

Product review

Vandersteen 3A Signature Loudspeakers By Doug Blackburn



Vandersteen 3A
Signature Loudspeakers

Review At A Glance

Sound:

Top-to-bottom integration is exemplary; very large soundfield, tight imaging, and great amounts of unforced detail; not spectacular-sounding, but spectacularly "right."

Features:

Four-way design with first-order crossovers and phase compensation networks; time/phase correct; same tweeter and midrange as much more expensive Model 5; Sound Anchor braces included.

Use:

Terminal-strip binding posts require that speaker cables must be terminated with spades at the speaker end; bi-wiring required.

Value:

Sets a high standard for what is possible at the \$3500/pair loudspeaker price point; simple appearance saves enough money to permit much higher quality drivers and crossover parts.

The 3A Signature has four drivers. The tweeter, midrange, and midbass drivers are all forward-firing. The low-bass driver fires from the rear of the speaker at floor level. Crossovers are first-order types to maintain accurate phase performance. Other steeper crossover slopes introduce phase error. Some people believe this is inconsequential, while Vandersteen and several other manufacturers believe that minimizing phase error is an important performance consideration. The midrange and tweeter are physically staggered to make the speakers time coherent. The importance of time coherence is another area of disagreement among manufacturers. Note that correct time/phase performance requires first-order crossovers *and* staggered drivers; one without the other doesn't yield correct time/phase performance.

Two pairs of terminals support bi-wiring *only*, but instead of five-way binding posts, these terminals are Phillips screws with barrier strips between. The terminals are mounted directly to the crossover, something not generally possible with conventional binding posts. In addition, the terminals barely protrude from the back of the speaker. Connections are easy, and there is no opportunity for binding posts to be damaged in shipment. There is no provision for the use of banana plugs or bare wire; spade lugs are required. On the back you will also find controls for midrange and tweeter levels.

It's probably worth mentioning that all four drivers are in separate enclosures to keep them away from acoustic energy coming from any other driver. Their enclosures are terminated transmission lines that assist in removing virtually all of the back-wave energy before it can reflect off of something and hit the back of the cone/diaphragm and cause 100% distortion (which is present and audible in many other loudspeakers). Also, the crossover (and terminals) are located halfway up the back of the speaker, for good reason. Placement here keeps the crossover outside of the driver enclosures, permits direct connection of speaker cable to crossover, eliminating any wire inside the speaker carrying a full-range signal, and puts the crossover in the center of the speaker, permitting the shortest possible wires from the crossover to each driver. You can read more about Vandersteen's design philosophy and goals in the interview with Richard Vandersteen on *SoundStage!*

I'm pleased to be able to tell you about the newest Vandersteen loudspeaker, the 3ASignature. In fact, this is the very first review of the 3A Signature—another *SoundStage!* exclusive. What we have here is a \$3495/pair package of practically perfect performance if ever there was one. Well, OK, it may not be *that* close to perfect, but compared to other loudspeakers in this price range and even more expensive ones, hoo boy, the 3ASignature is one precious pile o' powerful mojo.

What's different?

Vandersteen's Model 3 has been available since the late '80s. In the early '90s, it morphed into the much-improved 3A. The 3A Signature grew out of the work done during the development of the \$9800-per-pair Model 5, Vandersteen's current flagship loudspeaker. Using the 3A as the basis for comparison, the differences in the 3A Signature are as follows:

- all the critical capacitors and resistors in the crossover are replaced with the same-quality parts used in the Model 5 crossover;
- additional bracing is installed in the bass enclosure;
- the same tweeter used in the Model 5 is installed;
- the crossover is modified for the Model 5 tweeter;
- phase-compensating networks separate from the crossover are installed for the midbass and midrange drivers and are hand-tuned for each midbass/midrange driver combo plus the left and right speaker, so the speakers match each other;
- price includes large Sound Anchor rear braces; these are a \$200 extra-cost option on the 3A.

What does it sound like?

This review was conducted with pairs of the 3A and 3A Signature, so I would be able to swap both speakers in and out as needed to get the full measure of the 3A Signature's sound. Bear in mind that the 3A is a good enough speaker to stand competition with speakers that are considerably more expensive. So my descriptions of sonic differences between the 3A and the Signature may make you think that the 3A is less impressive than it really is. In fact, the Signature outdoes the standard 3A only because the Signature performs at a particularly lofty level.

The little bit of boomy warmth in the 3A's bass is gone in the 3A Signature. Likewise, there is a band of frequencies in the midrange of piano that the 3A pushes forward a little. Both of these are easy to hear on Paula Cole's *This Fire* [Warner Brothers Imago 946424-2]. Using the Signature, the piano notes on "Tiger" and "Where Have All the Cowboys Gone?" stay right where they belong, and the small boom in the bass is gone. Female vocal is another area where the perfection of the Signature gives a small but important improvement. Paula Cole's voice is at once richer and more immediate. The *space* around her voice is slightly woolly sounding on the 3A, but clean without the woolliness through the Signature.

The Signatures' soundstage is larger and *feels* real. The 3As' soundfield is revealed to be more like a good picture of reality than the real thing. As well defined as images are with the 3A, images are even better delineated by the Signatures. Complex recordings with lots of instruments in lots of different positions are confidently presented by the Signatures, each sound clearly delineated from the others. In comparison, the 3A runs things together a bit, and sounds are just not quite as well sorted out from one another. The dense mixes in some of the tracks on The Mavericks' *Trampoline* [MCA Nashville MCAD70018] are good examples of where the 3A Signature reveals each sound more clearly. The magic of perfect driver integration unclogs the midbass and midrange, achieving performance that is scintillating in the natural feel it has. The *baja sexto*, a huge bass-guitar-like instrument, on *Trampoline* is delineated with just the right heft, texture, tone and presence. The Signatures make this recording sound much more sophisticated than I thought it was after I listened to it for many months on 3As and other speakers.

The 3As can throw a large and convincing soundstage. But when you hear the 3A Signature in the same *room knock knock knockin' on heaven's door*, you get the sense that the sound is less contained, less constrained,

less a reproduction and easier to accept as the real thing. Sounds wrap around and appear even forward of the speakers. The Signatures can reproduce music fairly loudly and still maintain the apparent position of the instruments well back (like what seems to be 20 feet or more) into the soundstage. When the 3A does this, louder sounds come forward a bit, even if they weren't supposed to. Daboa's *from the gekko* [Triple Earth trecd 115] has a number of tracks that perfectly illustrate the improved spatial performance of the 3A Signatures. The ability of the Signatures to wrap around the room to your left and right sides and throw an even deeper image than the 3As brings spatial performance in my listening room to new, uh, heights.

Which brings me to the sense of height; the Signatures produce more of a sense of unrestricted height. No, you don't get vertical layering like you get horizontal spread or depth. The height thing is more subtle, but it is still vital to reproducing images of realistic proportion. The result on the Daboa CD is a very large and often ethereal soundspace—*people get ready there's a train a comin', you don't need a ticket, just get on board*—surrounding the natural and synthesized sounds on this interesting world-music recording.

The Signatures' transparency and rich-but-not-overripe harmonics are demonstrated on the Art Davis disc *A Time Remembered* [Classic DAD100, 24/96]. The tone of the sax is so right it's spooky, and sax is one of the hardest instruments to record realistically due to sound from the reed, body and horn all having different characters and blending based on where the microphone is located. The Signatures decode the different elements of the sax's sound and arrays them as they are when you hear a well-miked live sax. The piano never breaks up into differently spaced or disconnected parts. Notes ring true and in continuous connection, spatially and tonally, like a well-recorded piano should sound. The entire presentation has a new degree of

transparency that the 3A can't match. Combine this with solid and stable images and the performers seem to be right there in the room with you—heavenly, heav-van-lee. It may be an overused descriptive phrase in audio reviews, but in this case there really is something *there-like* going on. The Signatures don't romanticize the sound of acoustic jazz; you hear it as it was performed and recorded. In this case, that's the cat's pajamas. Play the blues one more time, please, Duke?

How different is the new tweeter?

The new tweeter carries a sense of refinement and has the ability to reproduce sounds with very subtle texture, volume and attack differences. The end result is like the difference between a nice Jaguar XK-8 and a Ferrari 550 Maranello. The 3A's tweeter never left me feeling cheated, but once you hear the 3A Signature/Model 5 tweeter, forget about it, you want the new tweeter. The new tweeter does and has more of everything. But there is absolutely no sense of detail being pushed at you or attacking you like you get from many other loudspeakers. Detail just emanates naturally rather than being launched. It is a different feeling than you experience with many high-end loudspeakers, so different that it will, I'm sure, be mistaken for being too laid-back, the decades-old "Vandersteen curse" that audiophiles in search of more (unnatural) pizzazz use out of hand to dismiss truly natural-sounding loudspeakers like these. People accustomed to more-than-natural energy levels in their tweeters just can't abide something that is this natural-sounding. Their loss.

Integration of the tweeter with the midrange now seems close to perfection, so perfect that after weeks of trying, I can't find any hairballs in the wide crossover zone between the two drivers. The Dave's True Story disc *Sex Without Bodies* [Chesky CHDVD174] illustrates the new tweeter's

superior performance on cymbals. Not only is the "chshhhhhhhh" of the initial impact correct as it was on the 3A, but the metallic ringing, which goes down into the midrange, and the decay are both rendered with more rich and complete harmonic textures. This results in a more sophisticated and expansive sound than you are used to from the 3A. There is no tendency at all in the Signatures to make female-vocal sibilants aggressive and overly obvious—a common failing when tweeters or midranges are goosed to make more air on the top end. Yet *Sex Without Bodies* definitely has far more air through the Signatures than through the 3As. You hear every nuance of the space and the performance standing separately from each other, just as if you were standing or sitting in that same space.

Listening to LPs on the Signatures was simply too divine an experience to discuss—too intense, too personal, too overwhelming. Like your first time, it is best enjoyed when kept to yourself and mulled over during times of pleasant introspection. I'm about to drift off again, just from the reminiscence. Sorry, *oh yeah, you've...got that somethin'*.

Isn't there anything you don't like about them?

Shoot yeah there's stuff I don't like about them. They may be great speakers, but they aren't perfect. I don't really love the way they look—they are perfectly OK visually, but that's all. I wish they looked snappier and more high-tech and just cooler. But I listen with the lights off, and what the speakers look like in the dark is completely irrelevant. I don't have more money to spend on a cooler-looking speaker anyway—so for my \$3500, give me all the sound quality you can possibly pack into a speaker and just make it look OK. I can live with it. I wish I could get Jerry Garcia[TM] grille cloth or maybe a jungle print or perhaps mauve, raspberry or turquoise cloth, or some cool pattern from the '50s. But I wouldn't want to pay more for it anyway,

so give me the black cloth and I'll deal with it. You could have Vandersteen's optional taupe grille cloth instead, but I gravitate to the black pretty consistently.

I wish the speaker-cable connections were at the bottom of the speaker instead of halfway up the back, so I could use shorter and cheaper speaker cables. But I know why the terminals are up there instead of down at the bottom, so I can live with this too. I wish the speakers came with Nordost Pulsar Points instead of Tip-Toes, but I can live with installing the Pulsar Points myself. There could be more power in low-bass frequencies in my room, but then someone else with a more normal room would be hammered to a pulp by the bass. I wish the 3A Signatures were panels or horns or dipoles or plasma speakers—anything but boring old sealed-box dynamic drivers. Not that there is any *rational* reason for this. I just want a bunch of like-thinking buds to commiserate with over how cool we are to be using the kind of speakers we are using. Vandersteens don't have anything cool to glomb on—they don't have much of a personality like some other types of loudspeakers. There's a heck of a good reason for that, of course. Live and recorded sound doesn't have the personality or sound of most loudspeakers. Performers should have the personality, not the sound reproduction, a preference that is sometimes difficult to satisfy.

In a nutshell

The Vandersteen 3As were comfortable, high-performance companions for many years. However, progress marches on, and the 3A Signature is better in every way. The 3ASignature receives my unconditional endorsement as a *SoundStage!* Reviewers' Choice. If you are looking for a speaker that can get you off audiophile treadmill so you can finally stop cherishing the equipment and start cherishing the music, the Vandersteen 3A Signature may just be your chariot to musical salvation.

Associated Equipment

Loudspeakers	Vandersteen 3A, Vandersteen 2Wq subwoofers.
Amplifiers	Warner Imaging Endangered Species, Belles 150A with binding—post upgrade, Belles Theatrix.
Preamplifier	Audible Illusions Modulus 3A with Gold phono boards.
Analog	Roksan Xerxes Turntable, SME V arm (rewired), Cardas Heart cartridge.
Digital	California Audio Labs CL-25 CD/DVD player, Panasonic DVD A-310, MSB Link DAC.
Interconnects	Nordost SPM Reference and Quattro Fil, Magnan Signature, Nirvana SL-1, JPS Labs Superconductor2.
Speaker Cable	Nordost SPM Reference; Magnan Signature, Nirvana SL-1, JPS Labs NC Series.
Power Cords	Audio Power Industries Powerlink 313; VansEvers Pandora Photon and Double Pandora; JPS Labs Digital AC, Analog AC and Power AC; Magnan Signature.
Power Conditioners	VansEvers Unlimiter, 85, RB-5, jr.11 analog, jr. 11 Video; Audio Power Industries] Power Wedge Ultra 115 and 116, Ultra Power Enhancer; Tice Power Block III Rev. B; Monster HTS 3000, HTS 2000 and HTS 800; AudioPrism Power Foundation III, ACFX and Quiet Line; Magnan Signature Multi-Outlet Power Conditioner.
Accessories	Bright Star Audio Big Rock, Air Mass and Little Rock; LaserBase.
Room Acoustic Treatments	Michael Green Audio and Video Designs Pressure Zone Controllers; Argent RoomLens; VansEvers Spatial Lens and Window system.

Vandersteen 3A Signature Loudspeakers

Price: \$3495 per pair USD.

Warranty: Five years parts and labor (with stipulations).

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