

The Other Amazing British Mini

ProAc's Tablette Anniversary

By Jeff Dorgay

Forget the headphones. Listening to Chaka Khan's voice blast through the Anniversary Tablettes from my comfy chair, I'm flabbergasted that these miniature marvels throw an even larger soundstage than my reference Quad 2815s, from which I've just removed the speaker cables. Now in its ninth version after 32 years, we have the Tablette Anniversary (signifying the 30th anniversary of its launch in 2013, when this speaker was originally introduced).

It seems like only yesterday when I got hooked on the sound of small British speakers, but after a pair of KEFs and LS3/5a's, I bounced back stateside for the legendary Spica TC-50. After torturing my local dealer with countless fried TC-50 tweeters and after reading *Stereophile's* review of the original Tablette, it was time to bid the TC-50s adieu and move back to the other side of the pond.



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REVIEW

Back to the Future

It's amazing how time flies, and today there is another new Tablette, the Anniversary model you see here. This diminutive cabinet still makes some of the most engaging small speaker sound you'll ever hear, and again is more refined in every way with nothing negative to report.

As good as the new dome tweeter is, the Anniversary Tablette makes tremendous strides in the bass and dynamics department. *(continued)*

I couldn't agree with the *Stereophile* review more: these speakers really nailed the mid-range, and in the small living room I inhabited, the lack of deep bass wasn't a deal breaker as I'd lived with ESLs for so long. After a while in a larger living room, tweeters started popping again, so the Tablettes and I parted company for a while. In 2003, I found myself in a small room again and on a limited budget; a quick call to my good friend Jonathan Spelt (the same gentleman who sold me my first pair in '84) at Ultra Fidelis in

Milwaukee, Wisconsin, had a pair quickly zooming my way.

Again, I wasn't disappointed. These speakers had only become more of what I loved and less of what I didn't. They had more LF energy: the top end now smoother and more extended, with the magic midrange and phenomenal imaging of the original model still intact. Unfortunately, when I packed my bags and moved to the Pacific Northwest, the Tablettes had to be part of the moving sale.



REVIEW

These little speakers don't sound little anymore. While they still sound better nearfield in the main 16 x 25 foot listening room, it's amazing how much air the Tablettes can move even in full-room mode. You will lose a smidge of their pinpoint imaging ability in a larger room, though adding a small subwoofer (I suggest the REL S/2 that we recently reviewed) makes for a formidable combination that easily knocks on the door of a lot of \$10k/pair speakers we've auditioned. But I'm not here to sell you a subwoofer.

Quick to unpack

The quandary you face with a pair of Tablettes is whether to optimize them for the biggest stereo image they can deliver, or the most bass reinforcement you can derive from your room. Those preferring the former should place them about 6 or 7 feet apart, making a triangle about the same distance to your listening chair, preferably as far away from the side walls as you can. If you want to cheat a bit and have to put your Tablettes a foot or so from the wall, I highly suggest a single 242 panel from GIK Acoustics just in front of the speakers to damp the first reflection. But if you really want Quad killers, get them about 6 feet from the sidewalls and be prepared to be blown away.

Angling the speakers in ever so slightly and keeping the tweeters at ear height helps to deliver everything the Tablettes are capable of, and the more solid your speaker stands (I suggest a pair of sand-filled Sound Anchors stands) are, the better the low frequencies will be rendered. A tiny bit of blu-tack or other suitable substance to improve the speaker/stand interface goes a long way, and be careful not to overdamp. Fifteen minutes and you'll have them sorted.



REVIEW

Around back, you'll notice that the Tablettes offer two pairs of binding posts to allow bi-wiring. That's an argument for your favorite internet forum, but we had excellent results with the new Clear Reflection cable from Cardas Audio that just happened to have two sets of bananas on the ends, so we were off to the races.

Tie your mother down

And with that in mind, Queen's *A Day at the Races* is the perfect choice to get the party started. Forget the hit single; you know what track to play. The current Tablette's ability to play really loud—this time courtesy of the Pass Lab's Xs300 monoblocks—is indeed impressive, with these little speakers giving their all, able to keep the heavily overdubbed vocals and guitars all in check. Diamanda Galas' *Plague Mass* increases the punishment; yet again the ProAcs come through reproducing her five-octave screams without strain.

Steve Winwood's piano glides through the entire first side of *John Barleycorn Must Die*, and about ten albums later, the way the Tablettes capture the essence of whatever music is thrown at them is their strongest suit. Just like a great ESL speaker, they are so coherent and smooth yet resolving, you don't want to flip through the tracks, whether listening to digital or analog.

Going back and forth between the new Quad and the Tablettes, it's tough to decide which is the more desirable speaker on certain program material – and when you consider a pair of these little ProAcs will only set you back \$2,400 a pair (\$2,800 in a premium finish), they are pretty sweet indeed.

Moving the Tablettes to the 10 x 13 foot room in my house is a much more intimate experience. As mentioned, the first reflection is absorbed with GIK 242 panels, and the rear wall about 2 feet behind the listening chair has a row of GIK diffusors. The sound is big, bold—and thanks to a bit of room gain—really not requiring a subwoofer at all. This is nearfield listening at its best, feeling like your listening chair has a pair of headphones strapped on it is the only way it can be described, with a vivid soundstage that is so immersive, in a dimly lit room you never even see the speakers.

Any amp will do

The current Tablette is easier to drive than the original. A clean original pair rustled from the shelves of Echo Audio in Portland, Oregon, for a quick comparison instantly puts perspective on how far this great speaker has evolved. While still relatively low on the sensitivity scale, requiring one watt for 86dB of output, the current speaker is much more "valve amplifier friendly." (continued)

In our small listening room, the 35-watt per channel PrimaLuna Dialog integrated with EL 34 tubes is wonderfully romantic, while the 30-watt per channel solid state Fern & Roby integrated that we review this issue is equally engaging, yet slightly more dynamic, due to this amplifier's greater control. Both are fun, both are awesome and either amplifier makes for a high quality, fully engaging small-room system. The 100-watt per channel Conrad-Johnson LP120sa+ paints a larger sound field, but you don't need this beefy of an amplifier to enjoy the current Tablettes. Rega's Brio-R is a perfect budget solution and if you're really slumming it, the Harmon Kardon 730 vintage receiver will surprise you.

Having bi-wired speaker cables won't make or break the sound of these lovely speakers, and perhaps the improvement in sound we heard was more from eliminating the stock jumpers between woofer and tweeter. An equally good result was achieved with single wire speaker cable and upgraded jumpers between woofer and tweeter. Cardas, Chord and Nordost jumpers were tried, all with equally rewarding results – a smidge more clarity from the upper midrange on up. Let's call it a 5% improvement, but the better your ancillaries, the easier it will be for you to hear.

I want them

I can't resist a pair of ProAc Tablettes, so this pair is staying. I'll be using them as my small speaker reference both here and over at The Audiophile Apartment. They are the speaker to beat for a small- to medium-sized listening room with resolution that matches the big boys. They will be receiving one of our Publisher's Choice Awards in our upcoming special issue. I can't suggest them highly enough. ●

The ProAc Tablette Anniversary

\$2,400 - \$2,800
(finish dependent)

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