

## Monitor Audio Platinum PL200 loudspeaker

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A few years ago, I had a phone call from a marketing organization. I was asked, as a member of the audiophile press, to participate in a survey dealing with the "images" of various brands of loudspeakers.



I declined to participate in the survey—*Stereophile* editorial policy does not allow writers to act as consultants, and this was tantamount to being a consultant, albeit an unpaid one. However, if one of the brands in the survey had been Monitor Audio, my answers would not have been terribly helpful: I had no very clear "image" of Monitor Audio speakers. British, well-made, uses gold-anodized dome tweeters—that's about all I could have

said about them. I had not listened to Monitor speakers for any length of time. My impressions were vaguely positive, but nothing to make me think that these were speakers I simply *must* review.

My impression of Monitor Audio speakers changed at the 2007 Montreal Festival Son & Image. At a show at which many excellent speakers were displayed, the demonstration of Monitor's Platinum PL300s was characterized by sound that I described in my [show report](#) as being "arrestingly lifelike." I made a mental note to myself to consider reviewing these speakers, but, what with this and that, by the time I got around to taking steps to arrange a Monitor Audio review, the year was 2009 and the new speaker in the Platinum line was the PL200. This speaker has much the same technology as the PL300, but in a more compact package and at a lower price (\$8000/pair)—a combination that always appeals to me. And a demo of a pair of PL200s at the 2009 Montreal show was most convincing. This time, I made sure that reviewing the PL200 was not a "Think about . . ." but a "Do!"

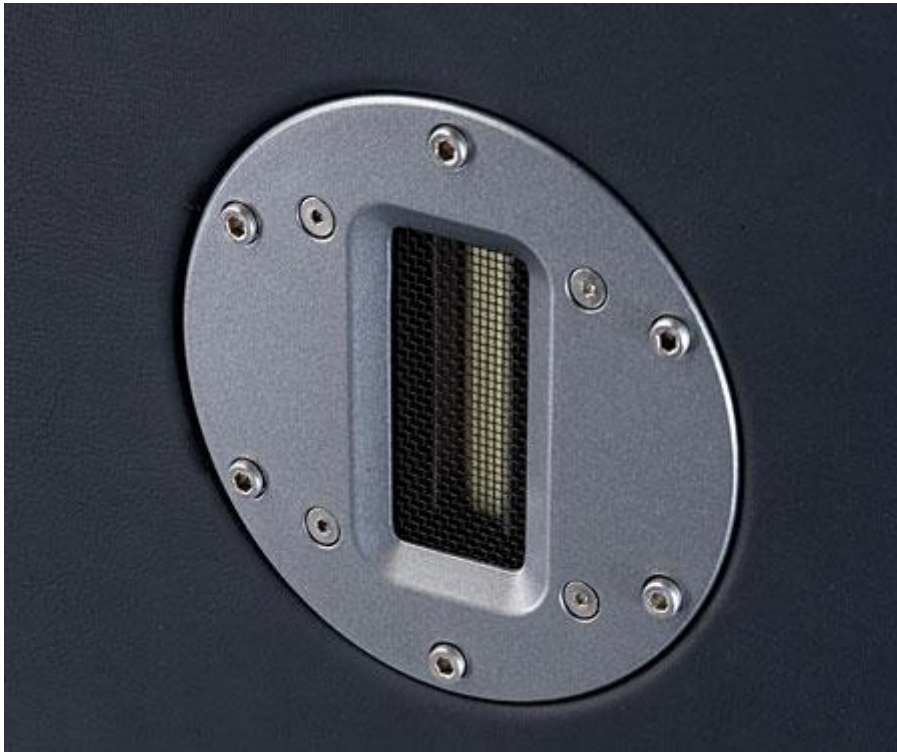
#### Description and design

Remember the advertising slogan for Clairol's Nice 'n Easy, "The closer he gets, the better you look"? Perhaps a wee sexist in today's world, but if Monitor Audio were to borrow this slogan, they could well adapt for the advertising of the Platinum PL200. From a distance, it looks much like any other floorstander. But get closer, and you'll see that the fit and finish are of a quality far higher than the norm. The wood finish (Santos Rosewood on the review samples) is impeccable: smooth, with a gloss that indicates multiple coats of varnish, each coat (of 11, I'm told) polished to perfection. Joins in the veneer are invisible. The front baffle is finished in leather—not just any leather, mind you, but "Strathspey leather," selected for its acoustical properties as well as for its appearance.

The drivers are on the exotic side: the midrange and bass have metal-covered cones, and the tweeter is a ribbon rather than the ubiquitous dome. The midrange and bass cones are made of a honeycombed Nomex combined with Monitor's Ceramic-Coated Aluminum Magnesium (C-CAM) alloy, forming a rigid structure with low mass. C-CAM is also used in the construction of the ribbon tweeter, whose frequency response is claimed to extend to 100kHz. Although this is well above what's normally considered to be the upper limit of human hearing (and the CD format is bandwidth-limited to 22kHz), there is some evidence that, at least with wide-bandwidth sources, ultrasonic response may improve the sense of reality of the reproduction. Even if the audibility or utility of the ultrasonic response is questionable, there is still the argument that a tweeter whose response extends far beyond the range of human hearing may perform better in the audible range. Oh, and in case you were wondering, other than in the finish of their WBT binding posts, the Platinum PL200 contains no platinum.

I couldn't find much information about the PL200's crossovers in the product literature or on Monitor Audio's website, but [Dean Hartley](#), the company's head designer, told me that the low-pass bass-driver crossover and both the high- and low-pass crossovers on the midrange are 12dB/octave, and that the tweeter is protected by an 18dB/octave crossover. Crossover components include high-spec foil capacitors and air-core inductors; the internal wiring is pure silver.





The fine-furniture finish of the PL200's cabinet hides a complex, high-tech construction. Multiple layers of bonded MDF form a multicurved shell; steel bolts tie the front and rear panels to a "pinhole" bracing structure. A tool is provided for tightening the bolts, which can loosen during shipping. Under the leather, the front baffle is made of something called Anti Resonant Composite (ARC), "a thermo-set polymer loaded with minerals." The midrange driver occupies its own sealed, tapered enclosure within the main enclosure. The bass is ported, but, again, the design is unique, and called HiVe II: a straight-rifled aperture that's claimed to be able to move air in and out more quickly than conventional designs.

The PL200's integral plinth is also made of ARC, and has feet that are adjustable for leveling. (A spirit level is provided.) The plinth houses two sets of WBT terminals for optional biwiring. I single-wired the Monitors.

Monitor Audio is owned and managed in the UK, but since 2004 its manufacturing facilities have been consolidated in China. ("The best move we ever made," says Dean Hartley.) According to Hartley, parts for the PL200 are sourced or made with the objective of achieving the highest quality and tolerances. The tweeter itself—the manufacturer of which requires extremely tight tolerances—is made in Malaysia. The final assembly is done in Monitor Audio's factory in China, with QC supervised and inspected by Monitor Audio's own staff.

#### System and setup

In considering reviewing a pair of speakers, I first must make sure that I have an amplifier that can drive them. Though the last speaker I reviewed, the [Avantgarde Uno Nano](#) (July 2009), thrives on low-powered tube amplification, a glance at the Platinum PL200's specifications told me that this speaker would require something else. Monitor Audio recommends an amplifier with a minimum output of 100Wpc. But with a speaker of the PL200's pedigree, those shouldn't be just any kind of watts—I'd want to use an amplifier good enough that its sound quality would not compromise the speaker's performance. Which one?

The solution presented itself when I remembered that Monitor Audio has exhibited very successfully with Simaudio electronics. A loan of the [Moon Evolution W-7](#) amplifier (150Wpc) was arranged, and the folks at Simaudio also suggested that I use the matching [Moon Evolution P-7](#) preamplifier as well—which, in combination with my [Ayre CX-7e<sup>MP</sup>](#) CD player, would result in a fully balanced system. Well, why not? Besides, the P-7 and CX-7e<sup>MP</sup> are both listed in Class A of *Stereophile's* "Recommended Components," and the W-7 is a lower-powered version of the [Moon W-8](#), another Class A denizen. In terms of electronics, I was pretty sure I'd be in good shape.

But my reviewing system still had not fully evolved. I looked at the interconnects I had on hand and realized that I lacked the requisite two identical balanced pairs: one pair for CD player to preamp, the other from preamp to power amp. In fact, the interconnects I'd been using were a bit of a hodgepodge, and some of them were no longer made—perhaps it was time to upgrade. But there are lots of interconnects out there, and I had no interest in trying all sorts of models from different manufacturers. The cables I've used more than any other are from Nordost: [Valhalla speaker cable](#), still current in their line; and Quattro Fil interconnect, discontinued some time ago. My positive experience with them led me to think that Nordost would be the logical choice. I talked to Nordost's vice-president of marketing (and sometime audio scribe), Roy Gregory, who offered to loan me some Valhalla interconnects and power cables to supplement the Valhalla speaker cables I already had. Replacing my stock Linn Ittok tonearm cable with Nordost's Frey (the Valhalla is too stiff for the Linn turntable's suspension) completed the Nordost cable loom. (See Art Dudley's discussion of the "loom" concept in "[Listening](#)" in the December 2009 issue.)

Over the years, I've found that speakers sound best when placed within a fairly circumscribed area, away from the front and sidewalls and along the 16' length of my 14' by 16' by 7.5' room, forming close to the classic 60° angle, when perceived from the listening position, or even a bit wider. (I like a wide soundstage.) Within that area, moving the speakers by small increments from the front and sidewalls and varying their toe-in allows some tuning of the tonal balance and optimizing the width and depth of the soundstage.

Sheldon Ginn of Kevro International, Monitor's North American distributor, came by to help me with the setup. He tightened the bolts that keep the enclosure rigid, and adjusted the feet so that the spirit level indicated that both speakers were level. Together, we moved the speakers around a bit until the soundstage came into good focus. I was told that my review samples had had a fair amount of break-in time, but more never hurts—whenever my wife and I were away from home, I programmed Monitor Audio's break-in CD (supplied with my review samples) for repeat play. Over a period of several weeks, the bass improved and the sound generally seemed to become more relaxed—but since the audio electronics and the cables were new in the system as well, I can't definitely attribute this change to speaker break-in alone.

As I kept listening to the PL200s after the initial setup, I had the feeling that although their soundstage was fine, the tonal balance was a little bass-shy. I moved the speakers a few inches toward the wall behind them (*too* close and you exacerbate room modes), which resulted in a better balance of the bass with the rest of the range. The PL200s come with metal grilles that conveniently attach with magnets. I compared their sound with the grilles on and off, and found the focus to be better with the grilles off, so that's how I listened to them. (This was also Sheldon Ginn's recommendation.)

#### Sound

For me, the two most important attributes that define loudspeaker quality are resolution and transparency. By *resolution* I mean the ability of a speaker to communicate the fine details of the music encoded in the recording, while *transparency* refers to a speaker's ability to present a "clear window" on the music, free of distortions and colorations. These characteristics are important for any audio component, but are particularly important—and particularly difficult to achieve—in a mechanical product like a loudspeaker. Some speakers that offer a detailed presentation also have a distinctive sonic personality that keeps reminding you that you're



listening to speakers, not live music. Other speakers are pleasantly "musical," with little in the way of a distinctive "speaker sound," but gloss over the music's finer details: such speakers are high in transparency but low in resolution. It's hard to get both in the same speaker. My Avantgarde Uno Nanos have very high resolution, but they also have a distinctive sonic personality—the well-known "horn coloration," which, while lower in the Uno Nano than in other horns, is still audible.



My usual test of resolution is to play highly familiar recordings, listening for any details I had not been aware of before. One disc that I find very useful for this is *All Star Percussion Ensemble* (CD, Golden Strings GS CD 005), an early digital recording (1982) selected in 1993 by *Home Theater* magazine's Thomas J. Norton, then my colleague at *Stereophile*, as a "[Record To Die For](#)." It's a sonic spectacular in the best sense: "balance is superb, detailing is precise and at times striking, dynamics wide, and the soundstage is particularly broad and

deep," to quote TJN. I don't know what equipment Tom used to come up with that assessment, but I've listened to this recording many, many times, and through the PL200s I heard details of orchestration that simply had not been apparent before. For example, in the arrangement of Pachelbel's Canon in D, I noticed for the first time that a percussion instrument enters the fray (at 2:42 into track 3) making "clucking" sounds. Could I have heard it through other speakers if I'd listened more attentively? Perhaps. All I can say is that with the PL200s in this system, the presence of this instrument was very obvious, and an effective part of director Harold Farberman's arrangement.

The PL200 also sailed through my other tests of resolution, such as revealing the editing glitches in Sylvia McNair's *Sure Thing: The Jerome Kern Songbook* (CD, Philips 442 129-2). These details didn't sound exaggerated, like a digital photo with the sharpening control turned up too high; they were just there.

Another way to assess a speaker's resolution is to listen to how it reproduces any changes in sound produced by changes in other components or tweaks. This opportunity presented itself when I was replacing my interconnects and AC cords with Nordost Valhalla products. Because I wasn't doing a cable review as such, I didn't spend a lot of time switching cables back and forth, but I *did* listen carefully before and after each swap (having first unplugged and replugged the original cable, to make sure that any sonic difference was not merely a function of cleaning the contacts, a natural byproduct of this process). In every instance, I could hear an improvement. The high resolution of the PL200s—and, of course, of the rest of the system—allowed me to hear differences that might have been obscured with other speakers. What most surprised me was that substituting the Nordost Valhalla power cords for the better-than-average (albeit an obsolete model) PS Audio cords at the input to the PS Audio Power Plant Premier produced a significant improvement in clarity and dynamics. But the Power Plant Premier actually *regenerates* the AC supply—why should the cable between the wall outlet and the Power Plant make a difference? Search me . . .

Soundstaging was simply superb: wide, deep, and precise in the spatial definition of sonic images on the stage. The soundstage was also quite high, seemingly located above the speakers. I would expect this from a taller speaker, and/or one that has an extra, upward-facing tweeter—but, of course, the PL200 isn't and doesn't. I really liked this effect—it made me feel as if I were sitting in the front of the orchestra section, rather than farther back or in the balcony.



When it came to transparency—defined as an absence of coloration or a distinctive "speaker sound" added to the music being reproduced—the PL200 once again performed like a champ. Colorations created by cabinet resonances can be problematic with floorstanding loudspeakers, but in the case of the PL200 were conspicuous by their relative absence. The midrange was essentially neutral, which was effective in communicating the distinctive characteristics of the voices of various singers; they sounded, as I noted in my April 2007 show report on the PL300, "arrestingly lifelike."

To the extent that the PL200 had a distinctive sound, it was in the direction of a slight brightness. If you consider tonal balance to be on a continuum, with *warm/lush/soft* at one end and *airy/cool/bright* at the other, then the PL200 was closer to the latter. The treble was highly extended—my hearing falls just *slightly* short of extending to 100kHz, so I'll have to take Monitor's word for that spec—and very clean, to the benefit of the sound of percussion instruments. In fact, at least some of what I heard as extra brightness might have been due to other components in the system. This is a perennial problem in evaluating the contribution of one component in a system, which is why it is best to switch out only one at a time. The [Nordost Valhalla](#) cables, which offer superb neutrality and resolution, aren't known for being forgiving or sounding soft. The Simaudio preamp and power amp are excellent products, but in [John Atkinson's review](#) of the Moon Evolution P-7 in the March 2009 *Stereophile* he noted that it had a "slightly more forward, slightly more robust" sound than his reference preamp, the [Mark Levinson No.380S](#); that may have been part of what I heard.

I also briefly drove the PL200s with tube electronics—[Convergent Audio Technology's SL-1 Renaissance](#) preamp and [PrimaLuna's Prologue Seven](#) power amplifiers. The results were interesting: The sounds of voices and musical instruments took on a decidedly softer, more rounded quality that was most attractive—more "musical," if you like—but the resolution was a notch lower, and the bass was not as tight or extended. On balance, I preferred the Simaudio Moon Evolution combo of P-7 and W-7.

With the Simaudio electronics, the PL200's bass was nearly as impressive as its treble. Played at a fairly high level, the bass drums and synthesizer on Mickey Hart's *Planet Drum* (Rykodisc RCD 10206) came over with enough impact to not sound wimpy, and the bass had excellent clarity and articulation. The double-bass line in "I Won't Dance," from Sylvia McNair's *Sure Thing*, was easy to follow without overwhelming the singer. As one might expect given the PL200's size and driver complement, the extreme lows (20–30Hz) weren't there—the speaker's claimed low-end limit is 35Hz, which seems about right—but the bass that *was* there held up to fairly high levels without sounding strained. Those who want more extended, more powerful bass might consider Monitor's matching PLW-15 powered subwoofer—or the PL300, whose larger cabinet contains, along with the same midrange and tweeter as the PL200, a pair of 8" rather than 6.5" woofers.

Which leaves us with dynamics—another of the PL200's strengths. With the appropriate recordings the speakers sounded "quick," and music had a subtle ebb and flow that resembled that real thing. Many speakers must be driven to high levels to get much of a sense of dynamic contrasts—not so the PL200. Some of my most memorable times with the Monitors were when I listened at night, with the volume set to what most people would consider a background level. The PL200 maintained its resolution at this level—even the softest musical passages had the appropriate dynamic variations. In this respect, the PL200 resembled the [original Quad](#) and KLH 9 speakers that I used to have. The PL200s were also able to play pretty loud—at levels that would have resulted in the Quads or the KLH 9s going up in smoke. At *very* high levels, the PL200s couldn't match the sense of dynamic ease that characterizes the [Avantgarde Uno Nanos](#), but the same thing might be said of just about any speaker of similar size and driver complement.

## Conclusion

The ideal loudspeaker would have no sound of its own: the sound that it made would simply reflect the input signal, communicating all of the detail and nuances present in the source. If such a speaker exists, I haven't heard it—but the Monitor Audio Platinum PL200 comes closer to this ideal than most. The product of a design process that has apparently examined every aspect of loudspeaker performance, the impeccably finished PL200 uses drivers that are unique to Monitor Audio, features high resolution and a high degree of transparency, and does an excellent job of getting out of the way of the music. It offers a balanced performance from top to bottom, with perhaps a slight bias toward the upper end of the range—but not so much that it sounds "etched." At \$8000/pair the PL200 is by no means cheap, but neither is it crazy-priced—the price is justified by the design, the quality of components, the obvious care taken in manufacturing, and, most of all, by the sound. It's a lovely speaker.