

Venture Grand Ultimate Loudspeaker (TAS 213)

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In one sense, this review is easy to write. The Venture Grand Ultimate is a superb speaker system that does everything extremely well. At another level, however, it presents a major challenge: The Grand Ultimate costs nearly \$90,000 a pair. For some audiophiles, this raises serious questions as to just how expensive high-end gear should get. More broadly, it imposes a different standard for reviewing. At these prices, a speaker must be more than excellent; it must challenge all other speakers in defining the state of the art.

Let me begin by addressing the cost issue. I can't justify spending nearly \$90,000 on a speaker anymore than I can justify spending equal or larger amounts of money for a car, a painting, a watch, or any other luxury item. I'm also all too well aware that the Grand Ultimate is priced far beyond the spending capability of more than 95% of the readers of this review—it is certainly priced far beyond mine, much as I wish that was not the case.

TAS, however, is about absolutes, and finding the best at any price. It is a search that is inherently defined by extremes. Art and technology always advance by pushing to new limits. Moreover, we need such extremes to really be high-end audiophiles. We need speakers and electronics that demonstrate just how good sound can get. We need dealers and friends that provide a comparative listening experience, and help us set the standards that allow us to judge the equipment we can afford. We need to know what products are worth seeking out, and listening to, to help educate us as audiophiles.

As for applying a higher critical standard to the Venture Grand Ultimates, if you set prices that can only be justified by being the very best, you really need *to be* the very best—particularly if you use a name as grandiose as “Grand Ultimate.” Even if the price weren’t so high, the name alone would provoke me into being as demanding as I possibly can be.

The practical problem then becomes how to set such a higher standard and then describe how well the Grand Ultimate can meet it. In an ideal world, this review would mean access to all of the world’s best speakers, all at the same time. It would mean listening to them under directly comparable conditions. The best I can do is draw on acoustic memory and a limited range of listening experience to *some* of the best speakers with *some* of the best associated high-end equipment.

Describing the result of my listening also presents problems. First, you quickly run out of credible adjectives to describe sonic nuances that are critical in justifying a speaker at this price. You can hear such nuances, but words can only take you part of the way in communicating such an experience.

You also are dealing with the law of diminishing returns. Any experienced audiophile knows, to his or her cost, that you pay more and more for smaller and smaller incremental improvements in sound quality. You do not get a 45-fold increase in performance by spending \$90,000 on your speakers rather than \$2000. There is no meaningful way to quantify the level of improvement, but it has got to be far, far closer to 15%–20% than to 4500%. Hyperbole is one possibility, but it wears thin because it colors so much reviewing that it has lost its impact. Being ruthlessly analytic is another answer, but dangerous in a world where almost every product is described in superlatives and objectivity can be misinterpreted as a sign the product does not approach the state of the art.

So bear with me. I am going to try to explain why this is a speaker you should consider if you have no effective limits on what you can spend. I’m also going to try to explain why this is one of those speakers you should seek out for the kind of listening experience that will help you define your goals if—like me—you are limited to far lower levels of investment. My words aren’t going to be enough, but hopefully, they will be an appetizer or incentive.

The Technology

Let me begin with the fact that this is an extraordinarily impressive design that reflects years of experimentation and effort. This is a key point in terms of pricing. You don’t pay these prices for cost of manufacture, any more than you pay an artist for the cost of his materials and by the hour for his labor. You pay for the skill and taste of the designer—in this case, the importer, Mike Slaminski, tells me that he is Hoo Kong Njoo, known as Didi.

Didi holds a Masters Degree in Physics from the University of Frankfurt. He put his education to work at a research laboratory doing investigations into cryogenics and super-conductor materials. According to the importer, the research was significant because the principal scientists were awarded a Nobel Prize for exemplary discoveries in super-conductivity. Didi then started a quest to design and fabricate “the most advanced speakers possible to realize the ultimate in realism,” founding Venture Audio in 1986.

At the same time, you can only understand a product of this quality and price if you understand the design concepts behind it, and Venture supplies surprisingly little details about them in its literature. Fortunately, Mike Slaminski is one of those importers (Venture is made in Belgium) whose commitment to this speaker seems almost as deep as that of its designer, and provided the kind of detail I think is essential in describing a product this expensive.

The Grand Ultimates are not supersized compared to some speakers in this price class, but they do weigh a solid 161 pounds each, and measure 13.8" x 19.7" x 48". Mike made it clear that the designer has been refining the use of multiple layers of solid hardwood to build up the outer walls of his speaker cabinets. The Grand Ultimate has evolved out of this multiple-layer design, plus changes made in an earlier Classic Series of speakers where he added a heavy damping sheet in the middle of the solid beechwood multi-layers. Since that time, “Didi...discovered the advantage of using HDF (high-density fiberboard) layers in between the layers of solid hardwood. That later approach was used in the Grand Ultimate cabinet with excellent results in reducing unwanted vibration.”



I've worked with enough speaker designers over the years to know this kind of enclosure effort is critical in exploring the state of the art, and far from cheap. Moreover, the importer reports that “Didi has experimented with other methods of cabinet resonance control. The use of heavy materials, such as metal or granite that have their own characteristic sound can induce a ‘cool’ or ‘lifeless’ sound print. As another example, the use of sand in the speaker walls can result in a ‘dull’ soundprint.” In other words, these examples

indicate that most cabinet designs have a way of manifesting peaks or valleys in the sound spectrum that complicate and compromise speaker design.

“There is another area of cabinet design that is important, and that is the shape of the cabinet. Didi uses a V-shape, where linear bevels converge to a narrow front baffle, in order to minimize the baffle surface area and the subsequent sound wave reflections. [The Grand Ultimate uses] a similar cabinet shape, or C-shape, with continuous curves that converge to a narrow front baffle that also minimizes baffle surface area. Baffle reflections interfere with the wave launch of the drivers, causing spurious distortions of the sound and reducing the coherence of the speaker...Once a quiet cabinet is achieved, the background is darker and the micro-dynamics are preserved for superb focus of images and higher resolution of tones and sibilance.”

Any photo of the result has to understate the resulting visual aesthetic—and yes, high-end design has to be judged visually as well as by sound. The Grand Ultimate is finished with a thick layer of a hard polyester (circa 1300 microns thick), which further reduces cabinet vibrations. My daughter was immediately struck by the fact that this is a remarkably attractive design. Since that time, the Grand Ultimate has had almost universal praise from women who are not great fans of the visual impact of large speakers and high-end eccentricity. It is beautifully finished and built, and it has all of the ingredients you would expect from a product whose designer has spent years trying to transform his concept of what a speaker should be into a reality.

As you might expect, a speaker in this price range also uses unique drivers. The Grand Ultimate speaker utilizes four 7" CFG bass drivers, one 5" CFG midrange driver, and one 2" AGC wide-range dynamic tweeter. It is Venture's first speaker with all dynamic drivers, and the importer explained the evolution of these designs as follows.

“Until recently, Venture used the best drivers available from driver manufacturers such as, Focal, Fostex, or Thiel (Accuton). Beginning in 2001, Didi engaged in a research-and-development program leading to his ability to design and fabricate his own drivers. If we abbreviate the Carbon Fiber Graphite Composite drivers as CFG drivers, and the Abaca Graphite Composite drivers as AGC drivers, it will help in describing the driver applications. Bass and midrange drivers of the CFG or AGC type have been selected for use in Venture speakers depending on the speaker model. Bass drivers are 7" or 9", and the midrange drivers are either 5" or 7", also depending on the speaker model.

“Currently, Venture utilizes either the AMT tweeter or the latest Venture design—the wide-range dynamic tweeter that attains an astounding bandwidth of 100Hz to 60kHz. The Venture tweeter comes in 1.5", 2", or 3" versions. All of the Venture dynamic tweeters are of the AGC driver type.

“The driver technology developed during the R&D program led to the two basic types of dynamic drivers. Both use graphite particles dispersed throughout a composite matrix. Graphite composite matrices were originally developed for use in vibration-absorption for ship hulls and other military applications. It is well known today as an extremely effective vibration-control technique. So, making driver cones out of a composite graphite matrix virtually eliminates spurious resonances in the cone that would otherwise add unwanted noise that can mask micro-dynamics, tonal vibrato, and other sound details. Graphite is also a semi-conductive material.

“The first type of driver utilizes individual carbon fibers that run through a resin cone in a proprietary pattern. This provides the stiffness needed for the cone to act as a piston in its primary motion and helps minimize the weight of the cone.

“The second type of driver utilizes a cone that is made up of abaca pulp with abaca fibers for stiffness. The abaca fibers come from the long stems of the abaca tree leaves. Of course, graphite particles are dispersed in the abaca pulp to form a graphite composite matrix. Abaca is one of the materials that is used to produce high-quality security papers such as U.S. dollar bills, which are well known for their flexibility and durability! Not only are these drivers durable, but they are stiff and lightweight, and sound very natural.

“Another major result of the R&D program was the optimization of the curvature of the driver cones. The sound wave launch pattern is determined by the curvature of the cone. Therefore, many experiments were done on driver cones to achieve phase and frequency linearity over a wide bandwidth. These characteristics are critical when first-order (6dB/octave slopes) crossovers are used in a speaker.

“Venture also uses very large and powerful magnets in the drivers, in order to exert an extremely tight grip on the cones. The control over bass driver cones is so strong that their Q is in the unheard-of realm of 0.17–0.25.”

The Grand Ultimate is a fixed two-connector design with two very-high-quality binding posts and no rear-panel switches, controls, or provisions for bi-wiring. The importer states that “all Venture crossover designs are first-order (6dB/octave). The crossover networks are hand built with point-to-point soldering and meet stringent quality control. Components are carefully selected and tested before and after assembly.”

He also states that “since 1987, Venture has been designing all cable that is used for internal wiring inside of its speakers. The internal cable design is based on the same technology used to design interconnect and speaker cables. The general concept of Venture cables is similar to some of the cables designed for microwave technology, which can have a bandwidth up to 18GHz with excellent phase linearity. The cable wires are high purity with special silver plating like that also used in microwave applications.”

Sound Quality

Let me stress three things about the previous design data. First, I don't endorse any one approach to any aspect of audio design. I've encountered too many superb products using radically different technologies and too many bad ones. Second, I do, however, think it is important to understand the design rationale behind a high-end product as part of the audiophile experience. And third, I wouldn't bother chasing down such details and writing about them if the product's sound quality did not justify them.

I had only read about Venture before Robert Harley suggested this review, but I certainly have heard enough from the Grand Ultimates to regard them as one of more important listening experiences I have had as an audiophile and reviewer. They are not a striking speaker. **They do not bring some special romance, coloration, or other sound character to the table. In fact, they are so neutral in timbre and transparent in sonic nuance that you only discover how truly good they are when you realize the amount of extra detail and information they provide with a truly high-quality front end and great recordings.**

What is particularly striking about the Grand Ultimates is how much they reveal about the recording and the components and cables in the rest of your system. They are extremely revealing, and they accomplish this without emphasizing any particular aspect of frequency response or timbre.

You do not get a rise in the treble or upper midrange that gives the appearance of increasing detail, but is actually exaggeration. **Their upper octaves are revealing without a trace of hardness that is not in the recording or front end of the system.** They do not have the kind of exaggerated “flat” response that actually alters the highs, and yet they do not soften or blur any aspect of sound quality.



With really good recordings, you hear an extraordinary amount of upper-frequency detail from strings and woodwinds. You hear all of the natural bite and character of the brass. Piano and harpsichord detail is natural enough to immediately identify the sound character of the particular instruments involved. Voice, particularly vocal sibilants, are natural, and close-miking (and mike-swallowing) is fully revealed. *But* you do not get the kind of hardness to the violin, clarinet, or harpsichord that is all too common with speakers that are voiced more by measurements and technical tests than by attention to live music. **There is life and air, and above all the highs and upper midrange are as lifelike and musically involving as the recording and front end permit.** These sound characteristics are critical to me in buying any speaker, but **the Grand Ultimate is truly one of the best of the best in finding the golden mean in the upper octaves that makes music come alive.**

Don't get me wrong. They are not forgiving. You will hear problems in a recording, and any hardness or softening introduced by your electronics and cables. You also will hear the effects of speaker toe-in, room characteristics, and listening position. Dialing these speakers in is easy if you want their “almost best,” but their highs are good enough so even tiny movements can lead to revealing improvements in focus, upper-octave energy, sound staging, and transient energy. You also can clearly hear the differences between good and mediocre SACDs, cartridges, and digital recordings. You don't need 96kHz/24-bit downloads to enjoy these speakers, but they are revealing enough that higher frequency and sample rates do make a more audible difference than usual.

The rest of the midrange is equally revealing and equally well balanced. It is something of the vogue in audio reviewing to pick out a few recordings and stress what a given product does badly or well. That doesn't work with the Grand Ultimates. **They are consistently revealing of midrange detail without altering timbre and especially without reducing lower midrange energy. In fact, they have a remarkably neutral midrange character, and one that, again, reveals the quality of the recording and front end while imposing little or no sound character from the speaker.** Several hundred recordings into my review, about the best description I could come up with was "truly neutral."

The bass is very tight and detailed, goes very low, and coloration was dominated far more by room effects than by the inherent quality of the speaker. This is a major problem with any speaker that has really excellent bass. The room becomes the dominant factor affecting bass performance. I did, however, move the speaker to the areas where it produced the flattest measured bass response, and also listened to its bass corrected with Tact and Audyssey equipment for part of the listening.

Two things became clear in the process. First, **the Grand Ultimates can produce extremely powerful and well-detailed bass that does not emphasize any given part of the bass frequency range and has excellent definition with clearly defined transients and detail.** Organ and bass drum buffs, along with bass guitar addicts, do not need to worry because these speakers do not have separate bass towers or do not appear to be large enough to fill the listening room. As for the rest of the bass, there is no added warmth, no tweaking to raise or lower midbass energy, and no special "romance" in the form of bass coloration. That makes the Grand Ultimates less impressive than some competing speakers but it also makes them more accurate. You are going to hear the actual frequency of bass notes and music with a minimum of overhang, and what this lacks in drama, it makes up for in realism.

Second, you need a really good, really powerful amplifier, or one with a high damping factor, to get the best bass out of the Grand Ultimates. In fact, you need this kind of amplification to get all of the life, energy, and excitement these speakers are capable of. They are not low in sensitivity; in fact their specifications say they have relatively high sensitivity of 92dB. You do need a really good amp to get the best performance with orchestral or complex music with deep bass, and 100 watts is about the minimum. They worked very well with my Pass XA-160.5, but lower-powered tube amps performed far less well, and solid-state amps under 100 watts also presented quality problems. This does not mean they need solid-state amps, however, since a really powerful tube amp like the superb new Octave Jubilees (300 watts minimum; 600 watts full power) did an incredible job of driving them.

As for the soundstage, this is both one of the Grand Ultimates' greatest strengths, and an area that may take you several weeks to dial in exactly. **These speakers have one of the most dimensional soundstages I have heard to date, and reveal a level of depth on recordings with simple, straightforward miking that HP is right to praise as one of the most important single tests of speaker quality.** As is the case with every speaker, however, it takes time to find the "magic" set-up position that works best in a given listening room and provides the most realistic mix of width, depth, and imaging stability and size.

I had the help of the importer, who showed me how much help a good dealer can be in setup (and that the Grand Ultimates were capable of even better sound staging than what I initially thought was excellent). He spent some three hours tweaking the setup, and I spent days afterwards experimenting. It is not that the Grand Ultimates are hard to position compared

with other speakers, but rather that they can reveal so much if you are patient. Moreover, they show all too clearly that there is no one position that is best in toe-in , distance, or any other measure.

If you are among the lucky few who can actually afford such speakers, I would strongly recommend against nearfield listening. These speakers don't need it, and are too bright, close-up, for my ears. But do experiment and keep experimenting. Much of what you pay for comes from their superb soundstage, and very small movements can be very revealing. This is particularly true with older recordings, and more recent audiophile recordings that don't involve complex miking, mixes, and remixing. These are areas where Chesky, Reference Recordings, older Sheffield, Wilson Audio, some Telarc's, and the best European SACD and HDtrack recordings can come alive with these speakers.

Summing Up

The only thing wrong with these speakers is the same problem I have with all of the top high-end speakers at the top of the price pyramid: I can't afford to keep them. As for their strengths, **they are clearly high-quality assaults on the state of the art that are well worth seeking out to hear**, even if you can't afford them. I won't attempt to rank them relative to other top contenders at this price. I simply have no way of making accurate comparisons in real time. I can say, however, that **the Venture Grand Ultimates are certain to earn your respect and to reinforce that respect the more you listen to them, even with the most demanding comparisons**. It's been a privilege to live with them during this review, and one I wish you could share.

SPECS & PRICING

Type: Three-way floorstanding loudspeaker

Driver complement: Venture 2" wide-range cone tweeter, Venture 5" graphite midrange cone, four Venture 7" graphite woofers

Frequency response: 24Hz– 60kHz (in room)

Sensitivity: 92dB

Impedance: 4 Ohms

Recommended power: 20 to 400 Watts (no clipping)

Crossover: First-order, hand-built, point-to-point soldering

Dimensions: 13.8" x 19.7" x 48"

Weight: 161 lbs.