the absolute sound®

Fyne Audio F1.8

Review

By Dick Olsher

Since its inception in January 2017, Fyne Audio has continued to advance coaxial point-source driver technology, which is exactly what you would expect from a cadre of mostly ex-Tannoy employees with decades of collective experience. At the helm of this Fyne effort is Dr. Paul Mills, whose design expertise is second to none. Hence, it isn't surprising that Fyne is now fully in control of its own intellectual property, including such driver components as waveguides, cones, surrounds, magnet systems, and high-frequency compression drivers. I find that most reassuring, as I tend to be distrustful of speaker manufacturers who source their drivers from external vendors and therefore lack full control over the manufacturing process.

The F1-8 is a member of the F1 series, and therefore represents Fyne Audio's premier stand-mount speaker. Think of the F1 series as the no-compromise embodiment of Fyne's point-source technology, proudly manufactured in the UK (Scotland to be specific). The F1-8 features an 8" IsoFlare bass/midrange driver mated to a 1" magnesium-dome compression tweeter, forming a time-aligned coaxial transducer. The cabinet is hand-crafted and finished in gorgeous piano-gloss walnut veneer with burr walnut inlay. The speaker's physical appearance, though, is a bit unusual, as it is dominated by the protruding coaxial driver which conveys a slightly Cyclopean look.

This is a bass-reflex design, but you won't find the port in the most obvious locations, namely the front or rear baffles. That's because the cabinet is bottom ported through an aluminum base that houses Fyne's patented BassTrax low-frequency diffuser. This strikes me as a clever idea that in practice converts the port's energy to an expanding 360-degree wavefront thereby improving bass dispersion. The drivers cross over at a frequency of 1.8kHz with slopes carefully tailored to achieve optimal integration. Unusually, the crossover is cryogenically treated to improve sonic performance.

A Presence Control is located on the front baffle which provides a ±3dB adjustment over the octave from 2.5kHz to 5kHz. It affords the ability to fine-tune a particular system setup, as well as address listening-room acoustics that may be overly damped or overly bright. Keep in mind that this is the octave where the auditory system is most sensitive, so getting it right is important to achieving optimal tonal balance. Maximum effect is at a frequency of 3.5kHz where the response takes a 3dB hit at the "minimum" dial setting. This is very audible, and I doubt that anyone will end up at this setting. My suggestion is to initially set the dial in the middle of its range (12 o'clock) and break-in the speakers for an extended period, at least 100 hours, to smooth out the treble range. At that point, my approach was to use soprano voice and violin tone to tweak the dial setting to tonal perfection. Most of you I suspect will end up, as I did, with a dial setting between 2 and 4 o'clock.

The in-room measured frequency response at 1-meter was extended in the treble to at least 20kHz and fairly uniform to a bit below 300Hz, where room modes began to dominate the response. The lower midrange was slightly recessed, mainly through the power range of the orchestra, covering the octave from 200 to 400Hz, which is pretty typical for stand-mount speakers. In-room bass extension was reasonably flat to about 45Hz. The measured impedance minimum was about 6 ohms, which translates into a tube-friendly, easy-to-drive 8-ohm nominal load. The rated sensitivity is 91dB, which means that even a 30–50Wpc power amp should do fine. Setup was quick and simple: For best imaging be sure to allow a few feet of breathing space behind the speakers, and toe them in so that the driver axes intersect in front of the listening seat.

As the audio gods would have it, I happened to be listening to the Tannoy System 1000 studio monitors when the Fyne F1-8 arrived on my doorstep. This late 90s Tannoy design features a 10-inch coaxial driver and conventional bass-reflex loading. In my estimation, that entire series represents the last great set of passive studio monitors marketed by Tannoy. I was quite interested to find out if Dr. Mills was involved in the System 1000's design, so I asked him about it. His response: "Yes, indeed, I was involved with those monitors. Those things can rock." And we certainly agree on that score.

So, obviously, I was very curious about how the F1-8 would fare sonically relative to this 20+-year-old Tannoy. Aside from the issue of maximum SPL, it quickly became apparent that the F1-8 was taking its Tannoy heritage to a much higher performance level. And that is a mighty Fyne compliment. Differences were readily apparent at the frequency extremes. The F1-8's treble range was impressively clean and detailed, and once the Presence Control was properly dialed in, naturally balanced relative to the midrange. That is to say, tonal balance was far removed from the forward, hyped-up presentation, that many years ago was referred to as "West Coast sound." Bass lines were tight and articulate, uncommonly so, for what is ostensibly a bass-reflex design. Jazz bass projected the sort of low-end solidity that I'm not accustomed to from a stand-mount.

What was nearly magical about this point-source design was its holistic presentation of the musical spectrum. The music flowed with a convincing wave launch unencumbered by the need to integrate disparate drivers on a baffle. It was as if the F1-8 projected a subliminal message affirming that its presentation was closer to the live experience. I was drawn into the music aided by the superb clarity of the midrange, which bordered on that of an electrostatic loudspeaker. In fact, if I had to describe the F1-8 with only a couple of attributes, transient speed and clarity come to mind.

It became crystal clear as I shuttled multiple power amps in and out of the system that the F1-8 was exceptionally revealing of amplifier differences. With the latest generation Gallium Nitride transistor-based Class D monoblocks from Orchard Audio, soundstage transparency reached a pinnacle probably only regularly experienced by gods on Mount Olympus. I mean it felt like total elimination of soundstage veiling. This was coupled with stunning resolution of complex passages highlighting the interplay of various instruments. Loud moments were negotiated cleanly without congestion. Reproduction of full-scale orchestral music wasn't a problem, and piano recordings were handled with splendid dynamic realism, a rare feat for a stand-mount.

Another memorable coupling was the BAT VK80i integrated amplifier. Tube virtues shone through, in particular luxurious harmonic textures. Microdynamic nuances bubbled to the surface naturally, giving the music's dramatic content satisfying poignancy. Ultimately, what you may think of the F1-8's character would be intimately tied to the flavor of the matching amplifier. But at the end of the day, I was convinced that its essential character is fairly neutral. It isn't rolled off in the treble, soft-sounding, or euphonic to the point of covering up front-end sins of commission, such as brightness or grain. As such, it demands excellence in matching components.

If imaging is a high priority, then you're bound to fall in love with the F1-8. It was able to consistently generate an exceptionally wide and deep soundstage with precisely focused image outlines. The width perspective was reproduced with remarkable linearity, meaning that image outlines were spatially distinct and easy to localize. In this respect the F1-8 exceeded the performance of conventional mini-monitors such as the BBC-spec LS3/5A.

The Fyne Audio F1-8 is a gem of a loudspeaker that delivers on the promise of a time-aligned point-source design. To paraphrase Robert Schuman's sentiment regarding Schubert, everything the F1-8 touches turns to music. It will keep you glued in your seat for many hours of listening enjoyment.