COVER REVIEW

Vivid Audio B1 Decade

REVELATION!
The Vivid Audio B1 Decade loudspeakers celebrate the high-end speaker company’s 10th anniversary with a design that’s technically sophisticated and musically arresting. Could these be the best loudspeakers Vivid Audio has ever built?

There are a multitude of reasons why the Vivid Audi B1 Decade is a special loudspeaker. No, make that a very special loudspeaker.

For starters, it commemorates the 10th anniversary of Vivid Audio, the KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa company founded in 2004 by Philip Guttentag, Laurence Dickie and Robert Trunz, and which has grown from humble beginnings to one of the top brands in the world of high-end loudspeakers.

Vivid Audio’s first loudspeaker was the B1, a relatively compact 3,5-way loudspeaker with an integrated stand and an unusual, ovoid shape. That shape has become synonymous with Vivid’s Oval Series loudspeakers, which also include the larger K1 and the smaller V1.5.

As the original Vivid Audio speaker, it’s fitting that the B1 was chosen by designer Dickie as the subject of a comprehensive update: another first for Vivid Audio. The result is the B1 Decade — a speaker that looks a lot like the original, but is in fact substantially different in almost every respect.

The B1 Decade made its world debut at the Munich High End expo in 2015, but global demand for the limited-edition speaker meant we had to wait almost exactly two years for a review pair to arrive. Even so, the speakers were well worth the wait.

The Rosso Barchetta red B1 Decades arrived in a pair of large wooden crates, and were installed in our listening studio, where they spent the first two weeks being run in in the company of our Primare PRE32/MA30 pre-amp/streamer and Parasound Halo A21 stereo power amplifier.

To be honest, they sounded superb right out of the box, and during the time I spent experimenting with different speaker positions, it quickly became apparent that there is something very special about these speakers. But first, let’s take a closer look at what makes the B1 Decades tick.

At face value, these special-edition versions look very similar to the B1s I remember reviewing many years ago — and indeed, the basic shape, concept and dimensions of the B1 Decade have been carried over from the ‘regular’ B1.

Thus it still consists of an oval-shaped enclosure supported by an integral stand. It’s still a vented box design, with a 3,5-way configuration that sees a trio of front-firing drivers combined with a second, rear-firing woofer to boost low-frequency performance.

But don’t be fooled: the B1 Decade is a vastly different, more sophisticated speaker than the standard B1 — which, by the way, continues in production, and won’t be replaced by the Decade special edition model.

Some of those differences are not visually apparent at all. For instance, one of the biggest upgrades is the construction material, which swaps the B1’s carbon-loaded composite for the vacuum-injected, fibreglass-reinforced, balsa-core resin developed by Vivid for its upper-end Giya loudspeakers.

The oval enclosure is therefore stiffer and lighter than that of the B1, but more importantly has a substantially higher resonant frequency, which means that any cabinet-related resonance is unlikely to be audible. The non-critical base and narrow double-legged support retain the B1’s original resin composite construction.

If you put a B1 and a B1 Decade side by side, you’ll also notice some subtle changes to the execution of the enclosure. The front and rear baffles are slightly convex, and the drive units are subtly recessed, apparently to aid smoother, more uniform dispersion.

Also reshaped are the front and rear reflex port apertures, which are now uniformly oval, while integrated grooves allow a more positive positioning of the teardrop-shaped, magnetically located metal mesh grilles.

The tweeter and midrange are the same, proprietary D26 26 mm and D50 50 mm
aluminium alloy catenary dome drivers as used in the B1, but they get visually arresting, permanently mounted plastic grilles.

The grilles look more like fancy, perforated and profiled waveguides, and are said to be acoustically transparent. According to Vivid Audio, they’re primarily meant to protect the notoriously fragile alloy domes from harm.

The midrange and tweeter are partnered by a pair of upgraded C125 mid/bass drivers. The major difference is the relocation of the magnet from behind the voice coil to a new position that surrounds the voice coil. The change increases the voice coil gap, which benefits speaker efficiency. But it also reduces inductance, which benefits higher-frequency performance.

The new mid/bass driver characteristics necessitated a revision of the crossover network, which has been optimised to make the most of the updated drivers’ capabilities. The rear-firing mid/bass operates from 100 Hz down to the B1 Decade’s 38 Hz low-frequency threshold, while the front C125 reaches up a lot higher, to 880 Hz. Still inherent to the design, however, is the fact the tweeter and midrange operate in conjunction with exponentially tapered tubes, which allow the drivers to operate unfettered by the energy usually created by the drive unit diaphragms’ interference with the rear of the enclosure in conventional loudspeaker designs.

Because the tweeter and midrange are mounted to these tapered tubes, they aren’t fixed to the enclosure itself, and are in fact decoupled from the cabinet via a bespoke O-ring. Each of the tapered tubes is securely bolted to the rear of the enclosure. The two C125 mid/bass units are directly coupled via a metal rod in a force-cancelling arrangement.

In the AV Magazine listening studio, the B1 Decades didn’t seem too fussy about positioning, as long as they were kept away from corners and rear walls. They ended up more than 1.5 m away from the rear wall, and about 75 cm away from the sides.

In this position, toe-in could be adjusted to suit personal taste: aimed directly at the listening position, the sound image was crisply focussed, with a pervasive sense of image depth and height. Toe them out, and the sound picture would broaden, with surprisingly little impact on the image depth, but with an enhanced sense of air and space.

I ended up aiming the B1 Decades just more than halfway between a straight-on configuration and pointing them at the listening position. In that position, the soundstage seemed at its most defined and most expansive, with a high degree of transparency.

For this review, the B1 Decades were partnered with various amplifiers, including the magnificent Ayre K-X5 and V-X5 Twenty pre/power combo, the Classé Sigma 2200i integrated amp, and the impressive Marantz PM-10 integrated amp (reviewed elsewhere in this issue).

Diana Krall’s latest offering, Turn Up The Quiet (96/24 FLAC) is a lucidly recorded celebration of the American songbook, with the songstress and pianist in fine form, but surrounded by an array of equally stellar backing artists. The result is an inviting and satisfying collection of late-night jazz, with producer Tommy Li-Puma overseeing a series of performances that are both intimate and approachable.

Under the auspices of the Vivids, the set sounded downright marvellous. Krall’s relaxed but crisply annunciated vocals were perfectly spotlighted, with delicate and incisive accompaniment from Krall stalwarts such as Anthony Wilson and Russel Malone (guitars), Christian McBride and John Clayton Jr (bass) and Jeff Hamilton (drums).

There was a delightful cohesion and sense of purpose to the performances, and yet the clarity of the recording (and the articulate delivery of the Vivids) made it easy and satisfying to follow individual instruments, and to recognise fine details.

On ’Blue Skies’ the bass had just the right mix of timbre, delicacy and attack, while the guitar’s gentle picking and strumming was handled with deft proficiency. Krall’s vocals sounded liquid, but with that typically husky, smoky edge brought clearly to the fore. And when her piano joined the fray, it did so with a
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Drive units .............................................................. 1x 26 mm metal dome tweeter
  1x 50 mm metal dome midrange
  2x 125 mm alloy cone woofer (coupled)
Bi-wiring ............................................................................ Yes
Impedance ........................................................................... 4 ohms nominal, 2,3 ohms minimum
Sensitivity ................................................................. 89 dB @ 2,83V, 1,0 metre on-axis
Frequency response ...................................................... 38 Hz — 33 kHz (±2 dB)
Power handling .......................................................... 300 watts RMS
Dimensions (HxWxD) .................................................. 1 095 x 265 x 375 mm (base depth 420 mm)
Weight .............................................................................. 36 kg each
Price ................................................................................. R360 000

**Verdict**

A huge leap from the already excellent original B1. Exceedingly fluid and transparent in the mids and tops, with an uncanny ability to reveal fine nuance and detail. Musically authoritative in every respect.

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**Supplied by**

Fundipoint
031-705-4168

**e-Mail**

sales@vividaudio.co.za

**Website**

www.vividaudio.com

**OUR RATING: 94 / 100**
COVER REVIEW

overshadowing the essence of the song.

While she (deservedly) commands centre stage, the backing band’s considerable contributions are never ignored: Ben Williams’ bass sounded powerful and articulate, with loads of power and purpose, but a vital edge of detail that brought its timbre and character into close focus, while the expressive drumwork of Jerome Jennings contributed plenty of precisely executed pace and sparkle. Victor Gould’s piano provided an intuitive and riveting counterpoint to Horn’s soaring vocals.

Turning to the rousing, boisterous rock of Paul Weller off his latest release A Kind Revolution (Warner 44/24 FLAC), the Vivids showed off their ability to rock ’n roll with the best of them.

They coped well with the dense, wide wall of sound on ‘Woo Sé Mama’, thriving on the sheer pace and vigour of the music and lending real substance to the raw-edged electric guitars. The pounding percussion was rendered with wall-shaking impetus, but the energetic bass was never allowed to become a muddy rumble, while the keyboards remained clearly discernable, despite the inherent viscosity of the production.

Again, the Vivids impressed with their immaculate timing, their clarity of purpose, their seamless and expansive sound-staging, and their ability to easily keep up with the pace and energy of the music. They delivered their musical wares with a keenness of focus and a riveting realism that was utterly engrossing.

Turning to Julia Fischer’s romantic, eloquent reading of Tchaikovsky’s Violin Concerto In D Major with the Russian National Orchestra under Yakov Kreizberg (Pentatone SACD), the Vivids accurately rendered the sheer artistry and splendour of the young violinist. They reproduced the timbre and delicate intonation of the instrument with an almost tender intensity, yet showcased the majestic energy of the orchestra with authority and splendour.

Again, the dimensionality of the sound picture allowed scale and presence to be rendered with compelling believability, while the recording’s tremendous dynamic swings were expressed with confidence. The music was presented with a truthfulness and insight, but also with an approachability and an authenticity that made for a gripping, thoroughly engaging listening experience.

I’ve spent time with most of Vivid Audio’s catalogue of speakers — from my own V1.5s and the original B1s to the majestic K1s, the Giya G2s and the Giya G4s. But for me, the B1 Decade is arguably the most complete, the best balanced, the overall most beguiling and compelling speaker Vivid Audio has produced to date.

Admittedly, in larger rooms than our listening studio, the larger Giyas, with their more powerful low-frequency talents, and greater room-filling capability, would have greater sonic stature. But there is a magical cohesion, a completeness to the rendition of the B1 Decades that I have not heard in this listening room before, and that makes these loudspeakers stand out from the pack.

The B1 Decade represents a proud and perfect celebration of Vivid Audio’s 10th anniversary, and the considerable achievements it has wrought during the past decade — not least the fact that they are still built in South Africa.

And with only 400 scheduled for production (half in red, half in black), they are desirable collector’s items that easily vindicate their asking price.

Deon Schoeman