

Transparency Defined:

The Manger Zerobox109

— JEFF DORGAY

Go ahead; say that ten times as fast as you can. At least Manger doesn't name their speakers after family members or pets; I like that German practicality. I've always been a huge fan of German cars, but now I have to add speakers to the list of great high-technology products that I enjoy from this country. *(continued)*

The Germans are quite the masters of understatement as well. (Except for those goofy op-art checkerboard interiors of the early Porsche 928s...) If I had to describe the Manger Zerobox 109 in one word, it would be understated. The next word would be quality, these are beautiful speakers and my test pair came in rosewood that looked like it came from the Maybach factory. For those of you in the crowd that aren't car enthusiasts, the Maybach is Germany's answer to the Rolls-Royce, and they are built to order through your Mercedes/Maybach center at about 500 thousand bucks a throw.

These speakers come with some pretty cool grilles that are very transparent, but I like the look of the Manger driver so much, if these were my speakers, I'd leave the grilles off!

Also worth noting is that the side panels are at slightly different angles, so that they are non-parallel, helping to better manage resonance. Due to the striped pattern of the rosewood cabinets, this was hard to see at first! I can only imagine how much work goes into all of those non-standard mitre cuts!

In the past, a few people have tried this unique driver, which from the technical info appears to be more of a membrane-like speaker than a ribbon or electrostatic with mixed results. As someone who really loves the sound of an electrostatic speaker, I was always intrigued by the potential in this driver because I liked the imaging and high frequency response. When I heard the Manger company was making their own speakers, my tail perked up just like one of my terriers and I was very intrigued to get a pair for review. Who else to get this design right than the people who designed the driver?

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I must confess after our classical guy Dan Babineau and I moved the 506 pound-each Tidal speakers at Steve Hoffman's house in August, I was really happy to get some 37 pound speakers to move around! The ZB 109s were placed on a pair of 24" Sound Anchors stands that were filled with sand to provide a sta-

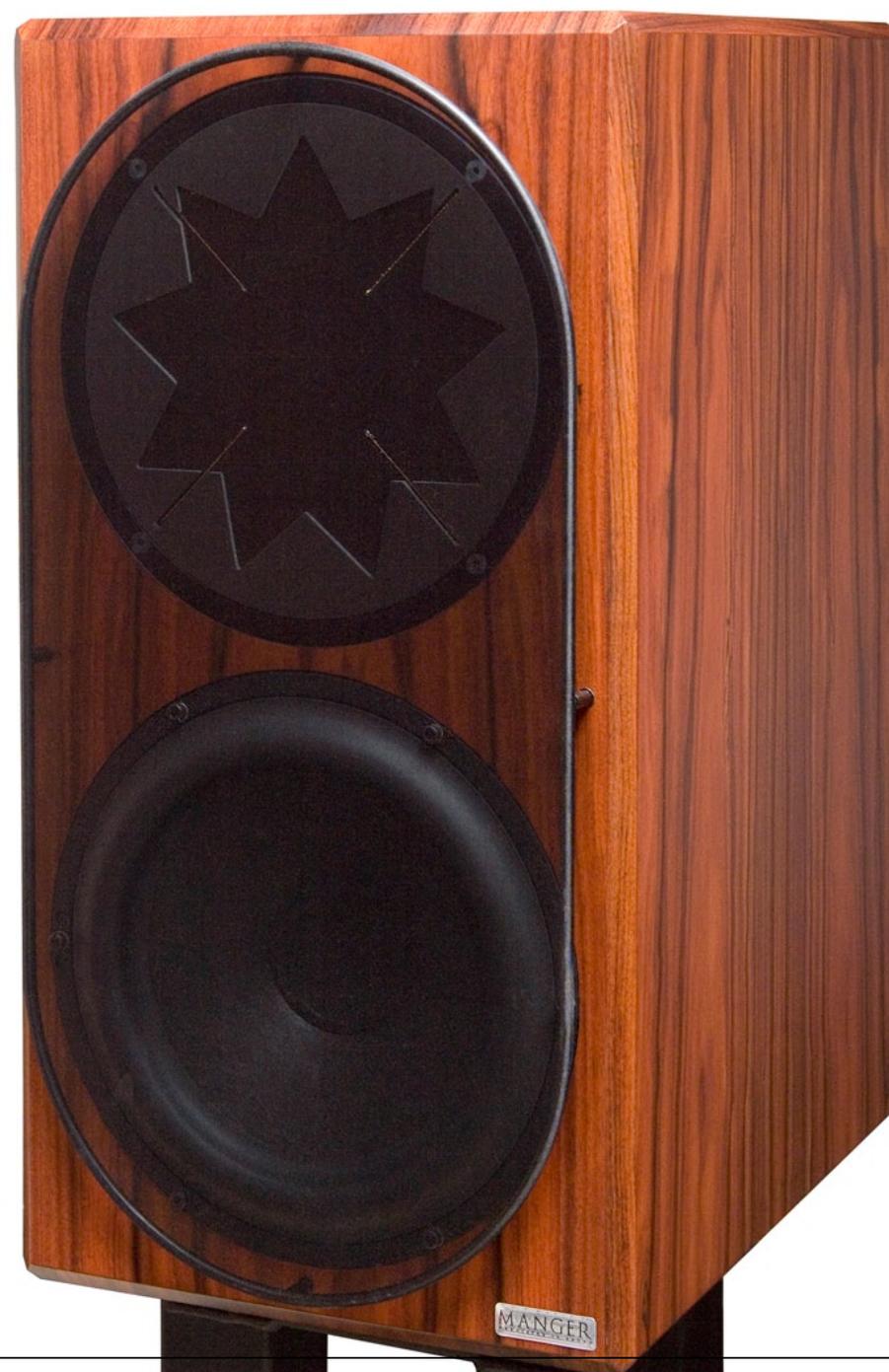
ble platform. The more massive you can make the stands for these speakers, the better.

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Setup

After getting the speakers unboxed and up on stands, I tried them with a few different amp/preamp combinations to get the sound I wanted. I have said many times before in these pages that I love panel speakers, and importer Jim Ricketts told me on the phone that these speakers had a sound quality very much like a good ESL. If you go to the TMH Audio website, (www.tmhaudio.com) you can read all of the tech information, which would take up the rest of this review, and you still wouldn't know what I think!

But the Reader's Digest version of the tech info is that this speaker has an incredibly fast, 13us rise time. For comparison, the average person can shift a Ferrari with a manual transmission in 40-60ms and Michael Schumacher can do it in 13ms if he's having a really good day at the test track in Italy. The Mangers are 1000 times faster than Michael Schumacher on top of his game. *(continued)*



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Because these speakers are so fast, Jim suggested that tube amplifiers might not be the best match for the ZB 109s and I concur.

The Manger driver goes from about 80hz all the way up past where dogs can hear, (35khz) so they need a little help with a woofer.

The ZB 109s are crossed over to an 8" woofer at 140 Hz and have a rated impedance of 4 ohms, with the low frequency range being 40hz at the -3db point.

While I had excellent results with all of the solid state amplifiers I used the ZB 109s with, I settled on the new preamplifier and amplifiers from Boulder, the 810/850 combination for almost all of this review. The speed of those 200-watt monoblocks was a great match for the ZBs along with cabling from ED. Running Springs Mongoose power cords were used throughout and a RSA Jaco provided clean power. My digital sources featured the new Wadia 531 DAC and the Metronome Technologies CD-3 Signature CD player in addition to my ModWright Denon 3910 for SACD and DVD-A playback. LPs were spinned on my trusty LP-12 with a Shelter 90x and the Ray Samuels XR-10B phono stage. Everything but the ModWright Denon was connected in balanced mode as the Boulder gear is balanced only.

Mr. Ricketts told me the speakers were broken in, so I got right down to critical listening straight away. I did not notice a change in the speakers character after the first day or so of being unboxed. (which like not having to lift heavy boxes, was also a treat!!) *(continued)*

The Sound

Because I like panel speakers so much, I found myself giving the ZB 109s a lot of couch time. I must say, the Mangers do sound an awful lot like an electrostatic speaker, but with some bonus features.

First of all, these are way easier to set up than any panel I have ever owned. Thanks to the traditional cabinet, they will work well in anywhere from about a 10 x 12 room to a 16 x 24 room with minimal adjustment, though they will benefit from a good sub in a larger room. (more about that later) I had great luck with my corner setup as well as the more conventional rectangular setup. As I was reading the Manger tech info, they claim that this driver does not “beam” like a panel speaker does.

They aren’t kidding. If you have a pair of Martin Logans, Magneplanar or Quads you know that the sound is very different sitting than standing. Not so with the ZB 109s.

One of the biggest strengths of this speaker is that the sweet spot is so

big, it’s almost nonexistent. Unless you get really off axis, the sound is great anywhere in the listening area; it’s kind of like those funny paintings in the scary movie where the eye follows you wherever you go! The Mangers are great for having a couple of friends over; everyone can enjoy them and not fight for the primo spot on the couch!

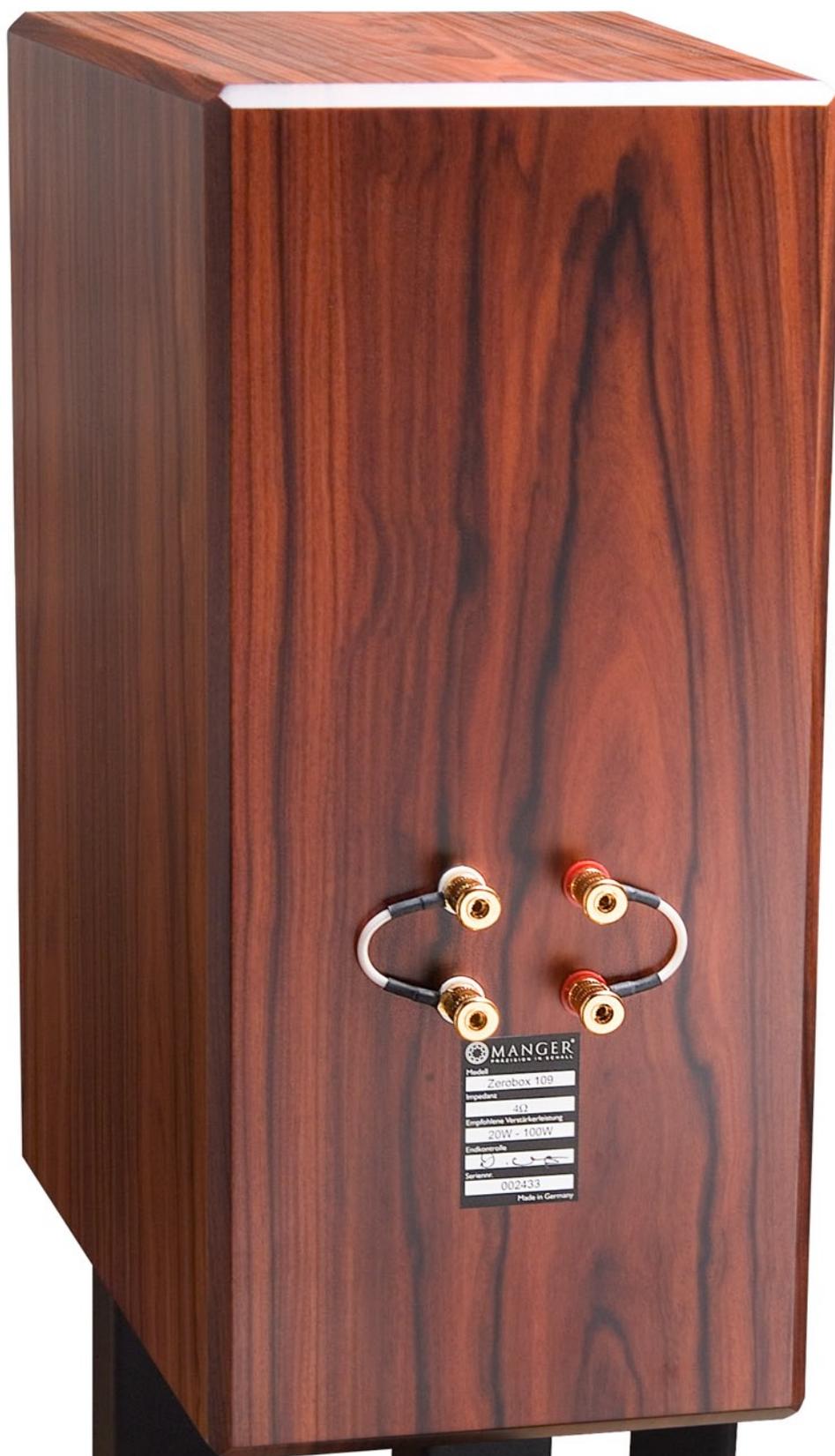
The high frequency response of this speaker is incredibly defined, yet very smooth and not grainy at all. Cymbals and percussion sound very natural because of the fast rise time and decay very naturally. Listening to some of my favorite King Crimson, Yes and Frank Zappa records, all which

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feature quite a bit of powerful drumming really shows how well the Mangers handle this type of program ma-

terial. Often times speakers will fall down when pressed with very complex musical selections, yet this is a test that the Mangers pass with flying colors. I do feel that the 35khz high end response helps contribute to the airiness of these speakers even though normal humans can’t hear that high. It’s very similar to the way a subwoofer going down so low adds weight to the sound without you really hearing it.

Before I go any further, it’s important to dispel why these speakers aren’t the best match for a tube amplification. It’s not really an impedance thing that I could tell, (Manger claims a very flat 4 ohm curve) but because the Manger driver is so fast and it is at a bit of a disadvantage, having to cross over to a cone driver for the bass, the tube amplifiers I tried just couldn’t reproduce the lower registers fast enough, so it made the difference in response time between the woofer and tweeter seem more evident and the drivers seem less coherent. *(continued)*



I used these speakers with the new F3 from Nelson Pass, the Conrad-Johnson Premier 350 and the new Boulder 850, all with fantastic results. The Pass amplifier was very good at lower levels and thanks to the ZB 109's 89db efficiency, would play fairly loud in a small room. But the high current capabilities of the C-J and the Boulder amplifiers really made these speakers sound a lot bigger than they are, thanks to the amount of speed and control they offer in the bass region.

Should you want to add a tube preamplifier to the mix to add a touch of warmth or romance, that is no problem. Swapping the Aesthetix Callisto for the Boulder pre-amp offered a different presentation that was equally enjoyable, though different from the Boulder. But if you have a tube power amplifier, I would suggest an extended audition or consider making a switch to solid state.

I was always impressed with how well these speakers did with resolving small details and spatial cues. Again, dipping in the pile of DVD-As, I was listening to **Chicago V**, which sounds really dreadful on LP, but the remastered version is quite nice. Again, a disc with a fairly complex textural arrangement, the small details came out in the mix, with a very big sound, in all three dimensions. Hall & Oates **Abandoned Luncheonette** (MoFi LP) also had a very magical quality to it thanks to the resolution of these speakers.

Moving right along to discs recorded in this century, I spent a fair amount of time listening to **Musical Soiree at Aimola** (home of Jean Sibelius), **Works for Violin and Piano** by Pekka Kuusisto and Heini Karkainen. I received this as a gift from Sami Penttila (the man responsible for designing Penaudio speakers) at CES and it is a wonderful recording. Again, these speakers do such a great job with the textural complexity of these instruments that are so hard



to capture on recording in a way that they sound tonally correct.

Bruce Springsteen's **Diamonds and Dust** along with a few of my other favorite vocal discs just kept reminding me how NATURAL the ZB 109s sounded in my room. Just so you know that these are not just a speaker for this type of music, I did give them the heavy metal brain damage test, which they also passed admirably. This speaker is capable of playing quite loudly if you have the clean power on tap.

Very Minor Limitations

The only real limitation of this speaker is its lack of output much below 35hz. Depending on the kind of music you listen to, this may not even be an issue. I honestly feel there is no shame in a \$7500 speaker that doesn't reproduce that last bit of bass, especially when it does such a fantastic job everywhere else. I did spend a little bit of time mating these speakers with the extraordinary REL B2 and this gave me a

system that would go all the way down to 20hz. I would highly suggest that you try these speakers as is and if you love them as much as I did, spend a lot of time with them and your music collection before going down the subwoofer path.

There is an ever so slight bump in the midrange response that is confirmed by Manger's own measurements, however it is not enough to make the speakers sound colored. It does give them just a slightly forward sound and with most recordings was not something I was even aware of. However, when listening to a recording that already has a bit of a bump in it, this becomes a little more pronounced.

The \$7500 Question, Answered

Because I have a daughter to send to college in a few years, I can't buy every great pair of speakers that spends time at TONE HQ. But the Manger ZB109 is one of my favorites. This is a pair of speakers that gets our highest recommendation. ●