

## **Living Voice R80 OBX: A Loudspeaker Confession**

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For observers and fans of Living Voice, it was a huge surprise: after years of development – and even a temporary complete cancellation – the big model above the successful Auditorium series finally came. What can the R80 do? And: was the wait worth it?

### **The Loudspeaker Confession**

Sometimes a new component can amaze you. And sometimes it can leave you frozen in disbelief. That's exactly what happened to me time and again with the Living Voice R80 OBX. Eli And The Thirteenth Confession by the somewhat forgotten Laura Nyro has been one of my favorite albums since the 1970s. Right from the opener "Luckie", she shows how her energetic and variable voice turns a folk-rooted song into a soulful R&B anthem. The recording engineers worked hard to do justice to the extraordinary vocal talent of the 21-year- old (after all, the great David Geffen was her mentor, so there was a lot riding on it). They captured her voice three-dimensionally, with high dynamics and all the exciting nuances of expression. Also, how strongly and physically the electric and acoustic guitars sound in the left side of the room at the start of "Poverty Train" – you can almost feel it. A good system draws you in with the captivating performance of a drug song, and it's not just for top-tier music fans but also for audiophiles. Actually. Because again and again, the sound of the album was somewhat overdone in the production –

the voice was often pushed so far into the foreground that it felt a bit unnatural. To highlight it, the lower mids and bass were practically consistently pulled back. As a result, this great LP always sounded a bit too bright, too lean, and together with the high dynamics, unfortunately, also quickly became exhausting. It worked better with tone controls or a restrained, possibly slightly rounded-sounding system. I've always helped myself by reducing the desired volume. Why am I telling you this? Because with the R80 OBX, I can truly hear this album properly for the first time – after decades! And not because the recording now somehow comfortably settles in – on the contrary: Laura Nyro has never sounded so strong and present, never has she filled the room as vibrantly and naturally as she does here. But the latest Living Voice has stripped away all the overwhelming and biting elements that many speakers reveal, in favor of a more refined, clearer, and more moving presentation of her wonderful voice. Apparently, the R80 simply digests the harshness of the recording better. A second factor in the newly revealed recording plays a big role – one that initially does not seem obvious : the sudden stress relief. The speakers now lend a kind of inner energy, a powerful flexibility to the somewhat underexposed lower mids, which previously almost never emerged. Not only does this add a supple muscularity to Laura Nyro's often driving R&B rhythm, it gives every voice and piece of music a lively and natural expression. Once you're used to it, a lot of other speakers sound dull or just "hi-fi." Let me get ahead of myself: the R80 frees up the lower mids and the midrange so thoroughly, it removes their restraints. A quality otherwise only known from ultra-sensitive systems. However, without the

often-cited sound colorations that sensitive listeners sometimes react strongly to. This elastic responsiveness, paired with an almost unbeatable harmonic sound color accuracy of the R80, is no coincidence. After all, Kevin Scott, mastermind (or maybe we should say "master ear") behind Living Voice – who developed the Vox Olympian – has surely created one of the most sophisticated and flawless high-sensitivity systems ever built (even if it costs as much as real estate). And it has taken him more than 10 years to develop this extremely homogeneous playback for his Auditorium models. Only one thing was missing (and "only" may be read in thick quotation marks here): a model in between – one that can do more than the smaller series and keeps up in many ways with the Vox models, but should still be somewhat affordable. The latter succeeded rather well. Originally, it was supposed to cost around €30,000; the final price class, which is being sold in Germany and Europe (Switzerland is an exception), is a pair of speakers for just under €50,000 – with external crossover– and, wonderfully beautiful, with high-gloss lacquer work, costs over €60,000 if desired. That Kevin Scott invested over five years of development into it is surely not a question – for such a long development, the company can't be paid. Otherwise, given the expected small quantities, the price would have to be significantly higher (not to mention that with an experienced developer, such a background effort usually means a whole lifetime of experience is behind the design).

## How the R80 Coup Happened

Scott chose two unusual and rare chassis, both from the Ellipticor series by Scan-Speak. Very expensive, both the woofer and the tweeter. Recognizable by their elliptical dust caps and elliptical voice coils and magnet gaps. This oval shape is supposed to reduce distortion. You can easily imagine that resonances distribute more evenly and occur less intensively than with the typical round form, also across a larger surface. Despite the very high price, it's surprising that they are used here at all – normally, they are reserved for manufacturer-specific applications with very large advantages. Because the Ellipticor tweeter plays lower than usual and the mid-woofers don't have to reach as high as in other concepts, Kevin Scott reports, he was able to take advantage of this unusual design benefit – but it never quite worked out. Only after years of endless tuning attempts in other areas, such as the crossover, did he try an unconventional version: he let the mid-woofers play higher and brought the tweeter in later than usual – against experience and measurement norms. Voilà! Apparently, the mid-woofers, thanks to their unusual characteristics, had no problem handling the range, and the tweeter worked just fine in its more limited range. Each change in crossover frequencies alters phase, slope, and tonal balance. Every change in the crossover pulls more strings. What many would describe as a developer's nightmare, the Englishman dryly calls a "mental challenge." Scott uses the mid-bass drivers in a D'Appolito configuration, meaning both reproduce the same frequency range – it's a true 2-way system. This improves spatial

imaging and increases sensitivity. The drivers have a sensitivity of 94 dB, and with the crossover, it's 93 dB. This means even low-powered tube amps can drive the R80 effortlessly. A custom L-C-R network ensures a friendly impedance curve: lowest at 6 Ohms, rising to 9.5, then back to 6 Ohms. This makes it easy for amplifiers, even single-ended tube designs from 7-10 watts, like a classic 300B setup. I tried it with the Frans de Wit Signature Century transistor and Octave Jubilee 300B tube amp. Usually, I favor one over the other, but both performed brilliantly with the R80 OBX – rich bass, fine midrange, acoustic delicacy, and dynamics.

### **Listening with Shostakovich**

Shostakovich's 8th String Quartet is among his most performed. Not because it's easy listening – quite the opposite. It fascinates with intensity and musical citations. A new 2024 reissue of Black Angels by the Kronos Quartet (Nonesuch 075597905809, 2-LP) includes this 20-minute piece on a dedicated LP side. The R80 OBX reveals bow pressure, instrument bodies, and atmospheric detail with extraordinary presence. Allegro molto, often reproduced chaotically, remains coherent and gripping. The Allegretto dances with elegance. The Largo builds tension. The R80 OBX lets you rediscover even familiar works. I was surprised how quickly the 20 minutes passed. It felt like a live concert, where immersion in the moment dissolves time.

## **Break-In and Component Matching**

The R80 OBX is not plug-and-play. It requires extensive break-in-several hundred hours. Initially, the sound lacks cohesion. One dealer noted poor initial sound; another was blown away after logging over 300 hours. The R80 must be left to play continuously for days to reach full potential. After break-in, the speakers offered vast stereo imaging with off-axis stability – a rare trait, even among top-tier designs. You can accelerate break-in by placing the speakers face to face with opposite polarity wiring and playing music constantly. Only three other speakers in the last 15 years behaved this way: Gryphon Atlantis, PEAK El Diablo, and the R80 OBX. All three used hand-made capacitors. Scott used a mix: custom polypropylene for the tweeter, paper-in-oil with silver leads for others. He even winds his own air coils with special copper, some cryogenically treated.

## **Rediscovering Recordings**

Back to Nyro: I own three pressings of Eli and the Thirteenth Confession – a 1972 reissue, a 1968 original, and a 2011 MOV pressing. The original sounds more immediate. The R80 OBX lays bare microphone setups, mixing decisions, and dynamic choices. Even the limitations become musical. Surprising insights also came from Tom Rapp's One Nation Underground (ESP-1054, USA 1967). Details missing on later editions suddenly became audible. And on FKA Twigs' Eusexia (Atlantic 075678606434, 2025, LP), the synthetic bass has flesh and

bounce. "Perfect Stranger" drops deep into club territory, the bass executed with precision. The R80 handles it all – thanks to the Ellipticor drivers and reflex port (R = Reflex, 80 = 80 liters volume).

If any speaker development was worth the time, it's this one.

### **Internal Design and Materials:**

- The rear reflex port is centrally located behind the mid-bass drivers, improving rear radiation and stereo depth.
- The cabinet uses a rare wood-epoxy composite. Only the rear wall is HDF. Internally veneered with maple.
- Damping inside is asymmetrical.
- WBT terminals are cryo-treated by Formula 1 supplier "Frozen Solid."
- Crossovers include New Old Stock capacitors, handmade inductors wound in-house, and USA-made resistors.
- The base plinth is made from laminated 2 mm layers of beech wood by Delignit, magnetically centered and mounted with Blu Tack.

Specs: Living Voice R80 OBX

- Design: 2-way rear reflex
- Drivers: 2 × 210 mm elliptical mid-bass, 1 × 34 mm elliptical tweeter
- Frequency Response: 25 Hz–20 kHz
- Nominal Impedance: 6 Ohms (minimum 4.5 Ohms) • Sensitivity: 92 dB (2.83 V/1 m)
- Finish: High-gloss ebony or custom
- Special Features: Custom crossover, Ellipticor drivers, D'Appolito configuration

- Dimensions: 31 × 109 x 42.3 c m (speaker), 49 × 6 × 42.3 cm (base), 12 x 27 × 45 cm (crossover) • Weight: 45.5 kg (speaker), 4.5 kg (base), 8 kg (crossover)
- Warranty: 5 years

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