

Ensemble ONDIVA loudspeaker *by Alan Sircom*

Some time ago, the Swiss firm Ensemble was best known for its standmount loudspeakers, with designs like its outstanding ELYSIA minimonitor. Over the years, the company has diversified into audio electronics, cables, tables, platforms, and floorstanding loudspeakers. But it never forgot the success of those early days and the importance of the standmount. Which brings us to the new Ensemble ONDIVA, and its matching ONDIVA ARC stand.

The ONDIVA is a standmount, rear ported, two-way design, with a distinctive 'wave' shape ('onda' is 'wave' in Italian), and they are designed to sit on the decoupled and deliberately flexible ARC stand.

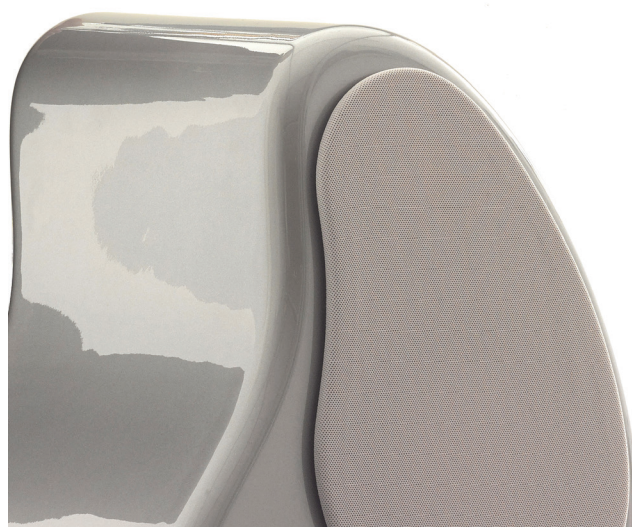
The ONDIVA features a resonance-damped 28mm textile dome tweeter coupled to a similarly resonance damped coated-sandwich 180mm woofer, with a 12dB/octave anti-resonance mounted crossover switching over at 1.8kHz. With a slightly above average sensitivity of 88.5dB and a nominal eight-ohm load, the loudspeaker is exceptionally easy to drive, although I suspect many will be used with the company's FUOCO integrated amplifier, anyway. Inside the cabinet, the ONDIVA uses Ensemble parts throughout: PROCAP capacitors, DALVIVO and MEGALINK conductors and all the gold-plated parts are treated with the company's CONTA+ treatment. Everything is considered, right down to the anti-magnetic screws!

The ONDIVA comes supplied with four little white nylon screws sticking out of the centre of four doughnut-shaped 'feet'. These screws are actually positioning guides to accurately place the ONDIVA on the ONDIVA ARC stand, and once suitably positioned should be removed. This simple, blindingly obvious way of placing a dedicated stand in the optimum position for the loudspeaker is also a very efficient way of decoupling the loudspeaker from the stand itself. Bear in mind, however, that any fine-tuning of loudspeaker position should be performed with these screws in place, just in case the loudspeaker shifts from its optimum point on the stand. It should also be remembered that these screws are used specifically with the ONDIVA ARC: Ensemble provides a set of eight regular screws and rubber feet for other stands.

The ONDIVA ARC has a basic, but effective, cable management system, which routes any loudspeaker cable along the centre-line of the ARC, matching its bow-like shape. This is not a problem when using Ensemble's own cables (or similar), but may prove a little bit of a challenge with Nordost-style flat cables, and especially thick, heavy boa constrictor-like cables with weighty boxes, which could in theory prevent the ARC from doing its job of decoupling the ONDIVA from its surroundings. However, although the requirement for Ensemble electronics and cables is not mandatory, I suspect many of these loudspeakers will end up being used with Ensemble's new DALVIVO loudspeaker cable.



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► Urs Wagner of Ensemble holds two things as self-evident; first, that music is not only a force for good, but has life-affirming, health-giving properties, and second, that these properties are best realised through the medium of acoustic instruments, recorded in a live acoustic environment with as little processing as possible. Typically, that means classical music. These two elements not only define Urs' wider outlook on life, but shape the products Ensemble manufactures. And the ONDIVA is no exception.

The ONDIVA is not a loudspeaker 'voiced' uniquely for classical music, but instead is referenced against the live concert hall and is 'less experienced' with music beyond that reference point, reflecting the ethos of the designer. The ONDIVA actually fares well with music far beyond its designer's experience, and predominately steers clear of 'opera singers trying to sing rock music' syndrome. That becomes clear because the ONDIVA is one of the few ported loudspeakers that passes the Trentemøller test: you can play 'Chameleon' from *The Last Resort* [Poker Flat] without the fast-paced nothing-but-a-transient ticks and beats 'gumming' up the bass ports.

It's not that the ONDIVA cannot play something like Avenged Sevenfold or Slipknot, it's just that it puts you in the kind of state of mind where you don't feel the need to play Avenged Sevenfold or Slipknot. Whether that's a good thing or not largely depends on how much of your listening time is spent listening to metal. If that really is your 'thing', the ONDIVA is unlikely to rattle your cage.

Rockist caveat aside, the ONDIVA is a lovely loudspeaker. It has a unique property that is common to every Ensemble loudspeaker I've heard to date, and that's a room-filling property that can only be replicated by omni-directional designs. The ONDIVA still has a distinct sweet spot between

the loudspeakers, but the off-axis performance is excellent. You can be sitting far to the left, right, walking round the room and even behind the loudspeakers and the tonal balance doesn't shift as markedly as most other dynamic drivers. This isn't just a novelty, it once again points toward that 'live instrument in a live room' effect, because that's how most live instruments behave in rooms.

The key aspects of the performance are fast-paced transient information and natural dynamic range. These are properties best exploited by acoustic instruments in a natural acoustic space, and such recordings are brought into the room by the ONDIVA. So, albums like *Somethin' Else* by Cannonball Adderley [Blue Note] sounds tight, smoky, and 'in the pocket', while 'The Lover of Beirut' from *The Astounding Eyes of Rita* by Anouar Brahem [ECM] sounds misty and ethereal. As they both should. However, 'Lucky' by Kat Edmonson from her *Way Down Low* CD [Spinnerette] accents the close mic'd qualities and she sounds artificially breathy and faux. Which probably says as much about modern studio technique and popular recording style as it does about the loudspeaker.

I can't help coming back to the word 'nice' time and again. This sounds like faint praise, but a loudspeaker this nice is easy to listen to, easy to love, and very, very good. It doesn't hide the truth of a recording – far from it, in fact – but the music it makes is very satisfying, just very nice.

The ONDIVA has a property that seems unique to really good loudspeakers; namely, that it makes you set a natural level for a recording, and that's not necessarily as loud as you might expect with rock, or as quiet as you might think from a string quartet. In fact, if anything, you tend to turn classical 'up' and rock 'down' through the ONDIVA; not because the loudspeaker accents the harshness inherent in non-classical ►



▶ albums, but because it gives you the opportunity to play classical instruments as loud as they really can be (anyone who's heard Mahler's Eighth at full roar in a live setting will know precisely what I mean).

This sense of scale gives the ONDIVA a unique feather in its cap. If you close your eyes, it will never once give the game away about its size. You will be convinced that you are listening to a large, full-range loudspeaker, rather than a wave-shaped two-way perched atop a single bar of a loudspeaker stand. This scale – best achieved with full orchestral works – borders on the uncanny, and is a delight to hear.

ONDIVA is a consummate detail retriever, especially (but not exclusively) in terms of soundstaging properties. But that soundstage is not designed to draw you in or impress you: the ONDIVA's soundstage is wide and deep, but you don't realise this immediately, as you might with some loudspeakers that present a huge soundstage as some form of impressive opening gambit. It's more a slow, inexorable realisation that the soundstage is orchestral in its scope.

What is truly impressive about the ONDIVA sound, however, is the solidity of those images within that soundstage. An audiophile obligation is to play a well-recorded version of Sant-Saëns *Danse Macabre* during a listening session. And solo violin is a perfect example of how good the ONDIVA is at producing an instrument rooted in space. The music is designed to be something of a hallucinogenic maelstrom of sound, but it's always music, not musicians, that should be swirling around you. And the ONDIVA does this brilliantly.

There is a lot to like about the Ensemble ONDIVA, especially if your tastes run to more acoustic, arguably more cerebral material. This is one of the nicest loudspeakers you can get today. And that is something to savour. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

ONDIVA loudspeaker

Type: Two-way, rear ported dynamic standmount loudspeaker

Driver units: 1×28mm soft dome tweeter, 1×180mm sandwich woofer, both custom made

Crossover: 12dB/oct, 1.8kHz crossover point

Frequency Response: 38Hz-25kHz (-6dB, in room)

Harmonic Distortion: 0.8% (average, above 100Hz)

Sensitivity: 88.5dB (1m/2.83V/pink noise)

Nominal impedance: 8 ohms

Recommended power: 50-180W

Connections: four-way binding posts, 6mm (recommended) or 4mm banana plugs, 8mm spades

Finish: Highly polished lacquer

Dimensions (W×H×D, excluding stands): 35×38×31cm

Weight: 15.8kg per speaker

ONDIVA ARC loudspeaker stand

Dimensions (W×H×D, excluding loudspeaker):

25×65×25cm

Weight: 15.9kg

Manufactured by: Ensemble AG

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