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Gershman Acoustics 30th Anniversary Black Swan Loudspeaker

Dualities

Andrew Quint

Exhibitors at a major audio show—loudspeaker manufac-turers in particular—have a leg up on the competition if they can score one of the larger demonstration rooms at the venue. Setting up in such a space, typically on one of the lower floors of the hotel or conference center, assures more foot traffic and implies a certain status. More importantly, if you're trying to interest dealers, journalists, and consumers in a large speaker, the sonic results are likely to be significantly better than those achieved in a smaller guest room on the 11th floor that's been cleared of its two queen beds and mini-fridge. Of course, those bigger spaces are in short supply and come at a significantly higher cost. But there's a reason why exhibitors with a prime space will often re-up on the spot when, on Sunday afternoon, the show organizer comes by with a contract for next year's event.

Eli and Ofra Gershman are fixtures at hi-fi shows—in Canada, where they live and work, in the U.S., and in Europe—and one always feels welcome in their room. Even a first-time visitor is treated like an old friend. Their personalities are very different, yet complementary. Eli is quiet and self-effacing, an innovative audio designer without a formal engineering degree who often "thinks outside the box" to come up with novel solutions to technical challenges. Ofra is the public face of the company; she has a background in graphic design and marketing but also a thorough understanding of her husband's loudspeaker design principles and the audiophile ethos in general. There are some parallels to the previous generation's most visible high-end audio couple, David and Sheryl Lee Wilson, though Dave Wilson collected fast cars and Eli Gershman races sailboats competitively when he's not conceiving of or building loudspeakers.

I'd heard Gershman Acoustics speakers at shows many times but always in smaller rooms. While they made a good impression, I always had a nagging sense that their full potential wasn't being realized, and I was right. At the 2024 Capital Audiofest, I found Eli and Ofra demonstrating with great success the 30th Anniversary edition of their Black Swan loudspeakers, powered by large VAC monoblock amplifiers in a 1440-square-foot meeting room—and picked them as my "Best Sound of the Show" winner. This had me pretty stoked, as I'd previously been assigned the Black Swans for review, and, as planned, the Gershmans dropped off the pair used at CAF at my place on their way back to Toronto. As their Grand Caravan headed off toward the Interstate—its gas mileage surely improved after delivery of its substantial cargo—my elation gave way to some doubts. My listening space is closer in size to one of those 11th-floor guest rooms than the Rockville Hilton's Madison Room. Fingers were crossed and silent prayers recited.

The Black Swans possess the capacity to unravel the ambiguities of the greatest music and recordings.

"30th Anniversary" refers to the three decades that have passed since the founding of the company rather than to the introduction of the speaker; the Black Swan is one of two Gershman Acoustics models to receive that descriptor, the other being the Grand Avant Garde. The original version of the Black Swan came to market in 2005 and was reviewed for TAS by the late Anthony Cordesman, who ultimately gave the product a Golden Ear Award. The current iteration is an imposing three-way design, standing 50" tall and weighing in at 235 pounds per side. Each channel is actually an ingenious two-piece system with a substantial cabinet for the woofer, fabricated from high-den-

sity fiberboard, that's straddled by a kind of A-frame structure supporting a truncated pyramid enclosure for the 1" soft-dome tweeter and 5.25" midrange drivers.

Though the system operates as a traditional tweeter/midrange/woofer array, there's actually daylight—less than an inch of space—between the two structures, meaning that the smaller box is mechanically isolated from the bass cabinet. The tweeter/midrange enclosure, on its sturdy legs, can be pulled forward and backwards with a supplied sliders to assure proper time alignment of the drivers, which can change with the distance to the listening position. Bi-wiring or bi-amping is an option, as there are two sets of binding posts, one located close to the bottom of the woofer cabinet and one on the rear aspect of the tweeter/midrange enclosure; for single-amplifier operation, the purchaser has a choice of Gershman's own proprietary silver/copper cable or a 4' length of Cardas Clear B to connect the two modules.

The most important difference between the 2005 model and this one relates to bass performance. The original Black Swan had a ported cabinet while the 30th Anniversary edition—like all current Gershman loudspeakers—employs sealed boxes. While having some well-known advantages over bass-reflex designs, this does present a problem for a conscientious speaker-maker to solve, namely management of the back-wave energy generated by the woofer. To address this, Eli Gershman developed his Bass Trap, officially known as "Back-Wave Control Technology." This is a separate compartment within the woofer cabinet, attached via a resistive line to the main chamber, that has an internal matrix construction to establish a pressure differential between the two volumes, reducing internal reflections and dissipating mechanical forces that could make their way back to the low-frequency driver. Implementation of this approach required the use of an entirely new 12" woofer with a dual voice coil and a larger magnet—a device manufactured by Creative Sound Systems (CSS) of Plymouth, Mississippi. (The tweeter and midrange drivers are produced by Scan-Speak.) Changes to the crossover were needed as well, which utilizes a combination of first- and second-order slopes with crossover frequencies centered at 350Hz and 1.8kHz. Also new with the 30th Anniversary version are isolation footers, eight per side, introduced to further reduce cabinet resonances.

The review pair had a high-gloss black finish, thanks to 15 layers of an Italian piano lacquer; a white gloss is also offered without an upcharge, but my feeling is that a Black Swan ought to be…*black*.

The time I spend reviewing any loudspeaker is typically split into two stages. The first, lasting a few days to perhaps two weeks (depending mostly on whether the speaker has been broken in and whether the manufacturer or a representative helps with initial setup, as the Gershmans did), is devoted to establishing that the product is performing as it should, with careful attention to positioning, experimenting with associated gear, and ascertaining that nothing's malfunctioning. The sofa that's the primary listening location in my room was moved back eight inches from its usual spot. The Black Swans ended up 17 inches from the front wall and eight-and-a-half feet apart, with the front baffle 11 feet from the sweet spot.

Grilles on or off? The Black Swan's walnut veneer-over-HDF grilles were surprisingly transparent, but I still preferred the sound grille-less. Bi-wire or not? That depends on the cables. Compared to my usual Siltech 880 series speaker cables, two identical pairs of T+A Speaker Hex cables were a step backward. However, some newly arrived wires from AudioQuest—ThunderBird Zero for the upper frequencies and ThunderBird Bass for the lower ones—were a fortuitous match for the Black Swans, which have some serious low-bass capabilities, and they saw service for much of the review period. The electronics were my usual Tidal components, a Contros DAC/controller and Ferios monoblock amplifiers; I played files streamed from Qobuz and local ones stored on my NAS with a Baetis Reference 3 server.

In the context of this review, I should bring up the fraught question of physical room treatments and DSP room correction. I do have a couple of room treatment products deployed in my 15' by 15' space (the ceiling height varies from 10 to 12 feet) that I consider "permanent," even though they are actually easily removable. There are six 2' x 2' GIK quadratic diffusors mounted in three heavy wooden frames attached to the wall behind the speakers and a single absorptive panel placed immediately behind the prime listening spot. Because my room is on the small side and the Black Swans do manifest a considerable amount of lateral dispersion—there's *no* drop-off at 30 degrees (at 1kHz), and they're just 2dB down at 45 degrees—I decided to try placing two additional absorptive panels at the first sidewall reflection points, which resulted in a significant

improvement in image specificity and bass focus. I went on to listen through my BACCH-SP processor with its proprietary DSP room correction engaged, with and without crosstalk cancellation, and heard some further enhancement of sound quality. However, I concluded that those last two interventions were not something that a potential Black Swan customer could be reasonably expected to implement, and I did my comprehensive observational evaluation of the speakers with only the sidewall absorbers as a modification to my usual setup.

After these issues were settled, I moved on to the second stage of loudspeaker assessment, the main period of critical listening that, for me, will last from two to six weeks and occasionally longer. A useful tool for this part of the review process is a carefully curated playlist of selections chosen to facilitate judging as many sonic attributes as I can think of. With these tracks—they number over 60 at this point—an effort's been made to drill down beyond an aural characteristic as broad as "bass" to consider more specific parameters such as bass power (César Franck's "Pièce Héroïque", as performed by organist Jean Guillou), bass extension ("The Hunter"—Jennifer Warnes), bass slam ("Too Proud"—Mighty Sam McClain), bass dynamics ("Tricycle"—Flim and the BBs), bass dimensionality ("LTMBBQ" from Wayne Horvitz's *Sweeter Than the Day*), bass tunefulness (Brian Bromberg's "Is That the Best You Can Do?") or symphonic bass weight (the Brahms *German Requiem,* a vintage Telarc recording from Robert Shaw/Atlanta). And this is where the Gershman Black Swans performed at a quite rarified level. They met the challenge of every one of the 61 tracks on the playlist, about seven hours of music in total, whatever the sonic metric being examined.

It came to the point where I was so confident that the Gershman loudspeakers would deliver the goods with *anything,* that I set the playlist to "Shuffle" and, without the knowledge of what was coming next for an hour or two at a time, enjoyed myself to an almost embarrassing degree; I was a little giddy. The Black Swans manifested exceptional flexibility when it came to the style of music they were asked to play and to the sort of recording they were encountering. This was relevant not only to the heterogeneity of low-frequency sonorities noted above (though the Gershmans certainly produced some of the highest-quality bass I've ever heard from a speaker system without discreet subwoofers) but also all the other aspects of recorded sound audiophiles attend to. Treble speed and extension, imaging and soundstaging, nuances of tone color, musical detail, rhythmic energy and momentum—they were rendered faithfully in all their glorious variability. It's standard for dealers to ask a customer about the kind of music they listen to before making a speaker recommendation. With the Black Swans, the customer's answer probably really doesn't matter.

I will acknowledge that, to some extent, the room does. Potential owners of this elite loudspeaker will either have a large space, or a smaller one like mine and a willingness to utilize room treatments, room correction, or both. Increasingly, I believe that there's no home audio system listened to outside of the nearfield that *won't* benefit from addressing the listening environment. Advances in both physical and DSP approaches to ameliorating room factors have leveled the playing field and made it possible for more audiophiles to accommodate a bigger range of top-echelon transducers in a typical domestic setting. But in the case of the Black Swans, understand that this is gilding the lily—improving upon what is already world-class performance.

As my time with the Black Swans wound down, I wondered about the name of the product. I'm no ballet aficionado but, like most classical music fans, I'm aware that in Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake,* Odile—the Black Swan—can be considered the villain of the piece. Ofra Gershman explained that the situation is more nuanced.

"The name 'Black Swan' holds a special meaning for us, inspired by both nature and art," she told me. "When we first saw a black swan, we were captivated by its unique and majestic beauty. Later, when we purchased our second racing sailboat, a J-24, we decided to name it 'Black Swan.'

"At the same time, the name also drew inspiration from the Black Swan character in *Swan Lake.* Odile, the Black Swan, represents a blend of dualities: wickedness and charm, strength and grace. These traits resonated with us….and when it came time to name the speaker, we realized 'Black Swan' was the perfect fit. Much like Odile, the speaker embodies a split personality. The balance of boldness and sensitivity is what makes the Black Swan speaker truly complete."

I'll buy that. The Black Swans indeed represent a kind of "duality"—the state of combining two different things—not unlike the Gershmans themselves. They possess the capacity to unravel the ambiguities of the greatest music and recordings. If a loudspeaker with a not-inconsiderable price tag that's clearly competitive with others costing much more, is economically within the realm of possibility, maybe a purchase of your own is in the cards. **tas**

Specs & Pricing

Type: Three-way, sealed box.
Driver complement: Scan-Speak 1" soft-dome tweeter, Scan-Speak 5.25" midrange, CSS 12" woofer
Frequency response: 18Hz –24kHz
Impedance: 6 ohms
Sensitivity: 88dB
Dimensions (max): 21" x 50" x 18"
Weight: 235 lbs. each
Price: $95,000/pair

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