

Join Blumenhofer Acoustics in Wiki Wonderland

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I suppose it is crazy to drive from the Netherlands to the south of Germany on Friday, listen to a set of loudspeakers on Saturday and go home on Sunday, but the truth is that these loudspeakers have a weight over 300 kilos each and won't fit in my living room. I could not have imagined before that listening should go beyond what I once experienced with Wilson Grand Slamm X-1 or the Avalon Osiris this weekend. Blumenhofer Acoustics set a new reference, probably for the upcoming years and almost literally blew me from my feet.

Blumenhofer Acoustic is the company and brainchild of Thomas Blumenhofer, originating from cabinet-maker and audiophile. After 35 years of building loudspeakers he never forgot his first horn system, made in the cowshed of his father. When he was 18 years old he started the company and Thomas became famous for installation of folded bass horns in Volkswagen Beetles. After every car-hifi show or meeting, when his Beetle shook he went home with a lot of orders! In those years Blumenhofer was also active in the professional market, and in many restaurants and discothèques were playing his horn systems. Even in concert halls in Munich, and during live performances it was often Thomas who brought in the PA system. Amongst the anecdotes, are the lovely stories about the gigantic horn he built in his garden that sounded out for miles over the countryside; and his home cinema system that reached down to 4 Hertz. His favour for horn systems comes from (beside their high efficiency) the ability to reproduce dynamics. Owing to the lack of damping material micro details are retained and horns give Thomas the 'reality' of being present at a live concert.

On the ground floor of his company we find CNC-cutting machines for milling the mouth of wooden horns, made out of bonded layers of MDF, along with cutting tables and stock. The more expensive cabinets are always made from quality plywood, because plywood evenly spreads resonances; the more affordable systems are more often made from MDF. A Blumenhofer speaker barely contains standard components. The higher frequency compression drivers used are modified with a wooden compression chamber and a beryllium dome. Bass units use in-house developed plastic laminate cones or laminated paper; depending on the size of the cone and its use. Blumenhofer sources his materials close to home and almost every part of his loudspeakers is made in Germany - drivers, cones, magnets, electro magnets and of course all the cabinet work is made in the company workshops, where the real wood veneer is applied by Thomas himself. Apart from one model all loudspeaker systems are 2-way. You will always find a horn in it, sometimes just for mid/high drivers, sometimes just for the low frequencies. Model ranges are split into the Fun-series (bass horns) and Genuin-series with reflex cabinets. Above those types comes the Gran Gioia with its front horn, the 3-way Clara Luna and the top model Wiki. His business partner Andrea Vitali has been responsible for marketing and distribution since 2009, who has also business interests in Grandinote electronics and Cammino cables. Thomas and Andrea employ two staff and some part-time employees.

So, back to my visit and the listening system. The leading role this weekend is given over to the Wiki loudspeaker system. In the beginning the Wiki was just a model to study the behaviour of horns and the use of associated drivers, the woodwork initially destined to become fuel for the Companies central heating system! The results were so amazing however, that Thomas decided to build a second horn and developed the complete system. The name Wiki, which comes from the history of the Vikings, started as a joke. The wife of Thomas was looking for him, found her man standing in his horn system and asked him whether he was building a complete Viking ship. No wonder since the dimensions are two meters high, a width of 90 centimetres and a depth of 1,60 meter. The bass horn consists of five parts, to be assembled at the customer premises. The driver is a 16 inch paper cone woofer, radiating to the front in a short horn and back loaded with the large folded horn, with its mouth around the 10 cm beryllium compression driver used for the high frequencies. Voice coils do not move in standard magnets but in electro magnets for a far higher flux. The crossover has its own casing outside the main speaker and is kept very simple. In Blumenhofers opinion systems faults should never be compensated by filters or absorption circuits. One has to use top quality units and dedicated horns. Even the efficiency of the drivers is matched acoustically by the horn size and not by the use of resistors. Phase errors are eliminated at the listening position because the mid/high unit is

mechanically adjustable, so low and high frequencies reach the listener at the same time. This phase correctness gives the idea of listening to a single driver.

The 300+ kilo Wiki is intended for room sizes over 100 square meters, the listening area at Blumenhofer is about 150 m². Finish is whatever the customer wishes. Andrea hopes that Thomas is able to build at least six pairs a year, but Thomas disagrees, he wants to give his attention to other products as well. Do not talk about prices; they are to be agreed upon because they depend on the residence of the buyer and finish of the Wiki. To give an idea, you could easily buy a nice house in the country for a pair of Wiki's. The Wiki is fed from a beautiful system. The analogue source is an Acoustic Signature Ascona turntable, provided with a SME 2-12 arm and a Soundsmith Strain Gauge cartridge. The turntable weighs in at 80 kilograms, a solid aluminium sculpture with great speed control, big dynamics and has, due to the Strain Gauge cartridge, a very clean and distortion free sound. A Cammino interlink connects to a Kanzy KAAM 1000 amplifier, in this case without the use of the build-in phono stage, because the Strain Gauge has his own pre-amplifier. The Kanzy uses four Gold Lion KT-88 tubes per channel and four JJ Electronics ECC803 tubes. Invisible are a further four rectifier tubes inside the amp. Although the amp can be used in triode mode and EL34 tubes are part of the delivery, our preference is ultra linear mode with KT-88. The dual mono amplifier has two volume controls, left and right separated; this takes a little getting used to but allows ultimate flexibility with the musical output. A typical male thing I presume. Advantage is of course the lack of channel imbalance caused by the volume control. This Kanzy KAAM 1000 is gold plated. A more affordable and more durable type with vapour-deposited material is available. But the luxury of real gold gives a nicer feeling with the Wiki's. Blumenhofer suggests with most of his speakers the use of a tube amplifier. For the Wiki the Kanzy amp is his favourite, other available brands are Mastersound, Grandinote and Einstein. When needed for a special amplifier Blumenhofer will supply compensation networks to the customer. Built into the loudspeaker. Blumenhofers do need only a few Watts due to their efficiency, more power is of course no problem. Before I forget, the loudspeaker cables are Cammino Reference types.

On my second day at Blumenhofer, the monotone sound of the small van that took me to Germany has left my ears and the quietness of the surrounding countryside drops below 30 dB. It is time to get some life into the Wiki with help from the tenor saxophone of Bennie Wallace. From that moment on, the scenery is set for the rest of the day. Thomas took care to warm the system, which results in a very natural flow of music that easily fills the large listening area. Did I hear the loudspeakers just in background during the time I had an interview with Thomas, no, right now (sitting in the best seat) the saxophone really hits me and is in the space with loud dynamics. Normally a saxophone can only be this close to the real thing during a live performance standing close by. I do not recall any loudspeaker sounding so realistic. On all other loudspeakers I know, the presentation is always more "artificial" and smaller than this system. Nor is the sound stage too big or (worse still) voices overly large. This becomes pretty clear with Jennifer Warnes on her LP *Famous Blue Raincoat*. Drum kit big behind her voice, the voice itself in the correct proportions. The dimensions of the listening room are phenomenal for percussion and guitar, but just close your eyes to get intimate with the singer. Goose bumps on both arms and shivers run down my back. This normally only happens during concerts and almost never on reproduced music. We play a little more off the album, a track called *Bird On A Wire*, followed on my request by *Joan Of Arc*. I love the stage and space around the instruments. Hard to believe what happens. These are not loudspeakers, since no speaker could sound this homogeneous in my imagination. Everywhere things happen in music in front of me and I really can't stop the tears that come into my eyes listening intensely, because I cherish every second of this experience. For instance Phil Spector would be able to realise his "wall of sound" on this system. Seven meters wide force of Yello, anchored like a brick wall. Bass registers remind me of an angry grizzly bear. Instrument after instrument demands its own space. Too much electronic sound to get me into tears again, you could say I am appropriately impressed. A short circuit occurs in my brain the moment I open my eyes on the next Yello track. The Wiki's visually attract heavy attention; you expect to hear left and right, or both speakers individually. But my ears tell me the opposite. The sound stage is somewhere before you, certainly not coming from a pair of speakers, it feels and sounds like a bunch of speakers and every voice or instrument has its own identifiable position; the way PA systems used to be setup for pop concerts in the past. What I'm hearing has no match with what I see, during this listening to Yello, a feeling that will remain all day. The illusion created in playback bears no relation to any earlier listening experiences in my memory.

The LA4 cheerfully plays the LP *Just Friends*. This is a direct-to-disc recording from the mid-seventies. A sound splash to all sides and this is not related to dust on the record groove. The blazing saxophone and the guitar of Laurindo Almeida create a combination of moving air against very subtle chord strumming, with a bass in natural support. Percussion on the LP contains a certain sensationalism, quite normal in the days when audiophile pressings left the moulds. In those days a better balance existed between audiophile reproduction and music played, against today's standard of fussing with second-class musicians on many labels. LA4 is again rock solid positioned, playing with such easy and dynamics, only available from really grandiose and correctly designed horns. Let's not forget the importance of the Kanzy amplifier, or the influence of the Cammino cables and the way the Acoustic Signature/SME/SoundSmith retracts every tiny details out of the groove. Doug MacLeod shows in *Come To Find* how an acoustic bass should sound. Leave that to a Blumenhofer. His voice is over-sized this time, a result of the recoding since all instruments are oversized as well; even the harmonica, a pity because we lose all intimacy. The performance is very direct and micro details flow freely from the mouth of the horns. Whichever way you look at the system, it destroys many sacred cows, not just a bit, more like in an earthquake. Music is no longer reproduced; it is played at the very spot. The longer this record spins the more I realise that the recording technique sets me close to the musician and this is why the oversizing arises. The Isao Suzuki Trio/Quartet plays *Blow Up*, a recording dated 1973 on the Three Blind Mice label. OK, I surrender; this is by far the best system I have ever listened to. Whether it was at shows, in shops, in an audiophile's home or wherever.

Absurd the way percussion explodes in my face, or how a cello sounds just three meters away, even how natural bass tones find their way into the listening room without any trace of resonance. I love the homogeneity of the two (Wiki) units. Especially the dynamics that get you on your feet. Three Blind Mice is known for its close microphone techniques; I guess they were never able in Japan to master the record the way I could do now on this system. Horns colour the sound? On Sade, not a trace of nasality to be heard. You want it louder? It plays louder, louder and louder on request. What I experience is almost the same as I heard earlier from this attractive lady during a concert she gave in Munich in May 2011. In the recording backup vocals are recognisable as separate voices, percussion is dazzling fast with almost unlimited dynamics. Easy and fluent listening that could last for hours. No one holds me back when I dig into the vinyl collection of Thomas and put on an LP with works of Albinoni on the turntable, played by I Musici. Again this wide and open stage without a trace of harshness. The harpsichord tinkling in the thin air. Just close your eyes and the orchestra comes alive. Softly whizz the cellos, powerful violin playing, and bass with correct and truthful registers. Each and every element is there for a perfect evening in a virtual concert hall. I have to suppress the tendency to offer drinks and refreshment to each member of I Musici, so very tangible is this performance. Subsidising into the beauty of the music is easier than compared to any other system I ever listened to.

The pure love for the profession of loudspeaker manufacturing and the love for music enlighten the space around me. Tenderness and sensitivity on an immense system, gentle in the soft parts without any loss of power, or full blown with no reservation if the musical score requires. The soundstage is wonderful, not too big, not too small, with retention of the intimacy of Italian Baroque coming from the time Albinoni lived. Followed by flute sonatas, amongst others from Telemann, in which case the character and the tonal of the instrument is so good, that on opening my eyes I expect Thomas Blumenhofers daughter in front of me playing on her recorder. The recorder, I very well know from the time I was a child till today's attendance's of in-house concerts, has exactly the correct tone, brightness and expression.

I still have conflicting feelings after my visit to the Blumenhofer listening space. At the same moment I realise I will never be able to possess a wonderful system like this, the relief comes from knowing I cannot afford the price tag. I simply cannot raise this sum of money, nor do I have the space to put the system down in my living area. Never before any system managed to grab me this way and was able to hold my full attention for so long. The fact that my brain was unable to combine the visual aspect with the reproduction of sound coming from a loudspeaker system says it all. Close your eyes and the orchestra is there. So beautifully projected, playing so pure that it must be a live performance. Only on opening the eyes does reality return, but it disappears again as soon as the next record starts.

You wanna know a funny thing? That Blumenhofer is able to ensure the reality of the Wiki experience over the complete product range. By bringing in the Genuin Two model the flow of music changed as

well as the ease of the sound, but not the purity. Listening to this smaller pair I even forgot that it was not the Wiki playing, but loudspeakers with a price tag of 20.000 Euros. Even with the Fun 13 of 2400 Euros a pair a lot of the Wiki character came back to me. This is admirable, very admirable. Although the smaller types will never become Viking ships, the Wiki is far too unique in that view, a pair of Blumenhofer loudspeakers must be within reach of so many music lovers.