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Category Winner: Loudspeakers \$2,000 to \$3,000

AURUM CANTUS MELODY M-103

**'Editor's
Choice'
Product
Of The
Year
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I knew those hard formative years at boarding school learning Latin in class and singing Latin hymns in the choir had to come in handy some day. I can still string together a few lines of the ancient language, but none of it makes much sense. “Look, a girl. Who is the girl? She is a large girl.” That sort of thing. For some reason these phrases have just stuck in my memory ever since.

However, this time I was able to translate (or at least I thought I could) the name of this particular unfamiliar loudspeaker brand. It calls itself Aurum Cantus, which I knew the latter part means ‘song.’ The Aurum bit was a bit trickier, but then it came to me - it means ‘gold.’ The fact that this brand has a Latin name that means ‘golden song’ is all the more interesting, because they are made in Shandong Province, China.

There is a strong Italian connection though, as the manufacturing company is part Italian owned and driver design and manufacturing used to take place in Milan. As part of the Jinlang Audio Co. Ltd., Aurum Cantus as a loudspeaker brand has been around since 1994. It started exporting the brand in 2001 and now ships the loudspeakers to 26 countries, including Australia, imported by Melbourne-based distributor, Final Link Audio.

I have to admit, I had not heard of Aurum Cantus before, so I really did not know what to expect when these M-103 speakers arrived.

What would we do without the Web? Well, after a few quick searches and a read of the manufacturer’s and Final Link’s websites, I felt I’d gleaned enough information to start with. Describing how a loudspeaker sounds is fine, but knowing where it comes from and how it got here certainly helps.

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My Internet browsing revealed another thing - lots of praise about the sound of its products, but this was something I was going to determine for myself.

It’s an odd thing, but I’ve also learnt over the years that a loudspeaker’s quality is often hinted at by the quality of the packaging. Don’t think me mad, but after years of unboxing and repackaging hundreds of loudspeakers, it’s a strange, but truthful observation. If the manufacturer goes to lengths to protect whatever’s in the box, there must be a reason. In this case, the box meant a triple compartment container, so just removing these loudspeakers took some effort. But I could see why immediately. Chinese craftsmanship has come along in leaps and bounds over the past few years and these are testament to the quality of manufacturing that’s now possible. These are seriously well crafted pieces of timber.

The review pair of the Melody M-103 floorstanders came in a Cherrywood (as pictured) real timber veneer that looked sumptuous. They also come in Rosewood with other finishes available to order. Build quality is flawless, with seamless edges, soft chamfering and an elegant cabinet shape and appearance.

These models are one of two floorstanders in the new Melody range, with a larger Melody M-102 joining the more medium sized M-103. These stand a touch over a metre tall and each speaker weighs a healthy 22kg. Removing the grille reveals what these floorstanders are all about and I have to admit to being something of a fan of ribbon loudspeaker designs (as long as they are implemented correctly, of course). I’ve owned a pair of Ambience hybrid ribbon speakers for around the past seven or eight years and still maintain there’s nothing that delivers the high frequencies quite like a well designed ribbon.

The unit in these is called a G3i aluminium ribbon and measuring

100mm in length it sits above a 7-inch (180mm) carbon fibre Kevlar mid/bass driver. The company manufacturers five different ribbon midtweeters and the one used in these Melody floorstanders was designed to offer serious performance, but because of its large-scale manufacturing, it doesn’t make the loudspeaker seriously priced. This was the fundamental aim with these two new models - to bring ribbon-based performance down to an affordable level.

At \$2,499 a pair, these certainly are classed as an affordable pair of floorstanding loudspeakers, but if you consider the cost of other ribbon tweeter loudspeakers, the real value of these Aurum Cantus designs becomes apparent. Listening to them only confirms this further.

The midbass driver is also a new design and it’s made of a composite of non-woven carbon fibre and Kevlar. The voice coil’s a big 50mm and helps the speaker measure down to an impressive (on paper, at least) 35Hz. At the other end of the frequency spectrum, the crossover uses high grade components such as Mundorf Supreme MKP capacitors and rated up to 40kHz, the Melody 103s are able to handle the extended bandwidth of formats such as Super Audio CD or DVD-Audio.

I allowed a week of running-in to let things settle down, as the longer you use metal ribbons, the better they sound. My Ambience Reference 1600s are still ‘bedding-in’ after months of use. I didn’t have to listen long to realise that these are something very special at the price. Hooked up to a Dared VP-845 18-watt Class A valve power amp (also from China) the efficiency of the speakers was put to the test, while conversely I also hooked them up to my ME 550II power amp to test their ability to handle current.

Power handling is stated between 50 and 200 watts, sensitivity is 89dB and a nominal impedance of 8 ohms makes for a fairly amplifier friendly load.



The high frequency magic is performed by Aurum Cantus Melody M-103's 100mm G3i aluminium ribbon midtweeter. This sits above the speakers' 180mm carbon fibre Kevlar mid/bass unit.

The low powered valve amp coped just fine and the combination made an excellent musical match. Generally speaking, ribbons midtweeters sound exquisitely detailed and sweet and both these qualities are evident in these. Despite the modest power of the Dared amp, combined with the warmth of the valve delivery, the Melody M-103s sounded completely unrestrained with a fulsome bass and delightfully liquid treble arrayed across a soundstage that is excellently deep and wide. They boast a lovely openness, setting vocals and instruments in this spacious soundstage which doesn't collapse when mixes get busy either. Add to this fine handling of dynamics and you've got the makings of a very enjoyable speaker to listen to. Which after time is reaffirmed and the more time you spend with them, the more you realise just how faithful their sound is.

One of the M-103's most impressive attributes is their natural tonality. This is due in part to the superb integration and delivery of what is a fine sounding ribbon, so instruments like a violin are neither smoothed nor aggressive.

These are extremes that most loudspeakers go to, but in this case, the Melody M-103s exhibit nothing but a very realistic texture. Guitars, drums and pianos also sound natural in a way that's rare at this sort of price level. They shine with vocals, sounding beautifully detailed and well projected with the likes of Jewel's *Deep Water* pouring into the room with such sweet clarity it's nothing short of enchanting.

Switching to the more dynamic ME amplification, they really came alive. Playing (suitably loudly) Audioslave's big opener *Cochise* from their self-titled first album and the drums hit so hard they have a physical as well as an aural presence, while other more rhythm-led tracks off the album are reproduced with finesse and fine dynamics. With hard-hitting material such as this, these single bass/mid drivers don't half deliver some punch.

In a marketplace that is literally bursting at the seams with loudspeaker brands and models, both from established international and locally designed and built manufacturers, there are occasions when a new brand does arrive on our shores that is somewhat of a giant killer.

It's probably fairly obvious that I quite like these loudspeakers. From a brand that I was unfamiliar with, these are easily one of the best sounding designs that I have ever heard for this sort of money.

Add to this sparkling performance top-class build and finish and you have what is quite simply a stunning all-round loudspeaker package at the price, and as such is absolutely deserving of its *2006 Audio & Video Lifestyle* Best Buy Awards status.

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Ancillary Equipment: Teac VRDS-10 CD transport, ME Sound 25/550II pre/power amplifiers, Dared VP-845 integrated valve amplifier, Wasatch Cable Works interconnects, Nordost Flatline Silver loudspeaker cables, Concorde equipment support, SAP Relaxa 1 isolation platform, Black Box mains conditioner

Distributor:

Final Link Audio Pty Ltd
34 Gamalite Drive
Melton
VIC 3337

Tel: (03) 9746 0394

Fax: (03) 9747 3063

Website:

www.finallink.com.au

Specifications:

Product Type

Floorstanding loudspeakers

Enclosure

2-way, two driver, rear ported

Driver Complement

1 x 180mm bass/mid driver

1 x 100mm G3i aluminium ribbon midtweeter

Recommended Amplifier Power

50-200 watts RMS (maximum)

Frequency Response

35Hz-40kHz

Sensitivity

89dB

Impedance

8 ohms (minimum 6.4)

Cable Connection

Biwireable

Dimensions

1025 x 220 x 273mm

Weight

22kg (each)

Price

\$2,499 per pair

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Reviewer:

Nic Tatham

All specifications and recommended retail prices were supplied by the distributor at the time of original review, and may now be subject to change