

AUDIO REVIEWS

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SEPTEMBER 2004



ARRO

Reviewer: David Abramson**Source:** Audio Note CDT One transport; Audio Note DAC 2.1x Signature DAC**Integrated amplifier:** Unison Research Unico**Speakers:** Totem Arro**Cables:** Ensemble Megaflex FSF speaker cables; Audience Au24 digital interconnect; Monster Cable Interlink 400 interconnects (subbing for Au24 - in for repair)**Stand:** Sound Organization**Sundry accessories:** n/a

Room size: 16.5' x 18' with 11' sloped ceiling

Review Component Retail: \$1,175/pr in black; \$1,350/pr in Cherry or Maple**Cupid's Arro**

I've got a taste for products with musical soul. A speaker's impedance curve may be flat and easy and the frequency response ruler-straight but it all don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing. Or, as our editor is fond of saying - it's got to have the *luv*. If you're a moonie, I think you know just what we mean and I guess that's why most of the HiFi I find myself making eyes at has some kind of exotic pedigree. I just love those products which are really hard to obtain or of which they only make 20 a year. Take Joe Fratus' Art Audio amps, for instance - relatively hard to come by but beautiful. If you have any questions, you ring Art Audio and the man himself answers the phone - in other words, *my* kind of product. Just try getting either Bowers or Wilkins on the line if you've got a question about your new B&Ws ...

Of course, there *are* downsides to such exotica. What with only one or two dealers carrying the 'line' (perhaps merely two products deep in your case), it may be difficult or well nigh impossible to locate a particular component for audition. Moreover, once you conjure said dealer and he flies you in for an audition *on him*, you risk actually liking the product and then having to wait the requisite 2 or 3 months for the piece's designer to fashion yours. And then there's the workmanship issue, meaning your particular sample may or may not be up to snuff. And if it isn't? Good luck on the repair turn-around. A word to the wise; don't bother pointing out the workmanship issue or you'll be told that "it's the music, stupid!" or get dismissals to that effect. Now it's not as though this scenario were always the case with high-end exotica (and it certainly isn't the case with semi-bespoke companies like Art Audio or Devore Fidelity), but it *can* be.

So sonic exotica can extract their price in many ways, and the fiscal one can be rather elevated. But I think you'll also agree that it can have considerable sonic rewards. Plus, let's be honest, there's the not-so-intangible 'coolness factor' of having a lovingly handcrafted sonic masterpiece on your figurative mantle. For these reasons, such products are often worth the turmoil of acquisition in the final analysis. Owing to their limited production and protracted research and development phases -- or perhaps in spite of it -- such sundry exotica often possess mondo musical soul of a kind that keeps you glued to your listening chair long into the wee hours. And it is precisely this kind of musically soulful quality that I often feel is missing in action when I listen to the latest well-tested, well-reviewed and measured-to-within-an-inch-of-its-life HighEnd 'mass-market' product. But don't hop that plane to your nearest 3000-mile removed dealer just yet.

Diana Krall owns a pair - how bad could they be?

While I love a musically soulful component, I also love a good laugh. And that's just what I got when Vince Bruzzese's Totem Arros arrived for my dissection. Upon 'hefting' these fly-weights out of the shoebox that passes for their shipping carton, I couldn't help but let loose a few



chuckles. These things are *puny* with a capital 'P' - something you might give your kid sister before she goes off to college to listen to Britney in her dorm room but definitely *not* seriously audiophile in appearance. Plus, they aren't exotic. After all, these are Totems, a line of speakers which, to be sure, have been the recipient of many accolades and medals in the past but also constitute a relatively well-known (translation: mass-market) HighEnd brand. Mention Totems in casual audiophile conversation and nobody gives you a blank stare. I hate that!

For me though, Totem isn't just another well-known brand. Totems fall into that special niche of well-known products, which aren't as ubiquitous as B&Ws or Thiels and thus have just enough coolness factor to be a viable candidate in my kind of search for truly musical yet also somewhat esoteric products. To boot, Vince designed one of my absolute favorite speakers of all time, a bona fide sonic tour-de-force in my opinion - the Totem Acoustic Model One. This speaker must be heard well set-up and properly driven to be believed. In a truly optimized setup (don't toe them in and do put them a bit out into the room on super-massive stands), they are scarily good, with true-to-life tonality and superb dynamics and imaging - a true audiophile classic if ever there was one. That's why the Model Ones [below] feature in my audiobiography as one of my personal touchstones. That's why my all-too-solid-flesh, non-golden ears are most definitely perked indefinitely in Vince's general direction. And while experience has already shown me that you don't want to underestimate Mr. Bruzzese's talents nor overlook them in your search for a good, reasonably priced speaker, the Arros *are* awfully small.

Overlooking that aspect for a bit, the Arro is a narrow rear-ported 2-way tower with a lower faux port for sand or shot filling and an upper acoustic port with a 4.5" diameter multi-layer mid/woofer and a ¾" soft-dome tweeter [above]. Quite a graceful design, actually. The crossover is 2nd order and according to the Totem literature, not only "lovingly hand-assembled" but simultaneously "ultra-sophisticated" and "ultra-expensive". Believe it! Vince told me on the phone that it takes his best technician 80 minutes to assemble one crossover. As with all of Vince's speakers, cabinet joints are lock-mitered for strength and the inside of the cabinet is veneered and coated with space-aged Borosilicate resin for stiffness. And even in the black that my samples are finished in, the Arros exude quality sans *that* two-of-a-kind, made-in-my-garage workmanship. The finish is satiny smooth, the cabinetry rock-solid and the stance elegant. Big-time WAF!

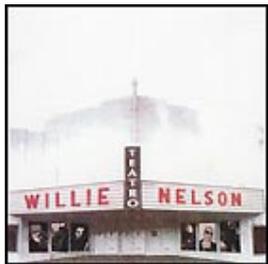
Upon looking at the Arro, I am put in mind of one particular design aspect that I think makes the Totem line of speakers if not unique then at least uncommon. Since the development process at Totem is largely listening- as opposed to IBM-based, Vince and his team optimize each model design individually. In other words, they follow their totem. This means that if you glance up and down the line, you won't find the same two drivers stuffed into cookie-cutter boxes of incrementally ascending size and price. With Totem, each speaker looks different and more often than not, utilizes a differently sourced or tweaked driver for its specific dimensions and design goals. Now that's the mark of bespoke speaker tailoring.

Moving on, break-in is a very real phenomenon in my experience even with cables but *especially* with speakers. There is one caveat though in that many -- not all but many -- of the truly special products I've heard improve with break-in like everything else but show what makes them special in one way or another early on in the process. The Arro falls into this group. Fresh out of the box and hefted (more like *flung*) into position ca. 17 inches from the front wall, about 7 feet apart and without toe-in, I put on one of my all-time favorite CDs (and one about which I'd love to write a feature at some point - it's that good) - Willie Nelson's *Teatro* [Island 524548]. You don't like country music? How 'bout magnificently crafted and delicate songs of love and loss sung poignantly in a beautiful acoustic space over rhythmic Spanish acoustic guitar accompaniments in an ethereal, almost new-age atmosphere? That's *Teatro!* It's simply a gorgeous album and I despise country music as a rule!

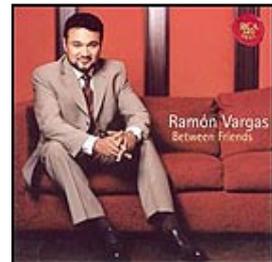




Immediately on the first song "Ou Es-Tu, Mon Amour?", the delicate haunting tone of Willie's first few nylon-strung guitar notes had me captive. There was an innate tonal rightness here which caught me off guard. When people think Totem, they often think "amazing imaging" and "big bass/small woofer", but do they think of "tone"? The little Arros prove they should if they don't already. As the CD continued, most notably a minute or so into my favorite song "I Just Can't Let You Say Goodbye", there is a magical moment when Willie's sister, his accompanist on this album, joins in with her voice. That was a magical union, allowing me to hear into that cavernous space while being possessed of a tonal right-on-ness that was downright BBC-like without the midbass bump. What I heard was very reminiscent of one of my long-ago bought-and-sold pairs of Spondors or Rogers.



Disc after disc, song after aria and as the break-in period wore on, the Arros' tonality went from near-faultless but maybe a hair bright/thin to near-faultless, *period*. Next up in the software stakes was the collaborative effort between lyrical tenor extraordinaire Ramon Vargas and by turns, a half dozen or so assorted basses and baritones entitled *Between Friends* [RCA 2440]. I know and love this CD for many reasons, among them Vargas' incredible musicality and at times almost uncanny timbral resemblance to the late Swedish superstar tenor Jussi Bjorling, particularly in the love duet that starts the album - "Au fond du Temple Saint" from *Les Pecheurs de Perles*. In this lovely duet, Vargas is paired with sometime Met baritone Vassily Gerello who sings with a heart-warmingly beautiful, rich tone in somewhat Russian-accented



French, modulating his dynamics just so in order to blend with his lovelorn tenor counterpart. Vargas is here and in general a beautiful singer, very musical and expressive and lacking only that *frisson* of tonal uniqueness that is the exclusive purview of the two or three superstars of an age. The Arros, relatively unbroken in (the literature says they need about 85-90 hours of play time) and without any sand-filling as yet, let me revel in it all. That tone was just about spot on, almost exactly as I've heard it on many a speaker revered for its accurate timbre like the Spondor SP ½, Harbeth Compact 7 and the Quad 63.

About mid-way through their break-in period, I attended a recital given at the Robinson Center here in Little Rock/Arkansas featuring none other than Dame Kiri Te Kanawa singing a lovely and rounded program of art songs and arias. On returning home, I decided to do what many of us audio types do after a concert with one of our favorite artistes – spin a matching CD and see if this hobby of ours lives up to its hype. I chose *Ave Maria* [412629] a mid-80's Phillips recording of spiritual songs such as Bach's "Laudate Dominum" and the ever-popular and sprightly "Let the Bright Seraphim" by Händel. By this time in the review process, I had filled the speakers with 15 lbs. of sand each, (Totem recommends 10-20), which might have solidified things a bit sonically. I dimmed the lights and adjusted the volume on my Unison Research Unico such that it about matched what I perceived it to be from my recently vacated seat in row T.



What I heard next was a quite believable rendition of Dame Kiri in an obviously different space doing what I had just half an hour ago heard her doing - sing like an angel. The creamy tone and ethereal pianissimos were all there in superb fidelity to the living artist. Granted, as this was a mid-80s recording and my cherished Audience Au24 interconnects were back at Audience for an alleged faulty connection (cheapo cables temporarily took their place), and as the Arros were only mid-way through their break-in period, the timbre of her voice was perhaps a touch thin, but only by the merest of touches. I listened to the entire CD and just relaxed into the space and the tone. Beautiful.

I don't know if it's the small woofers as some say or the magical soul Vince has imbued them with in some secret totemic ceremony, but another thing these little guys excel at is *speed*. They are blindingly fast when they need to be and they really got my foot tapping in a way it hasn't happened with so many other, often much higher-priced loudspeakers. If there's pace, rhythm and timing on your album, the Arros will glean it for you and then some. In fact, in this aspect they reminded me most of one of my exes, the Neat Mystiques. This British speaker, not too well-known outside of Naim/Linnie flat-earth circles much like the tonally-challenged Linn Kan, is a PRaT (Pace Rhythm and Timing) champ. A wonderfully musical speaker voiced entirely by ear (Bob Surgeoner's ear to be exact, a genuinely nice guy), the Neats are great all-arounders and loads of fun with all kinds of musical styles. But, while the Neats are jolly good fun, I felt the Arros to be their tonal superior, truer to life and to the recordings we all have of it.

Ma'am, your surgery went just fine...

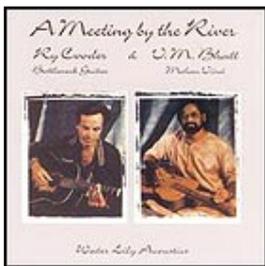
However -- and no matter how much money you throw at a speaker, there's almost always a however -- the Arros have what for some will no doubt be a fatal fly in their aural ointment. Scale? No. That they can do. In fact you will most definitely be pleasantly surprised by just how much scale they can muster. They can even pull off making a piano recording sound almost like a full-size piano, no easy feat for so diminutive a transducer. Cognitive dissonance to be sure!



Imaging? No. Now you *know* they can do that with their sleek'n narrow baffles and drivers so close to one another that their flanges actually overlap plus they're designed by Vince Bruzzese. C'mon now! Of course they can image. In fact, they are possessed of possibly the best and most spookily realistic imaging I've ever heard, barring perhaps the Quad ESL 63 in a good room and Totem's own Model One when well set up. Some might even claim such killer imaging is their *raison d'être* but I know better - it's their *tone*!

How about their bass, then? That's *gotta* be the flaw, no? They're small, narrow, lightweight, with a 4.5-inch so-called *woofer*. It's gotta be no bass. Wrong. Their bass is superb and not just for their size. Moreover, it is so well woven into their sonic tapestry that it almost isn't worth discussing as a separate entity. It is also drum-tight and lightning quick. I guess we could discuss it quantitatively because a lot of us have big rooms and like to listen at elevated levels. Okay, then you may have a problem. That problem will be an expensive one if you're not able to run fast enough to your volume control/remote to drop things to a level where the woofers aren't making a cracking sound as they slam into their stops. I experienced this frightening woofer cracking only once while I was playing Wilco's "Yankee Hotel Foxtrot" at an excessive level to show them off to my girlfriend. No harm done and she thought it was part of the mix. In sum, in a small to medium-sized room at sane levels while *not* playing Metallica, they will be just fine.

Their one flaw is lack of *impact* or raw displacement of air, that visceral sensation you get when the crescendo comes and the percussionist whacks the bass drum hard or even when the great Indian tabla player Sukhvindar Singh really



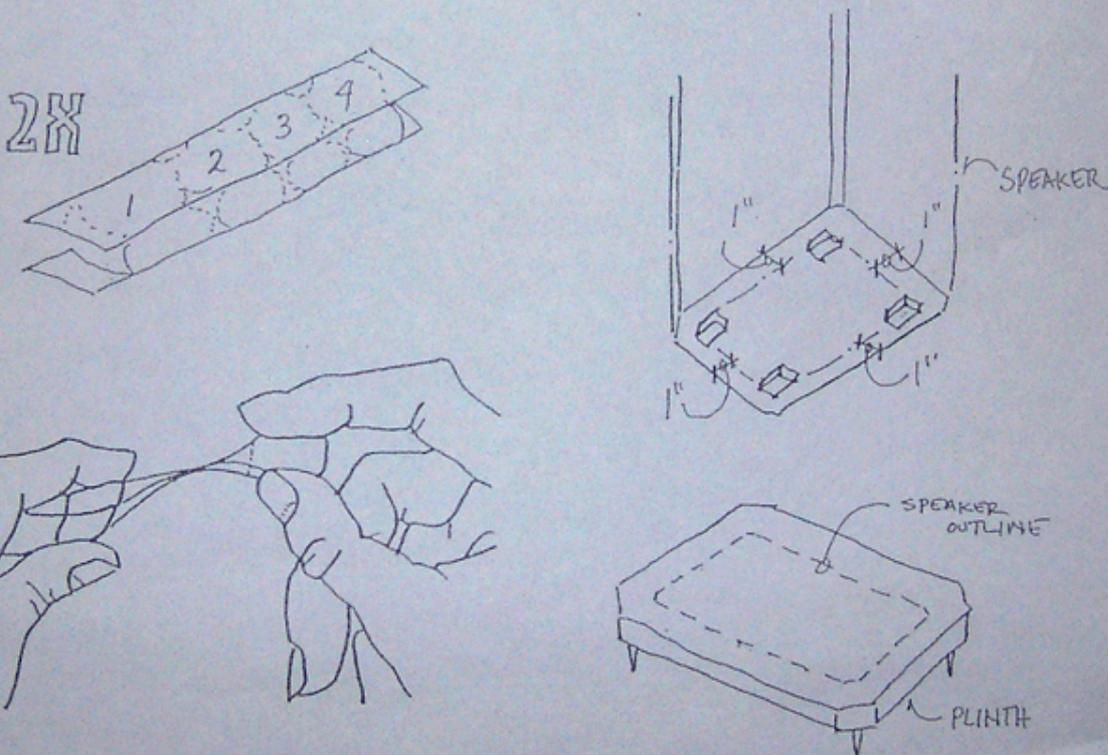
leans into his instrument during *A Meeting By The River*, the 1993 Grammy-winning Water Lily Acoustics [29] collaboration between Vishwa Mohan Bhatt and Ry Cooder. Robert Harley alluded to this lack in his 2001 rave TAS review of the Arro and I agree. The pressurization of even say, a 14' x 15' listening room just takes a bit more than so small a speaker can muster where the threshold of suspension-of-disbelief is concerned, the feeling that real musicians are playing in your listening room (or that you are listening in their playroom).

This sensation, for me, is a big part of what I love most about high fidelity audio equipment and a big reason most of us continue to throw money at our system pits. On some level, we all want our systems as often as possible to present us with the opportunity to believe that we are indeed in the presence of the artists whose album we enjoy. Great speakers alone don't do this - great *systems* do. But great speakers are inarguably a large part of that equation and in so many ways that matter musically, the Totem Arro certainly are that. But as far as visceral impact goes - well, Vince Bruzzese is a great speaker designer but neither The Almighty nor Newton. Those two probably knew you simply couldn't make a 34" tall while slim column with a 4.5-inch woofer hit you in the gut/chest with a rim shot or knock you over with the *New World Symphony* at full tilt and that's why they didn't start speaker companies [there *are* rare 4.5" woofer exceptions like the Platinum Solo or Reference of yore - Ed.]. But in the Arro's case, even a smaller ensemble like the one backing Nora Jones on *Feels Like Home* doesn't quite have the in-room impact I know it to have when played over physically larger speakers like the Neats. This is the one item that might be the coup d'grace for a would-be Arro buyer in a bigger room with certain musical needs.

Aah, the agony of the single caveat. "Oh the horror - the *horror!*", as someone once said. If only the Arro had the visceral impact of a physically larger transducer, all the while retaining their speed, imaging, coherence and perhaps most saliently, their lovely and enchanting tone, then ... *then* they'd be - well, perhaps one of Vince's larger floorstanders. I can only hope! Unfortunately, I have not yet had the pleasure of an introduction. In the meanwhile, the Arro remains that most frustrating of rare birds, the almost perfect loudspeaker - in my book anyway.

INFORMATION SHEET: General additional notes for Plinth Assembly

List of materials and Assembly instructions: You will find a strip of yellow reusable adhesive which separates into 4; per Plinth (2 adhesive strips in all) After the Plinth is assembled separate one of the 2 adhesive strips into 4 pieces. Take precaution to protect the finish of the speaker. Place the adhesive on the bottom of the speaker, 1" from the edge of the speaker; the adhesive will spread once loaded (see diagram below). Place the speaker with the adhesive square on the Plinth, once in place the Plinth and speaker will become one. Totem recommends you leave both speaker and Plinth connected indefinitely.



In fact, I'd like to be so bold as to say that in this very regard, the Arro's performance is in many ways reminiscent of another 'almost perfect' loudspeaker which some say wants only for impact - the Quad 57. Wait a minute - say *what?* "Don'cha be playin' with a legend now, boy!" Well sir, the Arro certainly has just about that legendary speaker's capabilities in terms of imaging, speed and coherence. And while I am loathe to risk all of what little credibility I may have by saying it's the champion's equal in terms of tone, the Arro certainly plays in the general vicinity of that league. What's more, in terms of sheer overall musical involvement, the Arro is much more than in the vicinity of a league. It's the star shortstop on the all-star team and a large number of its pricier, fancier and more exotic teammates are bringing it water. In other words, with a nod to ye olde editor, the Totem Arros very definitely *have* the luv - I'm struck.