

Kroma Atelier Thais – pure sound from stone

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Kroma Atelier Thais speakers

Spain has very little in the way of a hifi manufacturing legacy, up until this century there appeared to be no Spanish brands on the UK market. I wondered if this was because of the climate but other Mediterranean countries like Italy have been making audio equipment for decades, Greece also has a handful of established high end brands. As Kroma Atelier is one of a new breed of Spanish audio companies I asked distributor Guillaume Boyer about this situation, he mentioned two drive unit manufacturers, Beyma and Das Audio, the former is a familiar name albeit one that is focused on pro audio today. And of course there is Kroma Atelier founder Javier Millán has been developing products for 40 years but who has only recently broken out of his home market in Andalusia.

Today there is a small but growing band of Spanish brands in the high end of which Kroma Atelier is best known for loudspeakers. Their designs are distinguished by the use of Krion synthetic stone cabinets and Purifi drive units, they also have a reputation for very high quality finishes which are exemplified in the Thais floorstanders. One visitor remarked that they look like high end cars such is the depth of shine of the cabinet and it's easy to imagine a Porsche with this lacquered Graphite finish.

The Thais is a two and a half way reflex loaded design that stands at a domestically friendly one metre high (3'3"), the cabinet tilting backward slightly and counterbalanced by a plinth that extends backwards. While the cabinet is constructed in Krion I was surprised to see that the reflex port is wooden. Kroma tell that this is made of spruce and hand made by a Spanish guitar luthier. Apparently this isn't done merely because it looks beautiful but because the properties of this wood 'soften and control the airflow through the port'. It is shaped to avoid turbulence and to manage resonance much like many other designs but none that I have encountered

have used anything other than plastic, including some pretty ambitious models.

Rather than spikes the Thais is supplied with Isoacoustics Gaia feet which are gaining a good reputation as an aftermarket upgrade but are rarely supplied by speaker manufacturers. Kroma tell me that they initially developed their own Krion and Panzerholz (tankwood) feet but these were not adjustable so they set about looking for something more practical and found the Isoacoustics feet to be a good solution. I have long been an advocate of loudspeaker isolation so it's good to see a high end company going down this route.



The Thais drive unit array consists of two custom spec Purifi woofers and an AMT planar tweeter. We have seen a number of brands adopting the Purifi drivers over the last few years with the likes of Oepfi making a particularly good impression thanks to their many qualities. I recently listened to a prototype of a two-way that had one of their Ushindi woofers and was told by its designer that the Purifi drivers addressed distortion issues that very few other companies appear to consider. The examples we have heard certainly have a clarity and speed that is very rare, it seems likely that their price is the only barrier to wider use.

The mineral and resin based Krion Thais cabinet was chosen for its high density and structural rigidity and is lined with absorption materials to control internal reflections and minimise resonance. The cable terminals are placed half way up the back of the cabinet which means that cables are more visible than if they were lower down, this positioning was chosen because it keeps internal wiring from crossover to drivers as short as possible and that benefits sound quality.

Installing the Isoacoustics feet is a little challenging as it requires the branding on each foot to be facing forwards whilst keeping the speaker upright, there are two adjusters on the stud between foot and cabinet to aid with this and Kroma supply a spanner to fit the nut and lock the stud into the foot. With a patience it proved possible to have all four feet on each cabinet correctly oriented and the speakers standing up straight. A job best left to the dealer to sweat over if at all possible.

I initially set the Thais up in the same position that I normally put speakers of this size, with a gap of 55cm from the rear wall, this worked fairly well but the sound was a little lacking in the clarity I was expecting. So a bit of experimentation was done and I found that putting more space between cabinet (85cm in total) and wall alongside toeing them in so that their axis crossed behind my head (making a small section of the inside flank of each speaker visible)



worked best. I hooked up some William Eikos speaker cable and noticed that the terminals have custom made acrylic terminal clamps, a nice touch. As is the way that the brand and model name are machined into the back of the cabinet.

Sound quality

Loudspeakers with the Purifi drivers that I have reviewed in the past have had a tremendously fast and clean sound that erred on the aggressively transparent, delivering a presentation that was visceral in its intensity but inclined to reveal any limitations in the recording and playback system. The Thais are not like that, they have the speed and transparency that was expected but they are also relaxed and refined, how much of this is down to the choice of tweeter and how much to the way they have been voiced is hard to say but I suspect that the balance is a result of crossover tuning as much as anything.

That said I have never heard a harsh planar tweeter, these drivers are almost always relatively sweet sounding compared to domes, which probably has as much to do with their relatively restrained dispersion in the vertical plane as anything else. Dome tweeters have the same dispersion characteristics in all directions, planar designs are stronger in the horizontal than the vertical plane and this will reduce reflections from ceilings and floors which can often produce a smoother sound.

On the end of the Moor Amps Angel 6 MkII power amplifier (150W) the Kroma Atelier Thais delivered a lot of very engaging music before I got around to the writing stage, this was partly because they were a box fresh pair in need of run-in but mostly because these are such beguiling speakers to use. I didn't find any material on the streamer or turntable that didn't sound great, lesser recordings didn't sound as good as the good ones but none were exposed as being particularly harsh or compressed. This is a revealing loudspeaker have no doubt but not one with a take no prisoners approach that limits you to polished material, I particularly like the way that the highs are never hard or in your face. Marc Johnson's Samurai Hee Haw (*Bass Desires*) can get that way when Bill Frisell is let loose on synth guitar (an '80s aberration) but the Thais revealed the character of the instrument without emphasising its unpleasant tone. As a result this track sounded awesome and a lot better than it usually does.

I also enjoyed the way that the Thais seems to have plenty of time to flesh out all the elements in a mix, I suspect that this unhurried characteristic is down to the nature of the Krion cabinet. This material is very rigid compared to the wood variants found in most loudspeakers and far less likely to be excited by the vibrations produced by the drivers. It offers a degree of self damping and unlikely to vibrate and muddy the sound produced by the drivers, this means that the speaker's own noise floor if you can call it that is very low and doesn't blur the signal being reproduced.

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This calm transparency makes everything sound clear and distinct and the solidity of the box means that bass is stronger than you might expect for a speaker with two relatively compact drivers in a medium size cabinet. This undoubtedly contributes to the relaxed balance as much as the planar tweeter, it balances the mids and highs and stops any inclination to forwardness. As a result all manner of detail is presented in a clear, natural fashion that entices you to keep listening, with none of the low level colouration that afflicts so many speakers. I



particularly enjoyed the delicacy of cymbals and the snap of snare drums alongside the richness of Wayne Shorter's horn on the version of Court and Spark that he recorded with Herbie Hancock, Norah Jones and others.

Out of interest I tried the bass bomb that is Queen Mary by Francine Thirteen, this came across in full effect revealing reverb in the huge dollops of bass synth that most speakers fail to clarify, and, more importantly, sounding clean enough to enjoy without discomfort, suggesting that colouration is very low indeed across the board. I particularly like the way that despite the high resolution nature of the Thais the focus is always on the music, if there's a rhythm or a melody you know all about it, which with audiophile favourites like Birds by Dominique Fils-Aimé is unusual. Normally the scale and depth of this recording are so strong that the tune takes second place, here the groove was strong and inspired me to play the whole song. I also heard something in it that made it seem as if someone was outside the door for the first time, there is no shortage of detail.

Conclusion

As mentioned I used the Kroma Atelier Thais speakers for a lot longer than was necessary for the review because they are so damn good, genuinely revealing yet relaxed and with a superbly effortless sense of timing. The build and finish are absolutely first class as one might expect at the price but it's unusual to find a speaker with such sensible dimensions that can do so much so well and not require a mountain of power to provoke it into doing so.

The Thais is almost the least expensive speaker that Kroma Atelier makes and naturally I am intrigued as to what their bigger designs can do, this example suggest it will be an awful lot even if the asking price will be commensurate. For now I can highly commend these Spanish beauties and hope that they inspire the audio enthusiasts of the Iberian peninsula to follow Kroma Atelier's lead.

Pros

Fast, clean, transparent sound that's also relaxed
 Forgiving of lesser recordings; highs are never hard
 Strong, clean bass for two compact drivers, with very low colouration
 Keeps the focus on rhythm and melody
 Superb build and finish
 Doesn't need a mountain of power
 Thoughtful touches: hand-made spruce port, Isoacoustics Gaia feet, acrylic terminal clamps

Cons

Expensive
 Fitting the Isoacoustics feet is tricky
 Needs more space behind it than some
 Terminals sit halfway up the back so cables are more visible
 Brand is little known in the UK

Specifications

Type: reflex loaded floorstanding speaker with Krion cabinet

Crossover frequencies: 250Hz, 2.4kHz

Drive units:

Mid/bass: 2x 6.5inch Purifi paper/fibre mix

Tweeter: AMT folded ribbon

Nominal frequency response: 30Hz – 25kHz

Nominal impedance: 4 ohms

Connectors: single wire binding posts

Feet: Isoacoustics Gaia

Sensitivity: 90dB

Dimensions HxWxD: 1000 x 230 x 347mm Weight: 33kg each

Finishes: 6 standard Krion colour options, custom colours on request. Krion White can be combined with Carbon Fibre, Natural Wood, Titanium, Champagne or Aluminium

Warranty: 5 years

