

Equipment Report

Cabasse Pearl Akoya Powered DSP Loudspeaker

Neil Gader

The Pearl Akoya is a speaker system that defies easy categorization. It's absolutely unique to my experience. Like a satellite seemingly plucked out of orbit, this tiny sphere landed in my listening room and started more conversations about audio, its past and future, than any dozen cool products I'd previously had on tap for review. From the imagination of French designer/manufacturer Cabasse, the Pearl Akoya is, in a nutshell, a three-way, tri-axial, active loudspeaker. It's outfitted with built-in Class D amplifiers and a DAC with DSP control and room-correction calibration. Naturally it's Wi-Fi equipped for streaming high-resolution audio from subscriptions services like Tidal and Qobuz. And all this in an impossibly small, high-tech, spherical enclosure that's just under nine inches in diameter—the size of an average honeydew.

I realize that beauty, as they say, is in the eye of the beholder, but Pearl Akoya is nothing short of stunning and distinctive. As the “oohs” and “ahhs” from visitors in my home have testified, they will not go unremarked on. A descendent from Cabasse's larger Pearl, Pearl Akoya is significantly smaller and lighter than its big brother—shockingly small, in fact, and a true marvel of engineering and packaging.

As an aside, Pearl and Pearl Akoya's tech and design were actually foreshadowed years ago. CES veterans might remember that in 2006 Cabasse introduced the Sphère. At 54" in diameter this strikingly other-worldly creation was equipped with a quadri-axial driver and active DSP technology. Like Pearl Akoya today, the Sphère's architecture was carefully designed to avoid any standing waves or diffraction effects.

The Pearl Akoya transducer set includes a 6.5" long-throw, rear-firing woofer. The new coaxial midrange/tweeter is built from patented components: medium carbon with neodymium magnets. The tri-amplifier and electronics package resides between the rear woofer and front-mounted coaxial mid/tweeter. The thermal venting encircling the sphere is intended to cool the electronics and voice coils. The outer casing is fashioned from composite fiber and resin with a reinforced composite-fiber double-shell adorned with decorative chromium-like trim rings. An easily removable, circular metal grille protects the concentric driver. The speaker is available in a metallic-black or pearl-white finish.

Underscoring the portable nature of Pearl Akoya, a sturdy semi-hardshell carrying case is included. Tailored impeccably, it is made to measure to allow for minimal space when you travel. An interior pocket contains a power cord, input adapters, and a circular Bluetooth remote control for basic functions like vol-



ume, play, and pause. The size of a hockey puck, it's especially handy for on-the-go. The optional floor stands feature dual curvilinear uprights with a fitting that bolts to the base of the Pearl Akoya. The stand is affixed to a weighted circular bottom plate for stability and is provided with rubber feet or spikes, according to the owner's preference. Cabasse's power cord solution cleverly routes the wire down the interior of the floor stand uprights, allowing it to exit the bottom plate for a neat and safe installation.

A system of such relative sophistication requires a reliable “mission control,” and Cabasse provides that in its StreamControl app. It offers

multiroom voice control via Google Assistant (so, sorry, Siri), and allows playback of the same music in multiple rooms simultaneously, or of different tracks in different rooms redistributed via an alternative audio input. While most users will likely default to Wi-Fi streaming, Cabasse provides input options to connect a mini-USB thumb-drive or compatible hard-drive, an SPDIF optical, or even a CD or record player, via a set of analog inputs—all selectable via the app. Its DAC decodes a wide variety of audio formats—MP3, AAC, WMA, AIFF, FLAC, ALAC with resolution up to 32-bits/768kHz, among them. It will also decode DSD. The system is also expandable through the home

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Specs & Pricing

Drivers: 5" coaxial tweeter/mid, 7" woofer

Frequency response: 30Hz–27kHz

Power: Class D, 300W to tweeter, 300W to midrange, 450W to woofer

Inputs: Ethernet/Wi-Fi, Bluetooth, SPDIF optical, RCA analog, mini-USB

Dimensions: 8.7" diameter

Weight: 18 lbs.

Price: \$1900 each (Stands: \$400 each)

CABASSE

830 Menlo Avenue, Suite 100

Menlo Park, CA 94025

United States

(805) 837-4716

cabasse.com

up to seven units.

Once you're familiarized with the SmartControl app, getting the Pearl Akoya up and running over Wi-Fi is relatively easy. If signal strength is an issue, the Ethernet option is always a good alternative. For anyone who's ever paired an iPhone or Android to a Bluetooth device, setting up the Pearl is fairly standard operating procedure. Pairing is done individually for each speaker. They can be synchronized for stereo by engaging the group selector slider in the app. Wireless performance is excellent (Cabasse rates latency at 80ms, a good number).

The following listening impressions were all based on *post*-calibration results—an easy procedure that only requires running the in-app calibration program for each speaker. The room is analyzed using a series of sweep frequencies, and it only takes a few seconds for the data to be processed. (Additional contour controls in the app can be used to fine-tune the system) The before/after differences were startling.

Pre-calibration performance produced an overbearing low end. Imaging lacked specificity, and vocals were a bit lean and recessed. Once recalibrated, however, there was considerably less congestion, greater focus, and more natural transient attack. The midbass peak during David Bowie's "Let's Dance" was largely if not entirely suppressed. Auto-calibration also clarified the harmonies and double-tracking of The Beat-

les' "Here Comes The Sun" and enriched and centered Paul's vocals on "Mother Nature's Sun." Since a large measure of the Cabasse charm lies in its portability I started getting into the spirit of its "party-anywhere" mission statement by periodically changing locations and rooms and re-running the room-correction program. A thumbs-up each time. Proving its mettle, a single Pearl Akoya in my back patio one night was potent enough to prompt a spontaneous dance party at a recent BBQ—further testament to the success of the Cabasse design.

One hard and fast rule I've learned about audio reviewing is to make no assumptions and draw no conclusions based merely on the look, size, or brand of a loudspeaker. I've heard "sophisticated" tower floorstanders sound thoroughly lifeless and uninviting. I've heard stand-mount compacts that produced more musical "truth" with two small drivers than something else with a dozen. You just never know. With the Pearl Akoya, one thing was clear at the outset—it only took a few dynamically charged, bass-weighted measures of John Williams' "Liberty Fanfare" followed by tracks from the Yo-Yo Ma, Mark O'Connor, Edgar Meyer collaboration *Appalachian Journey* to consider that something out of the ordinary was going on inside these orbs. Bass extension dipped into the 50–60 cycle range with conviction and impact. The resonance and sustain as bassist Edgar Meyer dragged his bow across the strings were tangible. The explosive bass drum during the "Fanfare" was reproduced by the Pearl Akoya remarkably, albeit not in its bottommost and macro-dynamic entirety. If I'd just walked into the room and hadn't been briefed, I would've been looking around for the hidden subwoofer. And, no, I did not see that coming.

The Pearl Akoya certainly knew how to make a splashy entrance, but it also had a more complex, sensitive side to its sonic character. It conveyed an engaging and forward-driving mid-range-freighted personality, a signature that made the resolve of Bruce Springsteen's melancholic "Racing In The Streets" all the more compelling. Alison Krauss' embracing vocal during "Slumber My Darling" was articulate rather than overly assertive or stri-



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dent. Capturing the tonality and presence of Louis Armstrong's classic performance of "St James Infirmary" is a challenge for any loudspeaker, but the Pearl Akoya made a nice go of it. Armstrong's throaty vocal, its transient rasp and the slo-mo flutter of vibrato, retained a dense ripeness and complexity. There was a hint of added sibilance in the lower treble response. Though these octaves were fairly linear, evoking some air and buoyancy, cymbal bloom, the crackle of a snare, or the rattles of a tambourine still seemed slightly subdued. I concluded Pearl Akoya was a bit rolled-off in the upper reaches of the treble range, but not off-puttingly so. Imaging was stable and well-focused—a well-known strength often associated with coaxial drivers, as compared with the more common vertical array of woofer/mid/tweeter most of us normally see. Inner resolving power was quite good. Orchestral layering was evident if not outstanding, and during Rutter's Requiem, the concert harp was nicely delineated in the vast acoustic space.

Although Pearl Akoya exceeded my expectations in many respects, and likes to party with the best of them, this nine-inch globe does have limits. I think it's a bit too forward—a characteristic that reduces dimensionality and soundstaging. Transparency could be also be improved. I couldn't always listen especially deeply into a mix and hear the low-level information with the clarity that I know lies in the recording. Further, the overly-em-

phasized midbass provided seat-of-the-pants excitement but didn't really add musical information. At times, it had the effect of masking image and transient detail. [*Cabasse says that a software update, implemented by the time you read this, reduces the excessive midbass weight and increases clarity.*]

At \$1900 each plus stands, what about value? Consider this: Although it *might* be possible to put together, piece-by-piece, a component system that's competitive with the Cabasse, it would miss the entire point of Cabasse's fully integrated, high-style, nearly zero-footprint solution. So, I would say that, taken as a whole, the value proposition is pretty darn air-tight.

The question implied at

the outset of this article still looms. Is Cabasse's Pearl Akoya "lifestyle?" Is it a true portable? Is it really high end? It's actually the sum of all those things. And it's something more—add a high-resolution streaming service, and it becomes a fully self-contained, high-performance system, and with that, you're done, *fini*. And that's a very attractive proposition whether you're burning the midnight oil in a home office, kicking back at an outdoor BBQ, or just spending an evening relaxing to your favorite playlist in your den. If these scenarios describe you, Cabasse's "go anywhere, go anytime" Pearl Akoya may be just the system you've been looking for. Heartily recommended. **tas**