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HARRY PEARSON

The Zingali HM-215 Loudspeaker: A Horn/Bass Reflex Hybrid System

A Study in Aural Romanticism

Giuseppe Zingali is the principal author of a wide-ranging line of Italian loudspeakers, stylish to behold and, on the basis of the two models I've auditioned, studies in aural romanticism.

The HM-215 is the firm's top-of-the-line system and, to many an ear, an exemplar of the seductive in sonics. The top half of the spectrum is very nearly as pure as the best ribbon designs. The bottom octaves are warm and inviting—not far from the sounds you might hear in a finely tuned studio like Abbey Road.

From just above middle C upward, the system functions as a true horn. There is, specifically, a one-inch compression driver firing into a circular horn, called the Omniray GZ-15, that is cut out of a solid block of natural wood. Since each horn is virtually handcrafted from individual blocks of wood, no two units will look exactly the same, even though each I have seen is a beauty to behold and a sensual experience to run your fingers over and around.

The system has the virtues of a horn's efficiency, even though it is not, obviously, a full range "horn" like the original Klipsch of olden times. That's because the low end is

of bass reflex provenance. The entire system can be driven by amplifiers of relatively low wattage, like the stunning, single-ended, triode-tube designs from Viva (another Italian firm). And there seems to be no end to the amplifier power it can take—the speaker is said, in the literature, to be able to handle 1000Wpc. We tried it with some high-powered MBL monoblocks, and can attest to its lack of any strain when pushed, and pushed hard.



What the horn unit does not have are the colorations that, up until quite recent times, have been the bane and *bête noire* of horn designs. The crossover to the horn occurs at 500Hz (the higher frequency listed in the specs is, Zingali says, the result of a typo.) Its specs suggest 20kHz as the unit's upper limit, although without specifying a plus or minus figure. In its range from the crossover (inaudible to these ears), the Zingali horn is shockingly good—reminiscent, no more and only a little less, of the fabled Magnepan true ribbon from

Jim Winey. The top end has, like the Maggie ribbons, quite wide dispersion over its range, with a 140-degree angle of dispersion.

The width of dispersion, as with the Maggies, lends the sound a commanding spaciousness. In the case of the Zingali, its reproduction of the upper midrange and highs suggests some of the articulative clarity and enveloping (but never overblown) soundstage of our reference multi-channel Super Maggie system. This is stunning to hear from two channels, and not as easily described as these words might suggest. There is the spooky feel of a "space" floating in the room. This will make you want to listen twice to old favored recordings, particularly those rich in ambi-

ent information (whether they be from popular or classical discs). What makes this particularly convincing is the horn's lack of any obvious colorations or audible deviations in frequency response.

To me, this experience suggests that hearing the Zingali horns in a multi-channel array might be impressive, both in theatrical "surround" sound and musical multichannel, a consummation devoutly to be wished if we are heading toward a singular music/video system in years to come. Of course, the HM-215s aren't exactly tiny; they are 177 centimeters tall (about 72"), which, if nothing else, would create severe center-channel problems if you use five matching units in an ordinary setup. Their height results from the placement of the speaker's two 15-inch woofers both above and below the horn unit (and a large wooden knob at the bottom that serves as a midrange booster/attenuator). Zingali also manufactures a smaller version of its largest system with only one woofer, the HM-115, which is 143 centimeters (about 57") in height—still too much of a good thing. So you'd have to settle for the horizontal HM-Center, with its two smaller woofers flanking a central smaller horn. (This we did not audition.)

The smaller HM-115 was the first of the large Zingalis to arrive for evaluation here in Sea Cliff. We set these up in Music Room 2, where their bass reflex driver (with its claimed 30Hz response) sounded not at all robust on the biggest bass drum fundamentals (these occur in the range just below 40Hz). More apparent was the discontinuity in the HM-115 between the bass and the treble. The woofer was slower than the horn unit and had a decidedly different, and darker, tonal character. After I had the opportunity of hearing the larger HM-215 at Lyric Hi-Fi in Manhattan, I asked the speaker's importer to let me try a pair, reasoning that there would be considerably better reproduction of the bottom end, and assuming that two 15-inchers working in tandem would not only be faster, but better-articulated in foundation fundamentals. (In a perfect world, I would have preferred identical

dispersion patterns among the differing drivers. Oh, well.)

This proved to be the case. The discontinuity was substantially reduced—not scotched, but down to the point where certain kinds of amplifiers (tubed units) would make the system entirely listenable, if not absolutely seamless. Again, the best results came with single-ended triodes (as importer Victor Goldstein of Fanfare had predicted), in this case: the Premiers, the Hurricanes, and, best of all, the Viva Verona XL (which, not by coincidence, Goldstein also imports, and which, despite the pedigree of the importer, I have found in previous models to be the least colored and most truthful of all such designs). The XL, surprisingly, reduced a certain "fatness" and "bloat" in the lower bass, a coloration that had been most obvious on the massed (or solo) string bass. This was unexpected, because I hadn't heard a single-ended unit that actually *tightened* and made more defined the range below 100Hz. (I forgot to say that both speakers present 4-ohm impedance loads.)

It might be that a really large listening room (such as those found in some places out west and down south these days) might create enough distance between the speakers and the listener for there to be a more convincing blend of top and bottom. But, even as it was and with the Viva Verona monoblocks, it was good enough to fool several expert members of HP's improvisatory listening panel. (Incidentally, more than one person who heard the Zingalis thought they would make swell speakers for large spaces as *ne plus ultra* sound reinforcement systems for "big" music.) The HM-215's ease, even with low-power amplifiers, on orchestral fortes and its ability to recreate a dynamic "jump" from quiet soft to brazenly loud are seldom, if ever, heard in low-efficiency speaker systems. This, alone, can make listening to music quite involving. (The specified sensitivity at one meter/one watt is 103dB.) I almost forgot to tell you that the ± 3 dB adjustment knob, found on the speaker's front panel and used to tune the "middle," does not specify the frequencies affected.

If you sense an ambivalence on my part about the Zingali sound, it isn't out of any genuinely serious concern about what has been wrought here. Rather, the reservation belongs, specifically, to this listener—enraptured with the purity and truth of the horn design, but so spoiled by that sound that he wishes extended all the way down the line. Others, with a different aesthetic bias, are going to feel, perhaps, quite differently, given the fact that almost no speaker is more continuous at the Zingali's price level, a modest (for such an ambitious design) \$27,000/pair. If you can arrange a demonstration somewhere, see what you think and act accordingly.

The VPI Super Scoutmaster Plus

It was probably inevitable, given the increasing detail to all things once considered "small" in audio componentry, that someone in the analog playback business would start to think about those wires that run from the outputs of a phonograph cartridge along the pickup arm to the larger interconnect feeding the phonostage. According to VPI's Harry Weisfeld, virtually every arm designer devises his own arm interconnects, usually ordering off-the-shelf stuff from a large manufacturer of wires and wiring. But only a few, we have learned, are pickier than others about the pickup-arm leads.

And so, in an experimental mood, Weisfeld asked Joe Reynolds of Nordost if the firm would mind formulating an experimental length of pickup-arm wire. Weisfeld wanted to see just how much difference a really good interconnect would make in the nine-inch JMW arm on the Super Scoutmaster.

In a way, it was logical that he would do this. The design of the Scout series has provoked his creative juices—Weisfeld has updated the basic design of the original Scout twice. The first time, he came out with the more advanced Scoutmaster. Almost immediately, after