



Test: Consensus Audio Lightning SE Loudspeakers *March 2008*
by Ludwig Flich

Consensus Audio has completely redesigned the “Lightning”. The new “SE”-version offers pure emotion for audiophile epicureans.

Enlightenment

It was the “Airflow” technology that was designed for the Lumen-White speakers that first drew the attention of the audiophile community and later brought an international reputation to Stefan Fekete, engineer and audiophile loudspeaker designer from Vienna, Austria. Eight years ago Stefan Fekete launched his own company and developed the “Consensus” loudspeaker line, based on his own high standards: they must not only uncover nuances rich in details like the Lumen-White, but should go a step beyond with an even higher level of emotion that creates a listening experience that audiophile yearns for – often his entire life long.

Fekete’s experience and knowledge of resonance lead to an exclusive, lute-shaped design that is achieved through the costly process of bending of multiple layers of wood. The selection of the ceramic body from Thiel & Partner is a specialty of the house: three drivers are for bass and middle, and one is for high tones. The “Black Diamond” diamond tweeter is available as an alternate option to the standard ceramic tweeter and is meant to create more openness in the high tones. Consensus optimizes many elements themselves, or has them optimized by special order. The baskets and magnets are optimized for “Airflow”, the crossovers are handmade with Mundorf components and the inner cabling is “magnetically corrected”, which, according to Fekete, results in a dramatically improved signal reproduction. The connector sockets for single wiring are from the house of WBT.

The positive feedback from dealers and music lovers confirmed Stefan Fekete’s design concept. Some music lovers (even from India, China and Japan) flew to Austria to audition the speakers in their home environment. I was also invited to

visit the factory in Gaaden before the test. There, bordering on the palace grounds and surrounded by the forest, is the headquarters of Consensus, where Fekete and his four employees design, develop, assemble and test their speakers. There I quickly discovered also in the larger model, “Statement”, Fekete’s unique acoustic fingerprint: dynamic, that played without distortion, even at the loudest volume, and also with transparency and coherence – rich in details but at the same time a sense (sensuality) for the overall sound. Stefan Fekete explained to me that it’s important to him not to create a series of identical clones in various sizes, but rather to develop a unique personality for each individual speaker model. Of course, all models can also be fine-tuned even more using available tuning tools.

Back to Vienna: Following the basis installation of four spikes, which obviously tap into important resonance points, and the first piece of music, Stefan Fekete’s skeptical expression relaxed and he gave his approval to the acoustics of the library and listening room. He made a few more adjustments in the position and the choice of the instrument-wood plates that are placed under the spikes before he finally released the system for the test. The wooden plates, depending on the type of wood and the direction of the grain make the sound stage broader or deeper and the sound softer or harder. I chose the deeper, softer version.

As speaker cable, Fekete recommended Consensus “Magnetic Field Correction” cables, but then reluctantly allowed the sinfully expensive NF-Cable from Kondo to be used for this test. As CD Player/Drive the small Barclay was used and as SACD, several combi-players from Sony and Onkyo. The electronic consisted of a Luxman L-550 A II amplifier (a class-A) and SE-Triode amps from Audio Note and JJ Electronic.

PS Audio and Accuphase delivered stable current and alternate cables came from Auditive, Audio Note, Purist Audio and Ensemble Audio. The Schumann Resonator from Acoustic Revive gave further support to the listening pleasure.

The Lightning was Fekete's masterpiece in 2005, in the second company he's owned (the first, Music Link was at home in the sound studio arena). The SE version of the Lightning is a deeply redesigned new creation. It has a flow-optimized chassis made of birch multiplex, rather than fiberboard, that doesn't need insulation, and has a quality of components that equals those of the more expensive Consensus models. The development was done in cooperation with the Technical University of Vienna. The "micro-vibration diverting" base and the chassis with titanium speaker coils provide a much more linear movement.

For me, in this price-class, a loudspeaker that provides the depth, width and height of an imaginary concert hall and places the musicians in the correct position and sounds clean and not discolored is no reason to celebrate – it is simply a basic audiophile requirement. For this reason, I never play "Blues & Company" first, since that style of music always sounds nice. For me, more important is that emotion and critical, large orchestra recordings soon come across without any limitations.

Since I always was, and still am a fan of nearfield monitors, the Lightning SE were placed only about three yards away from my ears, while when I heard them in Gaaden they were about six yards away (according to Fekete, the placement isn't critical, as long as it is the classical stereo-triangle). It was beautiful, the way I could nearly feel the ingenious violin pizzicato in "Iberia" by Isaac Albeniz, orchestrated by Francisco Guerrero (conducted by Jose Ramon Encinar). The castanets and deep bass quickly got down to the nitty-gritty - especially with the Kondo cables, which seem to stretch the tone spectrum of the bass as far as possible. It was really beautiful the way the hi-hat in the songs from Simon Rattle's jazz album (EMI) was accented and the way the vocalists were expertly placed in the scene.

Musical friends of mine, who wanted to hear their newest high-bit recording of "The Four Seasons" by Vivaldi before it was mastered were flabbergasted: they had never heard such realistic dynamics outside of the concert hall, over a hi-fi system. And the soloists heard in the recording exactly the unique nuances of the Stradivarius violins they had played, which made them really happy.



Of course, the Lightning SE make a great first impression through their living-room size footprint and their shiny wood finish, but the lightning bolt of affection for these speakers really strikes at the first sound. I tested the speakers with my current CDs: Yes, really, the Beethoven symphonies were really much more musically exciting than I thought. The bass foundation of the string basses on the rear left side (!) radiated energy all the way up to the ends of my hair, and the tympani drums in the excellent recording of Bizet's "Chabrier" CD (Roth, Les Siecles) didn't just make an empty thump, they resounded with the real feeling of tympani's taut skin heads.

Of course, each cable brought its own sound to the system, and each of those was quickly reproduced by the Consensus speakers. Nevertheless, I was still astounded that – in spite of the revealing character of these speakers – there were only a few CDs that got on my nerves.

Most CDs received an additional dimension that supports my theory that there are hardly any bad-sounding classic CDs nowadays (what isn't the case for some CDs from the 1980's).

Old instruments, such as those on the Caro-Mitis SACD from Russia (with Dutch sound engineers) simply realistic, radiant and stirring, but never clashing and sharp. On recordings of modern orchestras - whether it was the Vienna Philharmonic playing waltzes (Kleiber, Sony), the Academy of St. Martin performing Sullivan overtures (marriner, Phillips), the Budapest Festival Orchestra playing Rachmaninoff (Fischer, Channel) or Mahler's sixth, played by the Arnhem Philharmonic - the Consensus speakers always put me in the best seat in the house. While listening to these recordings, one completely forgets about the speakers and the conductor's podium seems to be about ten feet away. The power that the low brass grunts out on Mahler, or the implicit way that the solo instruments separate themselves from the orchestra to play their part, is frighteningly real.

The Luxman L-550 A II with its musical timing and dynamic power (officially only 20 Watt on 8 Ohms) seemed to me to be especially well-suited for the Lightning. This combination had a very high "fun-factor" because the music was never cool and analytic, but was realistic and full, which rivals even good tube amps.

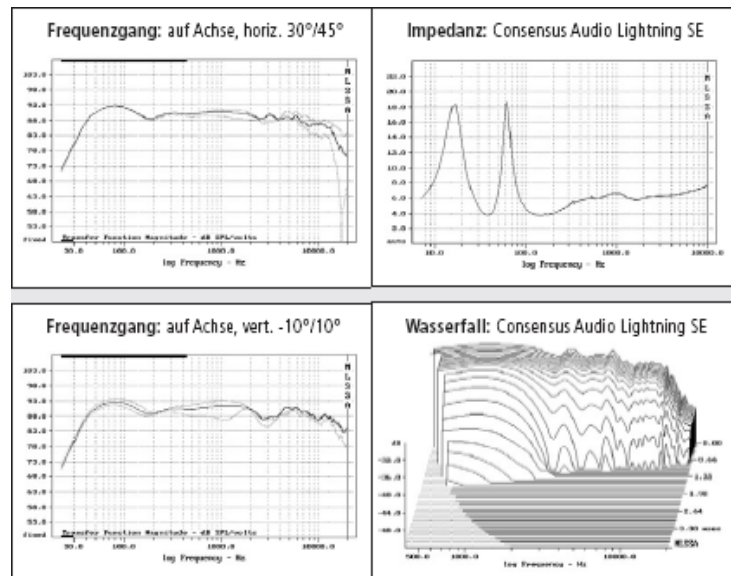
Of course, "We Get Requests", this time as sinfully expensive SACD, also had to be on the listening course: The balance of the trio was exemplary and the swinging crescendos were stirring. Jay Leonhart also sang the praise of the "Salamander" (dmp) with realistic, large upright bass, not a bloated cello. And for whoever really wants to know what this combination sounds like plays the SACD of good old "Tricycle" (dmp). Then every listener understands why Fekete calls his speakers "Lightning".

Conclusion

The Consensus Lightning SE are aesthetically pleasing acoustic objects, that, in my opinion, perfectly reflect the passion of their developer. With their emotional sound, the SE push the musicians into the room and deliver exciting sound above and beyond every musical style – and that for a great price, especially in view of the construction, beauty of the design and the acoustic reasons cited above. Combined with a good amplifier, these Austrian loudspeakers will provide you with many years of musical inspiration and listening pleasure.

Lab Report

The bass area of the Lightning SE is powerful. Measurements in the room showed an emphasis on 80 Hertz that provides weight and fullness. The radiation of sound is optimized at 30 degrees horizontal (the thick line in the diagram). Stefan Fekete's tip for the placement in a classical stereo-triangle fits exactly. The acoustical midpoint in height is approximately between 37 and 39 inches – the typical height of the listener's ears in a normal seat. The impedance lies slightly below 4 Ohms.



Consensus Audio Lightning SE

<i>H x W x D</i>	44 x 10 x 16 inch
<i>Warranty</i>	3 years
<i>Price</i>	USD 18,750.00
<i>Manufacture</i>	Consensus Audio Gaden, Austria www.consensusaudio.com
<i>U.S. dealer</i>	highend-electronic, Inc. Apple Valley, CA www.highend-electronics.com