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Von Schweikert Audio VR-55 Aktive Loudspeaker

Developed to update and replace the aging

VR-5 Series of products first introduced in 2004, the new Von Schweikert Audio four-driver, three-way VR-55 is available in either a Passive or Aktive version. The Aktive is identical to the Passive, save for the addition of an on-board 525-watt mono amp to drive the twin custom woofers.

The VR-55's enclosure generally follows the form factor initially seen in the original VR-5 head units, though that model's two-piece stacking bass-module and mid/tweeter-module are now a single cabinet, like that of the VR-44 (the replacement for the longstanding and diverse VR-4 lineup). Standing 42" tall, 14" wide at the base, and 28" deep, tipping the scales at an impressive 190 pounds, the VR-55 Aktive employs a very narrow, chamfered front baffle around both the custom 6.5" ceramic midrange and the doped beryllium tweeter. The baffle shape is designed to promote wide dispersion. The front baffle slopes slightly backward, tapering from 14" wide at the base to just 9" wide at the top, to facilitate driver time alignment and accommodate the twin custom 8" woofers housed in the bottom of the baffle and the large Class D amplifier in the back.



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Fabricated using VSA's patent-pending Triple-Wall Laminate Construction, my review pair's enclosures were finished in an impeccable piano-black lacquer. The outermost layer of this composite is a sheet of resin-based MDF (medium density fiberboard). The middle layer is a sheet of synthetic stone—made from crushed gravel, various other minerals, and a resin binder—that's bonded to the inner surface of the MDF outer shell. The innermost layer is hard felt.

Each of these three incongruent layers is bonded to the next with a thick (roughly 1/5th of an inch), industrial, anti-vibrational, rubber-based adhesive designed to add yet an additional obstacle to vibration. The resultant triple-layered wall is roughly three inches thick. This construction exploits the natural effects of using three disparate layers, all with inherently different and effectively opposing native “Q's,” working together as a resonance-cancellation system that effectively turns any unwanted energy into heat.

The finishing enclosure touch is what VSA calls Gradient Density Damping. This proprietary technique includes three different thicknesses of bonded Dacron batting. Packed extremely tightly closest to the cabinet walls, its density gradually decreases (i.e., it is less densely packed) as it nears the rear of the driver on its baffle. This innovative construction helps to provide exceptional absorption while greatly reducing reflections back into the cone.

First pioneered in the VSA UniField Model 3 speaker system in 2007, Gradient Density Damping is the result of extensive research using Cal Tech's Laser Interferometer Lab to measure speaker cabinet-wall vibration and the internal mechanical processes of stored-and-released energy. According to Von Schweikert, cabinets constructed with this method offer measurably superior results to those using solid aluminum enclosures—and do so at a drastically lower cabinet-production cost. This approach has proven so successful that it is utilized in all VSA models in production today, from the Vortex VR-22, to the VR-11SE Mk2, and the one-off, statement, four-tower VR-111XS.

The rear panel is busier than most, and its contents contribute significantly to the VR-55 Aktive's unique ability to seamlessly integrate with any room. Situated centrally on its nine-inch width—two inches down from the top—is the four-inch round housing for the 3" Rear Ambiance Retrieval ribbon tweeter, intended to match the transient response and tonal quality of the superb front tweeter and to help effectively replicate the concert hall (or recording studio's) acoustic space. An all-new ambience-retrieval circuit with a level control is also included. This control allows owners to tailor the rear tweeter's dipolar dispersion pattern and intensity to the environment—be it a hard and reflective surface or a softer, more absorptive one such as a curtain.

Behind a ten-inch-square silver plate near the bottom of speaker is a 525-watt mono Class D amplifier—engineered by and sourced from Channel Islands Audio, and using Hypex transistor modules and a linear power supply. This housing also contains the IEC socket and its amber-lit rocker-switch, two sets of five-way binding posts for bi-wiring, and two small, round control knobs for fine-tuning both the woofers and the rear tweeter. (More on this later.)

Both sets of binding posts are WBT-0710Cu Nextgen, fabricated from 99.996% pure, oxygen-free copper plated with a single layer of 24k gold and fully insulated with Makrolon. This copper/gold combination was chosen over similar posts fabricated from silver or platinum purely for its “sweeter” sonics.

About four inches above the amplifier plate, centered horizontally, is the six-inch mouth of the fluted woofer port. The woofer system employs a four-chamber hybrid transmission line and is user-adjustable via the rear-loaded port, with a factory preset “Q” of 0.6.

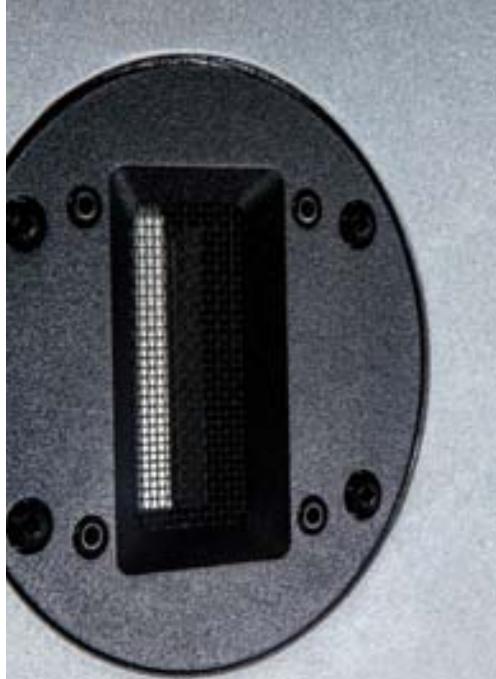
Moving to the front baffle, we find a unique driver set, the result of a four-year collaboration between Albert Von Schweikert and both Thiel and Partner (Accuton) and Scan-Speak. Albert's desire to eliminate what he felt was an unnatural resonance that spot-lit certain frequencies and prevented an overall natural timbre eventually led to the development of the VR-55's 8.5" and 6.5" Accuton ceramic-on-Nomex honeycomb



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drivers. Both employ what can only be described as massive, vanishingly low-distortion motors. (Yet none of this would be apparent from a casual glance at them through the perforated, concave curvature of their protective black grilles.)

The proprietary doping compound applied to the Scan-Speak beryllium 1" dome and its large rubber surround is also the result of a long-term collaboration between Albert and Scan-Speak, in an effort to prevent even the slightest perception of harshness.

The 3" aluminum-foil ribbon used for the Rear Ambiance Tweeter was designed by European speaker-maker RAAL, and boasts an upper frequency extension of 60kHz.

The crossover is constructed from the finest parts available, with all final components selected by ear. This particular crossover circuit, unique to Von Schweikert Audio, is a time-and-phase-aligned design that represents the latest iteration of its ever-evolving Global Axis Integration Network. With a goal of sonic "invisibility," the crossover leverages the advantages of servo-control and the use of very few parts in series with the drive units. Most of the constituent components are in parallel ground shunts to control phase and impedance. The crossover parts are hyper-expensive—including premium

devices from Duelund, as well as Jensen copper foil and Teflon/beeswax bypass caps. The main capacitors are Mundorf Supreme Gold/Silver/Oil. All inductors are copper foil, resistors are Mundorf metal film, and all internal wiring is Delphi's MasterBuilt Single Crystal Copper.

Into the Fray

Fortunately for me, the driver who delivered the large crates containing the VR-55 Aktive loudspeakers was willing to help me get them down my stairs and into my listening room—for a small gratuity. Extricating these speakers from their wooden shipping crates and getting them positioned in my room was relatively straightforward, but would have been a bit of a challenge to accomplish singlehandedly. The assistance of at least one other person should be considered mandatory for installation and setup.

Initially, the pair I was going to review was to have shipped to me directly from its official introduction at RMAF 2014, but there was a slight change of plans. During that initial exhibit, Albert heard some minor issues he felt he could successfully address. As a result, when the VR-55s arrived at my home in late January, they were not only improved, but also very well broken-in.

I began by placing them in the same locations as my longtime reference VR-5 Anniversaries, and over the next few hours of nudging them this way and back, toeing them in and out, I finally honed in on a location that offered the best compromise of timbre, coherence, and spatial information.

SPECS & PRICING

Driver complement: Two 8" woofers, one 6.5" midrange, one 1" tweeter

Frequency response: 16Hz-40kHz (-6dB); 21Hz-40kHz (-2dB)

Sensitivity: 90dB @ 1w/1m

Total system distortion: 0.5 percent at 90dB

Impedance: 8 ohms Aktive/4 ohms Passive

Recommended power: 20-200 watts

(Aktive), 100-500 watts (Passive)

Subwoofer amplifier power rating: 525 Watts

Dimensions: 14" x 42" x 28"

Weight: 186 lbs.

Price: \$60,000

VON SCHWEIKERT AUDIO

1040-A Northgate St.

Riverside, CA 92507

(951) 682-0706

vonschweikertaudio.com

info@vonschweikertaudio.com

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When it came time to install the floor spikes, I noticed that each speaker had two slightly differently sized pairs, with about a half-inch height discrepancy between them. After a quick call to VSA, I learned that there was a reason for this: The additional upward canting of this set of unequal footers was designed to offer just a bit more focus and tonal accuracy than using four footers of identical height. VSA suggested that the taller pair go under the front baffle and the shorter set under the amplifier at the speaker's rear.

Once I had the speakers suitably positioned and spiked, the real magic began. Normally, settling on that final placement would be the end of the room integration process, but with the VR-55 Aktive it proved to be just the beginning. Over the next few days, by taking advantage of the remarkable fine-tuning abilities offered by both the woofer and rear ambiance tweeter controls, I was able to achieve a bass coherence, depth, and impact, overall tonal balance, and degree of spatial re-creation considerably more refined and accurate than I'd been able to realize with the VR-5 Anniversary (which had nonetheless been remarkable), or with any other loudspeaker that has graced my listening room.

At the time of their arrival, I had four very different sets of monoblocks on hand, each exceptional in its own right, and seemingly perfect to test the versatility of these new speakers.

Given that VSA recommends a power range of only 20 watts on the low end to 200 watts or more for the VR-55 Aktive, I was curious to see how the exquisite Channel Islands Audio VMB-1 40W monoblocks (no longer in production) would fair. They employ an exceedingly simple circuit built around the National Semiconductor LM3886, feature a robust power supply, and are capable of creating some of the most organic midrange I've ever heard from a non-tube amplifier. The results were surprisingly satisfying for such incredibly affordable amps (their original retail was \$999/pr.). Their tube-like midrange tone and bloom dominated, while their slightly forward presentation was still apparent.

My only real complaint about the VMB-1 had been its inability to handle large dynamic swings at a decent, even small-room-filling volume. This was no longer a problem. They now exhibited an abundance of dynamics that, without the VR-55 Aktive's on-board mono amps, would have been unachievable.

Next up were my longtime reference Class D mono's, the Channel Islands Audio D-500 MKII. With those hitched to the speakers, I was treated to all their seductive qualities. The D-500 MKII has always offered some of the most liquid midrange combined with outstanding pitch definition, extension, and slam in the lowest registers of any Class D

entrant I've heard. (Keep in mind that VSA chose CIA to build the 525-watt mono amplifiers for the Aktive VR-55, and for good reason.) The D-500 MKII's primary weakness is how they handle the spectrum above roughly 4kHz. They just don't have all of the grace and poise offered in that region by the very best Class A or AB tube or solid-state entrants.

Next into the fray were the late John Ulrick's last iteration of the Spectron Musician III Mk2 SE, with all the upgrades, V-Caps, Super-Effekt Bybee Purifiers, and premium fuses. In their mono configuration, these behemoths deliver an absurd 2000 watts into 8 ohms! These signature editions of the Musician III Mk2 SE's showed why many consider the

Spectron to be in a class of its own—utterly quiet, superb microdynamic resolution, jolt-you-out-of-your-chair dynamics, and midrange bloom that is a cut above, especially for Class D. Honestly, I still find a bit to quibble about when it comes to how they handle the top three registers, but they are exquisite amps, nonetheless.

Last up were the Pass Labs XA160.8s. These seductive 160-watt, pure Class A monos are the latest creation from the brilliant mind of Nelson Pass, and they reconstruct music in a manner that satisfies both heart and intellect so completely that, once they were in place, they never again came out of the system. All further notes for this evaluation were taken with the XA160.8s.

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Constituent

It is no secret that I was not completely enamored of the earliest iterations of the Accuton ceramic woofers. Though their transient speed could be intoxicating, they often exhibited a ragged, edgy, resonance that could make them overly aggressive sounding. Rest assured, these aren't your father's Accutons.

Custom fabricated and highly modified, the VR-55's twin 8.5" Accuton woofers use a unique ceramic honeycomb lattice to which the ceramic cone material is bonded. The standard Accuton drivers do not use this honeycomb support matrix, and as a result are considerably less robust. In fact, they can be easily cracked or punctured with only the pressure of your finger. These custom-built drivers are astonishingly fast, with rise and settle times rivaling—possibly surpassing—the best I've heard from any driver of equivalent size.

In addition to possessing this astonishing transient prowess, they tender a remarkably natural and accurate timbre, completely free of audible ringing or resonance to my ears, and very high in fine detail, pitch definition, and harmonically rich and accurate tonal color and texture.

As well as having the ability to accurately execute blisteringly fast and precise transients, the woofers play very deep. VSA's claim that they are only 2dB down at 21Hz in this alignment seems completely realistic from both my rudimentary measurements and from extended listening. I've only heard a handful of speakers, all over \$100,000, that approach the bass-range power, weight, accuracy, and transient responsiveness the VR-55 Aktive.

There is a remarkably similar familial openness and transparency to the 6.5" midrange driver, fabricated of the same honeycombed, ceramic-coated materials as the woofers. Here again, the transient response of this driver is unnerving, and the degree to which it preserves timbral correctness throughout its wide bandwidth is remarkably hard to fault. Unrelentingly revealing and hard-hitting, it does not tend toward any of the usual congestive artifacts or ringing common in lesser ceramic (or non-ceramic) designs.

Midrange with the VR-55 Aktive is laden with texture and dimension, rich in detail, and replete in harmonic bloom. Instrument fundamentals from piano, violin, guitar, and especially the human voice, are rendered so realistically that they seem to conjure a living, breathing quality. The VR-55s offer some of the most beautiful, smooth, and expressive midrange I have had the pleasure of hearing—they are so engaging and articulate, so completely expressive and fluent, they almost burst with life.

While beryllium dome tweeters have been favored for their comparatively lower mass and the resultant speed that affords, in many applications, they could become overly assertive, affecting the overall system coherence and integration and making the system sound a bit discontinuous and bright.

The collaboration between VSA and Scan-Speak has resulted in an extraordinary tweeter. While the off-the-shelf version is unquestionably very good, after all the iterative electrical and mechanical modeling—all verified by listening tests—this final modified model was the first to fully satisfy VSA's sonic design goals. In an effort to eliminate a bothersome resonance that was intractable in the stock model, a film of an undisclosed damping material (co-developed with VSA) is applied to both the dome and the large rubber surround of this 1" dome tweeter. VSA and Scan-Speak have also significantly enhanced the flux density of the ring of neodymium magnets around the circumference of the voice coil.

The result is a very open, articulate top end that seems capable of adeptly and masterfully handling just about any high-frequency signal at any reasonable volume. Over my listening period, the tweeter never lost its overall effortlessness and articulation, and not once did it draw attention to itself; it simply revealed the music. If there is a more natural-sounding, more resolute 1" beryllium dome tweeter in production as of this writing, I've not heard it.



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Treble with this modified Scan-Speak tweeter is focused while delivering an unbelievably open and spectacularly airy top end. Uppermost registers are articulate with no sign of sterility or glare, and are rendered with an inescapable sense that there is nothing left unrevealed. The listener is treated to pure and uncongested detail, with vivid attack and seemingly endless ambient decay (recording permitting, obviously). The sheer totality of their reproduction of the sound of cymbals and triangles is exceptional, with the kind of shimmery warmth that you would hear live.

The VR-55 Aktive's sophisticated GAIN crossover delivers only high-frequency reverberant information from the recording to the rear leaf tweeter. When the rear tweeter's transparent contribution is combined with the overall front wave launch, the VR-55 creates a spaciousness and depth of field that very few speakers can approach, let alone equal. The result is a loudspeaker that speaks with one voice; driver and crossover coherence is among the smoothest I've heard.

Aggregate

My initial reaction to this extraordinary loudspeaker's voice was identical to the one I had at the introduction of the Magico Q7 at the 45th annual CES in Las Vegas, January 2012. I'm not saying that the VR-55 sounds *exactly* like the Magico Q7; rather, its level of performance so closely mimicked that haunting experience—the creation of an unqualified suspension of disbelief, the sense that I was in the presence of a live performance and not a loudspeaker—that I was beside myself with astonishment. When you recall that the VR-55 sells for one-third the price of the Q7 (in 2012), that makes the experience all the more remarkable!

Right from the crate (as noted, they were well broken-in), the VR-55s offered uncanny broadband pitch definition; lucid, airy, and detailed high-frequency performance; a vibrant, engaging, and tonally pure midrange; deep, articulate, impactful bass—and an unnerving level of transparency and transient speed.

Their ability to recreate a wide, deep, and *realistically sized* stage is second to none, thanks to both the physical baffle and crossover designs. Images within the stage are not only precise and rock-solid in placement, but also exhibit an unmistakable accuracy of size and shape. In this regard, the VR-55 Aktive is masterful, and handily bests many speakers I've heard at even three times their price.

Sound waves radiate in spherical patterns, so speakers that use narrow, contoured baffling (to minimize surface area around the drivers) and time-aligned crossovers—such as the VR-55 Aktive—will necessarily offer more accurate imaging and more articulate staging than speakers using otherwise equivalent drivers mounted to a wide, flat, constant-width baffle with no time-alignment.

With complex passages like the opening from Prokofiev's *Syrtian Suite*, or in the re-creation of the delicacies of massed strings, the speaker's ability to unravel dense and often complex layers of sounds is exceptional. It presents those layers without the slightest hint of congestion or indistinctness and with an ease bordering on effortlessness, all the while rendering such passages with indisputable tonal accuracy and texture.

If my descriptions of the drivers and of their performance give you the impression that this speaker is exceptionally transparent and wildly dynamic, you'd be correct. From the subtlest microdynamic expression to the most startling macrodynamic explosions, the VR-55 Aktive is astonishing at reconstructing the speed and scale of big musical moments. While I hesitate to compare their transient speed and dynamic prowess to that of a horn speaker, the reference seems fitting if only to convey the degree to which the VR-55 Aktive excels at the things that horns excel at. They consistently express dynamic

events with a sense of immediacy and control—both under acceleration and deceleration—that is unnervingly lifelike, and virtually unparalleled at anywhere near this price point in my experience.

Taken in combination, the midrange and treble performance of the VR-55 Aktive is more open and more transparent than I can recall hearing from virtually any dynamic loudspeaker. In fact, in this area it rivals the best I've heard from any planar or electrostatic design. In addition, its bass performance—in somewhat varying degrees due to the remarkable pair of custom Accuton drivers and the dedicated 525-watt, fully adjustable mono amp—simply needs to be experienced to be fully appreciated. Taut, deep, and lightning-fast, it differentiates pitches and timbres with an ease and accuracy that are nearly unmatched. Try as I might (and believe me,

I really tried), I could not detect the faintest hint of ringing, resonance, or driver distress during any of my auditions.

VSA has published the total system distortion for the VR-55 Aktive as being just 0.5 percent at 90dB. Given this, it's not surprising that one of the speaker's strongest suits is its transparency and resolution. The experience of listening to doubled (or any multiple) voices or instruments such as in duets and chorales, or with strings *en masse*, is nothing short of revelatory. The individual voices in such passages are more readily and effortlessly

delineated and identifiable as discrete voices. Yet that very individualism also allows them to emerge as more musically connected, more relevantly woven together. This heightened resolution affords a more musically expressive context and a degree of realism I'm not used to being treated to from other speakers in this class.

Inconsequential and inadvertently captured concert-hall noises such as a creaking chair, an air-handler blower, a cough from the audience, or the closing of a door somewhere off-stage are all revealed to be *exactly* what they are, rather

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than being presented as some indiscriminated noise. This attribute has the positive psychoacoustic effect of allowing the mind to follow more readily the flow of the music in its full context, rather than creating an unnecessary distraction while the brain tries to puzzle out what caused some indefinable, unrecognizable noise. In other words, because the VR-55 Aktive so clearly presents the distinguishable from the indistinguishable, the mind is not distracted by trying to identify the sound. This ability is, in my experience, something that only a small number of loudspeakers today can do exceptionally well.

Piano works are presented with uncanny vitality. The musings of Ivan Moravec playing Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 4 from *Ivan Moravec Plays Beethoven* [Via] or Vladimir Horowitz playing Chopin's Fantaisie-Improvisation, Op. 66 from *The Last Recording* [Sony], are presented on a heightened emotive level, granting the listener a more intimate experience. The challenging voice of the piano—whether vigorously erupting from the explosive attack of the hammers on strings, or their delicate brushing in a mere whisper—is actualized with a haunting degree of realism, leaving no question that the piano is, after all, a percussion instrument. This remarkable presentation serves to further enhance the rendering of the expressiveness of the music.

The human voice is presented in a most vital manner. Listen to the self-effacement of Tori Amos on *Little Earthquakes* [Atlantic], the mischievous wile of Rickie Lee Jones on her eponymous debut [Warner Brothers], or the visceral passion of Sarah McLachlan from *Fumbling Towards Ecstasy* [Arista], and you will find they are all equally realistic and powerful. Neil Young's ire or irony from his early works is laid bare. Thomas Dolby's acerbity and satire on *Aliens Ate My Buick* [EMI] have never been more obvious. Stevie Ray Vaughan's constrained angst on Absolute Analogue's wonderful 180-gram remastering of *Couldn't Stand The Weather* [Epic 25940] becomes a sheer visceral assault on the senses.

Given the heightened detail the VR-55 Aktive is capable of revealing, I was more than just a bit concerned about listening to older, less judiciously recorded works. I'm a product of the AOR radio era, so one of the real decisive tests for me was my first pass at David Bowie's 1972 Glam Rock classic, *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust*. While it is true that the VR-55 Aktive exposes a recording's blemishes and faults more clearly because of its extraordinarily low distortion and extreme transparency, it also serves to reconstruct the music's message more abundantly.

My first listen to Bowie resulted in the most emotional and engaging connection I have ever felt to that recording, and I assure you that I've likely heard the album 1000 times since its first release. For example, the backing vocals, which had always been an integral part of the underlying musical composition, were now rendered with a newfound clarity and authenticity. This invigorating contribution drove the musical expressiveness of the work, enhancing the narrative in a new and visceral manner by revealing a host of previously undiscovered sonic and musical details.

Do not take this to mean that the VR-55 can magically make a poor recording sound like an audiophile treasure; it will not. Yet all varieties of music were recreated with a naturalness, coherence, dimensionality, presence, texture, pace, drive, and immediacy so evocative of the live event that I felt as if that event had been transported into my room.

The VR-55 Aktive renders such an inherent sense of "live"—a symbiotic combination of its exceptionally low distortion, spectacular transient speed, sheer transparency, and resolving ability, and of an overall composure unlike anything I have ever experienced from a loudspeaker at this price—that I was completely enthralled.

End Game

Component pairing is crucial to really discover what this speaker has to say, so be prepared to match it with only the best electronics and sources. Do that, and these speakers will speak truthfully. Yet as candidly as they reveal weaknesses or strengths of all associated components, they can still deliver the lion's share of their magic with merely competent electronics—such as they displayed when paired with the overachieving Channel Islands

Audio VMB-1's. Driving them with the Pass Labs XA160.8's was a magical union; I'm sure there are many others.

Further, I cannot name another speaker, at any price, that is more capable of playing the chameleon and disappearing more seamlessly into a room. The adjustability of the powered woofers and rear tweeter allow the speaker to be successfully adapted to just about any amplifier (save for the flea-powered, 7-watt SET variety), and any room of any size or finish. Other speakers have self-powered bass drivers, and some boast a reasonable degree of versatility in gain, but nothing I've seen offers the engaging spatial and tonal fine-tuning ability of the VR-55's excellent 3" leaf tweeter.

What makes this speaker so alluring, and such a value, is the way it is able to synergize its innovative, inert cabinet technology, class-leading resolution, crystalline transparency, tonal accuracy, top-to-bottom coherence, and complete room integration ability into a vibrant and indisputable musical soul. Make no mistake; while it is expensive, its accomplishments make it a bona fide value.

The VR-55 Aktives have more than just the ability to vanish from the listening room, leaving only the musical experience. They deliver music in the most resolute yet wholly organic manner I have yet heard in a loudspeaker below the \$100,000 mark. The VR-55 is a new landmark—the most significant transducer Albert Von Schweikert has debuted since the introduction of the VR-11 in 2004. In fact, I would argue that it is even more significant.

What Von Schweikert Audio has created with the VR-55 Aktives is a compellingly accurate, resolute, coherent, and extraordinarily musical loudspeaker. So expressively do they communicate with such a remarkably faithful and engaging voice that I simply cannot allow them to leave my listening room. I had neither the intention nor the desire to spend this kind of money, but because they are so utterly captivating, I have worked with Von Schweikert Audio to trade in my VR-5 Anniversaries and keep the VR-55 Aktives. They are my new references. **tas**