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Music and emotion

Infinity IRS Omega

INTRO

Infinity is on the crest of a sonic wave. The speaker maker has one of its strongest model line-ups in years, crowned by a flagship that deserves to be counted among the very best. The IRS Omega expresses music in a way that will make even the most jaded stereo listeners sit up and take notice

Infinity is one of those classic marques that seems to have been around forever, providing a broad spectrum of models, ranging from the affordable, entry-level segment of the specialist audio field to true high-enders such as the legendary, but also notorious, IRS Betas. Now under the auspices of the Harman group, substantial investment in research and development, coupled to the expertise of the Harman organisations, has seen a renaissance for the brand - and currently, its extensive array of speakers probably represents its strongest challenge in an increasingly competitive market place.

The IRS Omega has the unenviable task of fulfilling the flagship role in the Infinity family - unenviable because the competition in the high-end speaker market has never been tougher. And besides, it has to represent exceptional performance to warrant its close on R50 000 asking price.

However, having heard the Omegas in a true high-end system, where any possible weakness would have been all too quickly exposed, I have to admit that these are probably the best speakers ever to come from the Infinity stable - better than the old IRS Beta, and certainly not nearly as difficult to set up and to drive.

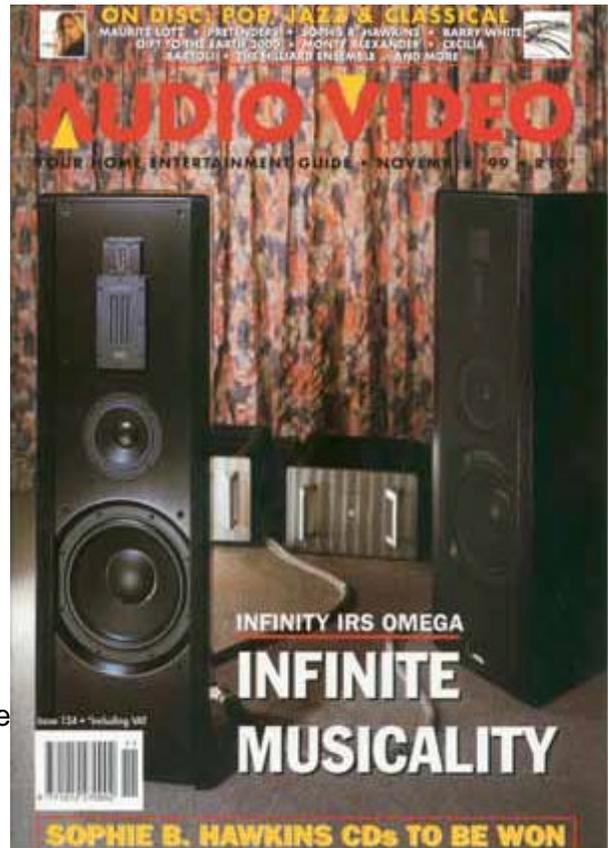
At face value, the IRS Omega doesn't look like anything special - and I don't mean that in any negative sense. But they have fairly conventional enclosures (or so it appears), aren't inordinately huge, and steer clear of any unusual cosmetic design features.

At 1 230 mm tall, 390 mm wide and 380 mm deep, they don't have a dominating physical presence, but the real wood black oak veneer cabinets are superbly finished. The sides taper slightly towards the rear to combat standing wave resonances, and the woofer is massive.

The company employs its own ribbon tweeter designs. Indeed, in the case of the Omega, there are two so-called EMIT tweeters, as well as an EMIM upper midrange ribbon driver. Only one of the two tweeters, namely an EMIT-B device, is visible, located high up on the baffle board. But there is a second, EMIT-R tweeter, which fires backwards. This, Infinity says, enhances the ambient effect of the music, and greatly benefits staging.

In effect, the two tweeters and the EMIM midrange operate together in a complex array that simulates a bipolar speaker, allowing extreme levels of detail, but seamlessly integrated into the overall soundstage. The rear-firing tweeter plays at a slightly lower volume level than its front-firing partner, thus providing the effect of ambience without compromising imaging or focus.

The fourth member of the IRS Omega's driver array is a conventional lower midrange driver - a 165 mm polypropylene design that fires forward in the conventional manner.



And then there is another piece de resistance: a massive 305 mm woofer, constructed according to the so-called Watkins principles. The parameters for a Watkins woofer link an extremely rigid cone with a very long throw to massive magnet construction, allowing for a lot of air to be moved both quickly and accurately, relative to the actual size of the cone.

It's a design principle that is more often found in car audio subwoofers, where smaller, faster bass drivers are required to ensure a deep, controlled bass. By applying the design to a large home audio speaker, Infinity has created a speaker that can produce a very deep, very accurate bass response without any danger of boominess.

The IRS Omega can be fine-tuned to optimise its performance relative to different ancillary components and acoustic conditions via an adjustable treble, which can be set to flat, accentuated or attenuated settings. The midrange also offers a choice between flat or attenuated settings. For this review, all controls were set to flat.

At the rear, gold-plated binding posts allow bi-wiring. Superbly engineered, the binding posts will accept four mm banana termination, as well as spades and bare-stranded wiring. Gold-plated jumpers for single wiring are supplied as standard.

Finally, the IRS Omegas rest on four spikes, although plastic feet can be opted for where damage to wooden floors or other flooring surfaces is feared. However, the former would be the preferred choice, because of their decoupling properties - probably vital, given IRS Omega's penchant for a deep, sonorous bass.

The data sheet quotes a frequency response of 30 Hz to 42 kHz (+/- two dB), with the crossover points set at 180 Hz, 900 Hz and four kHz respectively. At 87 dB, the sensitivity is average, and certainly not impossibly inefficient, so that fairly modest amplification could theoretically be used.

However, the IRS Omegas are happiest with a good amount of power behind them, and Infinity's recommendation is for a minimum feed of 100 watts, with the capability to accommodate as much as 500 watts of input power.

The review pair were set up in a fairly large listening room, with lots of oomph supplied by Jeff Rowland Model 9 power amplifiers. The latter were controlled by a Jeff Rowland Synergy pre-amp, while the source signal was supplied by a Theta Jade CD transport and a Theta Generation V D/A converter.

I expected an in-your-face, almost attacking sound that would no doubt be impressive in a blow-you-off-your-feet way, so when the first few bars of French troubadour Francis Cabrel's Samedi Soir CD had come and gone, I was a little perplexed.

Yes, the music certainly had the power and the presence, but rather than in your face, it seemed to delve into the emotions of the music, and produce a performance that was compelling in its ability to make the performance sound immediate, real and totally convincing.

Only when I started concentrating on individual components of the system's delivery, rather than on the overall rendition, did I realise just how fast, deep and impactful the bass was: it was never allowed to dominate the performance, but was perfectly and smoothly integrated into the greater whole of the music.

Yes, it had exceptional pace and slam, linked to absolute control, but it became just a perfectly executed component of a perfectly executed overall performance.

Do I hear you scoff? Yes, perfect is a strong word to use in the context of any subjective review, but I have to say that in this system, and in this room, the IRS Omegas produces a sonic performance that is worthy of very high praise. And, if a violin sounds like a violin, and a kick drum like a kick drum, with nothing added or taken away, then perfect is indeed a word that comes to mind.

The rest of tonal spectrum is treated with equal care, and the progression from sub-bass (I think that the 30 Hz quoted on the spec sheet is quite conservative) all the way to the upper treble is a smooth, sweeping curve with not even an inkling of an unnatural dip or rise.

In the past, the EMIT tweeters have had a reputation for clarity, but compromised to some extent by a tendency towards forwardness, but in this instance, they find their best-ever home: clarity and transparency are the words that come to mind, allowing a rich harvest of ultra-fine detail, but with not even the slightest tendency towards sibilance or aggression.

These speakers are precise to the extreme, as a reference speaker should be, and they will treat good recordings with the utmost respect. On the other hand, they don't punish lesser productions as severely. And that's why the IRS Omegas have to be described not only as accurate, but also as truly musical designs.

From a staging perspective, the transparency of the speakers, which allows them to 'disappear' as physical point sources, greatly enhances the listening experience. The soundstage is majestic, stretching in each direction, but always in a way that allows the final rendition to be considered cohesive and believable.

Depth, height and width become rather irrelevant terms when the speakers can reproduce ambient information so accurately: Pink Floyd's The Wall is rich in ambient detail, ranging from huge to intimate, and the Infinity speakers were never at a loss to reflect the varying atmospheres.

Detail and imaging are also perfectly executed, and indeed, the system revealed new aspects to some recordings that I thought I knew well. The rustle of a page, the slight rasping of a throat in the violin section - these are slivers of information that add to the overall effect of realism, yet are never allowed to turn the listening experience into a surreal or hyperrealistic feast.

To me, the final measure of a component is always its ability to entertain through musical truthfulness. It's been a long time since I enjoyed a system, and a pair of speakers, as much as the three-odd hours spent in the company of the IRS Omegas.

They do most things very well, but the sum of the various performance parameters is almost greater than the individual parts. Granted, they were listened to in some pretty classy company, but then they deserve to be partnered by top-end components.

With the IRS Omega, Infinity has a flagship loudspeaker that can hold its head up high in the esoteric audio arena. And while its performance in technical terms deserves high praise, it is its talent for translating the emotion inherent emotion in the music that puts in the top league.

Deon Schoeman

PEAKS

VERDICT

Immaculate musical presentation, thanks to massive, dimensional staging, clear imaging, a talent for dynamics and fine resolution. A class act in every respect.

TESTED WITH

Theta Jade CD transport, Theta Generation Va D/A converter, Jeff Rowland Synergy pre-amp, Jeff Rowland Model 9T power amps, Theta LaserLinque single-mode optical digital cables, Cardas Golden Cross analogue interlinks, Kimber Select KS-3033 speaker cables and bi-wire jumpers, Cardas Golden Cross and Siltech power cables, Shakti Bricks, Power Wedge mains conditioners, Eagle Audio custom audio stands.

RECORDINGS

Francis Cabrel - Samedi Soir (Columbia)
Pink Floyd - The Wall (Columbia)

Vivaldi - Four Seasons - Drottingholm Baroque Ensemble (BIS)
Tchaikovsky - Violin Concerto - Zukerman/Mehta/Israel Philharmonic Orchestra (Columbia)
Keb' Mo - Just Like You (Epic)
Dire Straits - Love Over Gold (Warner)
Stevie Ray Vaughan - Couldn't Stand The Weather (Columbia Mastersound)

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