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Waterfall Audio Iguascu EVO Loudspeaker

Fine sound and fine craftsmanship with these French beauties.

Review By Dr. Jeff Rabin

While Waterfall Audio's headquarters are in the North of France, their factory is just to the north west of Nice. This is in fact not so far from where I finished my last year of high school, just to the east in a small town halfway to Monaco in St. Jean Cap Ferrat. For me, therefore, these speakers came with a bit of nostalgia for an irreclaimable time in my life, one of missed opportunities, and somehow, listening to these speakers, and I swear this to be true, I believe I can once again taste and even hear a tiny bit of the dry, sun-blessed South of France through these truly outstanding and very out of the ordinary glass speakers that not only look the part but play it. Even though the geography may not be absolutely accurate, I would go so far as to call these elegant floor-standers the Cotes du Provence Rose Reserve of speakers, which if memory serves, also come in un-tinted, if not square, glass bottles.

The South of France is of course a very special place. I don't need to tell you that. Swapped like a trophy between what was to become Italy and Modern day France, it was only in 1860 that Nice was ceded to France much to the consternation of such mounted irredentists as Garibaldi. Forgotten pretty much until after the second-world war except by those in the know, the rustic region of mountains, dense pines, and hair raising switchbacks, was a cheap place to live, drawing painters, poets, novelists and other ne'er to do wells along with the monstrously rich such as Leopold the Xth who built his own Zoo on St. Jean Cap Ferrat with a nice view overlooking the marvelous gardens of the Rothschild's.

French is not even the regions first language, Nicois is. Not much spoken anymore, you can still occasionally hear it spoken by old men in out of the way bars who have obviously most of their time in the Mediterranean sun working with their hands. My landlady's father would only speak French if he had too such as was the case with me.

You can recognize the brilliant sunshine and the azure color of the Med in the stained glass windows of Matisse in the tiny Church of St. Paul de Vence, and in the palette of the later Chagall, not to mention Picasso and all the rest who traversed the alps, and in a hundred other artists that enjoyed the good fortune of practicing their craft within reach of the Siroccos that deposit African sand on European windowsills during the summer.

The Côte d'Azur of course also became synonymous as a play ground for the rich, the famous and the beautiful. I once spotted a smoking Jack Nicolson illegally parked in a bumblebee yellow Porsche 911 directly in front of the Hotel Negresco. Another time I passed Ringo Star on my way to school as he was coming back from the bakery with baguette and croissant. I was late. I couldn't stop and chat. In a Mexican restaurant I sat at a table opposite Prince Albert of Monaco who later drove off, inexplicably, in a tiny Suzuki 4x4. Judging by the company Albert was keeping, that famous euphemism may grace his obit.

But of course not all visitors to the coast are so confirmed.

While some returned home after catching a film or two at Cannes or after losing a pot of money at the tables in Monte Carlo, others like Grace Kelly made it their home, becoming a Monegasque Princess and the Prince's mother. (You too must get a chill down your spine as you watch Ms. Kelly driving a very frightened Cary Grant at speed over the mountain roads — I believe the *haute-corniche* had yet to be built.)

The above might seem rather irrelevant — after all, *oùest la viande bovine* — but I am not so sure, so please indulge me. It's a tough job describing audio accurately and I swear to you my humble reader that there is more than a bit of the South of France in Waterfall Audio's Iguascu Evo floor standing speakers and they are the better for it.

I had to look up Iguascu too.



With variant spellings, the Iguaco waterfalls, for which the speakers are named, consists of 275 waterfalls along the Brazilian Argentinean border ranging up to 80 meters in height along a span of 2.5 kilometers carrying water from the Iguazu River to the Paraná River. Upon first seeing the falls, Eleanor Roosevelt was heard to exclaim 'poor Niagara.' Poor Niagara indeed. All of Waterfall Audio's floorstanders are named after waterfalls, with the Iguacu Evo's representing their smallest, a two-way three driver sealed glass box — sort of like an upright casket for a dwarf sized Sleeping Beauty — with a passive radiator mounted in the base. Blessedly, each speaker sports only a single pair of binding posts so there is no worrying about bi-wiring or bi-amping. And I think this gives some indication of the speaker designer's intention. Extra cables would only detract from the look, do little for the sound, and get in the way of listening. Although these speakers may have been heavily tweaked to sound as good as they do, they are not speakers for tweekers.



It is difficult to describe in prose but nowhere in hi-fi is there really a clearer case of what you see is what you get and what you get is a perfectly executed column of tempered glass with gobsmackingly flawless edges. The only bit of subterfuge I can see is the necessary one of providing enclosures around the back of the individual drive units — more on this later — and the clever dressing of the internal wires up the front panel as an art-deco element of the design, almost like the face of the Empire State Building.

(For reasons of aesthetics, I would have preferred a more Art-Nouveau look. I won't say the speakers are boxy, which they are, but somehow being French I wish there was something slightly more feminine about them. Less Jean Gabin and more Juliette Binoche, *n'est-ce pas?*)

A fallacy of hi-fi is that almost always a speaker whose enclosure is made out of wood will sound better than a speaker that is not. There are several reasons for this, mostly unrelated to wood, such as that many (but not all) musical instruments are made out of wood, that a speaker is itself a musical instrument just as a violin from Cremona is, but the real reasons are that that wood is more expensive and harder to work with and if someone has gone to the trouble to craft a speaker out of good and cosmetically beautiful wood they are just as likely to have gone to more trouble in their choice of drivers, dimensions, stuffing, design and execution than the mass produced ash black MD-F'in-F monstrosities found at my local big box electronic store.



Glass is a particularly interesting material. Not only is it transparent, it is also exceedingly dense, and strange as it may seem, it is also an exceedingly viscous fluid at room temperature. You can see this in the drooping effect of Victorian windows where it is easy to pick out the original panes from their adjacent replacements. It is also, surprisingly to any stone thrower, elastic, but that is another story. I am not sure of the relevance of these last features — I doubt you will see your speakers drip like something out of Dali in this lifetime — but glass's great density makes for a non-resonant enclosure while its transparency dictates its design.

To stuff the speaker full of wool, real or artificial, after having gone to so much trouble to use glass would, really, be to defeat the purpose. Speakers, more often than not, unlike eastern statuary, with their smooth veneered sides are a dog's breakfast of wire, wadding, joists and exposed particle board on the inside. These speakers have nothing to hide because they have nowhere to hide. Such speakers are not, however, for the faint of heart or for those with small children or other animals. The speakers' enclosures are made of safety glass with sharp corners, of great weight and narrow profile and I imagine if knocked over could shatter or if rushed headlong into could gravely injure someone. The sparse accompanying documentation expresses serious warnings to be careful but I can imagine Cedric Aubriot, managing director of Waterfall, spending a sleepless night or two worrying about his company's creations breaking up into heaps of glass.

Makers of their own Atohm drivers, and unable to use conventional wadding to dampen the speakers output owing to their choice of transparent cabinet material, the mid-bass drivers are inset into their own enclosures just large enough to contain them and tame the back output of the drivers. The mini-enclosures are, however, vented, with bass supplemented by a passive radiator positioned in the base.

In a design twist, one I have never before seen, the speakers are supplied with different weights that you can apply to the passive radiators to adjust their response. In three sizes, the larger the weight, the deeper, if slightly more sluggish bass.

I listened to the Waterfall Audio Iguascu EVO speaker through the system that has become increasingly popular at my house. Squeezebox receiver, controlled by Duette controller, drawing music wirelessly over a spare computer. A coaxial cable is then run between the receiver and my Benchmark DAC, the Benchmark DAC then feeding either a low powered Vintage Leak Stereo 20 or a five-channel Dussun integrated. While the Waterfalls sounded just fine through the Leak, they are quite a bit less sensitive than my resident Tannoys and although I could get some gorgeous sounds out of them, particularly with acoustic music and female voice, I was just unable to crank them up sufficiently to play nasty grungy rock that I wanted to hear.

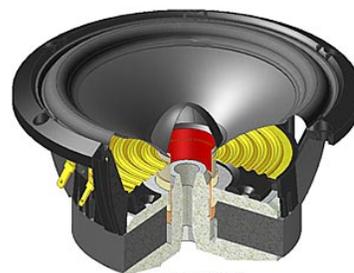
This was not the fault of the amplifier but rather small vintage tube amp I was using. There seems to be no tomfoolery in their loads. With a smaller amp, they simply won't play as loud. The Waterfalls do not need an overly powerful amp to wrestle their bass into a modicum of control. It's not so much that the Waterfalls are a particularly malevolent load there just an average sensitive load and need an adequate amplifier to get them playing their best, loud and without compression, compression here being an issue with the amp and not the speakers. Switching over to a solid state amplifier, they played quite a bit louder, but lost the finesse of the tubes. This is more a commentary on the amplifiers chosen than the speakers themselves with their narrow front baffles, ample power handling ability, and passive radiators are capable of a room filling wildly sound belying their small footprint.

If however one is the sort that trouser flapping bass is a requirement, this reviewer would suggest you look elsewhere, such as the Ministry of Sound, just across the Thames, in South East London by the Elephant and Castle. But for a medium size room with a medium size amp with decent resolution, preferably in an *uber* cool loft without children like the one that 13 on House lives in, these speakers are ideal.

Brightly lit, but not bright, highly resolving but not etched, kind to voice and acoustic wood instruments, they are not mushy. They are not however speakers for head bangers and where you to bang your head on one of these speakers a quick trip to emergency would certainly be in order. And if you're lucky, the floppy haired Aussie could put you right. I am not sure I have ever said this about speakers before, but these are *adult* speakers. Not adult in the way that some movies advertise themselves as being, but speakers for adults without kids, in groovy modern lofts or open plan lounge kitchen areas that want good modern design, but are not so vain or philistine to sacrifice sound quality to have it.

Not only do they remind me of the South of France, they remind me of modern proper lofts, those nice condos around Canary Wharf along the Thames with their polished Stainless Steel Staircase rails and blonde wood. These speakers cry out for open windows gazing on to azure seas and someone who appreciates good music played well but does not care for any of the audiofoolery that has so bedeviled and discredited our pastime.

On a diet of Bob Marley, Pink Floyd, Norah Jones, Maria Callas, the Clash, that bastard T. S. Eliot, Allison Krauss and Led Zeppelin, the Waterfall Audio Iguascu EVO loudspeakers never failed to deliver or made you think you were listening to glass. Throwing a wide and delineated soundstage, with good front to back layering, image height could have been higher but was perfectly adequate on the couch. Bringing the speakers away from the wall as much as possible without endangering the cats endangering them did wonders for the bass, not so much as reducing it, but giving the speakers a better opportunity to integrate with the rest. The Waterfall Iguascus are not for everyone, but for those that appreciate fine sound and fine craftsmanship and want something just a bit out of the ordinary, one will not go wrong with these French beauties.



ATOHM LD 150



ATOHM SD20-ND-W

Specifications

Type: Two-way, three driver medium height floorstanding loudspeaker
Tweeter: Atohm 20 mm silk dome with neodymium magnet
Midrange/Woofer: Atohm 150 mm
Passive Radiator: 210 mm
Frequency Response: 48 Hz to 28 kHz
Efficiency: 88dB/W/m at 8 Ohms
Recommended Power Handling: 40 to 150 watts
Peak Power: 300 Watts
Dimensions: 250 x 250 x 870 (WxDxH in mm)
Weight: 30 lbs.
Price: \$4500 per pair

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