

Audiovector R3 Signature floorstanding loudspeakers

by Alan Sircom

Audiovector's R series loudspeakers represent the company's core. Yes, there is the more affordable QR series and in-wall models, and technically the Big Three – the R11, R8, and R6 floorstanders – all stand apart from the core line. But the quartet of R1 stand-mount, R C centre channel, R Sub subwoofer and R3 floorstander tested here demonstrate many of Audiovector's key values.

Finished in one of four rich – but not elaborate – finishes, the R3 is a two-and-a-half way bass reflex loudspeaker, the reflex port of which exits through the base of the loudspeaker. It has an unthreatening 91dB sensitivity coupled with a nominal impedance of eight ohms and not much in the way of nasty impedance dips along its frequency response. Which means, the R3 plays nice with a whole range of amplifiers and is particularly happy when in a relationship with a moderately healthy integrated design. Powerlifters and vast pre-powers are not rejected, but neither are they a mandatory part of getting a good sound out of a pair of R3s.

These Audiovectors are not big loudspeakers. They are the sort of size that flows well into a living room without the kind of form factor that marks you out as 'that guy'; the "I'm so audiophile I have 3m tall monstrosities in my living room" guy. They aren't small either; so you don't have to compromise in performance in medium to large rooms. The R3s are made for modern living and modern listening rooms. Look, we've all had a bit of an insight into other people's homes thanks to lockdown interviews, and many folk have come out of the woodwork as having a decent audio system in the background. And in almost every case, those decent loudspeakers are a pair of floorstanders, none of which are two-metre-tall behemoths. Based purely on this rule of thumb, the 103.4mm height of the R3s put them squarely in the crosshairs of domestic acceptability. Put simply, they hit the Goldilocks spot of domestic chumminess without too great a sonic compromise. Happy listening!

In the 'basic' Signature guise, Audiovector's R3 features a pair of 165mm/6.5" carbon mid-bass units with a R Evotech soft dome tweeter. This has a clever rear vent that allows ▶



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- ▶ some of the high-frequency energy to escape to the rear of the enclosure, making the tweeter quasi-rear-firing (in fairness, from experience this is more significant when the dome tweeter is replaced by an AMT design). The cabinet is designed to be as non-parallel as possible, using the company's familiar and elegant curved back.

As ever with Audiovector, there are two parts to the tale. The first is how the loudspeaker stacks up in and of itself. The second is the future of the product and its ability to be upgraded to Avantgarde or Arreté levels. This upgrade path – something that is both unique to Audiovector and has been a core part of the brand for years – allows a user to either allow the loudspeaker to move with the times and the upgrades brought to elsewhere in the system, or acts as a form of layaway; if you want – but cannot afford – the Arreté version, you can buy the Signature edition and upgrade as and when funds permit. While in reality the former happens with greater frequency (and, in the process, tend to skip to the full Arreté version than the intermediary Avantgarde step), the great thing about this upgrade path is that it means people tend to hang on to their Audiovector loudspeakers for a lot longer than many enthusiasts; if a part of being an audio enthusiast is ‘itchy feet’, then the change from Signature or Avantgarde to Arreté represents a change that would normally only be realised by a change of loudspeaker.

The move from Signature to Avantgarde is basically a change from the R Evotech soft dome tweeter to Audiovector's AMT (Air Motion Transducer) folded magneto-planar design. The move to Arreté changes the tweeter yet again (to the higher spec. Arreté AMT driver), and adds the company's unique Freedom Grounding network, with a ‘DFF’ crossover and the use of cryogenics in the ‘NCS Freeze technology’ applied to important components in the loudspeaker itself. There is also a special ‘nanopore’ damping material used exclusively in the Arreté model. The bass drivers and the rear-firing treble system (as well as the laminated baffle and the titanium coils) are retained throughout.

This ability to pimp out your speaker's innards applies to Audiovector's R and SR speaker lines (except the top R8 and R11, which are only supplied in Arreté grade). The upgrade path is a unique and extremely clever aspect of Audiovector's design criteria, but it means Audiovector needs to get the

basics right; a so-so design might be masked by OK drivers, crossover network and so on, but if you then upgrade those elements that so-so design becomes all the more exposed. In more ‘fruity’ terms, if the R3 Signature was a bit of a turd, then polishing it to Avantgarde levels – or effectively belt-sanding and then polishing it to Arreté grade – would not be advisable. Fortunately, the raw material that Audiovector has to work with is excellent, and the R3 is a more than competent platform to enjoy some quality pimping sessions.

Set-up, installation, and general care and feeding are not too problematic. The loudspeaker needs a good 50 hours or more of a varied music programme played at a good lick to come on song, and I'd suggest in those first 50 hours consider any installation as a ‘first fit’. There's a sudden general loosening up of the drivers around that 50-hour mark and if you spent a long time getting the perfect position for the loudspeakers before this loosening up moment, expect to reposition them afterwards as the bass just got that bit fuller. Things may continue to improve beyond this magic 50-hour spot, but 50 hours is the point where the magic happens!

Positioning isn't an Olympic sport here, and the usual 1m from the rear and side walls will give a good sound. Fine tuning (post run-in) can turn that good sound into a far better one, with more cohesion across the mid-range and a precise balance between bass depth and precision. Toe-in in particular seems to be the key component in that balance between good and great and be mindful of side-wall first reflection points, as the tweeter has excellent dispersion properties. If anything, I'd say this becomes less impactful as you move up to the AMT high-frequency units of Avantgarde and Arreté. As discussed earlier, the choice of amplifier partners is pretty open thanks to the driving characteristics of the loudspeakers, however, I think the choice will tend toward solid-state rather than valve designs. Not through some gross incompatibility – no flapping cones or immovable tweeters – just that the tight, tidy, big and beaty bass lends itself to use with solid-state designs. Doubtless, there will be dozens of people who not only disagree, but also have the system to back up that disagreement. But that's the joy of audio... it's a broad church.

That term – ‘it's a broad church’ – could neatly sum up almost everything about the Audiovector R3, especially in its Signature guise. Just as it isn't that amp or position fussy, so ▶

▶ the R3 Signature is hugely accommodating of music played. With no Glastonbury this year, the BBC has been running a sort of ‘best of’ both on BBC 2 and on its iPlayer. Many of these are ‘must see’ events (Pulp, Bruce Springsteen, David Bowie) but some are not so hot. Lily Allen’s 2009 appearance – in her wannabe wardrobe malfunction dress – is a fine example, and a fine example of what the R3 Signature does so right. Played with charm and gusto, tracks like ‘The Fear’ put you in with the crowd, where more ‘prissy’ loudspeakers will highlight the weaknesses in her voice and the occasional mixing hiccups. The R3 Signatures manage to convey just how high she sounds, where a lot of other speakers at this level either soften the impact of her smashedness or highlight it like an anti-drugs campaign. I prefer the R3 Signature’s more entertaining and musically enlightening approach.

This is helped by an infectious sense of rhythm, if we’re still allowed to use the word ‘infectious’ right now. You’d be hard-pressed to find a more ‘boppy’ sounding loudspeaker when you play something with a solid 4/4 beat and you’d find it difficult to spot a better speaker at playing anything with a backbeat than the R3 Signature at anything like the money. OK, let’s rein that in a little; you would struggle to find any loudspeaker that revels in a backbeat that didn’t mess up some aspect of the rest of the performance. In other words, when playing ‘Depth Charge’ by King Tubby and The Barrett Bros [*Pick-A-Dub*, Jusik, TIDAL] it plays deep and powerful, but that is not emphasised so much that it makes Mozart’s trumpet concerto sound like it was mixed Lee ‘Scratch’ Perry. You could easily dance around a wide and varied collection of recordings and think the R3 Signature perfectly acclimated for that music, exposing the myth of ‘that’s a good speaker for classical music’.

Some of this comes from an excellent dynamic range and headroom. Once again, the real-world strikes. Having a loudspeaker with infinite dynamic range is not only the stuff of legend... it would actively get in the way of the performance in a smaller room. The R3 Signature’s dynamic range is powerful enough to cope with the big swings of orchestral music and the microdynamic swings of more audiophile-approved jazz combos, but does so in a way that seems all the more real and relevant in context. In other words, the R3 Signature is ‘dynamic’, not ‘twitchy’.

The R3’s tonal balance is just about spot-on, too. The treble isn’t too soft or too aggressive, the mid-range disappears nicely, and the bass is deep and controlled without sounding too dry or too fat. Of course, there is room for growth here, thanks to the upgrade path. But primarily, the sound of the loudspeakers is both tonally accurate and

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Two and a half way, floor-radiating reflex floorstanding loudspeaker

Drive units: 1× Audiovector-produced soft dome tweeter with acoustic lens, 2× 165mm Audiovector carbon-fibre mid-woofers

Frequency Response: 26Hz–52kHz (-6dB)

Sensitivity: 91dB

Nominal impedance: 8Ω

Crossover point: 230Hz, 3.1kHz

Dimensions (W×H×D): 23 × 103.4 × 36cm

Price: £4,299 per pair

Manufacturer: Audiovector

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perfectly pitched for the sort of moderate-sized listening spaces often found in UK, European, and Asian homes. While the R3 Signature scales well into larger or smaller rooms, it’s ideal for that 12’x 6’ listening space.

Imaging is also good in that context. The R3 Signature gets out of the boxes well, making a wider sound than it is deep or tall, but also projects well into the room. You don’t feel like you are playing on stage with the musicians, but it’s very much ‘third row of the stalls’ soundstaging.

Oh, and R3 Signature goes loud, too. One of the concerns with modern audiophile loudspeakers is they are designed for a musical aesthetic that doesn’t allow a ‘wig out’ factor. There are great exceptions – including PMC, Focal and Wilson Audio – that allow the listener to have that genteel refinement at all levels, but also allows that time when only AC/DC or ZZ Top is good enough. That time when you just want to play some music loud and enjoy it. The Audiovector R3 Signature are not troubled by the volume control. So long as you are not trying to overdrive an underpowered amplifier into clipping – which is something of a death sentence for all loudspeakers – the R3 Signature will fill a medium sized room with graunching guitars, big, powerful drums, and hyped up vocals. You aren’t in the room with them... but you are in the same arena.

Audiovector’s R3 Signature is a loudspeaker with staying power, even if you decide not to take the upgrade path. If you do, it’s a stepping-stone to audio greatness, but given the R3 Signature is pretty damn great to begin with, this speaker might just be all you ever need. +