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WHATMOUGH P33 SIGNATURE

Reviewer: Edgar Kramer

The Kee to Success

At the end of last year, I got an interesting email from a Ms Kee Whatmough who had been in touch with 6moons. Head mooner Srajan had taken the liberty of referring Kee -- who was hoping for a review as a form of opening to the international market -- to yours truly. Little did Kee know that her 6moons reviewer and portal to the world was not only living in the same country but just an hour's plane ride away. Ah, the beauty of this world-wide web we weave. Come home to access the world. It wasn't too long before I found myself trekking to the Whatmough Monitors' headquarters in Scoresby, Melbourne to suss out the operation.

Whatmough's impressive retail facility, highly professional business ethic and well-established network of distributors and retailers led me to think that not only is this company a shining example of a medium-sized outfit, it's also representative of the relatively disproportionate number of quality loudspeaker manufacturers in Australia. We home bake all manner of transducers from the most basic of budget cheapies to extravagant monoliths that aim at the highest pedestals of the audio engineering art. Our local engineers certainly aren't afraid of using varied technologies either. Our speakers use all manner of hand-made ribbons (from 2 inches to 6 feet), dynamic drivers of every creed, exotic enclosure designs, wideband drivers, passive and active designs, you name it. Duntech led the way for many others that since have carved inroads into the Asian markets and to perhaps a lesser extent the European and American sectors. These names may not be immediately recognizable to the overseas readership but here are some of the companies that do Australians proud: Aaron, Ambience, Aslan Acoustics, Dan A Digital, Equinox, Krix, Legend Acoustics, Lenard Audio, Orpheus, Osborn, Richter Acoustics, Sonic Purity, Sonique Audio, VAF Research and WAR Audio. But I could go on and on. All make products that, at their price points and beyond, will compete with the best the world has to offer. Look them up, explore and discover. It's all only a dot com away.

And as if this honorable list wasn't long enough (apologies to the scores I left unmentioned), here's yet another to add to the star-studded lineup - the subject of this review, Whatmough Monitors. Whatmough has been around since the early 1970s under Colin Whatmough as principal designer who has steadily built the company into one of Australia's largest and most reputable speaker manufacturing houses. Colin has always been in love with the art of speaker design. He recalls the days as an upstart in the computer industry when, as he watched over the fridge-sized computers making hour-long updates (Colin explains the same task would take minutes now), he dreamt up designs that his fervent passion would soon manifest. And it's the conceptual and practical success of these first efforts that led to the tremendous growth the company has experienced since - from one

single model to the extensive range available today.

In the early days, Colin experimented with his own hand-made ribbon aided by high-quality dynamic drivers in a monstrous box. The inherent quality of continuously evolving designs and their meticulous engineering brought about success within the audiophile community. This initial success prompted further development and investment and resulted in a slowly and conservatively expanding and evolving product line. This writer nostalgically remembers, back in the mid-1980s in his early days of audiophile passion or mania, lusting over a rather plump yet beautifully assembled and veneered Whatmough stand mount. The 202 Leadline as it was called was one of the very earliest adopters of the bright yellow fiberglass Focal tweeter that later on achieved fame in the early WATT/Puppy System 3. The 202 was a wide, tall and deep stand mount speaker with lead reinforcement, using the best drivers of the day that sounded as full, present and powerful as any floorstander.

Colin recalls a little personal and company history: "Back in the early days, I built a system called the Mark II. It had a large transmission line bass, open baffle midrange and ribbon tweeters which we built ourselves. That's when I went commercial, I felt these speakers were good enough to make a statement. They were state-of-the-art efforts in their day. It took me a month to build a pair and I was selling them for \$2,500. In today's money, they would be \$30,000 to 40,000 - and it was my only model.

"So I resigned from work and got into it full time. I was selling one a month for about 18 months out, which was not bad until I saturated the market. Every pair I sold went to single guys without fail. As they got married, the speakers went onto the second-hand market because they were the size of a refrigerator - enormous."

"At that stage I was a self-taught computer programmer. I had no technical background in speaker building but I'm the sort of person who once he gets into something is - well, unstoppable. There were no speaker building courses back then and actually none now either. So it was a matter of getting all the books I could and experiment. Often I would go to concerts and then come back home and get the soldering iron out, trying to recreate that same tonality. Sometimes I would do this twice or three times a week. Back in those days I didn't much like classical music but it's the only non-amplified music, the real reference if you're trying to design. Unfortunately with a rock concert... well, if you can't get better sound than a rock concert, then there's something sadly wrong. With classical music we'll never get there, we can only *approach* the real thing so it gives me something to aim for. And I still do that today. Classical concerts still are my reference."

Colin is behind every speaker the company crafts, from their Synergy starting range to the Signature series, Whatmough's crowning glory. From design to crossover and driver component selection to cabinet physiology to engineering and final listening tests, Colin strives to design speakers that display inherent qualities he considers essential. He firmly believes that tonal accuracy is the most vital quality of a loudspeaker. Regardless of its other qualities, if a speaker is not tonally accurate, it is still flawed according to Colin.

Not surprisingly then, it's in this area the P33 Signature excels. Without jumping the gun, let me tease you with a peccadillo - this speaker is a tonal champion. Period. Read on and you'll discover my validation for this audacious claim.

As the name implies, these *Signature* designs of which the P33 sits at the bottom rung -- it's followed by the 505 and then by the flagship Paragon, a true engineering tour de force [left] -- are the fruit of Colin Whatmough's utmost dedication and full-on engineering efforts. They have been designed purely for the audiophile and exhaustively tuned by Colin personally. As he explains, he stringently applies his core values of "...extended frequency range, a wide spacious soundstage, tonal accuracy, transient response, coherent and seamless integration as well as rhythm and timing are all essential to the criteria for a high-fidelity loudspeaker...".

The sound of light and color

The Whatmough P33 Signature is a nicely proportioned largish floorstander that strikes the keen eye as a cross between a Sonus Faber Amati and the larger Compass Series Usher speakers. The cabinet embodies a beautifully finished lute shape with a raised and perfectly machined curved frill on the top plate. The curved panels aid in the reduction of internal standing waves and are more rigid, therefore less resonant than conventional straight panels. Again à la Usher, the main body of the enclosure sits on a plinth that extends

beyond the rear of the speaker to provide extra stability. The veneer is a gorgeous Bubinga (the firm's trademark veneer of choice) in natural finish. For an extra AUD\$1000, you can request the immaculately applied gloss Graphite automotive lacquer.

The P33 Sig is a front-ported 3-way using high quality drivers. Starting at the top of the enclosure, we rather unusually find a 6.5-inch bass driver specially made for the P33 by Peerless, using a hybrid fiberglass-skin Nomex cone with plastic phase plug. Below that is the superb Scanspeak Revelator ring radiator tweeter, a driver that Colin treasures as having a beautifully extended and refined sound that approaches his beloved ribbon drivers without their dispersion and power issues. Next and in very close proximity is the 4-inch midrange which is of cellulose fiber and made by Vifa. Finally and closer to the floor, another 6.5-inch Peerless driver sits just above the reflex port.

Crossover points are stated at 400Hz and 3.8kHz, meaning the little Vifa midrange driver covers a wide range, making for a cleaner presentation without crossover artifacts throughout most of the vocal band. The crossover network is of very high quality, uses Hovland caps and is wired to the drivers via Cardas hookup wire. Frequency response spans 38Hz to 40Khz +/- 3dB and the P33 Sig is a 4-ohm design that is 88dB sensitive with an input level of 2.83 Volts (1 Watt into 8 ohms). The dimensions are very room friendly at 1200 H x 260 W x 430D (mm) and it weighs in at a reassuringly solid 45kg. Whatmough is a strong believer in tri-wiring or tri-amplification and provides three sets of high-quality Cardas posts without the cheesy copper links, his suggestion being that if you can't tri-wire for the time being (you must do so in future), the posts should be linked with short lengths of the same cable you use for the amp-to-speaker run.

Of importance to those on a tighter budget, Whatmough offers a non-Signature version just called the P33 where a Vifa ring radiator replaces the Scanspeak, Bennic components in the crossover the Hovlands, and standard internal cable and brass binding posts the luxu bits. This version is said to retain much of the sonic qualities of its more expensive sibling. The review pair apparently had been factory run for 100 hours prior to delivery. Nonetheless, I ran it for a further 50 hours before commencing proper auditioning. Having said that, even while the speaker was running in, I could hear very special things happening. Sure enough, once formal auditioning began, I was struck by the tonal beauty and accuracy and yes, there *is* such thing as simultaneous beauty and accuracy, a phenomenon I seldom hear, however.

The best indicators of tone are the human voice, piano and acoustic guitar. A plan of attack then formed by spinning the usual references that illustrate this key area of performance. Martha Argerich's *Rachmaninoff* was an example of how a piano should sound. The instrument's timbre, note fundamental and harmonic decay just sound right over the P33 Sigs. Some may equate this ethereal quality with a warmth and romanticism that bathes everything in honey and custard. They'd be wrong then. Colin has balanced the speaker so expertly that it remains faithful to the recorded information without suffering the "some frequencies stand out over others" syndrome. All is on an even keel without loss of detail. In fact that Scanspeak tweeter as applied in this design is one heckuva driver. High frequency content from cymbals to triangles to sibilants are utterly delicate, extended, life-like and oh so *sweet*.

Male and female vocals from Dianna Krall and Janis Ian to Chris Jones and John Lee Hooker were projected into the listening space with an aural *vision* of physical presence and body. The 4-inch driver managed to translate the electrical signal into a chest, throat, tongue, cheek and mouth entity. The P33 Sigs had me digging into my CD cabinet, pulling out all manner of vocalists in all musical genres.

A guitar reference I use over and over again in my reviews is the wonderfully captured *Duet* by French guitar virtuosos Sylvain Luc and Bireli Lagrene. Here again the P33 Sigs shone. As was the case with piano tracks, the tonal balance of the acoustic guitar as reproduced by the P33 Sigs was absolutely gorgeous. What the Whatmoughs lack in ultimate transient attack and macro dynamics as compared to my Wilson Audio reference, they made up by presenting a harmonically rich and filigreed string tone that enhanced the illusion of guitars in the room. This delicacy still retained all the finger clicks and rubs and string buzzes that expertly handled microdynamics can render and that audiophiles treasure. This is where the coherence of the speaker is also highlighted: the transition and tonality of the 4-incher and ring radiator is seamless.

Ditto for Ani diFranco's *Living in Clip*'s massively captured venue ambiance in "Amazing Grace". Between the

bass and treble extension capabilities of the P33s, eyes wide shut, the transportation to the event was almost unsettling. Ani's vocals are a little edgy and can get a bit fatiguing on this recording but the P33s ability to handle sibilance in a way that settled down the aggression without sacrificing the sss sound was extraordinary. Ani's band is spread across a huge stage and the drummer and kit are seemingly positioned at my next door neighbor's. And since we're on the subject of drums -- *and* bass -- well-recorded kick drum socks the gut while bass guitar boogies along. I'm talking fast and tight bass with enormous detail, punch and definition.

Want mo' Whatmough

On a magical Saturday evening, my wife and I inadvertently spent a 'lost time' six-hour marathon listening to old rock recordings. With a few exceptions, I find most of these older rock recordings compressed and bright. Not so with the P33s. These speakers have an uncanny way with mediocre recordings in that they seem to tame the harshness without losing the detail and excitement rock can provide. We found ourselves completely intoxicated and at the end of the six hours, without a hint of fatigue, just sheer enjoyment. We dug through it all: Pink Floyd's *The Great Gig in the Sky*, Steely Dan's *Josie*, Led Zeppelin's *Immigrant Song*, The Band's *The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down*, Billy Joel's *The Stranger*, Supertramp's *Goodbye Stranger*, the Beatles' *Come Together* etc. Importantly, the Whatmoughs engaged us on an emotional level. The hardware became irrelevant, the music the focus.

Did they display any major faults or failings? Nope. The P33 Signatures do it all very well. So you ask, are the P33s the perfect speaker then? They're on their way and down the path - further along than many competitors I've heard. And I come from a station along the trail that has been carved by a speaker costing five times more.

As a reviewer of equipment, my job is to examine a component's performance in all the key areas of bass, midrange and treble performance, soundstage, imaging, tonality and timbre, transient speed, frequency-wide detail and dynamics. The P33 Sigs perform extremely well in most of the above areas. And as far as tonality and 'musicality' in particular, they are outstanding and on a par with *anything* I've heard.

OK, I did say most. When a speaker excels at the heady heights the P33 Sigs do, any lesser performance in one or two areas have to be described accurately and carefully so as to not distort their extent. I found the P33s very subtly reticent in macro dynamics and transient attacks. These areas were slightly stunted in terms of utter extension or pronouncement. An example to illustrate this would be Stevie Ray Vaughan's *Tin Pan Alley* where the jutting guitar plucks and massive drum whacks are undeniably powerful over the Whatmoughs but not quite as explosive or with the same leading edge attack as can be had with my reference. It's simply that the P33s shine so brightly in every other parameter that the same level of ability is then expected throughout. These areas aside, I struggle to think of another speaker I've heard that has the same *collection* of outstanding qualities.

And the award goes to...

It has been a long time since any speaker impressed me this much. I found my time with the Whatmough P33 Signatures an absolute pleasure. They play music, not a stream of sounds sullied by compromise and emanating from incoherent sources, demanding a listener's interpretation or decoding. The Whatmough P33 Signatures are truly superb music reproducers. Colin, you've met your mandate.

I've been reviewing for a good few years now. I'm a jaded veteran of the audiophile trenches and given the amount of product I've processed, I've handed out precious few Blue Moon awards. In fact, the esteemed editor of Australian Hi-Fi magazine, Greg Borrowman, has been quoted as saying, "Edgar Kramer isn't easily impressed". My take has been that my responsibility to the reader and consumer is to pour such accolades on only truly outstanding products that perform well beyond their station and therefore represent outstanding value. Well, as rare as it's been, I'm thrilled to say now the time has come. I see a Blue Moon rising. Whatmough Monitors has arrived.