

Audiovector SR3 Avantgarde Arreté Raw LE floorstanding loudspeakers

by Alan Sircom



Audiovector is one of those solid, reputable Danish companies that doesn't make grotesque limited-edition models for the sake of it. So, when the company approached us to review its Avantgarde Arreté Raw LE model of the popular SR3 – one of just 100 pairs – we were somewhat taken aback.

“What's limited about it?”, we asked.

“It's made of concrete,” came the reply.

“OK, that obviously got garbled. Did you really say 'concrete'?”

The Raw LE model is very much an SR3. It's the same ported two-and-a-half way design, using designed-for-Audiovector, made-by-Scanspeak 165mm carbon/glass-fibre cones (with titanium formers and magnesium chassis) for the mid and bass, and the range-topper AMT folded ribbon tweeter in the treble. It has the same rear panel and base plate found in the Avantgarde Arreté version of the SR3. Just... finished in raw concrete.

In fact, the differences are more than just skin deep, but the headline change to this loudspeaker – the most visible change – is the move to a waxed 3mm thick raw concrete outer shell in place of the more usual wood veneers and piano gloss finishes. Fortunately, this concrete outer layer is extremely thin, meaning the loudspeaker is still capable of being lifted by lone humans without assistance or medical attention. It forms a sandwich with the existing NRFB cabinet – NRFB being Audiovector's secret-sauce acronym for its glue-loaded hardwood version of the HDF the company uses in its SR series. We don't know what NRFB means... I'm guessing it's not, 'North Rutland Fire Brigade'. And, as you might expect from a material used in the construction of roads, grim-looking Stalinist paradises and expensive-looking minimalist architectural paradises, a concrete shell is about as solid and rigid a material as you'll find in audio. It takes the standard – and already rigid – Audiovector cabinet and significantly ups its Young's modulus. In other words, stiffer than a very stiff thing that slept badly in an economy seat on a long-haul flight.

Concrete in the home looks great... in the right home. In fact, in the right location it looks perfect. Far from bringing 'multi-story car park chic' into the home, it gives a sense of purposeful minimalism that cannot be satisfied by wood or piano gloss. Granted, that presupposes a minimalist aesthetic that extends beyond the audio system and the likelihood is this will go into some very elegant, Spartan, modernist spaces, but for once this is the kind of loudspeaker that won't get moved by the photographer if your home is ▶

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- ▶ featured in *The Architects' Journal*. The other exterior change is a move to 24ct gold plated screws and fixtures, which adds a nice colour flash to the otherwise somewhat monochrome Raw LE.

Look closer and there are some subtle changes between standard and Raw LE versions of the SR3 Avantgarde Arreté. The AMT tweeter unit, for example, is the slightly bigger Version 2.0 design pulled from the taller SR6 Avantgarde Arreté tower speaker in the same line. This has a lighter (and, therefore, even faster) membrane than the one used in the SR3. This required a very minor tweak to what Audiovector calls its Dynamic Feedforward Crossover, and as a consequence Audiovector took the time to effectively ‘blueprint’ the crossover with components carefully selected for their tolerances and performance. Factor in the cryogenic treatment – and a variation on the wiring loom used in the flagship R11 loudspeaker – and this model is effectively the pinnacle of SR3 performance.

The easiest way to view these loudspeakers is to think of them as the Kobe beef edition of the SR3 Avantgarde Arreté. It takes all the best-of-breed elements of the SR3 as you might find in the already-refined Avantgarde Arreté version/upgrade, and gently massages it to be the best it can be. To recap, the SR3 has a three-step (four if you include its ‘active discreet’ powered version) good-better-best upgrade path, from domed tweeter Super through AMT and improved crossover Signature through to the Avantgarde Arreté version with improved cabinet rigidity, speaker/floor interaction, cryogenically treated components and more. The Raw LE comes in above that specification. Not massively above that specification – and in the unlikely event there was a Avantgarde Arreté Superhero Turbo Extreme GTi edition in the future, the Raw LE is close enough to the existing Avantgarde Arreté so as not to leave it out on its own. But, as the Raw LE is probably as close as it’s possible to get to the ultimate SR3, you are unlikely to get better than concrete.

If you are thinking this review leads up to saying the Raw SR3 LE is the best the SR3 can do, then you are about bang on. It retains the taut, crisp, and extremely rhythmic bottom-end performance and incredible clarity across the board (Audiovector was for the longest time Naim Audio’s distributor in Denmark, and that brand’s obsession with pace and rhythm has clearly left its mark). If you were to sum up the SR3 sound across the board, it would be ‘lithe’. The precision of that sound and its ability to react so rapidly to musical change and rhythm is paramount irrespective of grade of SR3, but as you rise through good-better-best, you gain some subtlety and grace to that sound. However, that seems to top out with the SR3 Avantgarde Arreté.

What the Raw LE version brings to the table instead is tauter, deeper, and faster bass, with greater transparency in the upper registers. The midrange – already a selling point of the SR3 – and the loudspeaker’s dynamic range remain more or less unchanged. The speaker excels at vocal presentation – ▶



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- ▶ Dan Auerbach’s ‘King of a One Horse Town’ [*Waiting on a Song*, Easy Eye Sound] deliberately and brilliantly sounds a little like CSNY backed by Motown’s finest soul orchestration – but with the Raw LE, those 1970s orchestral swells have more depth and punch.

The big thing to the Raw LE is it is more demanding of upstream performance than other SR3. The SR3 demands a good, powerful amplifier with a lot of grip. This is not the loudspeaker for someone with slushy-sounding valve amplifiers – it needs damping factor. As a consequence, using the SR3 Raw LE with merely ‘good’ designs can make for a listless and uninspiring sound at lower listening levels and unevenness at high levels. On the other hand, using it with some of the best solid-state designs (strangely, these are often also coming from Scandinavia... with products like the Aavik U-300 or models from the Gryphon range) and you have across-the-board consistency at low and high levels.

The SR3 Avantgarde Arreté Raw LE side-steps one of the main selling points of the Audiovector ethos – the upgrade path. Unlike almost every other loudspeaker on sale at this time, you can take a pair of SR3 Super loudspeakers and have them upgraded to full Avantgarde Arreté status. This clever way of improving your loudspeakers is not open to Raw LE owners, because they already have the best SR3 it’s possible to get. That doesn’t sound like much of a negative, but that’s about as near as it gets. Obviously this implies a certain amount of liking the basic trio of Audiovector SR3 loudspeakers.

I do like the Audiovector SR3, especially in its Avantgarde Arreté guise, so I’m pretty predisposed toward the SR3 Avantgarde Arreté Raw LE. The differences between the two are comparatively mild (you wouldn’t consider the SR3 a ‘veiled’ loudspeaker, but compared to the Raw LE, the standard version is subtly more veiled in approach) but shows just how much can be extracted from a good design by the use of careful tuning and uncompromising component tolerances. Of course, the improved performance is almost secondary to the styling, and the concrete-wrapped approach is surprisingly elegant and sophisticated. Concrete has gone full circle in architectural circles and is now a material of choice rather than a material of expediency or economy. In fact, it works so well, I would not be surprised if it appears in the catalogues of many speaker brands, especially as being able to finish your speaker in RAL colours does not have the same ‘wow’ factor it used to, and anyone who wanted their speaker finished to match their Lamborghini, has probably already done so. Concrete is a comparatively new, relatively rare finish in audio – I hope it won’t be over-used.

There are just 100 pairs of these loudspeakers in circulation, and most have already been sold. In fact, the company is clamouring for its review samples to be returned so they can be allocated out to some lucky Audiovector owner. I wish it were me! +



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Floorstanding two-and-a-half way bass reflex loudspeaker

Drive Units: 1× AMT tweeter, 1× 165mm carbon/glass fibre midrange driver, 1× 165mm carbon/glass bass driver

Frequency response: 22 Hz–54 kHz

Sensitivity (8 Ohm): 91.5 dB

Nominal impedance: 8 Ohms

Crossover frequencies: 350Hz/2900Hz

Power handling: 350 W

Dimensions (H×W×D):

103.6 × 19.6 × 36.6cm

Weight: 20.7kg

Price: £10,500 per pair

Manufactured by: Audiovector

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