

Moor Amps Ascalon-8: audiophile credentials

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Moor Amps Ascalon-8 loudspeakers

Moor Amps is a small, family company derived from a shared passion for music and dedicated to high-quality, British-built audio equipment. At its helm are Tim and Ruth Narramore with relations also involved, making this a real family affair.

Behind the brand is a passion for music along with a desire to use local, UK suppliers for manufacturing. Therefore, we see all final assembly and testing undertaken in-house and nothing is produced that does not meet the owners' high design and build quality along with what they call "exacting musical standards". It's a far cry from the all-too-common mass production in many areas of hi-fi these days, creating only market-driven products to hit specific price-points.

The Moor Amps marque is a play on the family name Narramore, originating on Dartmoor in the South West of England. There are differing versions of the name's derivation, 'North of the Moor' or 'Narrowing of the Moor' for example. Tim speaks of spending a lot of time exploring Dartmoor in his youth, and how it remains a very special place for him.

There is also a play on words in the company name in that one of the engineering philosophies at Moor Amps is 'More Amps'. This is how things began and led to a range of pre- and power amps such as the Angel 6 much admired by the Ear's editor and something of a reference point for him.

Creating a loudspeaker

The product range is called Angel because late one evening, after a long day of soldering, Tim powered up the first pre-production Angel 6 boards. One of his favourite live bands is Wille and the Bandits and he listened to tracks from the *Grow* album through the new amplifier. "It was clear from the powerful and emotional rendition of the track Angel that a breakthrough had been achieved, and the new amplifier was something truly different and special", he says. "I've

listened to the track many times since then on these amplifiers, and it never fails to be a moving musical experience – so the name stuck.”

Following wide acclaim for the electronics, Tim decided it was time to create a loudspeaker to do them justice. After considerable work and many iterations, auditioning various drive units, the Ascalon-8 was shown in prototype at the Bristol Show in February.



Ascalon was chosen as the product name, being a legendary holy sword forged by God for the Archangel Ariel to combat against the darkness. As such, it could be a tool used by the angels to bring music into the light. The number 8 relates to the fact that it is designed around an eight-inch woofer. We may see an Ascalon-6 or even an Ascalon-10 in due course, I am told.

Design

Since I first heard the Ascalon-8 at the Bristol event, taken with their neutrality while filling the entire exhibition space with a really involving sound, Tim spent the next six months on various small refinements until he was completely happy with the sound.

The formal launch was at June's Northwest Audio show in Cranage, by when a slight midrange harshness had been evened out and fine-tuning of the crossover network completed. Production finally got underway in October last year once a new midrange front-plate was created and a thumbs-up received from key dealers on the sound quality.

The tweeter is a high-end 25mm soft-dome from specialists SEAS, based in Norway, with the mid and bass units from Volt who are based in Dorset, not far from Moor Amps themselves. The two-inch (52mm) soft midrange dome was selected for its smooth, extended response with minimal colouration and low distortion over the critical midband frequencies. It comprises a one-piece fabric dome/surround coupled with a lightweight Kapton/Nomex, single-layer, round wire copper voice coil. Its magnet develops high flux density due to its precise gap clearance enabling excellent heat dissipation for high power handling and efficiency.

Volt's 8 inch bass driver in the Ascalon-8 unit uses a symmetrical field magnet system with a long-coil for large linear excursion capability. It features double rear suspensions for transient stability at high drive levels while the cone is doped for minimal coloration. Crossover frequencies are 900Hz and 3.5kHz, with the network built on a pair of circuit boards (one for the bass and one for mid/treble). These are matched to work with each driver's roll off



characteristic: second-order modified Bessel because Tim finds Bessel the most natural-sounding crossover where drivers permit slow roll-off.

He took particular care to flatten the responses with impedance matching networks, both to improve the extended flat response and to minimise impedance changes and make the speakers easier to drive by a wide range of amplifiers.

Crossover components and internal wiring have been selected for the most natural sound character as well as accurate dynamics and linearity. A choice Tim's been evolving for the past 30 years, I am told. These are optimised for vibration performance as they have to live inside a loudspeaker, and include extremely low ESR industrial-rated capacitors, metal-film resistors and silicon-coated wiring. Although he's tried many audiophile-grade components over the years, Tim keeps coming back to the sound of this combination.

The cabinet is hefty, constructed from 24mm birch ply (and made at a family member's carpentry business) with extensive internal bracing and a good deal of damping. The rectangular port, at the base of the rear baffle, has been very carefully designed for controlled, extended bass and has very low group delay.

On the rear connection panel are boost/cut switches to control the midrange (900Hz - 3.5kHz) and the treble (3.5kHz to >20kHz) by +/- 1dB. These can compensate the reflectivity of the listening room when used individually, or compensate the bass character of the room when used together, such that cutting mid and treble by 1dB, the audible effect is to increase the bass by 1dB. This is the setting adopted by Moor Amps at shows. Each speaker has three sets of binding posts, to feed the drive units individually if required. For the review, I left the wire links in place for single-wiring.

Installation

Such is the port's construction that the Ascalon-8s work best when far closer to the rear wall than might be imagined. In fact, in my compact listening room I found the optimum position to be just 14cm away and angled in slightly for best imaging. Further out into the room and the bass reduced drastically. These are domestically-friendly in that they not only can, but should be placed against the wall and I got them to work well in a modest-sized room.

At first there were some issues, and in the presence of the designer who had delivered them and helped with the unpacking. The sound was rather 'shouty' with a pronounced midrange and rather too strong in the all-important presence region. Sure, these were fairly new drive units but of more concern was that the loudspeakers were shipped in cold weather. Over the course of just 24-hours in my listening room, with white noise played through continuously, the situation improved dramatically. There was still something not quite right though; integration not as spot-on as it should have been and it took a while to solve the issue.

The speakers sit on over-sized wooden plinths, the entire area of which are in contact with the floor. I found that by using isolation cones at the corners and reducing speaker/floor contact

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area, improved matters such that we could begin to hear all that the design had to offer. Tim says that sometimes such cones, or spikes, work but they can also flatten the dynamics and reduce the speakers' transient response. I also found it beneficial to use the treble and midrange 1dB cut switches. These controls allow the Ascalon-8 to be used successfully in a far greater number of acoustic settings.



Sound quality

Coupled to the mighty Hegel H600 streaming amplifier and as part of our review of that hunk of a powerhouse, the Ascalon-8s proved they were highly capable loudspeakers.

I have never heard so much low-frequency information from George Ezra's hit Shotgun in my listening room, which also revealed just how loud the system can go without any hint of clipping, the sound remaining clean and yet thunderous. The vividness and realism were unlike anything I've heard in this room before. The clear sound of the singer's breath intakes and level of both mid and treble detail simply added to the overall enjoyment.

The effortless delivery continued with Tonight, Tonight, Tonight from the Genesis album *Invisible Touch*. The sheer smoothness and clarity, the fluidity of the reproduction without any restriction as we had the lower registers full of power and the upper ones sparkingly radiant, showed that these speakers matched very well to my acoustic environment.

My final immersion, before the listening panel arrived, was with a Radio 3 concert by the Lucerne Festival Orchestra of Bruckner's *Eighth*. Here the entire room was filled with the music and the atmosphere of the concert hall so evocatively captured. In this three-way speaker and mighty-amp pairing we have something very special indeed.

Gangnam Style

With the listening panel in place the music changed and we began with the smash single Gangnam Style from Korean rapper Psy because they wanted to test this heavyweight speaker's bass credentials. They sat in awe as the cones visibly moved, such was the level of bass the Ascalon-8s could generate. The floor even vibrated, while the vocal detail was immense. Certainly, the designer has created a loudspeaker capable of sonorous bass, clean midrange and detailed treble which are presented as a whole.

Switching to Starbuck's Moonlight Feels Right, with its amazing xylophone instrumental break in the middle, and the accomplished drive unit integration was again evident. We were presented with an holistic soundstage that was simply enormous, not least the speakers themselves are quite large. But the image went so far beyond the cabinets and projected into the listening room but not in an obtrusive way as is the case with many modern designs which seek merely to excite. No, this was a rounded sound with enormous ability to involve, even

absorb the audience who soon had feet tapping as we found the Ascalon-8s to pass muster in the pace, rhythm and timing department.

Revealing just how much detail they can extract from music, the Ascalon-8s did a fantastic job of reproducing Suburbia from the Pet Shop Boys, not least the abundance of sound effects on the track. Here we have a speaker that's aimed at the music lover; not a studio monitor to analyse the sound but a transducer capable of exciting the listener and, literally, bringing the music home across an extremely wide frequency range. The smoothness, detail and yet delicacy of the treble from that SEAS soft dome was remarkable and is one of the best implementations of the driver that I've heard.

Finally, we switched to off-air sources and BBC Radio 1 were playing unquestionably one of the biggest songs for the last few years in Rain On Me by Lady Gaga and Ariana Grande. Via the highly-compressed transmission chain the pumping bass was something else. Again, it felt as though the floor was moving under our feet while the broad smile across the panellist's faces indicated their high regard for the Ascalon 8's ability to not just entertain but extract musical joy from recordings and fully immerse the listener in the presentation.

Conclusion

With high scoring from my individual listening and from the panel, across a wide variety of source material, my nagging doubt was about the price until I saw just how other much three-way floor-standers now cost. One adaptation of a classic BBC design was nearly £18,000 while a three-way that I used to rely on in studio work is now priced at over £12,000 – both passive designs. In that context the Ascalon-8s are reasonably priced.

I have to concur with the comments made by some of Volt's staff who heard the Ascalon-8s at the Bristol show: this is one of the very best implementations I have heard of those hand-made British drive units. With the cabinet also sourced in the UK and construction completed down in Dorset, we have a rather special product here of true audiophile credentials.

My experience is that the Ascalon-8s work very well in a compact listening room of solid construction. I suspect most partnering will be with Moor Amps' own electronics but, have no doubt, the Ascalon-8s are fine loudspeakers which work well with other competent amplification as we discovered.

