

## SPEAKER REVIEW

# Beyond conventions

## Living Voice IBX-R2

By Dominique Mafrand

*Best buy High Fidelity*

# A

**t the last High Fidelity Audio Show, we met the French importer of Living Voice. This British company, though unknown in France, has designed and manufactured loudspeakers for over twenty years with one objective in mind: to faithfully reproduce the original sound as close as possible. With technological innovations which will take you by surprise...**

Founded in 1991, this company, right from the beginning, broke with tradition by advocating atypical speakers, namely the exceptional Air Partner in 1991 and the Vox Olympian in 2010. With a design philosophy based on *appreciating* music rather than the specific qualities of sound, each speaker is therefore developed to optimise performance and extract the *essence* of music. Their catalogue includes their top-of-the-range Vox Olympian speakers, as well as the Auditorium series (available in four models and two variants), and a “no holds barred” G8 equipment table built from hardwood and bronze. The R2 exists in two models; the IBX-R2, featured in this review, and the OBX-R2. The difference lies in the location of the crossovers, which are either internal for the IBX (I for inside) or external for the OBX (O for outside).

### ATTENTION TO DETAIL

Kevin Scott is the designer of Living Voice loudspeakers. For this music-lover and engineering genius, the sole purpose of speakers is to make you appreciate music. **Furthermore, the priority here is not using technologies that meet the current marketing trends, but designing speakers that produce more intensity, more emotion and more realism.** The tested IBX R2s were designed several years ago in the purest British tradition of acoustic speaker systems. In other words, natural materials and details are in, while exotic membranes and glamorous lacquers are out.

This two-way floor speaker reminds you of the Spondor BC1 (the authentic ones, from the first generation) or other Rogers from the wonderful BBC era when it comes to product *essence* and aesthetics. However, Kevin Scott has gone to the heart of the matter in designing the IBX-R2, **by selecting each material according its music rendering capacity, and only its musical rendering.** For example, having wooden cabinets that resound like a barrel when you rap against it. Obviously, that is a problem for some. In fact, all the first Living Voice cabinets were finished by Castle, a small loudspeaker and cabinet manufacturer who used a type of agglomerated wood known as "chipboard", a specific blend of hard resin and soft wood fibres of various sizes; a material more musically alive than that used in most affordable speakers. After changing speaker cabinet suppliers, Living Voice carried out many tests to find "the" chipboard formula (namely density and thickness) which corresponded to the desired sound result. On this point, the IBX-R2s have 18mm thick walls. According to the manufacturer, tone colour is lost with thick walls, because the vibrations are stored and dissipated later. Instead, the preference is for "supple"

walls which have no mechanical memory, so that vibrations are dissipated as quickly as they occur. This is the same approach for the Vifa low-midrange drivers, which are manufactured according to the same strict specifications since the release of the first R2. In this regard, it should be noted that the loudspeaker basket has always been and still is made of sheet metal rather than cast aluminium, for a better fluidity of sound and deeper silences.

### **TWO-WAY OR NO-WAY**

The IBX-R2 is a two-way floor standing speaker with two 17cm bass units positioned above and below a 29mm soft dome tweeter. These bass/mid drive units are reflex loaded with the vent located on the back of the cabinet. The tweeter is offset on the front baffle to optimise the sound image according to its position in the room. Each 17 cm speaker has a very light, doped-paper diaphragm with a small coil and foam suspension. These are wired in parallel to increase their radiating surface area and increase the overall sensitivity; a sensitivity that exactly corresponds with the natural sensitivity of the Scan Speaker Revelator D2905/990000 tweeter, designing out the need for any passive network equalization. This textile dome model uses a symmetrical magnet system with a frequency response that rises with outstanding linearity up to 30 kHz.

The designer has opted for a two-way instead of three-way crossover so that the mid-range frequencies pass through one low-pass filter, rather than through a high-pass filter and low pass filter - as is the case with a 3 way design. The high-pass and low- pass filters each have their own pair of binding posts to facilitate bi-wiring or bi-amping.

Extreme care was taken with the relative positioning of all the crossover components (mutual orientation and distance between them). This careful positioning minimises crosstalk and intermodulation, and preserves the stability of the crossover frequency.

The small black plinth has 4 adjustable 8mm spikes and the speaker is attached to this plinth via four Blu-Tac pellets, which act as a damping paste. In order to achieve a harmonious sound, many hours of study (shape, dimensions, materials) and listening tests were performed. All sixteen sides of these plinths are made from veneered chipboard and covered with a double layer of black composite material. Epoxy inserts consolidate the thin walls and screw spikes.

### **MANUFACTURE AND LISTENING EXPERIENCE**

**Construction:** A book should not be judged by its cover. The IBX-R2 is manufactured and finished with respect to the finest British traditions. The manufacturer has also paid particular attention to the choice of speaker components in the broadest sense: namely the wood, the drive units, and also the plinth that is absolutely vital so **as to experience the enormous musicality that this model is capable of.**

**Components:** The choice of cabinet material used to build these speakers was determined and optimised after extensive listening tests, **probably the most unique approach to date.** The Scandinavian drive units come from world-renowned suppliers. The low-mid range drive units are made to Living Voice specifications and are therefore proprietary. Thanks to relative positioning studies between the components, filtering was optimised in order to minimise mutual interference. It is almost certain that no other manufacturer around the world offers such a degree of focus, regardless of price.

**Low register:** The manufacturer has voluntarily opted for very thin walls and little damping in the cabinet. This choice allows vibrations, which cannot be avoided, to be heard as quickly as possible without "storing" the energy as in the case of thick walls and damping. This assumed mechanical choice results in high-level speaker sensitivity. **The listening experience does not exaggerate any high signal levels so the volume is more than enough**, and the cabinet itself is therefore not subject to pressure. However, connecting them to the rest of the system requires more care than with Lambda speakers, because, despite evidence to the contrary, in reality the results are not what are expected. After a disappointing first attempt, we tried other wiring combinations so as to *finally* arrive at a convincing register. The counter bass accompanying Sinne Eeg in "My Treasure" found a plausible virtual volume and a surprising depth of lower octaves with the drums, thanks to note articulation.

### Technical Specifications

Origin: United Kingdom

Price: 6,700 euros

Dimensions: 1,030mm x 215mm x 270mm

Frequency Response: 35Hz – 30kHz

Nominal Impedance: 6 ohms

Sensitivity: 94 dB/W/m

### SPEAKER REVIEW

#### LIVING VOICE IBX-R2

#### LISTENING SYSTEM

Electronics:

Nagra CD-P player

JD preamp and tube mono blocks

211 Jolida Music Envoy

Cables:

Synergistic Research

Element Copper (HP)

Alsolue Créations In-Tim (mod)

**Mid register:** **Clearly, the musical magic occurs in the mid range in an incontrovertible and radical manner. Tonal accuracy and lack of 'note to note' interference makes for a seemingly miraculous harmony; surprising achievements**, especially when facing a visually "basic" speaker. Consistency is perfect to the extent that the illusion of sound being broadcast by a single speaker leaves a permanent impression. Beyond off-putting technical words, it is quite difficult to describe the impression you have when listening to the IBX-R2, even if only a feeling of exacerbated realism of the musical texture and depth of sound. To some extent the bass is perhaps exaggerated, however these floor speakers seem to redefine the possibilities of what is felt thanks to a highly optimised product. The Living Voice was able to produce one of the most beautiful sound productions of the track "Ach, um deine feuchten Schwingen" by Félix Mendelssohn (interpreted by Marlis Petersen) to date, **something that we were unable to appreciate until now, at any price!** The soprano literally casts a spell with her truly exceptional modulation range, and you can hear and discern the smallest tonal variations without any difficulties whatsoever.

**High register:** **This register sublimely completes the quality of the medium.** The ultimate, final notes do not escape the natural pugnacity of the IBX-R2, which magnifies the effect of ambient realism. The essential content of the music is reproduced by the low-midrange units, but the tweeter subtly contributes with good message fluidity at the high frequencies; so much so that the harmonics can even lead the

listener to identify the atmosphere, instrument or place. In the "Moonlight on Spring River" by Zhao Cong, the (admittedly) artificial atmosphere is restored with a depth somewhat unknown in the listening space. The introductory pipa solo loses most of the greenness that we are accustomed to in exchange for depth and definition thanks to the very robust harmonic shelving of the lost notes.

**Dynamics:** The tonal qualities of the IBX-R2 immediately attract attention. The existence of timbre and spatial precision makes you forget the dynamic aspect of things. However, seemingly with no effort at all, **the Living Voice is truly dynamic in all senses of the word**, capable of transcribing any modulation deviations contained in a piece or a recording. The innate composure is good in the sense that it does not try to lure customers in by demonstrating more than its real capabilities; this reality is relative to the good or bad quality contained in the rest of the system. However, and for the domestic listening experience that they were designed for, these speakers are able to delightfully and precisely reproduce the dynamic scale as closely as possible, from the quietest pizzicatos to the wildest *fortissimi* (*Symphony no. 11* by Shostakovich).

**Note attack:** Following the example of their dynamic capabilities which have been appropriately and correctly demonstrated, the IBX-R2s excel in reproducing transitory passages. Like the dynamics, the message is not weakened by stress or a sense of urgency which may cause you to think – incorrectly – of a device that skips or is transparent: In the case of the Living Voice, it is simultaneously immediate and dense. This first criterion, in absence of the second, would result in a brilliant sound without any depth, while the second quality, without the former would produce a dull result. The IBX-R2 magnificently balances these two virtues so that the message is at the same time bright, expressive and captivating. In conclusion, **this combination is truly unique and not the prerogative of some high-end models. Great performance!**

**Soundstage:** The fullness of the soundstage works wonders. **The impression of "being there" has never been so evident as with the Living Voice, which is close to perfection in its reading of music.** Each recording, each track has a specific impression in direct relation to the rest of the system. Another point which sets these British floor speakers apart is their considerable capability of reproducing each sound (music note, atmospheric noise, reverberations etc.) with relief and energy, which instils a wonderful holographic effect to the message, regardless of what it is. The precision of the progressive layers of the audio map is without fault, and by the same token the precision of the intertwining of notes is magnificent. The readability is such that you are able to distinguish between each harmonious line in time and in volume for each distinct note. We are close to reality.

**Transparency:** During the listening test this speakers astonished us with the stunning similarities between the “reproduced” and “actual” sounds, as well as the differences between the “reproduced” and “actual” atmosphere. It is not our usual habit to talk about speaker behaviour in one or another region of the spectrum, or to discuss musicality in dynamic terms or the reactivity of the transitory passages, or even talk about bandwidth or linearity. No. We are stunned by the permanent realism of the message, by the emotion at the peak of the interpretation, by the intense, ethereal atmosphere of a “live” recording to the point that when you close your eyes you find yourself at the place of the performance. **Faced with such credibility, we are speechless.**

**Value for money:** This review was the opportunity to discover these speakers that have been in the catalogue of the British manufacturer for many years. Honestly, this is a discovery - a revelation. It would have been a crime to remain unaware of such a product, which questions many of the so-called

new ideas proposed by other manufacturers, who, without a doubt in good faith, are concentrated more on the “sensational” and the sales price. Once associated with good partnering equipment, the IBX-R2 are so formidable that we wonder if they are not going to wipe the floor with the other speakers that have a much, much higher price tag.

## VERDICT

Living Voice. It is all in the name, and we should have known that these speakers would totally change our conceptions and assumptions. Initially, upon removing the IBX-R2 from the packaging and viewing them for the first time, we were sceptical. Once up and running, we were left perplexed. How can these well-manufactured, yet visually humble speakers produce such a sound? It is obvious that the manufacturer was inspired by the natural, majestic sound of music to create the IBX-R2, whose design is a considerable work in itself. More than any piece of poetry or speech, the sound results speak for themselves and leave no room for doubt about the realism produced by these floor speakers. We can even go one step further and say that is well within the scope of the IBX-R2 to make you appreciate music differently. Highly recommended!

CONSTRUCTION	X	X		X	X	X	X
COMPONENTS	X		X	X	X	X	X
LOW	X		X	X	X	X	
MID	X		X	X	X	X	X
HIGH	X		X	X	X	X	X
DYNAMICS	X		X	X	X	X	X
NOTE ATTACK	X		X	X	X	X	X
SOUNDSTAGE	X		X	X	X	X	X
TRANSPARENCY	X		X	X	X	X	X
VALUE FOR MONEY	X		X	X	X	X	X