

# The "Athenaeum" Speaker System

## A Renaissance in Listening



The Linn Audio Athenaeum speaker system is the culmination of decades of research and development, as well as countless hours of expert and critical listening. It is so clear and distortion free that it has never even been heard before. It gives the biggest yet cleanest sound you will ever hear.

It's very high efficiency will perform well with tube amplifiers, even very low power ones, such as single-ended triodes, for the cleanest possible sound.

We call our systems "a Renaissance in listening." Music so clear and distortion free that it has never even been heard before.

## History of the Athenaeum

The Linn Audio Athenaeum speaker system is the culmination of decades of research and development, as well as countless hours of expert and critical listening. The founder of Linn Audio, David Linn, has a lifetime of experience with high performance audio equipment, having worked in the audio industry starting way back in 1965, when he was a sales rep for JBL. At that time, JBL was the highest of the high end of its day, and Mr. Linn has not forgotten the design principles and objectives of the JBL engineers. He utilizes many of these same principles today. Mr. Linn has since had training as an Electrical Engineer, and has applied all his engineering training and expertise, as well as a lifetime of listening and enjoying high-end stereo, to the development of his speaker systems.

This most special system was designed around some of the classic JBL principles, including large, paper cone woofers, with 4" voice coils, and a mid-range horn with a large compression driver. (See the section on "drivers" below, for more words about horns.) Both these driver elements were used on some very famous, and still desirable systems, such as the Paragon, which still commands a very high price for aficionados today.

## The Current Status

So the result that we have come up with in the Athenaeum design is something a little different than what is typical for home speakers, most notably the compression driver/horn for the mid range. Why do we still go for this old JBL design element when a cone mid range is more typical in today's designs? Simply because it sounds so good! Years of testing and listening has convinced us that this design is still the best for home listening. Also, as implied above, we have searched the world over for a compression driver that sounds great, and have located the one that we now offer in the Athenaeum system.

By searching the world over for drivers that sound the best in this design and cabinet configuration, we have found what we consider to be the most desirable and musical. We have not prejudiced ourselves by only considering the known name brands that are currently and commonly used in today's high end offerings, though we have tested and auditioned them all. We are being bold enough to take this unorthodox departure from the current doctrine of high performance design, in order to present the best possible musical performance to the buyers of these units, who will seek to enjoy the great sounding music that this system is capable of producing. We do, however, utilize the best available, and most famous brands of other components of the system, namely the binding posts, capacitors and internal wiring used in the system.

Those of you who are sometimes bothered by the so-called "digital edge" on some CDs may find that there will be a lot less of it in the use of this system. A lot of this "edge," we have found, is "component edge," that it is in the speaker systems themselves, and the components used in them. We have sought to eradicate it, as much as is feasible, in our systems, so that the Athenaeum, combined with other good quality components, amps, CD players, turntables, cables, etc., will reward the listener with the most pleasing and enjoyable music possible.

## Design Overview

A key design element is the use of very high efficiency drivers, both the woofer, and the mid-range compression driver/horn. In the old days, the only kinds of amplifiers available were tube type, so the efficiency had to be good. But today's high-end preference is also for tubes, using much the same designs that were popular then. So this speaker system is especially suited for those who still lean towards tubes. The system is set up for bi-wiring or bi-amping, however, and this is a modern improvement. We have found that this system sounds the best when a good solid-state amp is used on the bottom end, and a tube amp on the mid range horn. The mid range driver is extremely efficient, at 110 db, so that when run separately, a very low power tube amp may be used, such as a single ended triode design, which usually have quite low power, but the lowest distortion and most pleasing sound. See the "Drivers" section for more information about the drivers.

The cabinet has also been updated to conform to today's preferences for tall, but narrow enclosures, and constructed of very heavy MDF, a material that was not available in the old days. The original JBL cabinets tended to be low and wide. The Paragon was only 30" high and 8' long!

We have searched the whole world over to find the ideal drivers for this design philosophy, spending many years in the search. JBL itself now makes drivers that are more suited to commercial applications, such as theaters, and PA systems. Though we have tested the current equivalent JBL speakers, just to see if they are still suitable for a good home system, we have found others that we like better. We have even gone so far as to obtain the old original JBL drivers on the used market, to see how they stack up to what is available new today, and again decided that we could do better elsewhere.

## The Cabinet

The Athenaeum is based on the much larger and heavier Acropolis cabinet, but only about one half as high; 43" instead of 82 ½", and weighs 225 pounds instead of 450 pounds for the Acropolis. It is built with the very best materials, selected for their sonic merits, and constructed in a rigid and durable fashion. The walls of the enclosure are 1" of MDF, the preferred material for large, high performance speakers. We use only the densest and heaviest grade of MDF. The mid range horn is extended 1 ½ inches beyond the baffle to provide even better time and phase coherence for the entire system. (See the section below: "time and phase coherence" for more information on this feature.) A generous use of internal cross bracing further enhances the rigidity of the cabinet. The front-ported design is also a follow through from the original JBL design concepts, since it matches these kinds of drivers well, and further enhances the high sensitivity, low power requirements of the system, though this generally requires a larger cabinet than a sealed box design. But of course we are using a particularly large and heavy cabinet here, so the design follows through on the original concept. The cabinet is configured in an asymmetrical hexagon shape, which is not only pleasing to the eye, but helps minimize internal reflections of the sound, by avoiding parallel surfaces in the interior. The cabinet is lined with 2 ½" thick variegated foam pads, which prevent internal reflections that may adversely affect the sound, especially at the low end. The feet (6 per side) are very attractive and robust, in keeping with the size and weight of the cabinet, being machined out of solid brass bar stock, and weigh 1 pound each!

A variety of cabinet finishes are available. We also offer several natural finish wood veneers, with the most popular being a light stained cherry wood. We offer an all natural wood cabinet, with all surfaces covered in real wood veneer, as well as some solid wood parts, and all stained a light cherry color. We now also offer a very special wood design, made from all Ebony wood veneer, one of the most expensive woods in the world. For those who prefer a dark finish that will not conflict with existing furniture, this would be a much more exotic item than any speaker that is finished in simply all painted black.

## The Drivers

**The woofer** is a 15" paper cone type with an extremely large and heavy 25 pound magnet, working on a 4" ribbon wound voice coil. This bass driver, when used in a ported cabinet, has very high efficiency, and also an extended coverage from the bass into the lower mid range. Part of the reason for the smooth response and low distortion of this system is this extended range aspect of the woofers.

**The mid-range compression driver** has been super selected to be the sweetest sounding mid range and lower highs than any other driver of any type we have auditioned. It has a 1 7/8" diaphragm, and a neodymium magnet assembly for very high sensitivity, and smooth response covering from the mid-mid range up to the lower high range. The horn has been specially developed for its smooth distribution of the sounds in its frequency range, with an emphasis on both vertical and horizontal coverage to create a broad "sweet spot" for good stereo imaging, whether standing or sitting.

Linn Audio has recently developed a new, proprietary horn, made from all wood (smoother sounding than the typical plastic or aluminum horns) and totally free of any resonance problems, or other typical horn colorations. The shape of the horn is also unique. It is specifically designed for home audio use (most stock horns are intended for performance and theater use) in that it has a very broad polar dispersion (which is more characteristic of cone drivers) so that it does not "beam" high frequencies (again, typical of most stock horns) and thereby provides a very broad "sweet spot" for the listener.

This is an unorthodox use for the typical home music system, which almost universally utilize cone mid-ranges, but we have dared to depart from the doctrine, for the sake of musicality and sonic purity. Also, the typical practice of multiple midrange drivers, in order to get some "punch" in loud passages of music, is not necessary here. The single compression driver has way more "punch" that you will ever need, and lower distortion, at all levels of sound.

**A Few More Words About Horns:** It should be noted that engineers have long recognized that compression driver/horns have much lower distortion and more musicality than cone type midrange drivers. But manufacturers began to design away from them after the 1960's, primarily due the high cost of compression drivers, vs. the cost of cone mid-ranges. But today's high-end manufacturers have continued to specify cone midrange drivers, even when the lowest cost is not the primary concern. This, we believe, is just a "follow the leader" approach, and continues to be the practice because (it is believed) that this is what people are used to seeing, and expect in a system. We know what we hear, and have selected the compression driver/horn configuration for the Athenaeum based on long listening experience, and know "in our hearts" that a horn system is superior to cone midrange configurations.

A 100% efficient speaker system has theoretically zero distortion. Horn systems are approximately 20% efficient, cone speakers are 2% efficient. Horn systems are capable of giving a closer approximation of musical reality. With precision alignment, their performance achieves the highest performance in linearity, fidelity, dispersion, efficiency and power. Horn systems are expensive to manufacture. Quality compression drivers are machined to exact tolerances within microns. Unfortunately today, selling is driven by marketing, not consumer understanding.

So we think that our somewhat unorthodox employment of the compression driver/horn for the midrange in the Athenaeum Speaker system makes the most sense, in today's high performance market, and is a big reason why we believe that there is no better sounding system on the market today, regardless of price.

Horns have very special properties, including lower distortion than conventional drivers, faster transient response than conventional drivers, and are easier to drive at high SPL's than conventional drivers.

Lower distortion at a given SPL: For an equivalent SPL, horns require a smaller diaphragm, and since distortion is directly proportional to the size of the diaphragm, a large diaphragm electromechanical transducer (conventional cone driver) has to move much more than a horn diaphragm in order to create the same SPL (sound pressure level). The larger the excursion, the worse the distortion. So, for a given SPL, a horn loaded system will generate much lower distortion than an electromechanical transducer.

Faster transient response: Since the diaphragm is smaller, it is lighter and thus it accelerates and decelerates faster. This, in the real world, means superb, fast snappy transients. As the excursion of the diaphragm is very small as compared to a typical electromechanical transducer, the voice coil is much smaller and again, this translates to a lower moving mass, which again, results in fast transients.

Higher SPL's with a given input wattage: Small voice coils also take full advantage of the flux in the pole piece gap. This increases the efficiency of the transducer allowing the amplifier to work with greater ease. Since the amplifier has more headroom and the driver handles peaks and high outputs more efficiently, horns are able to produce much higher SPL's before they distort.

Thus, in the normal operating range, horn designs are faster, more dynamic, have a better transient response, have less distortion, and are easier for an amplifier to drive than conventional driver designs.

So, with the use of a horn, you feel the music, you become part of the music, and the music becomes part of you. The full-range phase coherent wave front of horns produces a solid image and presentation, as opposed to the phase impaired, smeared, and diluted imaging of typical low efficiency conventional driver designs. Horns will never sound veiled or compressed. The performers will be there, in your room, performing for you in the same way and location as the original recording venue. If the performer was six feet from the microphone during the recording session, he will be six feet away from you when the performance is reproduced through your system, not fifteen feet behind the speakers. Why would one want the performers to be fifteen feet behind the speakers if that was not how the material was recorded? We want the performers to be in the same room we are in, in front of us, so that we can feel the music, front row center.

Due to their inherent benefits of low distortion, high efficiency, fast and accurate transient response, and wide dynamic range, horn drivers provide a pure, unadulterated musical presentation, a more organic and natural recreation of the acoustic event. As a result, each different musical selection is portrayed with its own character and life, not that of the playback medium.

## The High Frequencies

The Athenaeum system does not use a separate tweeter for the very high frequencies, those above 20 khz. The special compression driver used has the necessary extended range, that performs all the way to 20 khz, so that a tweeter is not really necessary. However, Linn Audio does offer an accessory tweeter system that can extend the range up to 40khz, so that the very high frequencies may be reproduced, as on the Acropolis system

## Crossovers and Wiring

Linn Audio has a unique design philosophy regarding crossover design. We abide by the principle that the fewer components the better. All components, no matter how high quality, alter and color the sound, and at worst, add distortion and phase shifts to the signal. This is especially true of crossover components; capacitors and inductors. Most system designers of high performance speakers choose or design random driver components, which may not be good matches for each other, and compensate for these mismatched drivers by the use of massive and complex crossover designs, necessarily requiring many components in the signal path. We believe this philosophy is flawed!

We have started at the other end of the system, the drivers themselves, and have chosen not only the best we can find with regard to musicality and low distortion, but that match each other well, in terms of sensitivity, impedance and complementary frequency ranges. By taking this path to design of the system, we can minimize the components required to create a full audio spectrum, held to within +/- 3 db. It is very difficult to do, but we have done it, with the Athenaeum system. To take this design philosophy one step further, we have set up the system for bi-amping, and provide a switch to further reduce the components necessary for a full spectrum, yet flat frequency response. It has been said that: "the best sounding component is none at all!" So, we cannot have absolutely none, but we have provided the next best thing; minimal components in the signal path. And as stated, when the system is bi-amped, an absolute minimum of components need be employed. This is one of the main reasons why the Athenaeum has a very pure and clean sound, one that cannot be matched by systems that use complex crossover designs.

All the internal components are of the highest quality available, with the use of polypropylene film and foil capacitors, air core foil-type inductors, and WBT type insulated gold binding posts. The internal wiring is also selected from the best grades and sizes of high-purity, oxygen free copper wire, while all connections are point to point, and soldered with WBT silver solder. Resistors used for balancing the separate driver components (when mono-amped) are Mundorf brand and are of a high wattage, and flame-proof type, that will handle plenty of power.

## Unique 3-way Connectivity

A new feature of the Athenaeum is the addition of an extra binding post switch. The internal wiring is such that there are 3 different possibilities to connect the system to amplifiers, according to the taste and preferences of the user. The first two are as stated above, a single amp driving the entire system, or a second amplifier driving the mid-range, using the internal crossover networks. But it is known that additional clarity and transparency may be had by the direct connection of the amplifiers to the drivers, with absolutely zero components between the output of the amplifier and its associated driver, except for the cable.

Recent experimentation by Linn Audio has confirmed this hypothesis, and found that the clarity, definition, imaging and sense of “presence” are all enhanced by this direct method of connection. By this method, you eliminate the reactive components in the load level signal path (which can be compared to pushing and pulling on an object with a rubber band) and also eliminate the inter-modulation distortion by preventing audio signals from the unused portion of the spectrum from entering the amp altogether. This is especially important with the bass signals; i.e. keeping them out of the mid and high range amps. Of course, a crossover must be used, but it is employed at the line level, that is, the input side of the power amplifier, and the best way to accomplish this is with an active crossover unit.

## Introducing the new Linn Audio active crossover/preamp module

Linn Audio now makes a completely unique active crossover unit, especially designed and configured for the Athenaeum speaker system. It is unique, as it combines the functions of a preamp as well as those of an active crossover. When using this crossover, you do not need a separate preamp, which not only saves you the cost of the preamp, but eliminates many more components in the signal path – a follow through of our design philosophy for minimizing components in the signal path to the greatest possible degree. Consequently, there is minimal coloration of the music. The best possible sound can then be achieved: clarity, detail, definition, low distortion, and overall “presence.” You simply cannot obtain a better performing preamp than ours, regardless of price, and you also get the benefit of the active crossover functions (as above) and all the advantages of multi-amping, with the amps directly coupled to the drivers.

## The 3 Options for Connecting the System

- 1.) A single amplifier connected to all the drivers, using the internal crossover components.
- 2.) Bi-amp, with a fairly powerful, and preferably, solid state amp driving the low end, and a second amplifier, preferably an SET type tube amp (and one of very modest power may be employed) driving the mid-range, using the internal crossover components
- 3.) Bi-amp, as above, but connecting the power amp outputs directly to the low and mid frequency drivers and bypassing the internal crossover components altogether for these two drivers, utilizing an active crossover unit for frequency control of the crossover points between the drivers.

The two sets of binding posts, as well as the toggle switch on the rear of the newly designed Athenaeum cabinet, may be connected and configured for any one of the above 3 connection options, giving the user ultimate control of the resultant sound.

Of all these methods, the Linn Audio favorite is option number 3. This is what we use for all our testing and critical listening. But the user is free to experiment, and determine what is the most desirable for his/her own listening pleasure.

## Balancing Network

To Bi-amp, using the internal crossover components, one needs a balancing network between a standard preamp and the power amps. Linn Audio now supplies this network free of charge, with the

purchase of any system. It uses only stepped attenuators for the control of the three stereo amps, for the highest quality sound, and essentially zero coloration.

We also supply the instruments and test signals that can be used to obtain the proper balance between the amps, as well as full instructions on how to do so; also at no extra charge.

## Time and Phase Coherence

Much has been said about this issue in construction of high performance audio loudspeaker systems.

It is very important when it comes to accurately reproducing the sound stage, as well as the spatial relationships of the various instruments, and reproducing the overall “presence” of the music. Time and phase coherence add a dimension of clarity and spatial realism that cannot be achieved by other means. Only a very few of the top-end speaker manufacturers properly address this problem, and Linn Audio has sought to improve on all the solutions, to provide the best overall performance of any high performance audio speaker system available today.

In order to achieve this desired effect, all the frequencies of the music must reach the listener at the same time, that is, in the same “coherence” as that of the original source. This is a problem with most speaker systems that 1.) use complex crossover networks, with many components in the signal path, and 2.) mount all the drivers flat onto the front baffle, all in the same plane and therefore do a poor job of preserving time and phase relationships.

Crossover components create phase shifts in the audio waveform, so that the sound is “smeared out” relative to the original signal, and different frequencies are reproduced by the drivers at different relative times than in the original source. Different speaker drivers have voice coils and/or dispersion points that are at different depths from each other, so when the audio signal reaches all the drivers at the same time, the distance from the driver source, for the different frequencies, reach the listener at slightly different times. Both these issues, though not contributing to distortion of the signal, can adversely affect the “presence” of the music, as well as the breadth, depth and height of the sound stage. Timing errors also create the loss of much directional or imaging information. Also affected is the placement of the various instruments within the sound stage, in comparison with the original performance. Outputs of the various drivers must be heard in unison to preserve the original structure of the sound.

Linn Audio’s solutions to the first problem, that of phase incoherence, is to reduce the number of components of the crossover in the signal path to a bare minimum, thus eliminating the phase shifts associated with these components. (See the “crossovers” section for more information on this issue.) Linn Audio also uses very wide bandwidth drivers, so that more of the frequencies are reproduced in synchrony with each other from the same source/dispersion point.

The solution to the second (driver placement) problem is to step the drivers forward or backward on the cabinet baffle, so that the voice coils (and/or the principle dispersion points of the cone or horn) are aligned in space, and hence reproduce the various frequencies at the same distance from the listener. As a general rule, the horn/compression driver has the most depth in its dispersion point, so needs to be stepped out the furthest, while the woofer has its point further in front of the horn.



So in the Linn Audio Athenaem system, the mid-range horn is stepped out a full 1 ½ inches from the front baffle, while the woofer is mounted directly to the front baffle.

In conventional systems, drivers are mounted in a flat baffle such that the dispersion points are positioned at a different distance in relation to the listener. So audio signal from the tweeter arrives at the listening position in advance of the midrange, which in turn arrives before the bass signals generated by the woofer.

With the Linn Audio Reference System the drivers are mounted to achieve optimal driver dispersion for the listener's position, both in time and phase relationships.

## Overall Specifications

Enclosure type: Front ported

Woofers: One - 15" paper cone type; 25 pound magnet, 4" voice coil

Midrange: One – compression driver/horn (1 7/8" diaphragm)

Sensitivity: 97 db overall for mono-amp; 110 db on high end, when bi-amped

Nominal impedance: 8 ohms

Minimum/Maximum Power: 15 watts/600 watts

Frequency response +/- 3 db 30hz – 20khz

Overall dimensions: Height: 43" including feet.

Width: 27" at widest point

Depth: 28" at deepest point

Weight: 225 pounds each

Total shipping weight: 600 pounds.