

Venture Audio • Ultimate Reference Loudspeakers

" . . .big, beautiful speakers that produce a big, beautiful sound."

by [Marc Mickelson](#) | October 17, 2014

http://www.theaudiobeat.com/equipment/venture_ultimate_reference.htm

Venture Audio holds a special place in my audio consciousness. I will be attending my eighteenth consecutive CES in early January, and at more than half of them, I'm sure, a system with Venture speakers has been among the very best I heard. Perhaps even more impressive, I've heard Venture speakers driven with high-power solid-state amps (sometimes also with the Venture name), low-power tube amps, and amps that fall between these extremes. Such a track record, one would think, would lead to a high profile in the market, if not in the US then elsewhere in the world. While the Venture Audio name isn't exactly obscure, it's not omnipresent either -- even with all of that CES success behind it.



Price: \$150,000 per pair.
Warranty: Three years parts and la

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Some of this may be due to the company itself. Venture has two headquarters -- in Singapore and Belgium -- and there is absolutely nothing about its products that lends itself to mass production. Drivers are designed and manufactured in-house, and the cabinets, with their glossy veneered finishes, are sandwiches of hardwood and damping materials, not the ubiquitous MDF. And then there's the expense. Even a mid-sized pair of Venture speakers requires some heavy thought and a hefty bank account.

None of this is anything new for high-end audio -- the most refined products don't come cheap -- but almost universal success at shows surely is. When I first heard the Ultimate Reference at the 2011 CES, I was smitten. Big, pricey speakers are all over Las Vegas in early January, but the Ultimate Reference was one to remember, filling a big upper-floor room at the Venetian, but able to morph with the music, sounding diminutive or full-bodied, pure and unfettered, sometimes all within the same cut. I talked with the Venture people then and there, but it took some time to procure for review what was the only pair of the speakers in the US. Little did I know when those two huge flight cases showed up how much work and pleasure were ahead of me.

Venture is the product of Hoo Kong Njoo, who goes by the nickname Didi. He is a trained scientist, holding a masters degree in physics from the University of Frankfurt, who has done research in cryogenics and super conductivity. He's also friendly and jovial; at shows he seems genuinely pleased that you have stopped by his room to hear his speakers and electronics.

His goal from the very beginning of Venture Audio, which was founded in the mid-1980s, was to produce the most advanced, highest-performing loudspeakers, which naturally also means among the most expensive. Venture's current lineup is topped by the Xtreme, which costs over \$200,000 per pair. The Ultimate Reference is the penultimate Venture speaker, almost all of which are floorstanders of moderate size. This does not apply to the Ultimate Reference, however, as you'll read in a bit.

Venture has designed and manufactured its own drivers since early in the new millennium, the cones using a composite substrate embedded with graphite particles to virtually eliminate resonances that translate to unwanted noise in the speaker's output. Venture makes two different types of drivers based on these principles: Carbon Fiber Graphite Composite (CFGC) and Abaca Graphite Composite (AGC). Each is used strategically within Venture speakers, including 7" or 9" woofers, 5" or 7" midrange drivers, and a 2" tweeter. The CFGC drivers use individual carbon fibers that run through a resin cone in a proprietary pattern, which provides stiffness and helps minimize the cone's weight. AGC drivers have a cone that is made up of abaca pulp with abaca fibers for stiffness. These come from the stems of abaca-tree leaves.

The Ultimate Reference uses a 2" AGC tweeter, a 7" CFGC midrange, and four 9" CFGC woofers. Crossover points are 3000Hz and 400Hz, both of which reflect the confidence of the designer to adequately cover wider-than-normal frequency ranges with the drivers. Impedance is quoted at 6 ohms and sensitivity as 92dB, which make the Ultimate References suitable for a wide range of amplifier technologies and powers.

Cabinet shape is also very important, with all Venture speakers using a rounded V-shaped cabinet, the narrowest part of which is the front baffle. Interestingly, the Ultimate Reference has a pair of rear-firing ports located near the top of the cabinet instead of the bottom. They almost look like a car's exhaust system. Smartly, the binding posts are located near the bottom of the cabinet, with a pair of handles making small movements easy. They also let you do so without having to touch the cabinets, which have a gleaming finish that shows smudges well. In their proportions and shape, the Ultimate References are sumptuous speakers, looking appropriately expensive.

I've had a number of big, expensive speakers in my listening room -- and even more smaller, reasonably priced ones. The room has some built-in advantages for big speakers, including sheer size (it's 20 feet wide by 29 feet long with a ten-foot ceiling) and a relatively neutral character. It's neither lively nor dead, residing somewhere between these extremes, and while many speakers have generated impressive low bass, the room releases bass frequencies so they don't pool like water and become a problem.

While it's never a matter of hitting the nail on the head the first time when it comes to positioning speakers in my room, it has rarely been an ordeal. Some -- such as Thiel CS7.2 and Magnepan MG20.1 -- were more work than others, but in the end I -- or company representatives -- have always been able to find the right spots for any speakers, the process of doing so revealing useful information along the way.

I had no reason to believe that anything would be different with the Venture Ultimate Reference, but I should have known better. First, these are imposing speakers to unpack, because they are big and gorgeously finished. I absolutely did not want to mar their high-gloss macassar ebony finish, a goal that their size (58 1/4"H x 15 3/4"W x 24"D) and weight (265 pounds each) made infinitely more difficult. They also come shrouded in velvet body bags that cinch at the bottom, protecting the finish but also making the speakers more difficult to grasp and move.

Once out of the flight cases in which they are shipped and stripped of their protective coverings, the speakers' broad platforms slide relatively easily on carpet, making positioning and repositioning a workout but not an ordeal. What was an ordeal was getting coherent sound from the big Ventures. The speakers are two feet deep, which means they must be out into the room more than others, but no matter how close or far they were from the wall behind them, the sound just didn't come together. It was as though each driver was discrete, making its own music instead of contributing to a whole, complete presentation. There was also a phasey quality to the sound, images lacking not just outlines but any anchoring point within the soundstage. No matter where I moved the speakers, they never came close to scaling the heights they had at CES. I began to wonder if some damage had occurred in transit, although I could see no sign of it.

After spending a day and a half moving the speakers and listening, I received a break: Venture's US distributor, Mike Slaminski, called to ask how things were going. Mike is kindly and soft-spoken, and when I told him about the

troubles I was having, he let out a knowing chuckle, then proceeded to explain the problem. "You need to sit at least fourteen feet from the speakers," Mike told me right off the bat. While my room is big, I generally sit about ten feet from any speakers, as this has given the best balance between the equipment's and room's sound. "Then," Mike went on, "you need only six degrees of toe-in." This seems like almost no toe-in at all, but when you're "at least fourteen feet" from the speakers, it's actually quite a lot.

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So I moved my listening seat back four or five feet and guesstimated the toe-in. Eureka! The phasey, muddled soundstage was replaced with one that was focused and precise in instrumental placement. Most of all, the drivers coalesced, and the speakers' tonality had top-to-bottom balance. I continued to experiment with listening distance and toe-in, and

I gained a bit more focus and coherency, but without Mike's sage advice, this review may very well have been completely different. Mike is not just a distributor but also a dealer, and I for one would be very appreciative of his setup advice, whether over the phone or in person. The guy really knows his stuff.

Have you ever seen one of those pictorial spreads that show how some people look like their pets, spouses or even cars? You see a picture of a bulldog, for instance, next to a picture of the guy who owns it, and the resemblance is uncanny. Well, you now have an idea of what it's like to sit down in front of a pair of Venture Ultimate References. These are big, beautiful speakers that produce a big, beautiful sound -- not unrealistically big, not cloying or syrupy, just spatially immense and seductive.

Perhaps as a function of sitting so far from them, these speakers cast massive images -- trumpeters or bass players that seem to be standing, pipe organs that sound like buildings from afar, scale that's truly life-size, even with mono recordings like R.L. Burnside's *First Recordings* [Mobile Fidelity UDSACD 2026] on SACD or a recent ten-cent LP find of Leon Fleisher playing piano works by Liszt and Weber [Epic LC 3675]. Fleisher has had a storied career, punctuated by a neurological condition that saw him lose movement in his right hand, forcing him from performing and into teaching. Then over time he relearned to play, and in the 2000s returned to recording and eventually the concert stage. His story proves that in the right body the human spirit really is indomitable.

A stereo recording of a solo piano infrequently sounds as convincing to me as one in mono, likely due to the use of two microphones that put individual parts of the piano's range in each channel and makes the instrument sometimes sound like two. With the Fleisher recording in beautiful mono, the piano had such stature that it sounded like it was from a stereo recording, with detail that rang with life, spreading through the room. JVC used to call this effect "big mono" when applied to its XRCDs, but the right analog recordings are even more impressive at achieving it, with the Ultimate References presenting the grandest of instruments with a grand sense of scale.

With power music like "Words of Wonder" from Keith Richards' *Main Offender* CD [Virgin V2-86499], the Ultimate References sounded gritty and rowdy, launching drum strikes with whip-crack intensity, bass-guitar lines having presence and a touch of purr. These were speakers that didn't favor one kind of music over another, with solo guitarists and symphonies carrying themselves with equal verisimilitude. The midrange of these speakers does overshadow what happens above and below, but not only is that not a bad thing, it may be what convinces certain listeners to become owners. It's not that the mids seem overly prominent, due to a hump somewhere between 1kHz and 5kHz for instance, but rather an inner illumination, a glow that seemed to emanate from the center of each note. I know this sounds more than a little new-agey, but it's the best way to describe it.

The Ultimate References really brought voices to life, especially with well-recorded material like Diana Krall's *All For You* LP [Original Recordings Group ORG 006]. *TAB* writer Ken Choi put it well in his recent review of the Wyetech Ruby P-1 phono stage: "I suppose Krall has become an audiophile cliché, but I enjoy her music and the production values of most of her albums." Amen, Ken. This album, a tribute to Nat "King" Cole, has both musical and sonic values to spare, and it was a true happening with the Ultimate References, Krall's singing and playing on any of the cuts having equal ability to disarm critical functions and heighten involvement. And the Ultimate References did this with an array of amps, both tube and solid state, proving again the special qualities of the speakers with each change.

Listening farther away from the speakers than I was used to took some adjustment at first, but imaging proved to be pinpoint in its placement, both side to side and front to back. The speakers layered the soundstage especially well, though this will have something to do with placement within the room. With the speakers near the front wall, the illusion of depth was reduced, the soundstage flattening between the speakers instead of materializing around and behind them. These are big speakers for a big room - - no, make that *a huge room*. You would honestly be better off with another smaller Venture speaker, even if you can afford the Ultimate References, if your room is not suited to them. But when they have the space around them and, more importantly, the needed fourteen feet to the listening position, the Ultimate References fill more of the listening room with music than even some larger, more expensive speakers, perhaps because more of the room is devoted to them.

In terms of image density, the Ultimate References sound slightly lean -- not what's immediately considered beautiful for sure -- but they still impart great presence because of the three-dimensionality they convey. They are truly easy to

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listen to. They don't challenge, require careful matching with electronics, are best served only by the best recordings, or are only able to shine with certain kinds of music. Setup *is* critical -- more so than with any speaker I've had in my room, in fact -- but once that's taken care of, you simply connect them to the rest of the system and off you go. They make up for the fussiness required in their setup with an unfussiness in every other way. If you like the idea of having both tube and solid-state amps, alternating between them on a whim, few speakers will do justice to both of them as well as the Venture Ultimate References.

The various large Wilson Audio speakers I've had in my room -- everything from the MAXX 3 to the Alexandria XLF -- are equally impartial to one kind of amplifier. They also sound fundamentally different from the Ultimate Reference. First, while they require professional setup, they don't tax the listening space in the same way. You can sit close to them -- within ten feet -- and they still sound as they should. Their adjustability ensures this. The dynamic prowess and bass power of the Wilson speakers are more on display than with the Ultimate References. Play something majestic, like symphonic spectacles or pipe organ, and the Wilson speakers can seemingly blow you back a few feet with their agility and low-end power. The Ultimate References beckon more than grab you. They don't sound weak or overly fastidious, as though you have to adjust your expectations with powerful music. They simply aren't as overt, drawing you in before attempting to blow you away. Both the Wilson and Venture speakers are highly coherent designs, with the Ventures displaying more of a personality top to bottom because of their way with tone, especially through the mids.

It's a rare treat to hear two speakers like the Wilson Alexandria XLF and Venture Ultimate Reference one after the other, which is what happened for me. In comparison to each other, the big Wilson speakers are more about in-room presence, big dynamic swings, and low-end grunt, with the Venture Ultimate References relying on texture, touch, and soundstaging. Neither speaker is deficient when it comes to what the other does well, but they do point out that David Wilson and Didi Njoo voice their speakers differently, even as they chase the same goal of musical realism.

After all of the unpacking grunt work and setup gymnastics passed, I spent a very enjoyable few months with the Venture Ultimate References, using the many amps and preamps I had on hand, listening to analog and digital, often multiple different recordings of the music just to figure out what the speakers were doing. But

after that work was done, it was easy to simply listen to the music, to luxuriate in the unforced detail that these speakers conveyed, often playing recording after recording, just to hear them before the speakers had to be returned.

The Ultimate References really cast a spell. Listening to them was something I leaned into, instead of simply sitting back and observing. They were truly engaging speakers, not the kind for which you are a mere sonic spectator. After this time with them, I realized that this was what had so impressed me at shows -- that the speakers pulled me in instead of worked hard to impress. When high-end audio is right, this is what it does, and the Venture speakers did it as a matter of course.

I won't say that this is everyone's goal in putting together an audio system, or that it should be. When you spend the money that a pair of speakers such as this costs, you get to pick the sound you're after. But I'll take seduction over pressure any day, and that's what the Ultimate References give, in abundance. 🍷

Associated Equipment

Analog: TW-Acoustic Raven AC turntable; Graham B-44 Phantom Series II Supreme and Tri-Planar Mk VII UII tonearms; Denon DL-103R, Dynavector XV-1t and XV-1s Mono cartridges; Audio Research Reference Phono 2 SE and Lamm Industries LP1 *Signature* phono stages.

Digital: Ayre Acoustics DX-5 DSD "A/V Engine," CEC TL 1 CD transport, Toshiba Satellite laptop.

Preamplifiers: Audio Research Reference 10, Convergent Audio Technology SL1 Legend, Lamm Industries LL1 *Signature*, VTL TL-7.5 Series III Reference.

Power amplifiers: Lamm Industries M1.2 Reference and VTL Siegfried Series II Reference monoblocks.

Loudspeakers: Wilson Audio Alexandria XLF, MAXX 3 and Alexia.

Interconnects: AudioQuest William E. Low Signature, Nordost Frey 2 and Valhalla 2, Shunyata Research Zi-Tron Anaconda, Transparent Audio Opus MM2.

Speaker cables: AudioQuest William E. Low Signature, Nordost Frey 2 and Valhalla 2, Shunyata Research Zi-Tron Anaconda, Transparent Audio Opus MM2.

Power conditioners: Quantum QB4 and QB8, Quantum Qx4, Shunyata Research Hydra Triton and Typhon.

Power cords: Essential Sound Products The Essence Reference-II and MusicCord-Pro ES, Nordost Frey 2 and Valhalla 2, Shunyata Research Zi-Tron Anaconda.

Equipment rack and platforms: Silent Running Audio Craz² 8 equipment rack and Ohio Class XL Plus² platforms (under Lamm M1.2 amps), Harmonic Resolution Systems M3 isolation bases.

Accessories: Gryphon Audio Designs Exorcist system demagnetizer.