

Black Run

Loaded up with high tech materials, the German Isophon Cassiano loudspeakers feature some very innovative technology. Adam Smith listens in.

Isophon is a name that will be familiar to some, as makers of automotive loudspeaker drive units. However, this part of the company is under the French electronics giant, Thomson, who owns the original trademarks and designs but no longer manufactures under this name. The range of high-end loudspeakers that include the Cassiano are the brainchild of Dr. Roland Gauder of Acoustic Consulting, an independent company that designs a variety of high-end electronics, turntables and loudspeakers. Dr. Gauder commenced his career in Berlin with Isophon in 1989, and was granted permission to market under the Isophon brand name when the company was split up in 1997.

All models in the current Isophon range are manufactured in Acoustic Consulting's facility and custom finishes made to customer's requirements can be accommodated without any problems. Indeed the company's website boasts of over 200 finishes available on the Cortina, Corvara and Cassiano models, so there should be something in the portfolio to please everyone!

The Cassianos, and their larger brothers, the Arabbas, mark a new departure in design, however, as they make use of ceramic-coned bass and midrange drivers sourced from Theil in Germany. The Arabba comes with a diamond dome tweeter as standard, whilst the Cassiano can be specified with either a diamond or ceramic type - we are testing the diamond version here, but the ceramic version will save you around £4,000. Incidentally, the Arabba was awarded the coveted "Best Sound in Show" award for the January 2007 CES exhibition, so its younger brother has a lot to live up to.

Named after the San Cassiano ski resort in the southern Tyrol, the Cassiano is an attractively styled loudspeaker with a sleek and well profiled cabinet that does go some way to disguising its size. With dimensions of approximately 110 x 21 x 41cm (H x W x D) and each 'speaker weighing in at 30kg, they are not diminutive shrinking violets by any means. This is aided by the sandwich construction of the cabinet which features a layer of damping sand in between, along with extensive internal bracing. The gloss black finish of our review samples commands a £400 premium but is utterly fabulous and Isophon provide no less than a can of Steinway polish to keep them shiny.

One single set of WBT terminals are fitted to the Cassianos and they also have jumper links to set lower bass equalisation to flat, +1.5dB or -1.5dB in order to optimise performance in various positions in the room. All of these items are fitted to the bottom surface

of the loudspeakers, which further adds to their clean lines. Driver complement consists of two seven inch (175mm) ceramic bass drivers, one seven inch ceramic midrange and the 0.75in (19mm) tweeter. These are connected together using a crossover that is unique in offering filter slopes of no less than 50dB per octave - fourth order slopes of 24dB per octave are considered steep in the audio world and so these are positively precipitous!

Isophon say that the use of a low

string having superbly defined leading edges and a beautifully judged and natural decay. In fact, all instruments sounded astonishingly real.

The rare and expensive materials used in the midrange and tweeter also prove their worth with every track played. Vocalists have sumptuous detail and atmosphere to their performances, with each intake of breath between lines almost uncanny. The Cassianos have a rare ability to take those



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order crossover leads to overlap of driver output over a wide frequency band, giving rise to poor separation. On the other hand, steep crossover slopes have in the past been accused of robbing music of its dynamics and emotion, however, Isophon assure us this is not the case with the Cassianos.

In order to confirm this, the Cassianos were duly inserted into our test system of Quad QC24 and II-Forty amplifiers, a Cambridge Azur 840C CD player and an Eastern Electric Minimax phono stage. Vinyl sources included our Pioneer PLC-590/SME M2-10 and the Slatdeck Garrard 401/SME 312.

SOUND QUALITY

'Big' is not only the name of a 1988 Tom Hanks film, but also the word that kept popping into my head during my time auditioning the Cassianos. Whilst it can also be used to describe their height (and price tag...) it is most aptly applied to the soundstage that they generate - make no mistake about it, for realism, spatial abilities and soundstaging, these are amongst the best non-electrostatic loudspeakers I have encountered. No matter what music I played, I could shut my eyes and be transported straight to the concert hall, studio or even dance tent where it was recorded.

The Isophons' bass is immensely deep and powerful, yet exhibits pace, fluidity and a lightness of touch when required that belies their dimensions. Stringed bass instruments, whether acoustic or electric had real depth and emotion, with each plucked

effects that often lurk somewhere in the background of music and bring them right up to augment the main events of a track. Until you hear your music collection through loudspeakers like this, I suspect you will not be aware of what you are missing.

The Isophons also have immense dynamic abilities. They do not miss anything even at low volumes, but during listening I found myself inching the volume control higher and higher to enjoy their sheer power and control - there was never any sense of compression or strain. Whilst the Quad II-Forty amplifiers drove them beautifully, I did occasionally gain the impression that the Cassianos almost had a sense of 'is that all you've got?' about them, and more power would not go amiss. Whilst they do not specifically need a powerhouse to drive them, they really blossom as the watt count rises.

CONCLUSION

Whichever way you look at it, nearly £13,000 is a lot of money to spend on a pair of loudspeakers and it is not unreasonable to expect superlative performance for this sort of outlay. Fortunately if your purchase happens to be

Isophon Cassianos then you are unlikely to be disappointed. They have a formidable combination of dynamics, control and emotion that makes any music style an eye-opening experience.

They incorporate some very innovative technologies and exotic materials, and these sum to give a superlative result. From a purely personal point of view, I find myself needing to rearrange my own 'all time favourite loudspeakers' top ten, as I now have a new entry to fit in there...

VERDICT Magnificent loudspeakers that possess qualities of imaging, scale and dynamics that few others can match.

ISOPHON CASSIANO £12,900 (as tested)
Sounds4Enjoyment
 ☎ +44 (0) 23 9271 7628
 www.isophon.de

FOR
 - Immense scale and soundstage
 - Effortless dynamics
 - Build quality

AGAINST
 - Not the easiest of loads to drive

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

Frequency response of the Cassianos is commendably smooth and even across their entire bandwidth, with no major peaks, dips or anomalies to speak of. Treble starts to roll down gently from around 15kHz, meaning that the Cassianos will not be harsh.

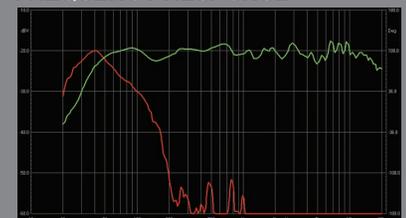
Bass output is very good. With the crossover jumpers set to 0dB, the main drivers operate down to 60Hz, augmented by the downward-firing port, which operates at around 40Hz. These aspects should confer upon the Cassianos a good, weighty, yet even character

Sensitivity is good at 87dB but measured impedance shows that the Cassianos will be something of a tricky load for many amplifiers. Electrically well damped, they have an average measured value of 4.7 Ohms, which tallies well with the manufacturer's 4 Ohm rating. However, the Cassianos dip down to a minimum of around 2 Ohms at low frequencies - just where most power is generally required.

Consequently an amplifier of at

least 60-70W that operates into loads as low as 2 Ohms will be required to get the best from the Cassianos. AS

FREQUENCY RESPONSE



Green - driver output
 Red - port output

IMPEDANCE

