

Living Voice's Vox Olympian **Loudspeaker** Sets Sail



Sound systems in yachts usually mean compromises, hidden loudspeakers, and emphasis at seaworthiness, at the cost of sound quality. Specialist hi-fi manufacturer Living Voice and custom installer Advanced New Technologies have joined forces to adapt one of the world's most impressive loudspeaker systems to maritime suitability. The result will forever change the definition of "the sound of the sea."

Words: KEN KESSLER
Images: © LIVING VOICE

As soon as you mention cars, planes or boats to audio designers, they either panic or shrug. They much prefer creating amplifiers, CD players and loudspeakers for the relative calm of a domestic environment. The typical home certainly doesn't suffer movement (unless you live near, for example, the fault lines in California), while temperature and humidity are fairly constant. As a result, electronics engineers need only concern themselves with such matters when they're making products suitable for export to the tropics.

Take the audio equipment away from the security and stability of the home, and all of the physical parameters change, not least being the constraints of limited space. For sound systems fitted to cars, vibration is an issue. In airplanes, cabin pressure is a concern. For yachts and sailing craft the swaying of the vessel and the exposure to constant moisture – even with the most luxurious of yachts – must be addressed.

For audiophiles who know the various brands' allegiances, Living Voice might seem like the last manufacturer who would be a candidate for supplying a sound system to send to sea. The company manufactures horn loudspeakers, which are intrinsically huge, and fashions them from fine woods, which may be susceptible to the ravages of moisture. To compound this, Living Voice favours the most fragile, temperamental and maintenance-needy amplification of all: valve electronics.

Along with its sister company, Definitive Audio, which specialises in creating custom-made, high-end music systems, Living Voice has managed to work around such seeming incompatibilities. And the least of one's worries is a ship's movement, because anchoring interior fittings for ultimate security is a known skill. Reassuringly, Living Voice reminds the wary client that the systems "are in themselves essentially bespoke, as they

are designed and tailored to each specific circumstance."

When producing a system tailored to an individual's needs, rather than resorting to a collection of components selected "off the shelf," Living Voice and Definitive Audio have to deal with several factors that affect performance. Not least is matching a system to the dimensions of the listening room, its reverberant characteristics – which are affected by the furnishings, their size, shape and materials, wall surfaces, floor materials and other influences – and the distance of the listeners from the loudspeakers. And that's in addition to ensuring that the components have been matched for both sound quality and electronic characteristics.

When one considers that even the

most elaborate of custom installations employ a selection of pre-existing components, what Definitive Audio and Living Voice are offering goes a stage further. They work with the clients' interior designers, independent audio designers, cabinet makers, silversmiths, sculptors and foundries to create one-of-a-kind loudspeaker designs that are bespoke in the true definition of the word, in both their visual design and choice of materials. For the customer, this means complete freedom from the conventions of commercially-available loudspeakers – the one part of the system that you cannot hide in a cabinet.

With this approach eliminating any limitations, the companies are free to use whatever materials suit both the sound of the loudspeakers





and the aesthetic concerns of the client. Living Voice has fashioned speakers from a vast selection of unusual and exotic woods and wood veneers, employed with traditional artisanal woodworking techniques.

Complementing the woodwork, or even presenting a complete alternative to woods, are enclosures using cast aluminium, bronze, copper or iron, stainless steel, carbon fibre and even solid metal billets. Living Voice can chemically "force-patinate" the surfaces to create a range of colours and textures so to ensure that they harmonise with the decor in their eventual resting place.

When teamed with yacht fitters Advanced New Technologies (ANT), the system benefits from further specialised attention, including the correct compliant isolation and anchoring systems for both the loudspeakers and the associated electronic equipment. At this year's Monaco Yacht Show, ANT showcased Living Voice's Vox Olympian loudspeaker system, thus raising the possibilities for high-end sound while at sea to levels that are hard to attain even on land.

Nigel Sherlock of ANT explains: "We specialise in supplying and integrating the latest "must-haves"

for the luxury yacht market and with audio-visual entertainment high on our discerning clients' priority lists, we are constantly looking for the most advanced and pioneering technologies to integrate. Simply put, the Vox Olympian speaker is a work of art that also happens to perform beautifully."

In purely aesthetic terms, the Vox Olympian is wholly sympathetic with yachts, especially as the materials employed recall the sublime woodwork found in the decks of classic sailing craft from the 1920s and 1930s. But even the exotic materials from which it is made are determined entirely by its functionality as a reproducer of sound. In addition to the real woods used in its enclosure and the horn itself, the speaker also contains parts made of gold, silver,

The esoteric nature of the Vox Olympian speaker works perfectly for luxury boat owners... with interior design and technology seen as a direct reflection of personality and taste.

bronze, tellurium, beryllium and alnico.

Inspired by the massive and magnificent horn loudspeakers that fed cinemas in the era when amplifiers could only produce a handful of watts, the Vox Olympian is an exceptionally efficient speaker able to deliver concert levels with small amplifiers. This makes it suitable to drive with the valve amplifiers preferred by Living Voice because of their warm, realistic sound. Its numbers are impressive: the Vox Olympian boasts a whopping 105 dB/w sensitivity across a remarkable 40kHz bandwidth from its four horn-loaded drivers. In plain English, the Vox Olympian will go as loud as you could ever want, with a frequency range wide enough to encompass every note in your favourite recordings.

Each speaker is entirely handmade in England, the construction process requiring approximately 1,400 man-hours. The speaker stands 1.5 metres tall and weighs 240 kilos per pair. Living Voice constructs the Vox Olympian horn from beech in a multi-layer ply format familiar to boat-owners, while cabinets are finished in exotic hardwoods according to the desires of the clients.

It will come as no surprise that the Vox Olympians are made to order, with prices quoted on application. The minimum lead-time is four months, the final cost typically in excess of £210,000, depending on finish. Says Sherlock: "The esoteric nature of the Vox Olympian speaker works perfectly for luxury boat owners, as superyachts have become second homes to many, with interior design and technology seen as a direct reflection of personality and taste. With its powerful output and eye-catching design, the Vox Olympian ideally suits large living spaces and cinema rooms on board superyachts – areas where it can add style while performing at the highest level, where large volumes of air need to be moved around to gain the ultimate sound experience." Visit www.a-n-t.net for more information. ❁