

# Alon Napoleon Loudspeaker System

by Scot Markwell

I have been listening for a few months to the new Alon Napoleon Sat/Sub system, latest creation of Acarian's talented Carl Marchisotto. This \$2295 system (the price gets you two small 8"H x 5 1/2"W x 7"D satellites that weigh ten pounds each and a substantial 16"H x 16"W x 18"D powered subwoofer that tips the scales at a meaty 85 pounds) does so much so well that one has to ask oneself if it is worth it to spend more? Heck, for another \$700 you can get three additional satellites and go to town in 5.1 surround! While this is not cheap for what appears to be a set of tiny two-way pansy speakers, let me assure you that these are not toys. As a matter of fact, in a small-to-medium-sized room, I have seldom if ever heard a more convincing system unless the price tag climbs three or four-fold. This system is *good*.

Let's get the negatives out of the way: No, this system will not play at excruciatingly loud levels, but it will, in a medium-sized room, handily encompass anything up to 100-105dB peaks. The satellites do not have any really deep bass response, and their super high-frequency ability could be blessed with just a little more airy extension. Let's see, I think that is about it. Oh yeah, one more thing, and this is the one that will amaze you: The system is much better than the equipment most people will mate with it, and will so sound its very best when used with the finest front-end components.

OK, end of the bad news. The good news is much broader and more interesting. The Napoleon satellite is a two-way design that reminds me (fondly) of the late, lamented Radio Shack Minimus 7. In a previous life, I had eight of them at one time in a set-up in which I used double-sided tape to make them into a mini-line source (four stacked speakers per side with the [metal] boxes on their sides, tweeters inboard). Also, you might remember the ADS 200, a similar-looking but even better sounding mini-speaker that many folks used to excellent effect with a variety of subwoofers. The Napoleons are unique in my experience in that they sound full and have a reasonable midbass foundation, never thin or screechy in the manner of too many mini-monitors. You can play a variety of music without the subwoofer in the system and almost not be aware that the bottom bass is missing till it comes along, so well balanced is the Napoleon. Plus you can kick the crap out of these little speakers and they refuse to blow up. I have played them to nearly insane levels (without high-pass filtering, mind you) with a VAC PA 100/100 equipped with KT-90 tubes, as well as a with a set of 150 wpc, Opus X, class-A, KT-90 monoblocs from Art Audio, and the little guys did not flinch. I also achieved great results with the latest 280wpc Van Alstine Fet-Valve 550EX stereo hybrid amplifier, and believe me when I tell you that it really woke the system up. (I have heard stories of 300wpc VTLs played full-tilt with no ill effects, too). They just play big and bold, with a refined tonal balance and a huge, though not overblown, soundstage presentation. The satellites seem to disappear, especially with the lights off so that you




get no clues as to the size of the things. From CDs of complex orchestral works such as Mahler: *Symphony No. 3* on RCA/BMG to rock material like the Eagles: *Hell Freezes Over* on Geffen to Joni Mitchell's *Blue* on Reprise LP, the Napoleons make music like much larger loudspeakers. You just have to pump a bit of power into them to get them motivated. This implies less-than-stellar efficiency, and it is true, so you will not really want to use your weenie triode amps with the Napoleons if you want to be able to run the full dynamic spectrum. On the other hand, if you are not a head-banger, you will be able to get by with as little as 30wpc or so. But they sound so great played full-tilt-boogie that I mostly stuck with more muscular amps whenever I listened to them.

While I recommend really good ancillary gear to get the most out of the Napoleons, you can, despite their being of such high caliber, play them to excellent effect with much more pedestrian gear. Marchisotto has set the speakers up with really mediocre electronics and says the system still sounded good enough to impress dealers and customers. I always like to duplicate stories like this if I can. Problem was, at my house all I had was modern gear. Except for an old 1973 Pioneer receiver rated at around 70wpc that I use to power my bedroom TV sound system. Well, I set it up with the Napoleons, running both LPs and CDs, and damn if the system did not sound amazingly good. No, not at the level of the more expensive amps, but good enough to embarrass any number of more costly stereo systems, all with larger and more pretentious speakers. This is a definite plus because it allows you to purchase a two-channel system along with something like a decent NAD or Creek integrated amplifier and CD player and still have money left over for some software and dinner on the town with your favorite companion. And you can upgrade at any time by adding more sats and even another sub without killing yourself financially. There is no need to spend more if you do not want to.

Did I mention the Thunderbolt subwoofer that comes with the system? No? Well let's remedy that. In an effort to bring the staggering bass performance of his \$120,000 Exotica Grand Reference (EGR) towers to a more practical size and price so that mere mortals can have a taste, Marchisotto has put together a rather ordinary-looking powered box subwoofer that uses a driver similar to that in the EGR combined with a compact Class AB amplifier that is specifically tailored to the driver's operating parameters. The result is a unit that is scarily powerful, while at the same time remaining tight, coherent, and pitch-accurate in the extreme. I can now hear bass detail and subtle tonalities that were lost in the quagmire through any number of other subs. It is a remarkably effective unit and one that seems to blend with various satellites much better than others I have used, and especially with its intended partners, the Napoleons. Played on the full system, LPs such as Elgar's *Caractacus* on EMI (with its full choir, orchestra, and organ), blossom into my room in much the same way as several more expensive and much larger systems that I have around do. Organ pedals are reproduced with their full weight and sonority; low-frequency transients such as bass drums, stage noises, and plucked strings seem to come right out of the satellites rather than the sub, so clever and articulate is the blending of the three pieces. And with really well done pop material, such as Holly Cole's *Temptation* LP on Classic Records, the upright bass has dimensional body and a quickness that allows you to hear how the instrument was tuned. The constantly variable phase-angle knob is a boon for most rooms, as the best performance is often reached somewhere between zero and 180 degrees, rather than at one extreme or the other. The only thing that upsets the Thunderbolt at all is pushing it too hard; the unit makes a blating/chuffing sound to let you know there is no more to give. The really clever part here is that the sub is designed with a driver that cannot be damaged by over-driving the amplifier. The drive amplifier is, by design, incapable of hurting the 12" woofer, which makes the sub pretty much

party-proof. Don't get me wrong: The Thunderbolt is capable of rattling the rafters, but everything has a limit. Also, in some installations it is possible to over-drive the input circuitry of the Thunderbolt; the solution is to simply advance the sub's gain control to the maximum and vary the level from the preamp or A/V controller. That being said, the Thunderbolt out-performs, in terms of output, depth of reproduction, transient response, articulation, and detail retrieval, any other subwoofer I have heard at anywhere near the price. Sure, you can go out and get the massive (and massively expensive) aluminum-encased Krell Master Reference subwoofer with 2600 watts or the Wilson Audio Specialties Watch Dog sub and really let your neighbors know you mean business, but you will spend a boatload more money and get little, if any, increase in actual in-room performance in the musical areas that count.

The entire Napoleon system sound can be described like this: Assuming you have some reasonable power behind it, it plays music in an effortless, supremely dynamic manner marked by a tonal balance that is quite natural, albeit slightly rolled at the very top, with a perspective that can vary from close-to in a smallish room to mid-hall in a medium-sized area. I have not heard the system in a really big room, but in anything up to a 23 x 12 room with a 9 foot ceiling, this system will play loudly and dynamically enough to satisfy all but the most ardent volume freaks. Vertical and horizontal dispersion characteristics are good enough that the sweet spot is rather broad and non-constricting, making it accommodate several listeners with ease. And all this with a sense of body, dimensionality and fullness in the lower midrange and upper bass that is most satisfying. I have also heard these fellows in a rather killer nearfield DVD/TV system at Harry Pearson's and I can vouch for their performance there, as well; the one caveat I have in that particular system is that its balance can err slightly to the lean side in the reproduction of powerful midbass sounds. To me, this is generally a good thing, as I favor the superb definition and articulation of that area than to suffering a more ponderous sound. But, like the EPA says, your mileage may vary. Most of these quibbles, by the way, can be ameliorated by judicious adjustment of the sub's crossover point, level, and phase controls combined with some experimentation with subwoofer placement and seating position.

In total, this is impressive in anyone's book for \$2295 for two satellites and the Thunderbolt sub. This is a small system (in size, at least) to take quite seriously, indeed, and one that may be had in both stereo and surround-sound packages: all the same speakers, just more or less of them. Have a listen at a good dealer showroom (or even better, in your home), and I guarantee that you will, at a minimum, be surprised at how realistic and enjoyable music can sound through such a modestly priced miniature loudspeaker system. As John Cameron Swayze used to say about the Timex watch, it takes a lickin' and keeps on tickin'. 

<b>Manufacturer Information</b>
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<b>Specifications</b>
<b>System:</b> Front ported satellites and subwoofer
<b>Response:</b> 20Hz to 22,000Hz (system), 80Hz to 22,000Hz (satellite)
<b>Impedance:</b> 8 ohms
<b>Minimum power:</b> 30 watts per channel
<b>Transducers:</b> 4 1/2" Bi-laminate woofer, 1" silk dome tweeter (satellite), 12" cast-frame ultra long excursion, Kevlar reinforced cone (subwoofer)
<b>Magnetic shielding:</b> Satellites only
<b>Connection:</b> Flush-mounted gold plated binding posts
<b>Crossover:</b> Hand-wired with polypropylene capacitors and air core inductors.
<b>Dimensions:</b> 8"H x 5 1/2"W x 7"D, 10 lbs. each ( <b>satellite</b> ) 16"H x 16"W x 18"D, 85 lbs. ( <b>subwoofer</b> ); 20"D inc. <b>amplifier</b>
<b>MSRP:</b> \$2995 Five channel system \$2895 Four channel system \$2595 Three channel system \$2295 Two channel system

<b>Associated Equipment</b>
VPI HW-19 MK IV turntable w/VPI JMW Memorial 10.5 arm; Benz LP, Clearaudio Harmony Wood and Insider Master Reference Wood, and Madrigal Carnegie 1 MC cartridges; Plinius M-14 (SS) and Hagerman Technologies (tubed) phono sections; Plinius M-16 (SS) and Emotive Audio Sira (tubed) line stages; NAT Se1, Ayon Audio Classic 32B, Viva 300B, Vaic VV52 B, and Manley Labs Neo-Classic SE/PP 300B SET amplifiers, VAC PA 100/100 and Art Audio Opus X tubed push-pull amplifiers; Audio by Van Alstine Fet Valve 550 EX hybrid SS amplifier; Forsell Air-Bearing CD Transport and EAD Theatermaster DAC; Reference 3A Royal Virtuoso, Alon Lotus Elite, and Living Voice Avatar OBX loudspeakers; Chase Technologies CH-1 passive surround decoder with a pair of small Radio Shack Minimus speakers for surround sound, SLM/Janis subwoofer; Siltech Gen III, Audio Magic, Stealth Technologies, and Acoustic Zen interconnects and loudspeaker cabling, Arcici Suspense Rack.