



# LINN TUKAN

*Anything Linn can do  
Tukan do better. But do  
you need an all-Linn  
system to tell you as  
much?*

by **KEN KESSLER**

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**F**oregone conclusion? A fait accompli? The problem with reviewing a Linn product is the baggage that accompanies it, baggage which all but writes the review beforehand.

So divisive is Linn, so emotive a brand – no, make that a religion – is Linn that just about every hi-fi reviewer in this country over the age

of 30 has had to declare himself 'pro' or 'anti'.

Me? I'm so thoroughly 'anti-Linn' that I find it hard to believe that no less than Ivor Tiefenbrun himself asked me if I'd like to review a Linn product. Maybe he's just having a laugh or running bets at the factory. I'm sure he feels no need to court my favour because (1) Linn is too big to be damaged by any review/reviewer and (2) I'm not powerful enough to make a difference to Linn's fortunes.

So now I find myself in front of an all-Linn system, for me an experience akin to eating airline food, driving a Ford, having kidney stones removed manually or viewing a Glenn Close film.

Did I say 'all-Linn system' even though I'm assessing just the Tukan? Yes – and that should surprise no-one. Linn spokespersons, having mastered the arts of propaganda,

brainwashing, historical revisionism and other ways of interpreting reality, appear to regard all non-Linn products (and I hate writing in dialect) as 'shite'. It therefore stands to reason that any review other than a rave will be torn to shreds if the reviewer was daft enough not to have used an all-Linn system during the listening sessions. The rebuttal might come in the form of a letter along the lines of 'Reviewer X cannot possibly know how our product sounds because he did not use it according to the design criteria, that is in a Linn system.'

And to be perfectly fair, everyone knows that Linn products – more than just about any other brand of hi-fi components – are designed not as 'universal' items but as parts of a one-make system...though I wouldn't dare to suggest that Linn's designers work in a complete vacuum. While I'm certain that Linn studies the products made by competitors, the company is so wrapped up in its own mystique that it probably pre-judges all opposition as unworthy.

Suffice to say, Linn pre-empted my concerns about a suitable reviewing system by offering to supply a CD player, pre-amp, power amp and all of the necessary cables without my having to ask. It meant that I could audition the Tukan as Linn designed them to be heard. To make doubly sure that I was using the Tukan properly, Linn sent along two employees to make certain that the system was working to their standards. This, of course, protects Linn as much as it protects me: should the verdict of this review prove to be a negative one, Martin Dalglish and Neil Gaydon can then explain away my findings because I don't understand the concept of 'tunes', I had other speakers in my room, I suffer from bad attitude, I listen to unapproved software, I don't own an LP12 or that, as they told me many times that afternoon, I simply '... don't know what (I'm) talking about.'

Funnily enough, I actually like the Tukan. It's the rest of the system that I wouldn't use as ballast on a freighter out of Panama, let alone suggest that anyone should hand over £4k-plus for it. But I dutifully tried the Tukan in both an all-Linn system and a decent system of my choosing. The Tukan was presented to me as a speaker which can be sold like any speaker – that is, it's available to owners of non-Linn systems as well as to the converted; using it as part of only one system, Linn or otherwise, would be as unprofessional an act as I can imagine. I believe it is every reviewer's duty to try any product in as many combinations as

time and available hardware will allow.

Because I am nowhere nearly as stupid as Dalglish and Gaydon might wish, I also insisted that Editor Harris visit my studio prior to my writing so much as a single word. I wanted him to hear exactly what I heard.

It's a good thing for Linn that I did review the Tukan with other gear. Only by using the Tukan with transparent, dynamic and uncoloured source and amplification equipment from other makers was I able to discover that this Kan replacement is a gem. I say that under no duress at all, but you should know that I consider the Kan to be one of the worst specialist-made loudspeakers I've ever heard; any replacement for that vile, accursed squawk box is bound to be an improvement. But I chose to think of the Tukan not as *Kan: The Sequel*, which might prejudice me, but as an upscale, two-way mini-monitor fighting in the arena defined by the LS3/5A. To do this, I simply drove the Kan out of my mind and judged the Tukan in the contexts of size and price, as would any logical assessor. As a matter of course, inevitability and propriety, the reference chosen was the LS3/5A, almost identical in terms of size as the wee Linn, but a couple of hundred quid dearer. As you'll see, at £399 per pair the Tukan is a bargain by any measure.

The Tukan measures a tidy 188×183×298mm (WDH) and it sits comfortably on Foundation stands as if to the manor born. Aesthetically, it betters the homely LS3/5A by featuring a full-width, frameless grille which provides a much more sleek, modern appearance. Removing this reveals a 19mm ceramic domed tweeter and a 125mm mid/bass driver.

What shocked me, given Linn's incessant nationalistic bleatings, was learning that these drivers are made to Linn's specification by Tonagen, a company I believe to be of the Asian persuasion. While Linn, like nearly every other maker in the world, has always purchased OEM speaker drivers, cartridges, tonearms and turntable motors (despite a belief in some quarters that everything wearing a Linn badge is made in Glasgow down to the last molecule), I would have expected Linn to source drivers in the UK.

At the back of the Tukan is a fully-veneered rear baffle with sockets for bi-wiring/bi-amping, a reflex port and ready-to-tap screw holes to accept the clever, adjustable wall-mounting hardware. Wall-mounting? Isn't this an act of the anti-Christ? Apparently not. As part of Linn's evolution from audiophile lunacy to

becoming a haggis-fueled version of B&O, the Tukan is described as a 'Bookshelf speaker for primary, secondary or surround-sound rear channel use'. This is a far cry from the kind of employment approved for Linn products a decade ago.

Tukan's cabinet is made from high-density material and the build quality and finish are luxurious enough to preclude domestic warfare. Along with purist-pleasing details like the sonically invisible grille, absorbent materials within the enclosure to maximise the low-frequency performance and even the use of veneers which play a role in the sonic performance, the Tukan is positively user-friendly in a manner which all but contradicts hi-fi hobbyist practice.

Positioning, for instance, was utterly non-critical, the Tukan responding to each change in a predictable manner: nearer the walls for bass reinforcement, toe-in for a hotter seat, etc. And at 87dB/1W/1m sensitivity, and with an 8 ohm impedance, the Tukan couldn't be less amp-threatening. But only a complete moron or peasant would waste these speakers in an A/V system driven by a 30-watt 'home cinema centre receiver'; conversely, only a partially deaf reviewer (or a particularly greedy dealer) would suggest that bi-amping with a brace of Klouts is the minimum acceptable amplifier match. As you'll see, Klouts are no match for the Tukan, whatever the quantity.

Given that my first burst of Tukan came via the Graaf 200W/channel OTL power amp, nothing which followed could diminish my favourable initial impression. This is despite the expected and received yawns and wisecracks from Mr Gaydon, whose well-trained foot tapped only when the system was changed to all-Linn; at least he's consistent. God forbid, then, that someone should give him a Viewmaster for Christmas, because the heightened sense of 3D – nay, the mere suggestion that life isn't 2D – would probably shock him into apostasy. Just as Linn steamrollers non-believers, so do Linn products flatten sonic images. By extension, a diet of source-to-speaker Linn-only sound is bound to disorient anyone's spatial perceptions.

While the Linn personnel were present, we switched from the Jadis D1/Krell Reference 64/GRAAF pre/power system wired with ART cables (which I'd been using constantly for the previous fortnight) to a Linn Karik/Klout/Kaim set-up with Linn wires. The speakers tried that day were Tukans and (Rogers) LS3/5As, both bi-wired and swapped system-to-system. I also substituted the Unison Research Simply Two,

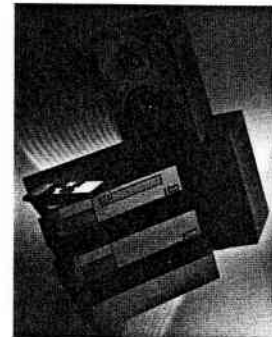
the Krell KRC/MDA300 combination, Audio Research's D130, Jadis D60 and myriad Musical Fidelity items for the Kairn/Klout pairing. For alternatives to the Karik CD player, I used the aforementioned Jadis/Krell combo, the Marantz CD52 Mk II SE (with and without the Audio Alchemy DAC-In-The Box), the Primare 204 and Krell MD-10, MD-20 and Studio digital components.

It didn't take long to confirm that the Karik/Kairn/Klout kombo compromised the Tukan, but I stuck with it for days just in case, like those computer-generated 3D optical illusions, you have to focus for ages before all is revealed. Burn-in periods, days with 'R's in them, throwing the rune stones – for me, nothing could alter the sonic signature of the Linn Experience to resemble anything akin to real music. At all times, the performance was 'shouty', edgy, aggressive and absolutely lacking in anything which even approximated a sensation of real space. Given that there are enough stunning recordings around for proving the presence of three-dimensionality in sound reproduction (for example, the LEDR test, to be heard on *HFN/RR's Test Disc III* and walkarounds from Stereophile and Sheffield/XLO), I don't feel any need to enter into an argument, such as would make John Crabbe and Linn allies, about the existence or non-existence of image height and stage depth. It exists, plenty of us have heard it and I am not going to be told that reality is 2D – certainly not by a £4000 system utterly incapable

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believe how thoroughly the all-Linn system was savaging the sound of its sibling product.

Replacing the three Ks with the Marantz CD player and the Unison Research Simply Two, at a total cost of only £1300 I hasten to add, cleaned up the chaos created by the Linn source-plus-amplification, allowing the Tukan to show off every aspect of its performance bar maximum available SPLs. Moving to more powerful amplifiers let the Tukan blossom, and I have no qualms about accepting the trade-off of kick-ass dynamics at the expense of, say, an LS3/5A's imaging and subtlety. Tukan, then, is a party animal for installations where space is at a premium or where large speakers are forbidden.

After the on/off, confused state of LS5/12 affairs, it's an absolute pleasure to report that the Tukan genuinely does what the finalised LS5/12 only might do, relative to the undeniably hamstrung LS3/5A. The high perceived value, complete user-friendliness, the big sound and the sane price tag will prevent the Tukan from suffering the fate of most other LS3/5A wannabes. The only problem I foresee is that you'll have a hard time finding a Linn dealer who'll let you audition the Tukan without Linn electronics. †

you have any right to expect from a speaker this size, is compromised by a disconcerting looseness, but you might rightly consider this a small price to pay for the extension and weight. As this kind of bass appears to be common to all the Linn components I tried, I can only assume that Linn designers think that floppy/sloppy lower registers create an impression of music flowing more easily, in the way that a shrieking midband grabs a listener's attention or excess level always wins an A/B comparison in a shop.

But this doesn't diminish the worth of the Tukan when it's used in a non-Linn context. In the all-Linn hardware chain, it seems to me, the sound is such that the listener thinks everything is about to fall apart, an uncanny sensation I've never experienced before. It's a sonic house of cards waiting for a shove, a nerve-wracking deception that annoyed me as much as the colour being out of whack on a TV set. It was eerie, the compounded levels of those Linn trademarks resulting in an echoey, phasey mess which was repeatably identifiable yet wholly incomprehensible. . . so much so that when SH visited, he had me run through the demonstration, using his favourite piece of solo piano music, three times because we couldn't

of recreating any sense of space.

Switching from Linn-driven Tukans to anything-else-driven Tukans showed that this speaker deserves to be one of the best-selling mini-monitors in the market – even at the expense of the LS3/5A. Once you feed it a decent signal, the Tukan comes off like an LS5/12 . . . at 40 per cent of the price. In two key areas, it does what everyone wants an LS3/5A to do but cannot: go loud and go deep. You don't have to be any kind of an enthusiast/audiophile to note the change; it's in your face. The extra weight, extra extension should put a smile on even the most poker faced, and there's enough headroom to allow even metal merchants to boogie. They're available from the Tukan, but denied by the LS3/5A. Which is, pretty much, what the LS5/12 is supposed to offer.

But for a thousand pounds...

Like the pre-production LS5/12 I tried, the Tukan is a bit over-generous in dishing up treble. This is but one of the traits, part of Linn's DNA, which remains constant whatever the system. The Tukan always – relative to the LS3/5A, the ATC SCM10 and Sonus Faber Minima Amator – shouts a bit and suffers from truncated stage depth. The bottom end, though so much more generous than