

## THE WHOLE GAMUT... (HI-FI+ 71)

GamuT D3i linestage, CD3 CD player, M250i monoblock amplifiers, and S9 loudspeakers

by Roy Gregory | May 11, 2010

Products: GamuT CD3, GamuT D3i, GamuT M250i & GamuT S9



For most readers, GamuT is a name more often associated with electronics, their D200 power amp attracting considerable attention when it was launched (originally as a studio product under the Sirius brand) back in 1999. What's less well known is the company also has a good reputation for ambitious loudspeakers, like the new El Superiores 9.

GamuT's loudspeaker line came about with collaboration with Lars Goller, formerly of ScanSpeak. This led to Goller first joining and subsequently buying GamuT... so he finds himself an OEM customer for his own driver designs.

This is a genuine no-compromise implementation and extension of the Goller low-loss philosophy, first seen in his distinctive slotted cone ScanSpeak drivers. Cutting the cones and then sealing those cuts with a dissimilar material keeps things light and rigid while breaking up the dominant resonance that might store energy. The S9 is also an entirely phase coherent system, with minimal hybrid first-order crossover slopes and very long overlaps between the drivers. In fact, the whole design revolves around maximising the in-phase output of the mid driver and minimizing damping materials in the system.

Despite the large size of the cabinet, it represents a single enclosed volume, the expressed intention being to extend the fundamental resonance of the mid-driver (and hence its in-phase output) as low as possible. By adding a tapered tap from the bass leg of the crossover, that actually extends down from flat at 200Hz to a  $-10\text{dB}$  point at 28Hz. That requires a genuinely long throw driver and GamuT's midrange unit employs a generous roll surround to handle all that LF energy. The rest of the drivers are the familiar ring radiator high-frequency unit and a trio of identical, pulp coned bass units, allowing the S9 to move serious amounts of air. A low-ish overall efficiency of  $88.5\text{dB}$  and the size of the cabinet serve notice of serious low-end intent. But, with no shortage of bass impact and weight despite a modest  $-3\text{dB}$  figure of 26Hz, this is more about deliverable power than ultimate extension.

The drive units and electrical topology are only part of this story. The cabinet is designed to operate almost without mechanical damping. Instead, the walls are built from a combination of 10mm of solid wood bonded to 20mm birch ply. The grooves cut in the outer walls are similar in function to those slots in the midrange drivers. What you can't see is a fan of similar grooves cut into the inner faces, which in conjunction with those on the outside, subdivide the large panels into

much smaller, irregularly shaped sectors or zones. Internal wadding is confined to layers of different density synthetic wool positioned to impede internal standing waves. Driver/cabinet interaction is handled by notch filters in the crossover rather than mechanical damping, GamuT feeling that this has a less intrusive effect on the energy spectrum of the music. Likewise, the wooden plugs used in the centre of each bass driver are individually tuned to the driver in question.

The attention to detail and singularity of design extends to all aspects of the S9. The reflex ports are turned from brass and mounted to stainless steel plates that act to inhibit resonance in the rear panel, while the solid steel base adds mass and stability, along with four spiked feet for levelling, along with integral skates for hard floors – when a speaker weighs this much spikes become superfluous! Even the purpose built terminals are unique in execution and philosophy, their massive conical faces designed to maximise the contact for Goller's preferred bare wire termination. Don't worry; they take 4mm plugs too... The vestigial grilles are removable and I actually prefer the appearance without them, although there's no sonic benefit to their absence.

As well as the speakers, and in keeping with the 'system solution' approach, GamuT also brought a set of matching electronics, consisting of a CD3 CD player, D3i line-stage and a pair of M250i mono amps. These are not exactly bargain basement items, although their combined cost pales when compared to asking price for the S9s, something akin to heresy in the UK. Yet, in practice, the notion that loudspeakers should once again receive rather more of your budget is once again gaining traction.

In depth discussion of the electronics is beyond the scope of this review, but they all share the same clean, uncluttered aesthetic, their brushed aluminium front-panels sprinkled with blue LEDs and circular knobs and buttons. The overall effect is techy without being overbearing, Scandinavian without being painfully austere – and for what it's worth, I rather like it. GamuT prefer balanced connection throughout the chain so that's how I ran the system. One fact to conjure with: rated at 250 Watts into an 8 Ohm load, the S9s are a nominal 4 Ohms with a fairly benign minimum at 3.1 Ohms. That makes this a system with an awful lot of headroom – and an equal degree of temptation!



Lars Goller himself set the system up, with the electronics installed on the finite-elemente Master Reference rack and the speakers set with an unusually wide stance and firing virtually straight ahead in the room. And I wasn't about to risk trying to shunt them around, not with each one weighing so much. I mention this because, ultimately I can't help feeling that the set up actually impacted on the sonic and musical results achieved.

Fire up the GamuT system and there's no mistaking the sheer power that's on offer. So much so, I found myself lamenting the lack of a volume level readout! The GamuT is definitely a LOUDspeaker. Driven by the unflappable M250i amplifiers it will play at prodigious levels; in fact, it will play louder even than you think, so clean is the sound that apparent volume is deceptive due to the lack of strain, glare or harshness. But pull out an SPL meter and the truth is quickly revealed.

Along with the available level comes an almost visceral sense of presence and musical substance. There's a solidity and intensity to instruments and voices, an almost palpable sense of drive and energy that projects the music into the listening room, making for dramatic musical performance, full of contrast and vivid colour, an expressive richness that transcends the cool, collected balance of the driving electronics. This is no lush, rounded or overly warm sounding system – but it is a system where instrumental colours seemingly vibrate with sheer energy. Indeed, at low-frequencies, the combination of power, presence and texture is absolutely first class. The Avalon Isis go deeper and deliver greater transparency and definition, but the S9s are spectacularly capable of reproducing convincing bass instruments and separating them out when they overlap.

Which brings us in turn to what is for me a presentational problem with this GamuT system. With many speakers or components under review, a particular disc seems to encapsulate their character, often revealing both their strengths (or style) and their weaknesses. For the GamuT system that disc was the Polskie Radio recording of the Gorecki 3rd Symphony. This live, hybrid SACD, with its tremendous atmosphere and emotional intensity, built on the bass heavy scoring of Gorecki's popular work plays straight to the power and presence of the Gamut system. As the conductor (Gorecki himself) enters the hall, you can hear an explosive reception of considerable warmth, one that should reach out and envelop the listener. Only with the Gamut system it doesn't. The spatial spread is good, but the applause never reaches out to encompass the listening seat. It also lacks some of its explosive quality, with fewer individual claps breaking out of the whole. Likewise, the shuffling as the orchestra settles is disjointed and lacks the spatial coherence I'm used to. It becomes discrete noises, rather than a single group of distinct but unified individuals, laid out on the stage.

The bowed bass melody is beautifully resonant and purposeful, despite the measured tempo, while the organ pedals are superbly separated and sonorous: The gradual layering of instruments as the piece builds, the increasing intensity of the playing – both are wonderfully captured. But spatially the acoustic is vague and instrumental position is poorly defined. While wide, the soundstage lacks depth and continuity across its width.

Now, all I can report on is the sound that I experienced in my room, while the impracticality of manoeuvring the speakers meant that any kind of exploratory or corrective action was impossible. In other words, listen in your own environment, with your set up and you could get wildly different results. What is also important to consider is that, spatial aspects aside, this system has some very impressive qualities to enjoy and admire and there's no escaping its musical impact or emotional communication.

Reach for Joe Cocker's Sheffield Steel and you are in for a treat. Right from the very first snare beat the solid, tactile bottom-end that came out of Compass Point Studios, the mobile, fluidity of the bass guitar, the substantial presence of the drums, are physically projected into your room. Cocker's impassioned vocals are driven forward, underpinned by the solid, propulsive rhythms and instrumental arrangements, leaving you in no doubt either of the power of this performance or Joe's status as one of the great soul voices. It's also music that thrives on the GamuTs' urgency and desire to be driven, just as much as the speakers respond to the dynamic demands of the signal.

Nothing I threw at the GamuT set-up, no matter how dense, loud or dynamic, phased it or threw it off balance. Even the thunderous opening to the Thin Red Line OST failed to disturb their calm. Instead, the stability and substance brought an almost hypnotic quality to the music, the gentle melodies stark against the rolling power of the backing, the fragility of humanity against the unstoppable, surging power of the Pacific Ocean crashing on the reef. As the piece opens out and develops more space and texture the melodies descend to the bottom end of the cello register, bringing drama and the sense of impending doom. The third track builds more slowly but if anything, reaches an even more thunderous crescendo. It's a powerfully memorable performance in every sense. The S9s didn't manage to threaten the structural integrity of my listening room, but they were mightily impressive even so and I can't honestly say I felt any lack of scale or power.



So, it's safe to say that they do big, but can the S9s do small? How about Shawn Colvin's 'Shotgun Down The Avalanche', a track of almost preternatural immediacy and life. It's complex rhythmic stutters and hesitations are handled with ease, the drum beat trip-hammer solid, the shape and attack on the guitar chords keeping things tight and under control. But that vocal delicacy and the dexterity in the fingering are gone, the tiny micro dynamic details that breathe life into the recording. It's almost as if the system is selective in its musical delivery, cleaving to structure at the expense of the finer details and delicacies.

Just as it's the speakers that draw the eye (and, given the chance, pummel the ear) it's hard to resist the temptation offered by alternative amplification – especially as there's a Bryston 14B SST sitting idle in the corner of the room...

Now, in price terms this is something of a mismatch, the 14B SST weighing in at around a third of the price of the M250is – a factor that was all too apparent when it came to the degree of detail and finesse on offer – but what it does have on its side is about twice the rated output (900 Watts into the S9's 4 Ohm load). It also has a more fluid delivery. Yes, there's less definition, particularly at the frequency extremes, but there's a greater sense of midrange coherence, at least in purely temporal terms. Musically, this translates to a more convincingly present vocal from Ms. Colvin, at the expense of a loss of detail and definition on the bells and other percussion which litter the album; a greater sense of building drama in The Thin Red Line at the expense of scale and power. It's almost as if the GamuT amps are

spending their power on controlling the entire musical spectrum and holding it all in line, while the Bryston is simply throwing itself behind the mid and trusting that the rest will follow. And that seems to be the nub of the question: do you want detail and definition or do you want flow and momentum? Different listeners will definitely lean towards a different solution or balance of virtues.

The Bryston experience is enlightening on two counts: it demonstrates just how even and controlled the GamuT electronics are, very models of balanced operation and reproductive precision; but it also shows their inherent character and reveals the inevitable costs that come with any approach. Bear in mind that the Bryston offers a tighter and more controlled view of events than most. Perhaps it really is just about power and the relative virtues of these two solid-state heavyweights simply reflect that. The bottom line in any case is not which I might prefer, but what you should expect when listening to the GamuT system and in that respect the answer is only too clear.

Standing as it is, the GamuT equipment delivers a performance of phenomenal power and scale, with a seemingly unburstable appetite when it comes to wide bandwidth signal and propulsive musical energy. It stands squarely in the high-definition corner of the hi-fi ring, and if this was a cage fight, I'm not sure the SETs trying to stare it down from the opposite corner would be attracting much money. What you get is solid slabs of sound that fill the end of your listening room and advance towards you with an unstoppable sense of the inevitable. Musically speaking, you want power? You want to be almost physically moved? This will do it every time. Whether it's the searing guitar riffs of Cheap Trick's *Live At The Budokan* (definitely the number one air guitar album of all time) or the stacked power chords of Echo's 'Forgiven', the GamuTs deliver sound that's seriously solid. If the price you pay is at the micro end of the scale, charged in terms of intimacy and musical sleight of hand, there are many listeners who will happily pay that bill.

The first rule of buying hi-fi is to be honest to yourself. Don't do a Desert Island Discs and select some obscure and impenetrable piece of 20th Century chamber music just because it makes you seem intellectually equipped. When it comes to music, emotion wins out every time – and if that means The Clash and 'London's Calling' then the GamuTs will deliver in style. Joe might not have liked the price, but boy would he have approved the performance! While the S9 is big and expensive, GamuT offer a whole range of products at more affordable prices – and this is one company with a very clear idea of exactly where it's going with each of its designs. Sign up and I'm sure they'll take you there.

## SPECS & PRICING

*GamuT El Superiores S9 Loudspeaker*

**Type:** Three-way, reflex loaded loudspeaker

**Driver Complement:**

1x ScanSpeak ring radiator HF

1x ScanSpeak 180mm slotted paper cone MF

3x ScanSpeak 250mm fibre coned LF

**Impedance:** 4 Ohms nominal

**Sensitivity:** 88.5dB

**Bandwidth:** -3dB @ 26Hz

**Price:** £75,950/pair

*GamuT CD3*

**Type:** CD player

**Price:** £4,700

*GamuT D3i*

**Type:** Line stage preamplifier

**Price:** £5,000

*GamuT M250i*

**Type:** Mono power amplifiers

**Price:** £15,900 pair

**Manufacturer**

GAMUT INTERNATIONAL A/S

URL: [www.gamutaudio.com](http://www.gamutaudio.com)