

The Vandersteen VLR Wood

Up Against The Wall

By Jeff Dorgay

FEATURE

As I listen to the expansive presentation of Prince's "Pearls B4 Swine," the tiny Vandersteen VLR speakers are practically nowhere to be seen in the room. Unlike so many other mini monitor style speakers that need to be out in the middle of the room to create this effect, designer Richard Vandersteen actually voiced these to work up close to the rear wall, making them perfect for the music lover living in smaller digs. Popping the Prince disc out and dropping in the recent MoFi copy of *Kind of Blue* is nothing short of a revelation for a \$1,275 pair of speakers sitting six inches from the wall. Bass is not in short supply and Davis' signature horn is lifelike, floating between the speakers with the drum kit locked firmly in place.

Vandersteen speakers are known for a natural tonal balance and have always been incredibly easy to drive, regardless of amplification choice. Richard Vandersteen's choice years ago to pay careful attention to time alignment of woofer, tweeter and midrange is a *huge* component to the fatigue-free presentation that his speakers offer. *(continued)*

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The VLR Wood speakers you see here are only about 12 x 9 inches and 10 inches deep. Available in six different finishes, they will integrate in any décor. In this small of a cabinet, instead of doing this the traditional way of physically placing the midrange and tweeter drivers progressively behind the plane of the woofer is not possible, so Vandersteen developed a coaxial driver with the tweeter concentrically mounted inside the center of the woofer, not unlike the popular KEF LS-50 that has received tons of acclaim both here and in many other hifi publications.

Smackdown: VLR vs. LS-50

We rarely do head-to-head comparisons with components here at *TONE* because so often it is an apples-to-oranges comparison that doesn't really make a ton of sense. If there were ever a comparison that begged to be drawn, it's in the case of the LS-50s at \$1,495 a pair and the VLRs at \$1,275.

Both speakers are so intriguing because they offer so much capability for the price and in a small package to boot. The LS-50 draws from 40+ years of KEFs design and manufacturing experience and borrows heavily from their Blade speaker, which is a sonic and aesthetic masterpiece. Vandersteen has been in business for 30+ years as well, and the economies of scale they (like KEF) enjoy as a major manufacturer also makes it much easier to bring that expertise to bear on a small speaker.

Having lived with the LS-50s for some time now, I find their only weakness is that they really need a high current, high quality power amplifier to shine. Much like the Magnepan 1.7, they are a \$1,500 pair of speakers that need a \$10k amp to sound awesome, and they're not terribly tube friendly to boot. Don't believe me?



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Listen to the difference between how the LS-50s sound connected to a low powered, moderate quality amplifier and to something from ARC, CJ, Pass, Simaudio or your other favorite high current power amplifier. Night and day.

Not so with the VLR – it has plenty of treble extension, and a level of coherence and refinement that the KEF's just can't match. Best of all, the Vandersteens are easier to drive with any kind of amplification, whether it's a 30 watt per channel valve amp or a vintage '70s receiver (the Harmon Kardon 730 makes for a heavenly combination). Much like the Vandersteen 2ce series, the 86dB sensitivity spec doesn't tell the whole story. Bottom line: it doesn't take much power to make beautiful music with the VLRs, and while they sound great with a budget amp, they steadily reveal more with better components behind them.

Throughout the musical range, whether driven by the HK 730, a PrimaLuna Prologue Integrated or the Audio Research GSPre and GS150 (tipping the scale at just over \$30k) the California speakers not only reveal more music, doing a better job of vanishing into thin air, than even the lovely British ProAc Tablette we reviewed last issue.

But the VLR must be placed within about a foot of the rear wall to produce full range sound. They image well in the more traditional mini monitor/nearfield setup – putting your listening chair in the middle of a triangle, with speakers and chair out in the room – but be prepared to add a subwoofer. I suggest solid stands about 24 inches from the ground for best results and observing the usual mini monitor protocol of as much mass as you can muster in the stands. Coupling the speaker to the stand with care will wring every last bit of performance from them. *(continued)*



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Back to the tone

Whether you love acoustic, rock or vocal music, you'll be stunned when you sit down in front of the VLRs for the first time. The sonic image they paint is a large one and if you didn't know better, you'd swear you were listening to a pair of Vandersteen floorstanders.

As someone who has owned Vandersteen speakers on and off for the last 25 years, and still keeps a pair of 1Ci's around as a reference speaker (almost identically priced, by the way), I can say that the VLR does an even better job of driver integration than the excellent 1Ci. The VLRs just breathe in and out with the music. Ellen Reid's voice on

The Crash Test Dummies' "Just Chillin'" is sublime as it delicately weaves itself between the slinky keyboard riffs, keeping its own space panned fairly hard right of center, yet when Brad Roberts' signature baritone takes over for the rest of the album, it too is reproduced with equal clarity and weight.

After tracking through a wide range of recording and musical styles, the amount of realism that the VLRs exhibit is staggering for a pair of speakers at this price. And like the rest of the speakers in the Vandersteen line, they can play loud when required. While it might be wrong to label a speaker "a great rock speaker," because

of its wide dynamic range and gentle way that it reacts when pushed too far, I've always loved playing rock music loudly through Vandersteen speakers, even though they do everything equally well. Yet cranking up *Led Zeppelin II* with the VLRs is a real blast.

We can go on and on with esoteric prose, but these speakers handle the musical fundamentals better than many speakers, regardless of price. You'll find the VLR in our print annual next month as one of our Products of the Year in the small-speaker category. I can think of no small speaker more deserving.

www.vandersteen.com

