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Dynaudio Confidence C1 Loudspeakers

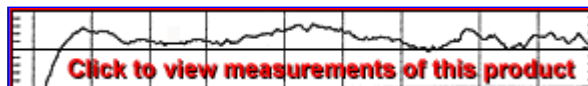
"...a size-defying demonstration that made me chuckle the first time I heard it."



by Kirk Midtskog

Many music lovers begin their audio lives with stand-mounted, two-way, "minimonitor" speakers because of their affordability, ease of placement, and lack of bulk. But when you consider that moving up to truly fine minimonitors can be expensive and require costly, heavy stands, and that such speakers typically have limited dynamic and frequency ranges, the practicality of floorstanding speakers can take on added appeal. Cone'n'dome floorstanders offer attractive cabinets in place of metal stands and usually have better dynamic punch. Their larger enclosures increase bass extension through additional reflex, suspension or transmission-line loading.

As is the case in nearly all things audio, the benefits equation doesn't end there. Not considering planars or horns, floorstanding dynamic speakers also have more that can go wrong: larger cabinet surfaces that can transmit unwanted resonances back into the drivers, and a larger baffle that can add diffraction artifacts. And if we're talking about a multi-way speaker, another crossover point is introduced, with all its attendant problems of smooth, coherent driver integration. The added bass extension and dynamic range of larger floorstanders may also be more difficult to integrate into listening rooms. They can overwhelm a room with standing waves and force you to place the speakers where their sound is



Review Summary

Sound "Right from the start, the Confidence C1s sounded pleasantly direct, detailed, open, and spacious, and they had good bass extension." "Their bass was pitch defined and carried considerable weight into the 30Hz range," and the C1s displayed "a quick, spacious, straightforward purity often associated with fine minimonitors, but they also conveyed considerable heft and physicality." "I typically associate this kind of aural physicality with much larger speakers."

Features "The bass-reflex C1 has a large port flared at both ends that exits at the bottom rear of the cabinet. The midrange/bass driver is mounted above the tweeter for better time alignment for a typical seated listening height, and this alignment also reduces interaction with the floor by placing the woofer higher than the usual tweeter-above-woofer arrangement

compromised.

Fortunately for those of us with small or medium listening rooms, Dynaudio's Confidence C1s mix the typical benefits of stand-mounted minimonitors with those of floorstanders. Introduced in 2006, the C1s are the latest and smallest addition to Dynaudio's Confidence line, which falls just below the upper-end Evidence line. The much larger Confidence C2 and C4 were both introduced in 2003, but do not assume that the C1s are a home-theater-inspired afterthought to complete the Confidence line. The C1s are high-performance stereo speakers in their own right.

The C1s measure roughly 8"W x 17 1/2"H x 17"D. They have a hint of Danish Modern appeal, and they actually look smaller than those measurements might lead you to surmise, because the curved, beveled, trapezoidal-like front baffle, a painted HDF/MDF/ MDF sandwich, appears to be floating in front of a 6"-wide cabinet. This unusual shape is said to help reduce baffle-induced diffraction and uneven dispersion patterns, and make all Confidence-line speakers less susceptible to some of the boundary-interaction problems that plague speakers in typical domestic listening spaces.

The bass-reflex C1 has a large port flared at both ends that exits at the bottom rear of the cabinet. The midrange/bass driver is mounted above the tweeter for better time alignment for a typical seated listening height, and this alignment also reduces interaction with the floor by placing the woofer higher than the usual tweeter-above-woofer arrangement would. This 6 7/8" driver has a one-piece molded MSP (magnesium silicate polypropylene) cone, a pure-aluminum voice coil, and a large neodymium magnet ring. The C1 uses Dynaudio's Esotar2 tweeter (common throughout the Confidence line), which is a 1.1" soft-dome magnetic-fluid unit with a thick aluminum-alloy front plate for high heat dissipation. The Esotar2 also has a pure-aluminum voice coil, an aluminum-alloy rear chamber with a built-in acoustically damped vent, and large neodymium magnet rings. The entire tweeter assembly is tightly integrated into the baffle for greater rigidity. The two drivers cross over at 1800Hz with 6dB-per-octave slopes. A single pair of WBT binding posts is around back

There are optional, well-made, two-post 25" stands (\$450 per pair) to which the thick MDF base of the cabinets bolts. The bottom assembly of the stand is a resonance-damping three-piece sandwich of steel, rubber and steel that accommodates the stand posts and floor spikes. The speakers and their sand-filled stands weigh a good 60 pounds each and could weigh considerably more with some lead shot added to the mix. The speakers come in cherry, maple, or rosewood finishes for \$6500 USD per pair, and in piano black or rosewood lacquer for \$7000. The packaging, user manual, and fit'n'finish of the review samples were all first-rate.

Getting started and setting up

The C1s' manual details that the speakers should be placed at least two meters from the listening position and the distance between the speakers should be less than the listening

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Use "The manual...gives refreshingly candid information about break-in and suggests 'several weeks running/playing.' It took about 350 hours for the C1s to settle in -- to develop their sound." "Dynaudio encourages fairly steep toe-in and recommends that you do serious listening without the grilles. I concur."

Value "How can a relatively small, stand-mounted speaker be value-competitive with a larger floorstanding multi-way speaker? If sonic performance acts as the primary guide, rather than sheer size and number of drivers, the Dynaudio Confidence C1s are worth every penny of their asking price."

distance. In my rather small 12 1/2' x 17' room, I ended up with the C1s placed 7 1/2' apart and around 9' from my listening position, when measured from the tweeters; so my setup was within the recommended range. The tweeters were 31" from the side walls and 68" from the wall behind them -- also within suggested range. Dynaudio encourages fairly steep toe-in and recommends that you do serious listening without the grilles. I concur.

The manual also gives refreshingly candid information about break-in and suggests "several weeks running/playing." It took about 350 hours for the C1s to settle in -- to develop their sound. If you hear any of the Dynaudio Confidence speakers, keep in mind that sufficient run-in time is crucial. Without this, the C1s had a prominent upper midrange and their bass sounded somewhat disconnected from the rest of the spectrum. Dynaudio also states that after the initial run-in period, "a couple of minutes [of playing] before every listening session will be helpful to 'warm up' the speakers." Nice tip.

Listening

Right from the start, the Confidence C1s sounded pleasantly direct, detailed, open, and spacious, and they had good bass extension. I don't mean good bass extension for a small speaker; I mean respectable bass extension, period. I am generally not a measurements guy, but I just had to haul out my *TRC, Check and Double Check* test LP [Westminster HiFi XTV 23649] to verify what I was hearing. The lowest tone on the *TRC* LP is 30Hz, and sure enough the C1s delivered it with power and definition. Even accounting for room reinforcement, just how Dynaudio pulls off this bass performance from a small two-way speaker whose given -2dB point is 45Hz more than intrigues me.

Associated Equipment

Loudspeakers – Coincident Speaker Technology Super Eclipse III.

Power amplifier – Gamut M200 monoblocks.

Preamplifier - First Sound P.D. 4.0 with Paramount Plus upgrade.

Analog - VPI TNT 3.5 turntable, SME V tonearm, Benz-Micro LP cartridge, Lukaschek PP-1 phono stage (with modified power supply).

Digital sources – Ayre Acoustics CX-7e CD player.

Interconnects – Shunyata Research Altair and Audience Au24.

Speaker cables – Shunyata Research Andromeda.

Power cords – Silent Source Audio Signature.

Accessories - Two 20-amp dedicated AC lines with FIM outlets, QS&D equipment

In general, when room reinforcement significantly influences bass response, the low frequencies become sluggish and uneven. Some notes stand out, while others sound attenuated. The C1s did not exhibit this behavior in my room. The synthesized bass lines on the compilation *OM=Chilled* [OM-248], especially "Planktens Cove," sounded even-handed and robust, while the midrange and upper frequencies remained unperturbed by the simultaneous bass demands on the speaker. Likewise, the powerful bass line from the *Swades* soundtrack [Super Cassettes LTD FSCD 1/846] came through cleanly, and this was a size-defying demonstration that made me chuckle the first time I heard it. OK, the C1s will not shake walls in a larger room, as some bass hounds crave, but their bass was pitch defined and carried considerable weight into the 30Hz range (and possibly lower) in my listening space. That's astonishing performance for a speaker of the C1's size. While my listening room may have just the right acoustic properties for the C1s' bass characteristics, I have had a few three-way floorstanders in my room that did not have the bass extension and power of the C1s.

The C1s had a quick, spacious,

rack, Tender Feet cones, Aurios MIB 1.2 and 1.0 bearings.

straightforward purity often associated with fine minimonitors, but they also conveyed considerable heft and physicality. "Concerto for Piano and Percussion" from the Ahn

Trio's *Ahn Plugged* [EMI CDC 7243 5 57022 2 7] illustrated how the snap and attack brought the acoustic instruments to life and how they were clearly placed in an expansive space. The C1s' uncluttered, straightforward sound was not achieved through a hyper-detailed presentation, though, but rather through a seemingly honest, well-balanced directness. On "Song of the Nightingale" from the *Stravinsky* CD [Reference Recordings RR-70], the orchestra was beautifully, cleanly rendered with an expansive, corporeal presence. I could hear and *feel* the musicians in space, not only on the loud bass-drum strikes but also on the more delicate instruments like triangles and plucked violins. I typically associate this kind of aural physicality with much larger speakers.

The C1s' soundstage was huge: deep, wide, and quite high. If I closed my eyes, I could easily imagine that I was listening to taller floorstanding towers that were placed farther apart and away than the C1s actually were, because the Dynaudio speakers created a soundstage that was truly expansive. The space was filled with air, and the stable individual images had a convincing verisimilitude. On the Ahn Trio recording, the "Oblivion" cut, the C1s reproduced the trio and percussion with a delicacy and spatial believability that blended seamlessly with the musical heart of the performance. Specific images were always placed into a realistically proportioned spatial context, as with the *Stravinsky* CD, which had a realistically scaled soundstage that fit the entire orchestra into a believable picture.

If I had to speculate on a way the C1s may deviate from tonal neutrality, it would be that they may have a slightly recessed lower midrange and upper bass -- a range that can lead to a honky or a bloated quality when room interactions were not well controlled through optimum speaker placement or use of acoustic treatments. Dynaudio may have designed in a slight recess in this region, or my room may have caused this perceived recess; I honestly can't tell which. The C1s did not, however, have an artificially elevated midbass to create an impression that a small speaker is trying to play bigger than it actually can. The cellos and upright basses on the *Songs of the Auvergne* LP [EMI AE-34471] were in no way exaggerated and very much in keeping with the chamber-sized orchestra that would be fitting for this material.

Perhaps owing to the advantages of small size, simplicity, and ease of placement within a room, the C1s did possess a kind of coherence that translated to a feeling of purity and directness that I believe is special at any price point. No part of their performance seemed at odds with another part. Micro- and macrodynamic events blended seamlessly with each other to create a reasonably convincing and enjoyable musical experience. Spatial cues remained consistent throughout their bandwidth, unlike with some speakers that can create a disconnected quality by spotlighting the upper frequencies or possessing a sluggish quality from an over-ripe bottom end.

The C1s really shone in their ability to dig out low-level information, while still keeping all of the details integrated into a musically meaningful whole. "Agnus Dei" from *Requiem, Five Anthems* [Reference Recordings RR-57CD] illustrated this in a passage at the 2:31 mark; there are four very quiet tympani taps that will either get lost under the system's noise floor or be mistaken for something non-musical that crept into the recording, such as a chair being moved. The C1s clearly showed how those light taps were strikes of the tympani and are part of the music.

Likewise, this level of resolution will show you how some recording engineers fool around with gain levels, such as those on Joni Mitchell's *Travelogue* [Nonesuch 9817-2]. On

"Cherokee Louise," the orchestral introduction has a passage that features two clarinets that apparently needed to have their spot-microphone level brought up and then returned to a more integrated level as the intro finishes up. The ambient noise level around those clarinets clearly goes up during their intro duet. Not all speakers (and electronics) can unravel such distinctions.

I bring these examples up merely to illustrate how transparent the C1s were, rather than to indulge in a boring discussion about recording quirks. When transferred to a purely musical context, this same level of resolution allows you to delve into your chosen music at a deeper level -- beautiful performances, engineering noodling, and everything else.

Like any transparent speaker, no matter how coherent or well integrated it may be, the C1s will not turn a strident recording into something else. "La Desaissada" from the *Songs of the Auvergne* LP spotlights soprano Jill Gomez to the point at which much of her upper range carries a distracting piercing quality in an otherwise beautiful performance. Even though the C1s can track the overlapping ripples of sibilance better than some other revealing speakers, "Poustoro" from the same LP has some sibilance that just can't be avoided, and the C1s did not gloss over it. Some listeners may favor a more laid-back, forgiving speaker, one that makes nearly all recordings listenable.

Also, even though Dynaudio has reportedly optimized the crossover to mitigate difficulty for the amplifier, the C1s are probably tube-amp compatible only with at least 70 stout watts or so, because their 86dB sensitivity and 4-ohm load will greatly tax a less-beefy tube amp. They just lapped up the 200 solid-state watts that my Gamut M-200 monoblocks served up. The C1s will also not do the large-scale trick in large rooms. Without a subwoofer to augment the lower end, they are not a headbanger's cup of tea. (What minimonitor is?) Their looks may not exactly cause all hearts to skip a beat, and they don't impose a visual "statement" on a listening room. They just sit there doing their fine job of things when fed a high-quality signal to work with. Their design seems to be more a result of function than any aesthetic consideration, Scandinavian or otherwise.

Comparisons

Other than my Coincident Super Eclipse III speakers (\$7000 per pair) also being a dynamic design, they are about as different from the Dynaudio C1s as can be. My long-term reference, the Super Eclipse IIIs are much larger floorstanding, five-driver, three-way speakers that weigh 92 pounds each. Although they work very well with good solid-state amps, they are clearly designed and marketed with tube amps in mind; their manufacturer-stated sensitivity rating is 93dB, and they are said to be a 14-ohm load. Even though the two speakers are different animals, my Gamut M200 solid-state amps served them both equally well. I had formerly used a pair of 95-watt, triode, push-pull tubed amps for a few years before switching to the Gamut M200s, so, I am very familiar with the Super Eclipse IIIs' performance with tube and solid-state amplification.

The Super Eclipse IIIs do indeed have greater low-frequency extension with accompanying impact than the C1s can muster. The large dynamic swings of a big orchestra playing full out with bass drum-punctuated crescendos sail through on the Super Eclipse IIIs; the C1s can sometimes balk on these passages by simply not going as low

Doug listens to the C1s

I can't say that I'm a fan of the Dynaudio Confidence C1's looks or even its build quality, particularly given its high price. To my eyes, the styling is odd to the point of being unsightly, and the build quality, while good, is really nothing special.

But I certainly like the way the C1 sounds. It has a rich,

or rendering a large dynamic swing with the same convincing slam. Thankfully, the C1s showed little evidence of awkwardly reaching a limit by becoming harsh or ragged. Unless severely pushed by a completely unrealistic volume setting, they just won't extend as low with requisite impact. That is preferable to obvious cone breakup or "bottoming out" that some small speakers will exhibit at even lower volume settings.

The Coincident speakers also created the impression that the back of their soundstage was a bit deeper than that of the C1s, but I never felt the C1s shortchanged stage depth on their own at all. The Super Eclipse IIIs had more lower-midrange presence, which can either work for or against different recordings; in some cases, it brings a greater feeling of gravitas or emotional import, while in others it can make the musical meaning harder to follow.

The Super Eclipse IIIs had a large soundstage, but the C1s created an even larger, more open and airy one. The C1s had greater and more refined upper-frequency extension, which gave them a quicker, more lively sound in general. The Super Eclipse IIIs' initial dynamic response sounded just a hair slower. The C1s' soundstage boundaries seemed to expand and flow more freely according to the music program. By direct comparison, the Super Eclipse IIIs sounded constrained, but that could also be a function of not having enough space to breathe in my room.

To provide context within Dynaudio's product line and a comparison to another stand-mounted speaker, I also listened to the Dynaudio Special 25s (\$5650 per pair with stands). The Special 25's internal volume is roughly 50% larger than that of the C1 and it weighs about 20% more. The two speakers share the same Esotar2 tweeter but have different tweeter-mounting hardware. The Special 25's woofer is a larger 8" unit, and its cabinet has a more traditional rectangular box shape with the tweeter mounted above the woofer.

full presentation that belies the speaker's small size. In fact, it sounds like a small floorstanding three-way with a reasonably sized woofer delivering the low frequencies rather than a stand-mounted two-way with a 6 1/2" driver handling both the midrange and the bass. Play something with prominent bass and everything but ultra-low bass is intact. The C1 sounds remarkably full.

The highs, too, are airy, sweet and extended. Unlike Dynaudio's much-less-expensive Focus 110 (\$1400), which has a slightly tipped-up top end, the C1 doesn't sound projected in the least. From head-to-toe, it sounds extremely well balanced, with a sweet treble region that's never offensive.

For me, though, I was most impressed with the midrange -- in particular, how it handled voices. From Johnny Cash to Mariza, male and female voices blossomed with presence and texture that no other stand-mounted speaker I've heard matches. There's bloom that makes the mids sound rich, but not overly so, since it never sounds obscured and congested.

The level of detail that the C1 displays is also impressive -- good enough to place the C1 near the top of the small-speaker heap. However, as resolving as it is, it doesn't quite match KEF's outstanding Reference 201/2 in this regard. The 201/2 costs \$5000 per pair, \$1500 less, and it is a knockout. The 201/2 doesn't have the bloom or romanticism of the C1, but it does have the edge in resolution, which can be readily heard with recordings that capture a lot of acoustic space.

When I consider its big, weighty sound, clean highs and glorious midrange presentation, the C1 clearly betters the sub-\$3000 "commonsense" designs I like so much. My reservations about the C1 are only in regard to its looks -- admittedly, a very subjective thing -- and its price. Yes, it betters those sub-\$3000 speakers, but \$6500 is a lot of money for any small speaker, particularly one whose appearance I have trouble appreciating. Even the C1's real-wood veneer looks pedestrian to me.

On the other hand, the C1 has a rich, robust sound that very few other minimonitors can match. Voices, in particular, sounded magical. Dynaudio has hit a near-perfect balance with this speaker, making it one of the best-sounding stand-mounted two-ways I've heard.

...Doug Schneider
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The sonic similarities between the C1s and the 25s were unmistakable. They both have the same quick, open, detailed presentation accompanied by expansive soundfields. The Special 25s did have a little more powerful, extended bass performance, and the volume did not need to be turned up as high to get the same output. In this regard, the Special 25s were closer to the Super Eclipse IIIs than they were to the C1s.

Where the 25s departed from the C1s were in areas of coherency, transparency, and musicality. Whether the results arose from the C1s' tighter driver proximity, the woofer sited above its tweeter, crossover and baffle optimization, or the closer driver sizes, the C1s simply struck me as being better integrated and more musically rewarding. The Special 25s were more tipped up in their treble response and had oodles of detail, but that detail was not always as well connected to the rest of their presentation, especially compared to C1s. Vocalists' lip sounds through the Special 25s, for example, could sometimes be a little more prominent compared to their throat tones and body resonances, thereby creating a slightly disjointed quality. Also, the more forward treble of the Special 25s, while initially dazzling, was actually less transparent overall. The details of one musical element could become overwhelmed by the next element without the first one being allowed to complete its uninterrupted course. The C1s sorted out complex, simultaneous, overlapping events better.

Old joke: "What's the most important thing in comedy?" Just as you see the person start to begin to guess an answer, you cut in loudly, "Timing!" The C1s have good timing. I would not be surprised if the Special 25s actually measure better, because they could render certain details exceedingly well, but the C1s' overall tonal balance and coherence just seemed to make more sense of the music.

Summing up

How can a relatively small, stand-mounted speaker be value-competitive with a larger floorstanding multi-way speaker? If sonic performance acts as the primary guide, rather than sheer size and number of drivers, the Dynaudio Confidence C1s are worth every penny of their asking price. At the end of the day, the C1s proved to be deeply rewarding speakers; they covered the hi-fi areas of detail, imaging, and tonal accuracy exceedingly well, and they always did so in a way that was consistent with music itself. The C1s thrilled me with their strengths -- their musical honesty, balance and integration. Their only weakness, as far as I can tell, was not being able to produce high output levels and crushing bass in a larger room - a moot issue in my case and for many audiophile who might consider them, I would imagine.

As a confirmed user of three-way floorstanders for 14 years, the C1 minimonitors won me over by pushing my musical buttons, and they made me rethink some of my assumptions about small speakers. The C1s could be easily dismissed as yet another expensive minimonitor with limited frequency range and dynamics, but that is for people who assess audio gear mainly with their eyes. I have not heard some of the *über* two-ways on the market, but I can say that the Dynaudio C1s serve all kinds of music with great aplomb, and this leads me to believe -- with *confidence* -- that they deserve to be considered part of that distinguished crowd.

...Kirk Midtskog

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Dynaudio Confidence C1 Loudspeakers
Price: \$6500 per pair.

Warranty: Five years parts and labor.

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