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## SonicFlare Reviews the Gemme Audio Tanto Loudspeakers and Monarchy Audio SE-250 Mono Block Amplifiers

by Sandy Greene



Don't stress me out. I'm spoiled. I get to audition really cool new and pricey audio gear at no cost. But if that gear even thinks of getting in my way of enjoying the music, I can be the biggest baby. If I

don't get my therapeutic time in front of my music system listening to the highest quality audio, I can get quite cranky. It's my escape from work and if it's work just to get good sound then it just doesn't work for me.

Usually, not always, the gear I review enters the room pretty easily. Just some minor tweaks over an easy afternoon and I'm set. If there's break-in time needed for the gear, no problem. I set the gear up, let the music run and leave the room for a while. I can even deal with most gear through its break-in time as decent gear usually starts out decent and only gets better.

The Gemme Audio Tanto's (\$5495 pair) did not enter the room gracefully. They followed up the elegant Verity Audio Rienzi's. Their partner-in-waiting; the [Monarchy Audio SE-250's](#) (\$5000 pair) didn't seem to hit it off with them too quickly.

At first, when I initially set up the Gemme Tanto's, I could hear most of their strengths but one glaring room conflict kept me from enjoying all of their goods. Gemme advertises fantastic bass response from these small floor-standing speakers. In my 11 x 17 room, with suspended wooden floors, placing them along the long wall, I could not get a flat and neutral balance. Their bass was overpowering the room. I tried different amps. I initially saved the Monarchy Audio SE-250's for the Tanto's because I wanted to give them the best I had, and the SE-250's have been my best amps in house for about a year. I tried the 47 Lab Shigaraki integrated amplifier. I tried my Rogue Audio Stereo 90. I tried different sources. I tried different speaker cables. I tried various placements of the speakers... and then I sent JP and Robert from Gemme and email asking for their advice. A lightning fast response came overnight with a simple solution that I can't believe I didn't try.

The Tanto's are a rear-ported design. They feature a similar bass loading design like my old Meadowlark Kestrel II's. The Kestrel's were front ported and I placed them pretty close to the back wall. With the Tanto's being rear-ported, I figured I'd need to place them further into the room and further from the back wall. I placed them about in the same location I had previous success with the Verity Audio Rienzi's. I used the Rienzi's with their woofer facing the wall.

My floors are wood suspended over a basement below. Here's the brilliant part. Robert from Gemme suggested I move the speakers back towards the wall. This would take my suspended floor out of interaction

with the bass-rich Tanto's. Moving the speakers closer to the wall was counter-intuitive to me... with the rear-facing port and the heavy bass response about to be increased by reinforcement from the wall behind. The floor interaction reduction made sense though and viola! The bass boom all but disappeared and the speakers immediately sounded more holistic and coherent.

Obviously placement with the Gemme Tanto's is critical to get them to integrate their robust output into the room. Gear synergy was now more easy to judge. I tried all three amps again and all worked well and have their own unique character that was now more obvious. I feel a little silly, but before I admit to not thinking of trying the speakers closer to the back wall, I feel vindicated in my assumption that the Monarchy Audio SE-250's would be the best match for the Tanto's.

The Tanto's are quite efficient at 91db and the Monarchy SE-250's are pretty powerful with their 250 watts. The Tanto's run their main driver almost full range and with this combo of efficient, almost single driver, paired with powerful mono amps, you would think the pairing wouldn't work well. But the SE-250's have a very gentle hand with their tube input stage and dynamic MOSFET amps.

The Tanto's are a warm sounding speaker. As I mentioned before, they have a similar bass output design to my old Meadowlark Kestrel's. Like the Kestrel's, they are a two-way design. Like the Kestrel's, they are ported. Like the Kestrel's, they have a ring radiator tweeter. I am a huge fan of this tweeter. It has a very organic and liquid sound. It is never harsh and never draws attention to itself. Like the Kestrel's, the Tanto's practically disappear. They image exceptionally well. Vocals are beguiling. Instruments have an easy texture and flowing rhythm.

Another similarity to the Kestrels is how loud the Tanto's can play without the listener really noticing. They are completely free of glare and harshness and can handle all sorts of scale and dynamics with ease. They don't mute treble response or dynamic slam at high levels yet those elements never become exaggerated even at high output levels.

Though the Tanto's can handle high output levels, they remain extremely rich and full at low output levels. The Meadowlark Kestrel's never really did well at low volumes and never were as full and enveloping as the Tanto's. The Tanto's have the welcome combination of full-range output, texture, touch, dynamics, ambience and imaging that make them a transparent window into the performance. When you can hear the hall, the studio, the character of the instruments, and the mood of the performer; the ability to be transported by the recording is that much more likely. The Gemme Tanto's enable that thrill.

That they enable the thrill is half-due in part to the excellent amplification provided by the Monarchy Audio SE-250's.

The Monarchy Audio SE-250's are the best amps I've had in my home. I have, and have had a few in the past years, including other Monarchy Audio amps and pre's. There is a family resemblance. The SE-250's have a very lively feel. They seem to WANT to play music have fun while doing it. They do a magical trick that few components I can think of do... they inject energy to the performance. It's like the performers are actually happier to play for you through the Monarchy Audio SE-250's.

The SE-250's have a single tube at the input stage of each mono block. The tube euphoria you would expect, and Monarchy seems to lead on about, is very subtle. I believe it adds a bit of ambience but very little. The bass control, something you would think the tube hampers, is very good. These amps really drive the music. They are tight yet tuneful. They are very transparent and only enhance the experience by really just giving the listener more all around.

I've had other mono blocks and I really enjoy the separation mono's provide. They do however, require more precise toe-in positioning. When you get the toe-in of any speaker dialed in well, the images are much more

stable and solid than with most stereo amps. When the speaker positioning is not dialed in well, the sonic image locks to the speakers and shrinks both vertically and horizontally. When all was set up well, the Gemme Tanto's completely disappeared.

How bout some music then?

I've picked up a bunch of used vinyl recently and spent some hard earned cash on some new CD's as well. First a fantastic new CD, Andrew Bird's "Armchair Apocrypha". This CD has mood and ambience a plenty. He's got some of the lyrically arty and nerdy rocking rhythm of Granddaddy in him. He's got some of the deeper instrumentation and dramatic arrangements of Sufjan Stevens in him and he's got some of Jeff Buckley angelic vocalizations in him. Add an almost eerie whistle to most tracks and you have the makings of one of the most transporting albums in recent memory.

The Tanto and SE-250 combination with the excellent 47 Lab Shigaraki transport and DAC through my Rogue Magnum 99 preamp, really take this recording to a most angelic place. The emotional impact due to the portrayal of the ambience heightens the musical experience to the point of goose bumps every time I listen. It just does not grow old and every time I listen I discover something new and magnetic in the recording and performance. This is what great gear with a great recording can do.

Onto some vinyl of pretty opposite nature. Only thing in common is that both are older recordings of live performances. First is Sonny Boy Williamson and the Yardbirds recorded in London in 1963 at the Craw-Daddy Club. The Tanto's and SE-250's have such a full and transparent sound as to simply get out of the way of any recording and reproduce a performance in full scale and emotional impact.

This live show was rumored to be such the swell of energy to bring a crowd of eight hundred cold Londoners to the "boiling point" (as it says in the album notes), and pretty much launch the Yardbird's career. That's incredible energy if you've ever experienced anything similar in a live performance. Through the Tanto's and SE-250's with my usual analog front end (Rega P25, Exact II mm cart, Gram Amp II se phono pre) this album just completely comes to life... life in 1963. It sounds like I imagine '63 would feel. Gritty blues harp, tight minimalist drumming, twangy overdriven guitar, scruffy voice, cold small hall with lots of mesmerized people.

The other bit of vintage vinyl that stands out as taking most advantage of the sonic abilities of the Gemme Tanto's and Monarchy Audio SE-250's is the 1973 recording of Puccini's "La Boheme" featuring Pavarotti with the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra. Now, I'm no opera buff, but this is just beautiful music with obviously dramatic live dynamics and vast sound stage. The Tanto's deliver all of the sonic information and really heighten the drama of the performance. Many speakers I have had would not produce this performance in such a life-like, full-scale manner as the Tanto's driven by the SE-250's can.

In summary, the Monarchy Audio SE-250's and Gemme Tanto's make a fantastic pairing. The SE-250's simply provide the power that, although not required for excellent sound with the Tanto's, propels and transports musical performances. The SE-250's are the best kind of partner. They simply enhance and enable their partner's best attributes. They bring excitement and impact to the experience without ever sounding exaggerated; only enhancing all the good that's already there, on a recording, and capable from a great loudspeaker.

Speaking of quite a loudspeaker, the Gemme Tanto's are quite a quality product. They're beautifully crafted. Smartly engineered, wondrously supported, and beautiful sounding. They are a small package with a big sound. Their sound has all the ability and quality to enable real musical enjoyment usually provided by much bigger and more expensive speakers. I recommend you audition them with the best amplification available. Not because they demand it, but because they deserve it.

## Comments

Dear Sandy,

What more can we say?!? That's an absolutely great, gratifying review, and you said it all in great style too! As noted, that deep bass needs an attention to positioning and solid foundations to sound its best, and I'm real glad we could help you on this. The top level imaging, vast soundstage and disappearing act are in great part due to the complex, multi-layer cabinet construction using elaborate wood-particle/elastomer/solid HDF side panels. Even though you'll never be able to admire the complex inner construction, we took the extra step of machining the inside panels as well. All this attention to details might be the secret ingredient that makes our VFlex speakers so natural, focused and effortlessly lively. Thank you for this hot review, and we'll make sure we contact the folks at Monarchy! ;-)

Posted by: **Jean-Pierre Boudreau** at October 4, 2007 9:48 AM