

1095

Great sound for slightly more than a G!

By Jeff Dorgay

Bending The Rules: The **ELAC** **Carina** BS243.4

\$1,199
elac.com



Near perfect driver
integration

Big sound, small form
factor



Zero downside



When you think of maximum hifi value, few speakers have garnered as much praise as ELAC over the past few years. Designed by master speaker builder Andrew Jones, their small and mighty monitors are on the top of everyone's "best of" list, with their B6 speakers at only \$229 a pair are an incredible triumph of what can be accomplished on a tight budget.

Going up the price ladder, to \$1,195 brings all the essential traits we've come to associate with ELAC, adding a level of physical and sonic refinement I'd expect in a much more expensive speaker. I mean no disrespect to Mr. Jones, but when you're building a pair of speakers for \$229, there's no margin for error. My other favorite inexpensive mini monitor, the Paradigm Atom is similar yet different. As you go up the ladder, even \$75/pair, every dollar spent on this resistor, a piece of wire, or cabinet material, is critical. There's no margin for error or waste at this price, and that's why I find the Carinas so fascinating. I'd wager, that there's as great a density of thought in speakers like this as a flagship speaker on one level.

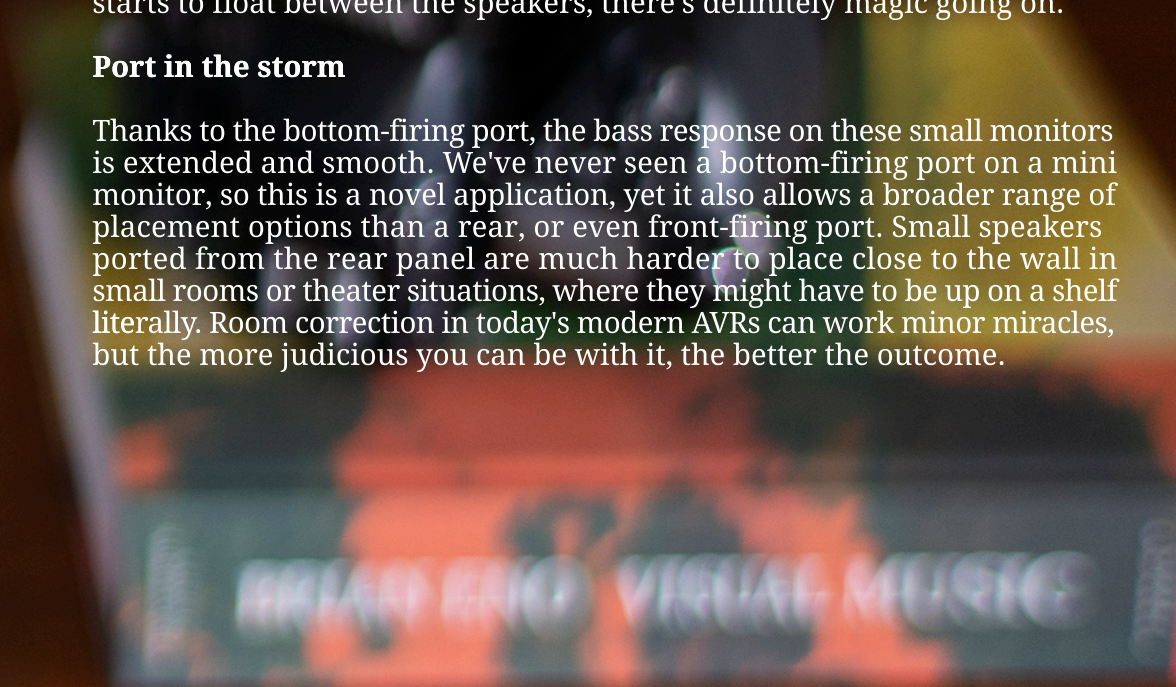
Jumping right in

Wanting to waste no time getting to business on the smallest of the Carinas, they were installed in our living room system, and just for the first few days of break-in, placed on top of my JBL L-100 Classics, while speaker stands were procured. Even up to high, they sound inviting from the second they are powered up, in this case with the lovely Conrad-Johnson ART 27A, at \$22,995. (Yeah, that's not a typo)

Playing the oldest speaker demo trick in the book, the Carina's sound incredible with the ART. Rocking through a long Rick Springfield playlist, I'm taken out of my totally 80s mood and plunged into a ton of Miles Davis. You say Kind of Blue, I say Bitches Brew every time. As "Pharaoh's Dance" starts to float between the speakers, there's definitely magic going on.

Port in the storm

Thanks to the bottom-firing port, the bass response on these small monitors is extended and smooth. We've never seen a bottom-firing port on a mini monitor, so this is a novel application, yet it also allows a broader range of placement options than a rear, or even front-firing port. Small speakers ported from the rear panel are much harder to place close to the wall in small rooms or theater situations, where they might have to be up on a shelf literally. Room correction in today's modern AVRs can work minor miracles, but the more judicious you can be with it, the better the outcome.



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After a couple days of playing music of all types, perched on top of the JBL's, it was time to escape the dorm room set up and get serious. Lightly blu-tacked to a pair of Sound Anchors 24-inch stands, brings the EMT tweeters much closer to ear height, and with a little bit more fine-tuning, these speakers spring to life. Should you buy a pair, give them at least 2-3 days of play, they open up tremendously, showing their real voice after a short run in. So, we tried the Carinas in two separate environments.

The BS243.4s are available in satin black, as you see here, or in satin white and their curved shape is finished to perfection on every surface. These speakers look and feel more like something you'd expect to have at least another zero on the price tag, and the small, chrome rings around the 5 1/4" woofer and tweeter are tastefully restrained, rather than some of the big, blingy, chrome rings we've seen. These speakers look as beautiful as they sound. You can read the full tech specs here:

<https://www.elac.com/product/carina-bs243-4/?r=us>.

It's interesting to note, that in both rooms the Carinas sound a bit soft and unengaging when listening at a low (approximately 75db average level), but when inched up above about 80db, they really come alive. Let's face it, that small woofer can only move so much air! On the desktop, they perform better at extremely low volume levels, than they do out in a room at low levels, no doubt due to proximity.

Small Room

Placing the Carinas in a 12 x 14-foot room, powered by the new PrimaLuna EVO100 amplifier, 40 watts per channel of tube power is more than enough to make for an engaging system. Going a step further and adding a small sub to the mix is even more intriguing, but not necessary to get great sound from these. I used a small REL because it was close at hand, but ELAC makes a full line of powered subwoofers, so you can keep your system all ELAC. As always, place the speakers apart until the soundstage disappears, and then bring them back together a bit, to pull the stereo image back together.



As mentioned earlier, that bottom-firing port doesn't interfere with the room, so once you have width figured out, just move the speakers closer to the wall until you achieve your favorite blend of mid-bass and low bass. Finally, a little bit of experimentation with rake will give you that last touch of treble smoothness and integration with the woofer. All told, this should only take about 30 minutes, with a little help.

Set up nearfield in a small-ish room is immersive, and I preferred the speakers closer together than usual, only about 4 feet apart (tweeter center to tweeter center) making the ELACs sound like a massive pair of headphones. This is a lot of fun and bringing in the speakers a little bit, eliminates most of the sidewall interaction.

Medium Room

Moving to my living room that is 13 x 18, the Carinas still turn in an excellent performance. If anything, the down-firing woofer opens up and moves more air in the slightly larger room. About 9 feet from the couch proves great, though this changes the presentation, now a little less intimate, yet rendering a broad soundfield for such a small pair of speakers. The stereo image is wider, but not quite as deep. The speakers have no problem at all, filling this room with the modest power of the EVO100 integrated.

Listening to Matthew Sweet and Susanna Hofts cover Bryan Ferry's "More Than This," is particularly engaging, feeling the ELACs keep these two unique voices separate, yet blended together in their harmony bits. Where the baby ELACs give much more sound than one might expect for a \$229/pair set of speakers, the small Carinas are top of the category mini-monitors.

Again, the comparison to the KEF LS-50 comes up, and while the small KEFs excel in coherence, the ELACs are much better well rounders, doing so much really well, where the LS-50 does a single thing incredibly well. Not that these speakers are any slouch in the coherence department.

Final thoughts

As with any top-shelf speaker, the ELACs continue to reveal more music as they are paired with better ancillaries. Should you build a system around them, they are forgiving enough to pair up with a budget or vintage amplifier and resolving enough to mate with amplifiers in the \$1,500 - \$5,000 range.

Though their rated sensitivity sounds a bit low-ish (85db/1-watt) they deliver room-filling sound with even 20 watts per channel and are easily driven by tube amplification as well as solid-state. The JET AMT tweeter is very smooth and does not need a tube amplifier to tame it.

Other than reproducing the last octave of deep bass, or being able to play at earsplitting levels, the strength of these speakers is the high level of musical information they reveal, for their minimal cost. It's exciting to see several truly great speakers that are in reach of any music lover. The ELAC Carinas are certainly at the top of our list.

Andrew Jones' sterling reputation is once again upheld with the ELAC Carinas. These are fantastic speakers.

www.elac.com

