

# Von Gaylord Audio system:

Harmony Preamp, Nirvana Mono Amps, Legend Reference Speaker System, Chinchilla Interconnect Cables *by Alan Sircom*



**T**here are those who snigger at the name Von Gaylord. The six-year-olds in the audio business aside, the company came out of design criteria first seen in the Legend loudspeaker. Von Gaylord Audio is designed to make a more systemic approach to music reproduction than can be made simply by adding a pair of loudspeakers to a system. ▶





▶ Von Gaylord's biggest identifier in some circles (puerile sniggering aside) was its liquid cooled valve amplifiers, the Uni Sea models. These came with a significant does of 'WTF?' when first seen (high voltages, glass, and liquid... what could possibly go wrong?), but is actually insanely sensible when you dig a little deeper. The four-chassis amplifier pumps out 200W in Class A and without that liquid cooling, listening would be on the Hades side of 'uncomfortable'. Overclockers and supercomputer designers regularly liquid cool their hot-running computers; why should audio be any different? We're not testing the Uni Sea (at least not yet), but instead have gone with VGA's other Big Idea... the systemic approach to audio. OK, so VGA is not alone in making such an approach, with brands like McIntosh and Audio Note both making valve amplification, speakers, and more. However, this only goes to show the validity of the idea.

VGA's quest for music perfection doesn't extend to the front-end, however. This is a conscious decision, both playing to the design team's strengths and a recognition that a small audio brand must concentrate its energies on devices that are not money pits. To *do* digital audio properly today requires a multi-disciplinary team of digital engineers, app designers, and even helpline experts to prevent that new wonder-streamer from becoming an expensive brick a month after launch because of a wireless router upgrade. There are companies that specialise in that field, but for a company of VGA's size, they specialise in that field alone. Instead, the brand takes the best of that digital output and gives it the full VGA treatment.

That treatment begins with the Harmony line preamplifier, the entry point into VGA's systems. This one-box valve design strips away all but the basic functions of a preamp, passing up on a balance control, balanced inputs or outputs, or even a tape loop. There are just three single-ended line inputs, two knobs, and a toggle switch (OK, there's a basic remote and a blue LED denoting power on status, but that's about it). Inside, this is a point-to-point preamplifier, using VGA's premium silver wire throughout. Short of a passive pot in a box, this has to be one of the simplest preamps on the market at the moment, and when it comes to preamps, simple is good!

This connects to the outside world through the deliciously named Chinchilla Mk II interconnects (there is a power cord – but not UK ready yet – and used ▶

▶ to be a matching loudspeaker cable which is temporarily off the radar, leaving just the Return Of The Legend 7000 wires), These use different gauge strands of silver and copper. Unlike most cables (where these conductors would either be twisted together or laid in parallel, the Chinchilla Mk 2 use a combination of both design types within the same grey braid. They are terminated at both ends with lacquered locking RCA connectors, which do mean the spacing of the outputs of any digital device need to be wider than usual (the RCA connectors of my workhorse Hegel Mohican CD player were too close together for these cables, for example).

The next link in the chain is the Nirvana mono power amplifier. This all-valve design uses two 6SN7 double-triode valves in the input stage and two matched pairs of 6550 power valves in the output. These are fully self-biasing and are capable of a claimed 130W per channel. Autobias aside, there are few concessions to modernity here, in all the good ways. OK, that also means no valve cage so it's perhaps not the first choice for those with tearaway toddlers (or lumbering Labradors), but it is also – like the Harmony – a full point-to-point wired design without a PCB in sight. It includes four and eight ohm output taps, with high-grade binding posts. The pair weigh in at a fairly meaty 41kg.

The final link in the chain is the Legend Reference, which has more than a nod back to VGA's original incarnation. This is a two-chassis low floorstander (which is, in fact, probably best used on low stands, getting the tweeter closer to ear height). It's a three-way ported design, with the top-box containing the 38mm inverted Kevlar dome tweeter and the 184mm Kevlar mid-woofer, and the lower cabinet sporting a 254mm woofer. The truncated pyramid shape means a lot of non-parallel surfaces inside the cabinets of both loudspeaker enclosures, which helps keep internal resonance at a minimum, and the loudspeakers are connected in series. As the top-box is bi-wireable, you could notionally run three sets of speaker wire from amp to loudspeaker, which could get spendy!

VGA's Legend Reference is rare for a loudspeaker in that it has just the one finish on offer – gloss mahogany. There are no grilles, no frills, and there is little in the way of high-grade nonsense on the website. The loudspeaker system is efficient (the quoted 90dB sensitivity and eight-ohm load seem accurate, and if anything somewhat modest), and is stated as returning a full 20Hz-25kHz (within 3dB) frequency response.

The thing about VGA is there isn't a *thing*. The products are described in bullet points on the website and while there is more information on flyers whenever Von Gaylord Audio rocks up at a show, these are remarkably un-pushy, almost to the point of self-deprecation. It's almost as if the company wants us to listen to its product, not its hype!

Let's get the nasties out of the way first. The combination of a loudspeaker this sensitive with a powerful and dynamic valve amplifier, and a preamplifier that has a sensitive volume control means occasionally things get loud, fast. The difference in output level of two recordings is the difference between "that's really good" and "I promise not to play that loud again, officer." In terms of volume control adjustment, that point between 'too quiet', 'too loud' and 'just right' is a hair's breadth. I played two recordings in quick succession – 'Figure' by Vök from the Network album of the same name, and the title track from

*Inform Educate Entertain* by Public Service Broadcasting [Test Card], and if you set the volume by the first, the second was almost inaudible, while vice versa was too loud. This is a first, and I'm not sure whether it even counts as a 'nasty'. In fact, it suggests the VGA system is transcribing the differences between digital files so well that changes in level that might otherwise pass almost unnoticed are brought into sharp highlight. What is good here, however, is that sound played loud is muscular, dynamic, and clean. There is no shouty element to this reproduction (unless you play very loud indeed) and the mix of samples and very fine drumming on the Public Service Broadcasting track was clearly delineated... and rhythmic fun to boot!

Now that the safe-cracker volume part of the performance is out of the way, we can get on with enjoying the VGA system because it is extremely enjoyable. There's an ease to the whole presentation that accents the coherence of the system perfectly. Music flows effortlessly from theme to theme, and no track highlighted this better than 'Contact' by the Gary Peacock Trio on their *Tangents* album [ECM]. This track evolves from avant-garde noodling into a clever piece of thematic almost modal jazz over its first four minutes, and that acts as a test of a system's coherence; if you can tease out where the noodling is going in the first three minutes, the system is on form, but if you are still scratching your head five minutes into the track... get a different system. On the VGA rig, you got in lock-step with what the trio were doing pretty quickly.

A part of this coherence comes as a result of exceptional dynamic range. Sounds have a shock quality as they start and stop fast, whether that's the 'don't mess with me' anger of Little Simz [Grey Area, Age 101], or the sheer power of Joyce DiDonato's voice singing Donizetti's 'I Capuleti e i Montecchi' [*Stella di Napoli*, Erato]. Both these tracks also hint at other areas of excellence in the VGA system. Little Simz girl-grime rap is hard

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to follow both in terms of accent and sheer speed, but the system is both quick-witted and articulate enough to cope. On the other hand, the Stella di Napoli album highlights the good image depth created by the system. That image is deeper than it is wider, but the overall effect is one of a really natural sound, rather than hi-fi artefact. You don't feel like there is a ball of musicians in the distance, but neither do you get the artificial layers and metres-wide instruments of some of the more imaging-oriented systems.

An interesting part of this system is it isn't quite how you might expect it to sound. Big, efficient loudspeakers fed effortlessly by big valve power amplifiers... that's going to sound rich and lush; the kind of system that forces you to play Nat 'King' Cole albums every few days. While the VGA system is very good at playing 1950s crooners with spun-sugar voices, in fact this is a system that by those 'what's a tweeter?' standards is actually a detailed and almost bright-sounding system. It's not hyper-detailed, especially in the context of the etched brightness of today's audio, but neither is it the rose-tinted view of valve-based audio you might expect.

The more I played music through the VGA system, the more music I wanted to play, which is always a good sign in a system. Moreover, it invited me to explore different musical avenues with each piece of music played, rather than more predictable musical tramlines. That suggests the system is so adept at not getting in the way of the music, it's allowing me to be my own musical curator without the sound influencing my internal and almost unconscious decision-making processes. If James Brown leads you to Schoenberg, which then leads you (via Judas Priest) to Fela Kuti, the system is giving you the freedom to explore music well.

You'll notice that throughout this test I have concentrated deliberately on discussing the system *qua* system and have not broken it into constituent components. That's not malign; these devices play nice with the other children. But it's that they work exceptionally well together that to break rank is to break some of that wonderful coherence, and it's one of those things that you almost immediately feel the urge to restore. That might just be the best part of the whole VGA package; it works so well that when you start splitting things up you start to appreciate how Yoko Ono must have felt in the late 1960s. You almost feel like blaming yourself for your senseless actions and rebuild the system.

Von Gaylord Audio has made a great system here. It's unprepossessing and understated yet is capable of great force and power. It's subtle, yet bold. All the components of this system work well outside of the VGA ecosystem, but work so well inside that system that I can't pick out one as being exceptional or the weak link in the chain. It all just works together so well that you can't help but be impressed. If you can handle the hyper-sensitive volume control, Von Gaylord's entry is worth looking up. +

## SYSTEM COMPONENTS

### Harmony

One box, three-input single-ended line preamplifier: £5,995

### Nirvana

Mono, all tube power amplifier: £6,495 per pair

### Legend Reference loudspeaker

Two-chassis, passive ported stand-mount loudspeaker: £14,995

Chinchilla interconnect cables:

£995/1m pair

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