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Sam's Space, by Sam Tellig

Skylan speaker stands

Now to Ireland.

Actually, Canada. A son of the Emerald Isle, Noel Nolan now abides in Calgary, Alberta, where he manufactures his Skylan speaker stands, amplifier stands and equipment racks. He sells directly and through dealers. Most Harbeth dealers in the US offer Skylan stands, which is how I discovered them. Walter Swanbon, of Fidelis AV, the Harbeth distributor, is a big fan. Noel Nolan's own speakers are Harbeths.

The stands are what the British (and Irish?) call bespoke: they're custom-made for your speakers. One post, two posts, four posts - your choice. Your choice of height, too: Noel or your dealer can advise. They can also advise what to fill the posts with: lead shot (nyet), sand (no, in most cases), kitty litter (the cat's meow), recycled plastic pellets, or white rice, available in sacks from any Asian grocery.

Wait a minute - I thought this was supposed to be sane.

Prices vary, as do the stands. If you want the four-post SKY-P4 20 (20" High), for instance, the price is \$531/pair. Figure another \$50 or so for UPS shipping and customs clearance to the US. Fill for the stands is up to you and on you. Kitty litter from Costco does fine. (Noel provides a scoop and a paper funnel.) Twin-post models for, say, the Harbeth PE ESR cost \$285/pair plus about \$40 shipping. Four-post stands for big speakers can cost over \$600/pair with shipping. Still reasonable.

To some customers, stands seem an unnecessary expense. But with stand-mounted speakers, you avoid what the late, also-missed Harvey Rosenberg called "monkey coffins". Harvey left the planet a year before Lars, almost to the day, and of the same cause: heart attack after an airline flight. Harvey, too, would have loved the Magic Gong.

Noel Nolan suggested I try a pair of Skylans with my Triangle Comete 30th Anniversary speakers. Naturally, he made them the proper height (24") with custom cut top plates. I'd had the Cometes sitting on Triangle's own, single-post steel Boomerang stands (no longer in production).

"Steel is easier and cheaper to work with," Noel told me. "There's just one problem. Steel rings. MDF and PVC, for the most part, do not." He then described his own stands: "the four center posts are made of custom polymer, mostly PVC, with some virgin vinyl." (Stolen from Art Dudley or Michael Fremer?) "The top and bottom plates are MDF, which I cover with a vinyl material that adds a little more damping. There's a metal coupling rod going down each of the posts. The rod holds the speaker stand together, and is also a conductor from the bottom of the speaker to the bottom of the stand. The mass-loading fill [of your choice] sits around the rod and helps damp the rod itself."

The next job was to assemble and fill the stands. With kitty litter.

"Not my kitty litter!" meowed Maksim. His brand is Scoop Away. Marina bought a bag of Fresh Step at Costco by mistake and Maksim turned his nose up. I can imagine audiophiles discussing the pluses and minuses of different brands of kitty litter. Not to mention white vs brown rice. Play sand vs traction sand.

Assembling and filling the Skylan stands is a job for two people - preferably two who have done it before. Walter Swanbon and Buffer Ergmann had, and did.

Still, I'm no stranger to Skylan stands. I've used them with my Harbeth Compact 7 ES3 speakers for nearly four years, and my son uses a pair of Skylans appropriate for his Harbeth HL5's.

Noel has also come up with what he calls the Q-Brick. This is a small decoupling device - a puck, really - layered with several different materials (he's not saying exactly which) that fit inside the four recessed holes in each stand's top plate. "The idea is to sit [it] atop the flanged inserts where the connecting rods are attached. This gives a direct transmission line from the bottom of each speaker to the base of each stand."

I changed nothing. I hadn't even brought the Magic Gong into the living room. Walter and Buffer just added the Q-Bricks, which transformed the Skylan stands I already had and was using for my Harbeth Compact 7 ES-3s. Overall definition snapped into clearer focus. Bass tightened. Later, the Magic Gong - the PMR Premium - brought even more to the fore.

I hate it when that happens.

I chatted with Noel Nolan by phone, which I suggest you do. He's a pleasure to talk with, and you do want your stands bespoke, don't you?

"Years ago, people were looking for extra bass out of speakers. This is where stand manufacturers were paying the most attention, mass-loading their stands with sand or lead shot, or a mixture of both. When I started paying closer attention to Harbeth and Spendor speakers, those with a lighter wall construction" - and whose cabinets are designed to flex like those of musical instruments - "I realized that a mass-loaded stand might not stand and deliver.

He continued: "I start with something that doesn't resonate like steel. Most makers of speaker cabinets use MDF anyway. I cover the MDF top plates with a vinyl material that adds further damping. I went to a PVC composite for the posts. I got the revelation whilst sitting on a PVC lawn chair. This lawn furniture is strong, I thought. As it turns out, PVC is easy to work with."

Noel (or your Skylan dealer) can set you straight about feet: "Some people get totally mixed up about what a pointed foot does. The only reason you have pointed feet on a stand is to penetrate the carpet, and whatever padding, and just barely come into contact with the floor. You do not want the spike biting into the floor so that you get the floor exciting into the stand.

Other loudspeaker importers and manufacturers have been turned on to Skylan stands - including Louis Chochos, of Omega Loudspeaker Systems in Norwalk, Connecticut. Noel now exports his stands and other products to Germany. Russia.

I won't say the Skylan stands are beautiful, but I do find them totally functional. I have heard no other stands that sound nearly as good. They're cust-made, and the prices are reasonable. I see or hear no reason to import steel stands from the UK, France, or China. Even when you fill the posts with nothing, the Skylan stands don't ring. If you want to ring, get a Magic Gong.

You can nix the need for stands with floorstanding speakers - Harvey Rosenberg's "monkey coffins". John Marks has written about this: the smaller a speaker cabinet, the easier it is to

control its resonances. Stands cost money, but so do speakers built down to the ground-and perhaps that's done more to make them sell better than to sound better.

When I need speaker stands, or just want to talk about speaker stands, Noel Nolan is my go-to person: a stand-up guy.

That's my stand.

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