

The Audio Beat

[High End 2012](#)

High End 2012 • A Treat For the Ears

by [Roy Gregory](#) | May 17, 2012

Having spent some time discussing the problematic acoustics and structural vagaries of the MOC in [the first part of this report](#), it's time to buckle down and recognize those exhibitors who overcame the (considerable) obstacles -- either through sheer grit, skill, perseverance, dumb luck and determination, or by simply decamping to the HiFi Deluxe parallel show at the Marriott.

If you can't make show rooms work, are you really going to do that much better in a customer's home? The rooms at the MOC might be bad, but you can get good results out of them -- if you approach the problem in the right way. What amazes me is how many exhibitors simply forged ahead regardless, and I'm forced to wonder how many even recognized the sonic catastrophe that resulted. When an £800 speaker and a set of mid-priced electronics are showing them how it's done, the answer has to be "Not many."

As if to really ram that point home, the best sound at the MOC was to be found in the **Leading Edge** room. A cooperative venture between UK-based **Vertex AQ** and the German loudspeaker manufacturer and architectural acoustics company **Kaiser**, Leading Edge offer a complete range of mechanically coupled supports and room acoustic treatments. Assuming their products actually do what it says on the tin, who should be better placed to tackle the MOC's nightmare acoustic environment? Not making the task any easier, their system was set up in one of the top-floor rooms, which suffer the biggest problems, making the results achieved all the more impressive.



How did they do it? The system itself was all good stuff: digital front-end was a PC acting as a file server, using J-play 4.2 software and a **Human Audio** Tabla USB-to-S/PDIF converter (\$995) to feed a **Vertex** Aletheia DAC (£11,500). The turntable was a **Spiral Groove** SG2 with Centroid 'arm carrying an **Air Tight** PC-3 cartridge. Amplification was courtesy of **Thrax**: their Orpheus phono stage (£15,000), Dionysos line stage (£15,000) and Spartacus parallel single-ended-triode monoblocks (£36,000). Speakers, not surprisingly, were Kaiser's own, either the Kawero or the new, [stand-mounted Chiara](#), the latter being in use on the several occasions that we were listening.

But the real reason for the system's success lies in the supports, cabling and acoustic treatments that allowed the equipment to show what it was capable of. The most obvious elements were the large D-panels and the funky Spline Diffusers (shown above behind the rack) used to calm the room's lively acoustic. The diffusers will be familiar in concept to anybody who has seen RPG Skylines or similar disruptive/random reflectors, although Kaiser claim significantly more sophisticated mathematics behind their three-dimensional form. Certainly, simply standing in front of them and clapping demonstrated just how effective they are. The larger, freestanding D-panels are also much more sophisticated than they seem. Unlike most acoustic treatments, they work in the velocity domain rather than by absorbing pressure variations. With a full review pending, I'll skip the finer details, but experience at home has demonstrated just how effective they are. Interestingly, Fono Acustica also used the D-panels in their room, to similarly positive effect. In a permanent installation the panels can be wall- or even ceiling-mounted, making them a very practical solution in a domestic environment.

Far less obvious was the contribution of the Leading Edge racks. This modular support system uses a cascade approach to isolating the signal, both by draining unwanted energy from the equipment itself and decoupling the support shelves from the outside world. The shelves themselves contain acoustic absorption to dissipate the energy fed into them via the dedicated couplers. They also have RFI-absorbent material, and they utilize the same micro-perforated undersurface that you see on the D-panels. They are, in effect, more capable and far more attractive versions of the old Vertex Kinibalu support platforms, but incorporating a stacking capability and individual leveling for each shelf. Additional mini D-panels can be added to the sides of the rack to further inhibit airborne energy from both reaching the equipment and spreading within the room itself. Again, these impressive components are in-house at present. Cabling throughout the system was Vertex AQ, and this included considerable treatment of mains-borne mechanical energy and RFI.



The end result was a system that was allowed to really sing. The Chiara speakers contain a lot of hidden technology, including a rear-facing ABR and a sophisticated acoustic matrix in their stand that helps account for the lack of audible cabinet effects in their sound. As soon as the music started, the speakers simply disappeared. Weight and scale were both exceptional for the size and €15,000-per-pair price, with a real sense of presence and dimensionality. Music breathed convincingly, tonality was natural and dynamics impressively unforced and lively. In short, this system was doing everything a good system should. It was getting out of the way of the music, allowing me to enjoy the performance without drawing attention to itself -- and it was doing it to a standard that easily exceeds many a really expensive home setup. To achieve that level of coherent, natural and convincing musical communication is impressive under any circumstances; to do it in the attic of the MOC must seem close to miraculous to many of Leading Edge's competitors -- if they even took notice. Yet this sonic splendor was simply the product of a systematic, all-embracing approach to those issues that impact the operating conditions of any system. As the saying goes, "It's not rocket science."

Once you've experienced what Leading Edge has achieved, the results witnessed over at the Marriott should come as no surprise. Why? Because all of the better-sounding rooms at HiFi Deluxe shared this holistic, systematic approach to setup.