

Guru QM10 Speakers

by Gregory Koster



PHOTO 1:
Guru QM10.

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Price: (\$2395 for black and piano lacquer and info and matte black

Before General Motors bought Saab and denatured it, Saab automobiles had a devoted following based on extreme engineering aimed at producing the absolute best car for its intended purpose. They weren't inexpensive, and they couldn't do everything that a Jaguar or a Chevy Suburban could do—but on the rally circuit in the 60s and 70s they were the top guns and everybody else ate their dust.

Guru speakers are the 21st century equivalent of those early rally Saabs. Designer Ingvar Öhman has invoked the Norse goddess Sjöfn to marry physics and art in order to produce "the world's only known full-range mini-monitor." The Guru QM10 is a two-way, vented-port design that claims flat bass down to 30Hz from a bass driver with a 4.25" active membrane diameter in a ten liter enclosure

(12" W × 9" H × 10" D).

They also claim to avoid the narrow "sweet spot" limitations of many high-end speakers, aiming to produce a "holographic" image over a wide area of the room, and to do so in a typical listening environment (not the unnatural anechoic chamber of a certain other northern country's test lab). And to top it off, these qualities are said to result from speaker voicing designed for placement right up against the wall, which is how all mini-monitors should be designed. After all, if you have enough space to pull the speakers out into the room, you could fit a floor-standing cabinet and help physics give you full bass extension. [Note from Ingvar Öhman, R&D Guru Pro Audio: I do *not* recommend to pull the speakers out into the room, just because there is space enough to make it possible. But yes, the bass modules + QM10 can be used at a distance from the speaker wall, if there is something hindering putting the speakers close to a wall—or they can be close to the wall (still with the QM10s on top) giving an ever greater potential. So, having the speakers out in the room is an option (thanks to the controls on the bass module) but we still recom-

ment that it must be made on a computer-aided milling machine.

The upshot is a claim that the Guru QM10s are small, exquisite (in the optional piano lacquer) speakers that hug the wall and practically disappear on their diminutive 24" stands to achieve a high degree of spousal acceptance while still producing audiophile sound—"the Holy Grail of audio."

So, is this Granada I see or only Asbury Park? Let's crank them up and see.

SETUP

To be fair to the speakers under test, I always try to follow the manufacturer's setup recommendations as closely as possible. For a valid comparison I also position the comparison speakers in the same location, even though this may not be the position they were designed for. Thus any negative comments about the comparison speakers shouldn't be held against them—they may sound much better if used as their designers intended.

Lars Erickson of Sjöfn Hifi [no longer representing Guru audio] suggested putting the Gurus as close to the wall as possible (less than 6"), toed in so that you just see the outside edge of the cabinets,

"Guru speakers are the 21st century equivalent of early rally Saabs."

mend having them (the whole package) close to wall, to maximize dynamic headroom and minimize distortion (i.e., being as kind and respectful as possible to the music being reproduced).]

The midrange/woofer driver is Ingvar's own design, custom-made by Scan-Speak of Denmark. The Mylar tweeter is modified by Ingvar. And the cabinet is designed to such a tight specification

with any kind of foam on the wall toward the center, and with the tweeter just below ear level. [Note from Manufacturer: The figure 6" does not come from Guru. In fact the user's manual states *"very close to a damped wall."* By that we mean as close as possible, possibly only giving room for a 2", maximum 3" thick absorber behind the speakers' inner back corner.—Ingvar Öhman].

He also noted that designer Ingvar Öhman doesn't want subwoofer reinforcement. [Well, I haven't really said that. Subwoofer reinforcement *can* be a good way of improving the performance of a sound system, as long as it utilizes dual subwoofers that can work stereo-phonically, and is of a quality equal to the QM10's own in the bass range. I have, however, designed a bass solution for the QM10 that takes into account the small size of the QM10 and the possibility to have specialized bass modules (we prefer to call them that, not subwoofers) in close proximity to the QM10s. This also makes it possible to choose a different crossover frequency than the usual 80Hz. My experience is, however, that a subwoofer is not needed with the QM10 when played at levels most people would use in their homes. So, I do believe (i.e., my experience is) that most subwoofer systems do not improve the bass of the QM10, but there are exceptions. This is not a black/white question, but one with a grey answer. Very light grey yes, but still grey.—Ingvar Öhman].

Following this advice, I positioned the Gurus (and the comparison speakers) 61" apart center-to-center, toed in as directed, with the center of the back 3.25" from the wall (the distance ranged from ¾" to 6" at the edges of the cabinets). I placed couch cushions on the back wall from the inside edges of the speakers toward the center. I sat 66" away diagonally, so that I was well away from the back wall.

The only part of the instructions that I couldn't follow was the ear level. [That is (as said) not an instruction coming from me or from anyone else at Guru, so—no problem! Listening from any height is fine. At least ranging from 3" to 6"! The "magic" will be present at any height there within. (Magic meaning opening up a well working holographic window to the sound stage.) Actually, that is what holophony is all about—enabling people to be viewing the art, visual or sound, from a wide choice of positions in the room, horizontally, depth vice and vertically—just as in front of a real life music group!—Ingvar Öhman].

Lars had supplied 24" stands with the Gurus, but because the speakers are only 9" tall, it was impossible to sit low enough to position the tweeters "just below ear level." Given all the claims about designing these speakers for typical listening environments, I thought that I should sit in a typical chair even though that put my ears well above the tweeter levels. [Our recommendations (user's manual p. 6) are that the speaker should be placed at a height of 2' (60cm). The consequential height of the tweeter compared to the ears is not important and should not be used as a measure. Anything goes. The output of the speakers is timbrally modulated as a function of the listening height, to always produce a stable sound stage at a constant height above the floor, behind the loudspeakers, with all its intrinsic height preserved. This is one of the more important features of the speaker and a consequence of my ambition to make it create a holographic (holophonic) window into the world of music (or other sounds).—Ingvar Öhman].

My comparison speakers were Aperion Intimus 5B bookshelf speakers, and a ten-year-old pair of NHT Super One satellites paired with the NHT SW2Pi subwoofer, which has been the reference set in this system.

CRITICAL LISTENING

Dvorak—Serenade(Delos3011)—The Gurus were lovely on this recording, played at a chamber music level of 76dB (pink noise). The bass was full and balanced, although the deepest pizzicato notes were a little fainter than the rest; highs were not rolled off but also not screechy; the middle was balanced both tonally and on volume.

The Aperions were slightly warmer and had less extension on the highs.

The NHTs (sats and sub) were similar to the Aperions, except that the bass extended further down. Even without the highest extension they felt very balanced.

The Gurus with the NHT subwoofer sounded the same as the Gurus alone. The bass may have been slightly fuller or deeper, or I might have been fooling

myself (it was that close). The subwoofer didn't pay its way here.

On this well-recorded chamber music selection, the Gurus (sans sub) were the winner.

Rosemary Clooney—My Buddy (Concord 4226)—The Gurus were tonally cool but not forward. Rosie's voice cut through the orchestra but sounded normal (some speakers that place her in front of the orchestra sound as though she's singing into a megaphone). The snare and cymbals were prominent over the bass drum and the rest of the mix. Great definition—you could hear every instrument clearly. No hint of added warmth, but a slight hollowness to everything.

The Aperions weren't warm, but they were warmer than the Gurus. Rosie wasn't quite as far forward. The snare and cymbals were balanced with the bass drum and with the overall mix. But the definition wasn't as pronounced. There was no hollowness, but a slight warm blanket on everything.

The NHT/sub was midway between the Gurus and the Aperions. Deep bass, but lacking the great definition and texture of the Gurus.

The Gurus plus sub brought out the electric bass, but the midbass was a little muddy and some of the definition was lost.

Winner? The Gurus and the Aperions were two equally valid approaches. The Gurus really grabbed my attention with definition, but the Aperions might be easier to live with long term.

Liszt—Mephisto Waltz (Reference Recordings 25)—The Gurus are Goldilocks! Warm speakers enhance the bottom of the piano on this recording so that it sounds like a Bosendorfer (which it's not), but they also roll off the top end. Cool speakers make the piano sound thin on the bottom and clanky on top. The Gurus showed a full concert grand bass without reverb and a nicely extended but not at all clanky top end. Perfect—the most natural and enjoyable I ever recall hearing this recording.

The Aperions were much warmer. The top was rolled off, and the bottom had

added reverb and smear. It was still a natural concert feeling, but several rows back (the Gurus were actually on stage).

The NHT/sub had more bass, but not in the sense of deep bass extension. The hall was more reverberant, the mids felt warmly chesty, and the highs were rolled off. Overall balance was tipped far to the bass end.

The Gurus plus sub had no perception of added bass, but the mid-bass wasn't as clear.

The Gurus (sans sub) were the clear winner here, with a natural piano sound and wonderful presence.

Canteloube—Chants d'Auvergne (Virgin 90714)—The Gurus presented the sharply recorded voice very well. The edginess and buzzing that so often plague this recording were gone, but the voice didn't feel rolled off. The orchestra was well defined but didn't have the fullest bass extension. Warm speakers sound better on this recording, but the Gurus were probably as kind to it as you can be while still reflecting the actual recording.

The slight warmth of the Aperions was again a veil that went too far in taming this recording's problems and moved the whole performance several yards away. There was no vocal edginess, but the sound was much less involving.

The NHT/sub bass made the orchestra sound more balanced, but the warmth and rolled-off highs cut the involvement.

The Gurus plus sub were much like the NHT/sub.

Nobody wins on this recording (ever), but the Gurus were probably the best possible combination of warmth and accuracy.

Holst—Planets (EMI 47160)—On this recording and those that follow I always raise the volume to 82dB, and physics seemed to reassert its rules on the Gurus at that loudness. The sound was excellent from the cellos up and they were able to handle the loudest passages without congestion, but the deep bass was missing and the system approached the volume limit because blue warning lights started flashing on all the climaxes.

(I checked with Lars Erickson about this, and he reported that "the blue lights indicate that the speakers are approaching distortion levels unacceptable to designer Ingvar Öhman. As a rule, as long as the lights are lit less than half the time, the speakers are performing within the strict parameters that Ingvar specifies." So no harm, no foul.)

The Aperions were similar, but the highs were a little shrieky.

On the NHT/sub the bass drum and tympani were much more noticeable and natural, but the highs came on like a peaky turbocharger: wham!!! They had more peak headroom, but a very noticeable change in timbre as the tweeters took full power.

The subwoofer took the strain off the Gurus to keep the blue lights off and add some power to the bass drum, without any cost. This was the clear winner on this cut.

Prokofiev—Romeo & Juliet (Delos 3050)—But don't write off the Gurus for orchestral music without a subwoofer wingman. On this selection they once again got it just right, with full extension at both ends plus more detail and texture than I'm used to. The trombones felt perfect. This had a real "you are there" feeling.

The Aperions' slight warmth enhanced the trombones into a menacing gang (very appropriate for this Montague/Capulet rumble), but that was the only gain. There was less extension on top, no more depth to the bass, and much less definition and texture.

The NHT/sub was all highs and lows (when the highs are loud in the score). This was like a Detroit big-iron car that puts up good numbers but loses the comparison test because it just doesn't feel right. The trombones were really powerful, but they were surrounded by an unnatural orchestra.

The Gurus and sub didn't gain anything, because the added bass was clearly accompanied by mid-bass smear.

So the winner was the Guru pair, which provided all the extension plus detail and texture for a very "real" feeling.

Bach—Tocatta & Fugue (Delos 3503)—The Gurus were perfect again. The bass chords have all the extension and authority you need (from 4.25" drivers!). The treble pipes were fully extended but not edgy (this is a close-recorded CD, so that is often a problem). There was lots of detail and texture—I heard more notes in the chords than I've ever noted (pun intended). Hall reverb (which is tight on the recording) was reproduced just right.

The Aperions had typical good bookshelf performance, which shows how great the Gurus are. The feeling of spaciousness and just-right hall reverb were replaced by a slight warm muddiness in the middle, and the highs weren't fully extended and were slightly harsh. Bass extension was OK for 5.25" drivers—not really different from the Gurus.

The NHT/sub brought real bass to the party. Being able to reproduce the pedals at full volume counts for a lot on pipe organ music, but again this felt like all top and bottom.

The subwoofer's effect on the Gurus was subtle—a little more bass, a little congestion. Either way is OK, but for me the subwoofer doesn't cover the cost of admission. So I declare the Guru pair the winner again.

Bach—Tocatta & Fugue (Dorian 90134)—Speakers that do well on the Delos usually are too warm for the Dorian, but the Gurus handled the Delos without adding much warmth and they also tamed the excess warmth on this recording. The result still isn't satisfying, but I think the problem is in the recording—the hall is so reverberant and the mikes were so far away that the detail I long for just isn't there. What's notable is that the Gurus' sound is the best parlay for these two Bach recordings that I've heard.

The Aperions' added warmth on a warm recording only exacerbated the problems. Everything was submerged into the reverb soup. This could work if there were real bass extension, but with the satellites alone it was not at all involving.

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