







Laudspeaker Combak Encore ENC-5

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Tuning tools are the butter on the high-fidelity freak's bread. Some of the most highly regarded products for stimulating that audiophile desire are made by Harmonix, whose Encore speakers come with an uncanny and built-in ability to generate excitement.

The Tuning is Included

The answer came easily when friends and relatives asked what would make my birthday (which this year ends in a zero) something special: a wonderful phonograph record. Leave it to my brother-in-law to be the victor with what literally looks like a 100-yard bull's-eye target. Since receiving this magnificent 180-gram vinyl by Speakers Corner Records, which originally appeared as PHS 900-000 on the Philips label, this record has been making the rounds time and again on the solid Kuzma Reference turntable playing Franz Liszt's Piano Concertos No. 1 and No. 2. Together with Kirill Kondraschin conducting the London Symphony Orchestra, the entire recording was done by Mercury for Philips from July 19 to 21, 1961 at Walthamstow Assembly Hall in London.

Sviatoslav Richter, born into a Russo-German merchant family in what is today the Ukrainian city of Zhytomyr, displayed a highly



energetic approach to Liszt – an outlook and manner I found most endearing the first time I listened to this record. Things got really exciting over the course of the next few weeks spent enjoying the Encore ENC-5 monitor speakers from Combak Corporation, which is better known for its Harmonix and Reimyo brands. My anticipation was running high, especially since I also have a different recording of Liszt's Piano Concertos No. 1 and No. 2 on vinyl, namely an issue (839 531) in the Philips' Festivo Series with Byron Janis on the piano performing the material with the Moscow Philharmonic Symphony Orchestra also under the direction of Kirill Kondraschin.

Although the same conductor is standing at the rostrum, the Encore ENC-5s leave no doubt that it is the pianist who makes the difference. Unlike Sviatoslav Richter, the American Byron Janis takes a much more reserved approach when playing the first piano concerto, which premiered on February 17, 1855 with Liszt at the piano and his friend Hector Berlioz conducting. Much from Byron Janis emerged soft and blunt from the speakers, whereas with Richter these same notes sounded firmer and sharper. "Sweeter than with Richter and less demanding, with trills that more casually ripple away," is what my listening notes said. With Sviatos-

The Accompaniment

Turntable: Kuzma Reference **Tonearm:** Kuzma Stabi Reference **Cartridges:** Benz Micro Ruby Open Air, Benz LP, Ortofon Rohmann **Phono stage:** Jeff Rowland Cadence **Preamplifier:** Jeff Rowland Synergy II **Power amplifier:** Jeff Rowland Model 12 **CD transport:** Theta Data Basic (Philips CDM-9 Pro) **D/A converter:** Theta DSPro Generation III **Hi-res formats:** MacBook Pro with Decibel and Amarra player software **Speakers:** Trenner & Friedl, Parker 95 (update 2005) **Cables:** Cardas Golden Reference, Cardas Neutral Reference, Brodmann Acoustics **Accessories:** Analog SID (Sound Improvement Disc "A"), Millennium carbon LP mat, Clearlight Audio RDC cones, SIC (Sound Improvement Couplers), Audioplan Sicomin Antispikes (SIAS) device feet, A.R.T. Q-dampers



Loudspeaker Combak Encore ENC-5



The basic ingredients for the ENC-5 come from Europe. This photo shows the carefully selected coaxial drivers from SEAS in Norway. A 176 mm fiberglass midrange driver and a 25 mm aluminum tweeter are built into them. Shown here are the drivers without the tuning elements used to harmonize resonance after the equipment reaches Japan. Once this tuning is completed, and for reasons of acoustics, the cabinets should no longer be opened

lav Richter these shakes, and even the right-hand runs, are simply charged with greater energy. The hands of the pianist apply more pressure on the keys, which extends from them through the felt hammers to the strings.

The Encores were found to possess a quality attribute that allows them to clearly bring forth the differences between the two recordings. With Byron Janis you can hear less *maestoso* in the first movement and less *marziale* in the third, whereby the *animato* in the second movement has greater spirit and energy as it sallies forth from the speakers. This American pianist conveys more lightness of being in the second movement of Liszt's concerto in E-flat major. In the case of Richter it sounds as though he had to go through the trials of life before attaining this lightness, which at last prevailed.

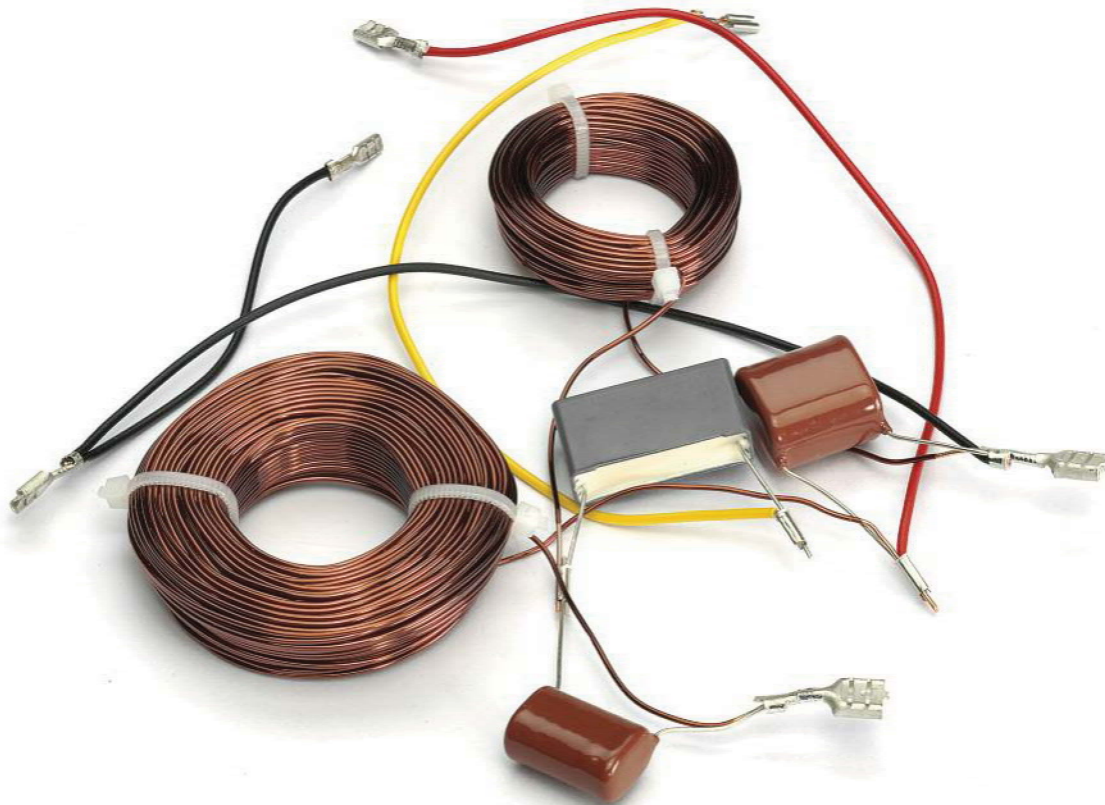
To my ears, however, everything about Byron Janis' performance was a little too agreeable, even if it was a historic recording described this way on the original Mercury Living Presence album cover: "First recordings ever made in the Soviet Union by American technicians and musical staff and equipment." The fact that they did their work well resounds most beautifully through the Encore monitors. Each group of instruments is clearly delineated at its respective place on the stage. When the brass takes charge in the first movement, their sound comes from a deep part of the room. More so than with Richter, the piano is part of the orchestra in the recording with Janis. Only in the *Allegretto vivace* of the second movement does it push its

way to the foreground with an imposing vehemence. In the *Allegro animato* the triangle is being struck subtly, yet audibly far in the back.

What really distinguishes these small monitors is their superb acoustical transparency. And, well worth pointing out here, that certain something that can only be characterized as "natural." In the notes from my evenings of listening it is written: "Harmonix tuning appears to bring out the best-possible three-dimensionality, clarity and nuance from the coaxial chassis. The effect is a naturalness best described as closing your eyes, and there before you appears a brightly illuminating orchestra stage." By brightly I mean resplendent and not ablaze in the glare of dozens of lights. For Jan Sieveking from Combak corporate sales, that is the quintessence of the Harmonix tuning philosophy: "Japan sees the loudspeaker as an instrument and demands absolute naturalness in sound quality as its top priority. The outstanding spatial reproduction and distortion-free manner of play are, so to speak, mere side effects of this approach."

The Encores create a grand mosaic in which the individual stones and colors are easily recognizable and yet never present themselves to the eye as single pieces, but only as parts of a whole. Contributing to this is the manner in which the imaging plane tends to be a touch behind the front of the chassis of what, even on its surface, are loudspeakers that radiate superb quality. It's almost as if a boundary was drawn similar to the way referees sprayed foam on the pitch during the World Cup in Brazil to mark the line that the defenders may not cross during a free kick. These monitors' disciplined restraint is highly conducive to listening pleasure simply because the Encores, despite their transparency, never come across as shrill or conspicuous, and the music leaves the cabinets with more freedom at the same time. Even when an instrument is definitely recorded on the left or right channel, it doesn't remain fixed to the one or the other coaxial chassis, but spreads freely throughout the room.

Perfect examples of this are Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's Piano Concertos 24 in C minor and 25 in D major as recorded by Ronald Brautigam and Die Kölner Akademie. To maintain the integrity of the practice of historical reproduction, Brautigam plays a Paul McNulty fortepiano from the year 1992. This instrument was built based on a historical model created around 1795 by Anton Walter, the Imperial Royal Chamber Organ Builder and Instrument Maker of Vienna. The SACD on the audiophile label BIS (1894) has the effect of making the fortepiano seem some-



Gradient in Finland engineered the crossover for the two-way system

what distant on the imaginary stage, which in turn nicely does justice to the delicacy of this instrument as compared to the modern piano.

Apropos piano, Alfred Brendel's interpretations of these very same Mozart concertos provide an impressive demonstration of how thoroughly these small monitors can reproduce all of a piano's octaves. In contrast to the BIS-SACD, the solo instrument on the audio CD box set of piano concertos from Decca (Die Klavierkonzerte 5–27, Universal Music Group 4802599) was recorded very directly. And it is this, which makes Brendel's gentle approach to the second movement, and the

masterful way the Encore ENC-5s join together the theme's touches of sound one after the other, so very impressive. This is followed in the vibrant third movement by the piano's compelling full tonal range in the left hand as well.

Much as he might like to, Kazuo Kiuchi, Combak Corporation's chief executive and tuning pioneer, cannot repeal the laws of physics. The carefully selected coaxial chassis are integrated within cabinets measuring 217 x 300 x 217 millimeters, which are unable to project the pure power and foundation of a full-fledged floor-standing speaker. As expected, for example, the emphasis of the timpani was more on the head than the bowl in the "Drumroll" symphony by Joseph Haydn (Denon CD-75653). The manufacturer lists the frequency response as 60 to 20000 Hz at +/-2 dB. Therefore the drop at 45 Hz is -6 dB. "Midrange" is what the official documentation calls the fiberglass driver with a diameter of 176 mm. The 25 mm coaxial aluminum chassis operates at the higher frequencies on the axis of this driver.

Against this background, one of the specifications for this test was to examine how these compact monitors deal with large orchestras. Classic Compact Discs, a division of Classic Records, tried very early on to make the CD high-end capable. They converted recordings to digital format with 20 bits and burned them onto 24 karat gold. I just happen to have such a recording of Edvard Grieg's "Peer Gynt" (London Gold-CD CSCD 6049) with the London Symphony Orchestra under Øivin Fjeldstad. The Encore delivered a very direct orchestral sound and allowed the music at the end of the 3rd movement to elegantly disappear in fine dynamic gradations. What really stood out were the liveliness and sparkle of the pizzicati at the beginning of the 4th movement. For their part, these small speakers certainly welcomed the dynamics on this Gold-CD and through them were able to show how faithfully they follow the music's energetic content, regardless of whether the music changes in nuances or giant leaps.

The playing of Hector Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique* as performed by the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra under the direction of Massimo Freccia on Chesky Records (CR 1) produced a similar result. The small monitors reproduced the orchestra well above the volume that cannot normally be heard outside the room, and without losing its breath or step. The Encores never lost sight of how the sections of instruments are arranged on the stage. Several times I could not help but notice how gloriously and brilliantly the horns shone from the backmost row.

The manufacturer speaks self-confidently of a state-of-the-art speaker in terms of size and price category. The chassis come from

SEAS in Norway. These are permanently installed at Gradient in Finland, where the loudspeaker with all its requisite ingredients from cabinet to crossover was developed. The ENC-5s are shipped in this basic configuration – not as fully assembled speakers, but in their constituent parts – to the Combak Corporation in Japan. There the monitors are given the final touch through the addition of various tuning elements. "The cabinet undergoes resonance tuning, the drivers are modified again, and even the resonance of the crossover is harmonized," explained Jan Sieveking from the German sales division. Of this tuning, all that can be seen are the two side-mounted vibration absorbers and the "Harmonix Professional Tuning Devices" and "Encore" logos on the front above and below the coaxial driver. All four of these elements influence the cabinet's oscillatory response.

That's about all that meets the eye when it comes to the tuning. "What you can't see is the truly exciting part," observed Jan Sieveking, pointing out



The back is closed with wood used in instrument making. The small terminal connectors provide a firm hold

that the photos of the drivers and crossovers only show the unfinished state as supplied by Gradient. The experts in Japan keep their cards close to the vest in terms of what they do next with this equipment. But whatever they do, it must be substantial when you consider the captivating “naturalness” I mentioned earlier and which recurred throughout the test. Kazuo Kiuchi certainly knows what he’s doing. And he has evidently packed all his understanding of resonance into the monitor, which comes with integrated Harmonix tuning as a standard feature.

Underlying all of this are the decades of experience acquired by Kiuchi’s Combak Corporation, which was established in 1970 as a trading house for music supplies with a special concentration on stringed instruments. At that time, instrument makers and physicists alike were asking themselves why it is that stringed instruments from the masters Stradivari, Amati and Guarneri are perceived as producing a superior quality sound, and yet exact copies fail to achieve such merits. With the help of computer technology, it was finally shown that the instruments



Even the Harmonix logos (and those of Encore not shown here) do their part to ensure proper resonance tuning



Combak’s tuning experts have placed a vibration absorber on each of the cabinet’s two sides

made by the masters have a surprisingly similar resonance spectrum, which differed significantly from those of their copies. Kazuo Kiuchi applied this knowledge to the HiFi system by using an arrangement of disparate components, all of which share a common tuning for harmonic resonance.

Consequently, the Combak Corporation applies a special lacquer of the kind used on musical instruments to its loudspeakers. Even the back of the ENC-5 consists of a type of wood used in making musical instruments. Here, and in the interests of attaining a better impulse response, they decided to do without the originally planned opening for a passive diaphragm. According to the manufacturer, the cabinet must not be opened under any circumstances. This is because the construction itself has been mechanically tuned in its entirety and any removal and reinstallation of a driver would require the speaker to undergo a new tuning. You may, however, remove the metal grill in front of the drivers.

This is how these diverse tuning practices sounded when playing Zimbabwe by Dollar Brand (enja 4056): A very directly recorded piano with hard right-hand key strokes in the second piece on the A-side, staccato-like piano chords in the third piece "For Coltrane, No. 11" on the B side. Though the drums remained unobtrusively in the background, this did not detract from their driving cadence. With this record the Harmonix-tuned Encore not only demonstrated that they can render the music with great depth (something they de facto always do), but in this case with great breadth as well. The bass so-

lo on the left side is almost outside the speaker. Altogether the piano, flute, bass and drums are easy to make out at their respective places.

Time to hear from a woman: Teresa Berganza has a slight vibrato in her voice as Carmen with the London Symphony Orchestra under Claudio Abbado. The singer's dynamic onsets form a suspense-filled arc that the Encore ENC-5s track with utmost attention. It was with the expected precision that these monitors passed the location-finding test I perform using this cross-section from the Bizet opera every time a new device is added to my system. A trumpet comes first from deep right and is plainly audible despite its low volume. Then it gains strength as it moves to the foreground with a rich and full body. There is a clean separation between the two groups of the boys' choir, and the individual voices of these young singers have body and pure tone as they leave the speakers. The Encores recreated the stage of this recording of Carmen (one with which I am intimately familiar after so many hours spent listening to this CD) exactly as expected – only more accurately or perhaps better said more "illuminatingly."

The longer I listened to these loudspeakers, the less my mind concerned itself with what might be going on below the stated cutoff frequency of 60 Hz. In any case, this has no impact on the lifelike impression of the musical reproduction. The Encore ENC-5s are truly superb pieces of precision equipment that will arouse the desire and passion of those who have a sense for the fine and subtle. □

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Principle: Two-way coaxial (176 mm fiber-glass midrange driver, 25 mm coaxial aluminum tweeter) **Impedance:** 8 ohms **Frequency range:** 70–25, 000Hz +/-2dB; 55Hz -6 dB **Crossover frequency:** 2800 Hz

Sensitivity: 86 dB/2,83 V/1 m **Recommended amplifier power:** 20–150 watts

Styles: Black or russet (reddish brown) **Dimensions (w/h/d):** 21,7/30/21,7 cm

Weight: 5,8 kg **Warranty:** 5 years **Price per pair:** 6500 euros

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