The moment I remember most vividly while reviewing the Consensus Audio Engineering Conspiracy loudspeakers ($41,700 USD per pair) was seeing my sister stand in the middle of my listening room one evening, eyes closed, her dancer's body gently swaying to the violin of Hilary Hahn. She had never heard my audio system before. Transported by the music, she looked at me in wonder: "What is this?"

For me, her spontaneous response to the music was a reminder that music is motion, originating in the passionate movement of a human body playing an instrument or singing. It was a reminder that when we hear music reproduced with all its depth and nuance and power intact, it re-creates that movement and emotion in the listener.

That moment was the essence of why the pursuit of high-end audio is worth it. In particular, it illustrated for me the importance of making the final link in the chain — the loudspeaker — as good as it can be. Which means making it something very much like the Consensus Audio Engineering Conspiracy.

Conspiracy: breathing together

I'm not sure what the intentions of designer Stefan Fekete were when he named the Conspiracy, but I prefer to set aside the more sinister definitions of the word. In its original sense, conspiracy meant "to breathe together," and that very much speaks to my experience of what Fekete’s Conspiracy does for the relationship between listener and recorded performer.

Fekete is the designer and owner (with other investors) of Consensus Audio Engineering, an Austrian company founded in 2005. He has an unusual pedigree for a loudspeaker designer: in addition to being a music fan, he is an airflow engineer who worked for a race-engine company. Formerly the designer for Lumen White loudspeakers, with CAE he has been able to further develop his ideas and designs. One sign of his design prowess is the Conspiracy’s claimed frequency response: 18Hz-32kHz, -3dB. Those are good numbers, but they're far more impressive when you realize that the low end of the range is achieved not with a separate, self-powered subwoofer with a 15" driver, but with a clever three-way "air-flow damping" design for a ported cabinet that reproduces the bass with four 7" drivers.

The Conspiracy used to be the top of the Consensus loudspeaker line, but two new models have rendered it the company’s midpriced offering (if $41,700/pair can be considered “midpriced”). Above it are the Passion ($78,000/pair) and the Statement ($108,000/pair), neither of which was available in the US as I wrote this. Below the Conspiracy in the Consensus line are the Magma ($32,900/pair) and the Lightning SE ($18,800/pair).

The cones of the Conspiracy’s four bass drivers, single 7” midrange, and 1.2” tweeter are ceramic (a black diamond tweeter is available at extra cost). The drivers are made by Accuton, with proprietary CAE modifications to the basket, spider, and magnets to optimize the airflow. The tweeter is at the top of the 54”-tall cabinet, below it the midrange, and below that the four bass drivers, with crossover points of 200Hz and 2.5kHz and an overall sensitivity of 92dB. Crossover parts are custom-made in Germany by Mundorf. Internal wiring is the company’s original design, and the single-wire connectors on the back are WBT’s platinum terminals. The design is clean and elegant, with black metal screens protecting the drivers and making a conventional speaker grille unnecessary.

The truly high-end wooden cabinet (53.8”H x 10.5”W x 20.3”D), with its teardrop-shaped horizontal cross section, is perhaps the most elegant I’ve seen. “Resonance optimized plywood materials” (as CAE’s website describes them) are used in the construction and topped with an elegantly stained and finished veneer of etimo, an African hardwood. The hardness of etimo reportedly improves the Conspiracy’s sound. The finish is a polyester lacquer buffed to a deep shine that looks much richer than the superficial gloss of polyurethane or similar plastic finishes. The downside is that the finish is relatively fragile; when moving the speakers, beware of inadvertently scratching or dinging the finish with a belt buckle, ring, or
other hard object. The elegant design of the Conspiracy makes it relatively unimposing for its size, and its design and construction have kept its weight to a fairly reasonable 154 pounds.

Alfred Kainz, owner of highend-electronics, Inc., in Apple Valley, California, is CAE’s main US representative, and he’s pretty passionate about the Conspiracy. “This speaker can play just about any music,” said Kainz. “It does more right than any other speaker I’ve heard, which is why, when I first heard it, I wanted to represent Consensus Audio.”

As usual, I was curious about who did the listening while the product was under development. “Stefan [Fekete] is the designer, and he does the listening. The loudspeaker has to meet his criteria for performance,” said Kainz. “He listens to classical and jazz, and other acoustic music. I personally listen to classical and jazz, too, so maybe that’s why I like these loudspeakers so much.”

Kainz pointed to the Conspiracy’s main strengths as being timing and coherence, both of which speak to the careful arrangement of the drivers and the crossover design and frequencies. “The decay of sounds is also more real to the ear,” he said. “Listen for the realistic decay of a piano note. You can also hear it on classical and jazz music, and other acoustic music.”

Setup and system

Alfred Kainz was encouraging about setting up the Conspiracy speakers: “They’re relatively easy to set up. Just place them wider than other speakers, with a little bit of toe-in.” His advice proved to be spot on: their final positions in my room were a couple of inches farther from the front wall and about 18” wider apart than my reference Triangle Stratos Australes.

Kainz also noted that although the speakers are fairly sensitive, and a relatively comfortable load for an amplifier (5 ohms nominal impedance), that amplifier should put out at least 15-20Wpc. “I wouldn’t use an SE 300B amp to drive them — but anything more powerful than that should do fine.”

He also sent along a set of Consensus Resonance Technology spikes ($2000/set of 8). These are optional but highly recommended. The top end of the spike’s threaded bolt connects to the speaker, and the other rests on a gel that absorbs vibrations. Below that, the pointed spike itself then sits on one of three possible spike plates that are relatively soft, neutral, or hard. On a surface such as a hardwood or stone floor, the neutral or soft spike plate is supposed to work best; the neutral or hard spike plate is recommended for a carpeted floor. I found the differences subtle but significant. On my maple hardwood floor, the neutral spike plate had the best combination of detail and solidity of tone. “Be careful” is the watchword — the top surface of the spike plate consists of a tiny dimple in the middle of a metal disc scarcely more than half an inch across, surrounded by wood. With the spike attached to the speaker, it would be all too easy to gouge a hole in the wooden surface of the spike plate if you tried to move the speakers after they were in position.

Other gear used for this review included a Cary 306-200 CD player, a Rega P3-24 turntable with Clearaudio Maestro Wood cartridge and Lehmann Audio Black Cube SE phono preamp, Classé Audio CP-700 preamp and CA-M400 monoblock amplifiers, Triangle Stratos Australes speakers, Legenburg Apollo speaker cables and Hermes interconnects, a PS Audio Power Plant Premier power regenerator and Shunyata Research Hydra Model-4 power conditioner, ESP Essence Reference power cables, and Stillpoints isolation devices.

Following Alfred Kainz’s recommendation, I let the speakers break in with over 100 hours of continuous play before I began my serious listening.

Listening

My first experience with the CAE Conspiracy loudspeakers was nearly as memorable as my sister’s. I sat transfixed in my listening chair a long while, impressed with the levels of detail
and transparency these speakers conveyed. Furthermore, this was one of the few speakers I’ve heard that created those qualities without compromising the richness of the sound and making music sound thin. I got lost in the depths of some of my favorite CDs, hearing more in the music than I’d ever heard. My first and most lasting impression was of a coherent, convincing presentation of the music that I could listen to all day.

Along with the music she dances to, my sister Barbara has a great deal of experience listening to live classical music, and, in particular, has the unusual and frequent experience of hearing music from seats quite close to the performers. When she attends concerts at Orchestra Hall in Chicago, she usually sits in the terraces behind the orchestra, close to the musicians. From there, she hears sound that is far closer to what a recording microphone would hear than what she would experience sitting in the center of the hall 20 rows back.

Furthermore, just a few weeks before her visit, Barbara had sat in such a terrace seat to hear Hilary Hahn play from just a few feet away. As it happened, she had also given me a CD of Hahn playing the violin concertos of Samuel Barber and Edgar Meyer, accompanied by Hugh Wolff and the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra (CD, Sony Classical SK 89029), and was able to compare her memory of the tone of Hahn’s live performance with that from my sound system. She was impressed. “This is very close to the tonality of the violin I remember hearing Hilary play,” she said. Although we didn’t do an A/B comparison with my reference Triangles, I also heard the timbres of acoustic instruments reproduced by the Conspiracy speakers as very close to what I’d hear at a live performance, and closely approaching the performance of the Triangles.

Barbara’s main comment, though, had to do with the presence of the orchestra itself. “I am really impressed at the reproduction of the full orchestra that this system is able to create,” she enthused. She was also clearly impressed with the range of sound and the level of detail the Conspiracy loudspeakers could reproduce: “You can hear the entire string section — and the double basses are amazing. They are really subterranean.”

I very much agreed. The bass reproduction of the CAE Conspiracy loudspeakers went deeper (though perhaps not more powerfully) than any I’d heard in my system, and I have no problem believing that their claimed low-frequency limit of 18Hz is accurate. More important than how impactful the bass was, however, was how naturally it integrated with the rest of the sound conveyed. There was never a sense that the bass was there to hit us hard, just that it was there as it was meant to be — as part of the music.

Partly due to her experience with live listening, Barbara was also able to point out to me something I’d never heard with any other loudspeaker — not just room ambience, but the sound of the resonating room itself. “You can hear the cellos sitting on the resonating floor of the concert hall,” she said. “There’s a real sense of the instruments sitting on the stage, fixed in space, and the sound of the floor beneath them.” Sure enough, when she called it to my attention, I could hear it, too. Again, the detail brought forth by the Conspiracy loudspeakers not only permitted us to hear the orchestral instruments with extraordinary fidelity, but to identify a unique contribution of the room as well.

Another listener who offered his observations was Alex, an 18-year-old audiophile friend. The son of a friend’s girlfriend (if you can follow that), Alex had asked for my help a few months before in refoaming the woofers of his used Cerwin-Vega D-9s, which he’d bought for $250 from an ad on Craigslist.com. Not stopping there, we rewired them with solid-core OCC magnet wire and (because their sensitivity is 102dB) connected them to a $79 T-Amp. Alex’s investment in 20-year-old speakers now sounds as if it’s worth 20 times as much.

Alex listens carefully for sonic differences, and wants gear that gets him as close to the performance as he can get. He, too, noted that, compared with the Triangles, “the Conspiracy loudspeakers are tighter and more detailed overall. The high notes are more pronounced, and the bass goes lower.” I particularly valued the impression on his 38-years-younger ears of
the Conspiracy’s high frequencies, and also of the timbral differences between my reference speakers and the CAEs. “The Triangles sound more ‘wooden’ and warmer, especially with violin and other string instruments,” he said. That confirmed what I heard, as well.

Perhaps the most impressive thing I noticed about the Conspiracy loudspeakers was a dramatic difference in their dynamic range and expressiveness, both subtle and otherwise. Listening to James Asher’s percussion album, *Feet in the Soil* (CD, New Earth NE9512-2) — particularly the first two tracks, “Pemulwuy” and “jileu” — I was used to hearing the percussion line being rhythmic and propulsive, if perhaps a bit dull. What I heard with the Conspiracy was far greater note-to-note variation in the power and tone of the drumbeats, which made these percussion pieces come compellingly alive. As for Alfred Kainz’s suggestion that I listen for the realistic decay of piano notes, they were indeed more sustained. In the final bar of “You Don’t Know Me,” an old favorite from Patricia Barber’s *Nightclub* (CD, Premonition 5738), the sound of her piano dies away naturally, followed by some brief taps on a nearly inaudible cymbal. The piano was indeed clearer than I’d ever heard it, all the way through to silence, and the cymbal was very quiet, but clean and crisp.

In sum, the CAE Conspiracy loudspeakers were simply the best I’ve heard at conveying microdynamic differences that bring a sense of aliveness to the music, and were equal to the very best I’ve heard in bass extension, detail throughout the audioband, transparency without thinness, and top-to-bottom integration of the sound. In absolute macrodynamic slam, particularly on low frequencies, they weren’t the most impactful, and they may not be the ideal speaker for headbangers. Even so, they kept the bass in proportion, and convincingly and powerfully conveyed the scope and size of orchestral works. Similarly, they fell only a hair short of the speakers with the best fidelity to acoustic timbres that I’ve heard.

For once, however, the specifics don’t tell the whole story. As good as its individual qualities are, the synergy of the CAE Conspiracy’s positive attributes allowed it to present more than the sum of its sonic parts. The richness of musical detail, the rightness of proportion, the completeness of the sound, and the convincing presence of the music conveyed by this loudspeaker made it truly superb. In short, the Conspiracy is the best loudspeaker I’ve heard in my listening room, and I could happily live with a pair of them for the rest of my life. If my audio budget allowed it, I would.

**Considerations and conclusion**

It is in the nature of things that scientific concepts and measuring tools cannot completely describe and measure reality. A loudspeaker that is truly faithful to the music is so not only as a result of the phase relationships between its drivers or the contour of its frequency response. As important as the theories and numbers are, and as important as it is for the engineers to get them as good as they can get them, there is always something in a musical performance that we are capable of experiencing that cannot be described by the numbers. As my sister found as she moved to the music of the Consensus Audio Engineering Conspiracy loudspeakers, it is about a piece of audio gear being able to convey the passionate movement of the musicians and the emotion of the performance.

The outstanding achievement of CAE is that, in the Conspiracy, they have found a way to get the engineering and the music right. This speaker has been designed with enough technical savvy to use 7” bass drivers to convincingly reproduce depths they would seem to have no right to plumb. It also proved capable of letting me experience aspects of music that I might not otherwise have even been aware of, such as the microdynamics of percussive rhythms, and the subtle resonance of the stage on which a cello section was playing.

The Consensus Audio Engineering Conspiracy enables the music to move the listener in all the ways a listener should be moved. If you can afford the price of “breathing together” with them, they should be on your audition list.

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Consensus Audio Engineering
Conspiracy Loudspeakers

Price: $41,700 USD per pair.
Warranty: Five years parts and labor.

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