

Shahinian Obelisk Loudspeaker

By Jason Hector



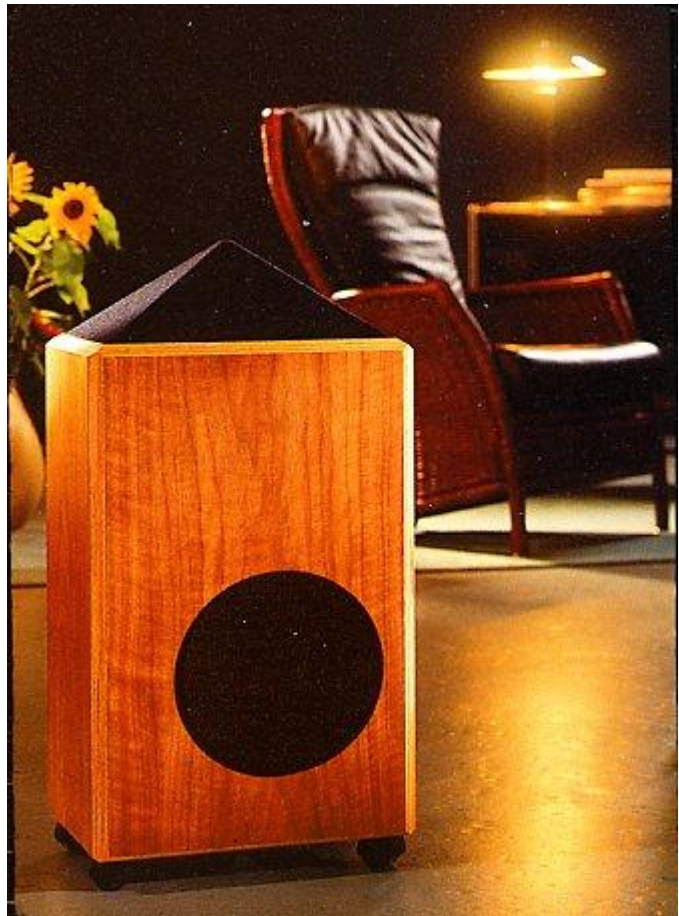
There are many larger than life personalities in hi-fi design. In fact audio engineering seems to attract men with a vision, or heretics by any other name. Richard Shahinian, the owner, creator of Shahinian Acoustics, is one such man. It is beyond the scope of this review to delve deeply into Shahinian's beliefs when it comes to speaker design. These will be explored will be explored in this magazine in considerable detail in a forthcoming interview with Dick himself. Suffice it to say he does not believe in the common direct radiating loudspeaker concept, claiming it does not adequately represent the soundfield of real instruments and so is inherently flawed. Shahinian is convinced that speakers should radiate sound in all directions to more realistically portray instruments. I am not qualified to pass technical comment on these views, but

what I can say with absolute certainty is that Shahinian speakers are capable of an effortless and organic musical reproduction, which fills any listening space with a very real sense of scale and performance. The characteristic sound of a pair of Shahinians, and believe me when I say that the whole range from the little Super Elf to the majestic Diapason share a family sound, majors on portraying integrated musical performances in a low distortion and above all natural manner. The whole range is available in the UK through John Burns of Pear Audio.

I have been a fan of Shahinians for quite a few years now since I first heard Arcs at my dealer's. I was busy chatting away at the back of the demonstration room when the music started. Within two minutes the Arcs had completely captivated me. On closer listen they seemed a tad laid-back (bear in mind I was using Linn Kans at this time) and seemed lacking in some detail, but this concern quickly disappeared as I got used to their unusually natural presentation. After a few minutes I realised that I would have to have a pair because of their ability to communicate music like no other speakers I had heard. What was truly surprising about this reaction was that the system was CD fronted and being a bit of a vinyl head I have always failed to see the attraction of the silver disc and to be honest I used to struggle to listen to music from CD. I feel that most speakers try to pull CD apart, but Shahinians manage to emphasise the different aspects of the medium resulting in a persuasive and enjoyable medium.

After I had bought a pair of Shahinian Arcs and felt happy with them I made a common hi-fi mistake, I listened to something I couldn't afford but from then on felt a need to have. The production question was the Shahinian Obelisks, the next speaker up from the Arcs. Now that I have been able to put the pennies together (I would not have allowed them into my house until I could afford a pair!) it is the Obelisk that is the subject of this review. However I've actually only gone and done it again with the Obelisks big brothers the Hawks (will it never end? Will I ever learn?). Therapy, namely a firm hand from my wife, is keeping this particular lust under control – along with the risk of bankruptcy.

The Obelisk was the first speaker designed and built by Shahinian and it appeared in 1977, giving it the sort of product lifetime normally reserved for a Salisbury amplifier or a certain Scottish turntable to name but two. In a similar vein, and perhaps even more than these other designs, the Obelisk has continuously improved over the years, to the extent that today's Obelisk could not simply have been built in 1977. The Obelisk has always been a pseudo-omni or poly-directional loudspeaker of compact dimensions, to use Shahinians own description, that is ideally suited to modern living spaces. Well, my front room anyway. The speaker cabinet is constructed from 19mm thick ply made from 13 sheets of Finland birch. All four of the major surfaces are finished in a variety of available veneers. The corners are shaved off to expose the ply structure and that alone certainly gives the speaker an interesting and distinctive look. But add in the rest of the design and we are clear of the prevailing orthodoxy of loudspeaker design.



A true three-way design, the Obelisk bass frequencies are courtesy of a front mounted eight-inch polypropylene drive unit which is mounted off centre, I guess to avoid baffle standing waves, although the speakers are not supplied as a mirror pair. The bass driver is loaded by a folded transmission line that terminates in a rear passive radiator. The rather complex arrangement allows the use of a low Q drive unit and a high Q radiator to generate a fast and tight loudspeaker that is surprisingly still capable of sounding rich, powerful and both tonally and harmonically correct. I say surprisingly since many loudspeakers that sound fast and damped in the bass also sound lean and incapable of generating the palpable pulse of sound that many bass instruments produce when live. Either that or the bass is under damped and

left to wallow completely at will, with the end result in the worst case that the listener seems to be presented with two tunes when one is intended. The Obelisk allows you to have your cake and eat it. This is ably demonstrated with the perennial Sheffield Steel by Joe Cocker, an extremely dynamic recording, especially the drums on tracks like Ruby Lee. You immediately appreciate the speed of the Obelisk bass, its extension but also the ability to experience power and harmonic content of a whole drum response truly involving you in the rhythm of this track. These speakers thrive on material like this. The interaction between musicians is well presented and the whole is integrated very persuasively; you can't help but be swept along with the musical message.

Setting a Shahinian tradition for the company's larger speakers, the Obelisk takes a multiple drive unit approach. Rather than the single midrange and treble unit firing toward the listener found in typical three ways, the Obelisk has two 38mm Titanium dome midranges, and four Titanium/polyamide dome "supertweeters". These six drivers are mounted on the faces of a pyramidal structure with a midrange and treble unit firing fore and aft and the other two tweeters firing into and out of the plane made by the loudspeakers. This arrangement achieves the poly radial radiation pattern preferred by Shahinian and is taken to its extreme in the Diapason loudspeaker with its 14 (yep 14!) mid and high frequency drive units per channel plus two driven bass and two passive units of course. The pyramid of mid and high frequency drivers is atop the ply cabinet and all the active drive units are covered by protective "grilles" which should be left on during use. The end result is a speaker that looks not dissimilar to a shortened version of the London office block Canary Wharf, although the entry price is significantly lower. The crossovers in this speaker are yet another unusual design as they do not include Zobel networks or resistors and are tuned by ear. This is a strategy that can lead to problems as it makes it much more difficult to match the drive units in the speaker to give an even response, especially when you up the ante by including so many. So the Obelisks even, in room tonal balance (measured, simply, at the listening position with an RS audio power meter and test tone sweeps from a sinusoidal signal generator and of course by ear) is a great result.

Sharing power across all of these drive units must also help to explain why the Obelisk is unburstable, and try as I might, since I first heard these speakers I

have yet to hear them harden at high volumes. This is particularly obvious with a large choral work like the Mozart Reuim Mass. We are presented with a beguiling all enveloping sound field that the listener has no difficulty falling into, and a fascinating rendition of the scale of the acoustic space which is simply missing in most systems. On this sort of program liberal application of the volume control causes many speakers to start to screech as control of the tweeter becomes a thing of the past. Not with the Obelisk. They are always in control and I am certain that they will keep going long after you or the amplifier have waved the white flag. These speakers do not require behemoth amplifiers to perform in most situations, but they do appreciate current capability because of their pretty peaky (it's actually the high frequency impedance troughs that have tended to upset some amplifiers in the pas) impedance curve. I would certainly expect some valve amps to struggle. The Lavardin IS Reference could not quite cope, even at moderate levels, while regular readers will know I have used the beefy Rotal integrated to drive these speakers during my review time with it to good effect. But they really appreciate the Naim NAP 250 as a minimum (a pair of 135's are preferred) or my current favourite devices, the Dynavector HX75 or HX 1.2 power amplifiers.

Now take Malher's 5th Symphony and the second part, the Scherzo. A constantly changing piece of music where we find the orchestra following several instrumental themes. With the Obelisk each is easy to follow with the various instruments presented with timbral accuracy, the bass rasps powerfully, the strike of timpani washes over you and around the massed strings in the foreground. But the whole is allowed to be greater than the sum of these parts as intended by Malher. Here we also find the one area where the Obelisk will not be appreciated by all: that is the lack of pinpoint, tightly focused Wilson-esque stereo image. The Obelisk (and other Shahinians) present a wide sound-field, that is more than capable of filling very large spaces and which does extend into three dimensions but the image is more diffuse than with some direct radiating speakers. To me this is a non issue for several reasons: firstly stereo imaging is of secondary importance to the musical performance and message, and secondly the Shahinian style of imaging seems more genuine and less forced and contrived anyway. As a consequence of their radiation pattern there is also a huge sweet spot (more like a sweet acre) allowing more enjoyments for off axis listeners and

making a pair or more of these speakers excellent for home cinema use. What these speakers do extremely well is portraying a realistic sense of scale, a difficult concept to explain. Take the comparison between a solo singer and a full choir (back to the Mozart Requiem). With some systems the soloist seems to grow to fill the same aural space as the full choir and seem overblown, not with the Obelisk. When the full choir takes up the lead up the lead the power and their physical size is accurately portrayed without losing any of the subtlety of the single exposed soloist.

Electrical connection is to multi way binding posts which are mounted under the speakers. A tidy solution but make sure your plugs are a good fit to avoid them dropping out. Shahinian supply pairs of moulded banana plugs with their speakers that provide a good fit and do not allow the amplifier outputs to be shorted but be warned if you use your own plugs. Spade connectors and a spanner a safer solution. The bottom connection plate also contains a fuse holder and at the end of describing the construction and design of this speaker we come to the final anachronism, the supports that keep each speaker off the floor. Surprisingly for a speaker with this high level of performance (and price) each Obelisk is mounted on four plastic castors. Well Shahinians are nothing if not consistently different! Some of you reading this may now have trouble taking these speakers seriously but let me reassure you that if anything sounded better it would be used. I know after the fruitless experimentation I undertook to try to bypass the anonymous and rounded plastic feet of the Shahinian Arcs; big sharp spikes = good speaker, right? Wrong! Theoretically the casters do allow you to store the speaker against the wall and bring them out for listening, although I would not recommend this as the speakers do seem to sound best when left in-situ, despite the fact that they are remarkably unfussy when it comes to actual placement. They do require at least 12" of free space behind them and prefer space to their sides. I found the best results with them a little further apart than I was away from them. This relaxed behaviour with respect to room position is a characteristic of the Shahinian range and stems again from the sound radiating pattern.

One word of warning, these speakers have the longest and most tortuous run in of any loudspeaker I and anybody else who has experienced them have ever heard. Straight out of the box they sound rough, with little and badly defined

bass. After a few hours they seem to have settled and sound pretty good, great you think, that was painless then over the next month you enter a frustrating roller coaster period where they seem to improve then go backwards. I ran them in during my day at work leaving the TV playing through them and this helped speed the process but I could never predict what I would find on returning home. At times the treble and midrange sound muffled, at others the bass had no connection to the rest of the music. The bassist wasn't just playing with poor timing, he seemed to be in a different band and playing another song! After a fortnight I seriously considered returning them to John Burns thinking there was a fault. "Bear with them" I was told. Great advice when I had just looked a right idiot in front of a work colleague (they sound like that and you paid how much?!?) who wanted to hear them! Fortunately John's experience proved correct and they gradually achieved their consistent high performance. All I can advise is to persevere and make sure the demonstration pair you hear are fully run in. Because once they are settled in, your biggest worry is how to get enough sleep as frequent early morning listening sessions will become unavoidable.

The Obelisk is not just about playing large massively dynamic music. Witness the beauty and emotion in a vocal performance like Rickie Lee Jones' – Its like this (a great album that you should all own) on the Obelisk and you will be entranced. Or take the portrayal of the tension in the spaghetti- Western like tracks on Calexico's The Black Light, acapella brass beautifully rendered with the rasp of trumpet fully intact and correctly grating at times. Excellent and most impressive is the ability to communicate these rhythmic and seemingly simple tracks with an enthusiasm that is infectious, revelling in the complex interplay of the band members. When presented with such a complete musical ability it seems somewhat churlish to dissect the sound by frequency, so I won't dwell on this. I've already mentioned the bass which is very impressive for the cabinet dimensions, the mid range and treble are both extremely clear and free from distortion, in fact the Obelisk is almost panel like in this respect. When you are used to listening to a pair of Shalinians other speakers sound broken and disjointed when you listen to them. They lack the complete integration of musical strands and natural exuberance of these speakers. Indeed it takes me a fair time to readjust to a directly radiating speaker. All of

which lends an inescapable credence to Shahinians views; it may not be the only way to design speakers but it surely is an effective one.

I'll leave it for Dick Shahinian to sum up the Obelisk in his own oh so correct words and style "For its size and price, its actual response is nothing short of remarkable . . . It recreates space . . . and possesses a sense of scale. It is still unique; it makes music!"

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