smoothness (when presented with an appropriate signal of course), they do have more air and space. Down below, the Soavos boast a very taut yet musically fluid bass, but lack that last few percentage points of grip that the NS1000Ms have (again, given the right amplifier to drive them). The flipside is that the new Yamahas sound

or Yamaha NS1000Ms (both work out about three times as expensive in real terms). The Soavos are just plain great at everything - they're as musical as they come at the price, yet impressively neutral and transparent in the best monitor tradition. They're remarkably insensitive to the genre of music you choose, seeming to excel with almost everything you throw at them. They seem excellent in all conventional hi-fi senses (imaging, dynamics, detailing, etc.) yet don't sound like they were born in the laboratory – quite the reverse, as they love to boogie. Finally, there's the sort of woodworking that wouldn't look out of place in the interior of the latest Range Rover, with a similarly high level of contemporary style. Fine all round musical instruments, I can think of no other £2,000 floorstander I would currently choose over them.

VERDICT 
 Surely the most capable all round floorstander at its price, the Soavo is musical, dynamic and transparent in equal high measures. Superlative build and finish complete the pretty picture.

YAMAHA SOAVO 1 £2,000
 Yamaha Electronics UK Ltd.
 ☎ +44(0)1923 233166
www.yamaha-uk.com

- FOR**
- musicality
 - finesse
 - seamless integration
 - design, build, finish
- AGAINST**
- nothing



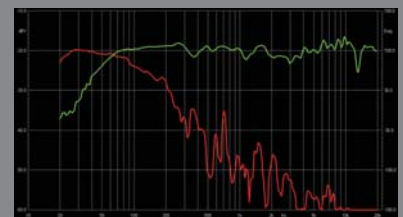
MEASURED PERFORMANCE

The Yamaha Soavo 1s have a very good and flat frequency response across their full bandwidth and all drive units integrate well with each other. The slight lift in treble response around the 8-10kHz region will add detail and will combine well with the small dip towards 3kHz to ensure no harshness in the midband.

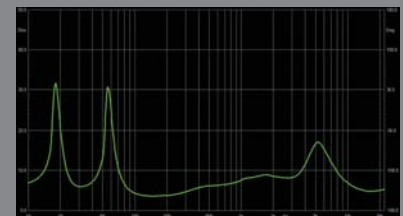
Bass from the two main drivers starts to roll off below around 60Hz and is augmented by the port, which has a broad response that reinforces down to 30Hz. The Soavo 1s should have a good, clean and detailed sound with good bass weight.

Average measured impedance was 6 Ohms, dipping to a minimum of around 4 Ohms at 150Hz. Sensitivity is high at a measured value of 89dB and so, provided the Soavo 1s are used with an amplifier that is happy with a

genuine 4 Ohm load, then they should work well with 40-50W. AS



FREQUENCY RESPONSE



IMPEDANCE