

A Fine Thing Indeed

Hurray – they had a baby! So to speak, of course. Indeed, the highly exclusive loudspeaker manufacturer Kaiser has now released something akin to an entry level model.

Everything is relative. This applies just the same to an entry level product, and is how one should consider the “Chiara” (that's the newborn's name) in relation to her older siblings. This unique two-way loudspeaker costs 16,000 EUR. But in comparison to this publication's review of the Kawero Classic last year, costing 78,400 EUR, one could say this appears in proportion.

For those who are not yet acquainted with the company, a short overview: Kaiser actually stands for Kaiser Möbelwerkstätten GmbH by the German/Austrian border town of Passau. Their facility is equipped to process, handle and shape wood products into the most variable and unique specialty forms. I have never encountered a business that comprehends “wood” as a three dimensional material which can be pretty much “molded” into most any exotic form. This is a multi-generation-old family business with stands on solid financial footing, engaging historically in the most diverse and complex projects, except the manufacture of loudspeakers. Kaiser's present-generation leader is Hans-Jürgen Kaiser, and it was he who introduced the company to HiFi speakers of the highest order. Along with two other men, whose names represent the other initials of the portmanteau “Kawero,” they built a very special line of loudspeakers which is now comprised of three models.

The Chiara differs quite radically from what one would normally assume a “mere” two-way loudspeaker to be. The enclosure is no simple box with square uniform walls, but rather is a complex geometrical shape made up of eight surfaces, none of which stand in any parallel relation to the others. The form's exterior is a complex sculpture of trapezoids and triangles, and the side walls are diagonally creased and bent over the corner-to-corner “fold” just a tad. 99 percent of all existing loudspeaker manufacturers wouldn't dream of such a thing, and even if they would, are not equipped to faithfully plan or functionally execute it. For Kaiser, with their immense assortment of specialty custom machinery and know-how, this is not a problem, even when the sandwich material is made up from six layers of differing materials whose central constitution is Panzerholz. This extremely heavy, dense and incredibly stable (even bulletproof!) natural wood laminate bears relation to its original wood source only to the point when one begins working it. But the Chiara is built by expert craftsmen such that it looks effortless. Our test pair came in noble white; the front face is made of an exotic wood veneer, and the very surface is an extremely thick and perfectly polished clear lacquer finish.

The form of the pedestal beneath, fixed directly to the speaker enclosure through an acoustical damping solution (more on this later), is just as impressive. When viewed from the front, the loudspeaker optically gives the impression of lightness, due to the thin form of the stand's one-legged silhouette. Viewed from the side, however, the whole thing looks rather like a stealth aircraft.

Rainer Weber is the chief developer. This man is truly a ruthless engineer who can conceptualize a loudspeaker to function exactly to any desired spec. In the Chiara, he prescribed the low midrange to a 15-centimeter driver from the top tier line from Scan-Speak called the “Illuminator.” In the low bass region, additional support is offered by a rear positioned 18-cm passive radiator, also based on the Illuminator series, but custom manufactured for Kaiser with an aluminum membrane. The tweeter is a specially ordered customized version of an Air-Motion-Transformer design from Mundorf. The tweeter is positioned at a slight angle and somewhat recessed into the front for ultimate time alignment with the other drivers. In addition, the recession acts as a waveguide and aids the tweeter to more fully integrate with the acoustical system. During the course of loudspeaker development, Kaiser took even the slightest details of design to heart. They even implemented such radical internal solutions such as labyrinth-formed passageways for acoustical decoupling of the terminals on the rear wall of the speaker, as well as a custom acoustical energy management between the enclosure and the pedestal through the use of three specially placed internal Panzerholz decouplers.

A large portion of the budget for this speaker is allocated to the top-tier parts of the internal crossover network: here we find coils, capacitors and silver-graphite resistors exclusively from Denmark's Duelund. Copper versions of the coils and capacitors were chosen. Within a loudspeaker so thoroughly developed such as this one, it makes sense. The physics brought into action in this loudspeaker are so "spot on," that sonic differences between components suddenly mean all that much more to the final sonic outcome. One could fill a book with this loudspeaker's construction specifications. The crossover contains a novel solution to compensate for the Baffle Step, which is the bending of the emanating sound waves around the corners of the front of the loudspeaker. Or the fact that the crossover network is built into an acoustical labyrinth similar to the one in the stand. In short: we're dealing here with engineers who take loudspeaker design very seriously and have long ago graduated from the well-beaten path of typical loudspeaker design.

Proceed with caution, though. You don't want to just plunk it down, hook it up and be done with it. The Chiara is a speaker which has no less than magical capabilities, but it wants to be provided the necessary motivation. Using the wrong loudspeaker cables? It can sound tired and matt. Left and right speakers not symmetrical with regards to the listening seat? Have you considered toe in? Please consider these details. The soundstage will appear accordingly flat or with holes. Driving power? Not such a big deal, although a few Watts more will never hurt and some Class-A type freedom will be pleasantly appreciated. This here is a serious speaker project, not loudspeaker "fast-food." When everything is set up properly, the Chiara spoils you with extremely noble sound staging that you can throw any source material at, without onset of listener fatigue. The sound this speaker produces is all in all natural, balanced and broad. It articulates the finest detail, reminds the listener that it may be time for a fresh vinyl cleansing, and raises no doubts whatsoever whether the needle adjustment is fully accurate or not. Perhaps the most astounding performance aspect of this loudspeaker is its capabilities with regards to bass performance. Of course, with its 13-cm driver, even with the additional help of the larger passive membrane, it doesn't break any world records in terms of wall-shaking horsepower, but the cleanliness of the solution is astonishing and in this respect reminds one somewhat of the Krell "Modulari Duo."

For me, one of the most beautiful pop re-releases in recent years was the 2012 45-er of the Californian band "Counting Crows" 1993 debut album called "August And Everything After." The Chiara beautifully brings out the magic of these melancholy and very complex arrangements. The distinct placement of the many sound sources is brought out very nicely. There's energy, charisma, and at the same time a certain peacefulness about the sound. But politeness can end just as quickly, for example with the percussive and rhythmic accents which enliven "Omaha." "Giften" wasn't a highpoint, perhaps owing to the dip at four kilohertz. But this by no means impedes this speaker's ability to transfer waves of information. The more one experiences this loudspeaker, the more one is exposed to an ever-expanding universe full of possibilities.

Holger Barske

[Technical sidebar]: *Earlier in this magazine, we saw that mere flat linearity is not the design goal of the Kaiser line of loudspeakers. The Chiara design also calls for a characteristic feature in the frequency response: around four kilohertz there's a small dip, and above that, the high frequency level rises noticeably. In real world settings, setting the speakers up accordingly compensates for this to a large extent. The speaker is not incredibly efficient at around 83 dB at 2.83 Volts, but it's not unreasonable. The typical Impedance lies at 8 Ohms. Distortion values are exceptionally low: Over a substantial portion of the spectrum, the distortion values at 85 dB SPL lie under 0.1% – this has to be a record.*