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TIDAL AP1

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TIDAL AP1

OF ROYAL BLOOD

By Carsten Barnbeck. Photography: Manufacturer, Carsten Barnbeck

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It wields immense power, offers tonal neutrality and irresistible musicality, and is a sublime beauty with uncompromising build quality. The AP1 from TIDAL Audio is a statement piece for active speaker technology and could easily claim the throne in this category. However, its majestic big sister, the Royale, currently holds the throne – after all, the new princess costs less than half as much while delivering comparable performance.

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The two active TIDAL queens side by side: it is immediately apparent that the AP1 (right) is larger than the Royale, shown here in the multi-piece Duotone version.

— "We build emotions", says the small red lettering beneath the TIDAL Audio logo. Founder, owner, and designer Jörn Janczak has already proven his devotion to this slogan more than once. Musical journeys with his loudspeakers are always extreme experiences. Yet what I hear at this moment catches me off guard. We're sitting in the listening room at the company's new headquarters in Erftstadt. In front of me stand the four-piece, over two meter tall flagship La Assoluta and a pair of Sunray speakers – essentially La Assolutas without the separate woofer towers. In comparison, the speaker currently knocking my socks off with its unfathomably deep soundstage and seemingly limitless power appears almost frighteningly delicate. Janczak is introducing me to the world of his masterpiece, the Royale, marketed under the TIDAL X BUGATTI label. I am enveloped in sound with detail, composure, and effortlessness that leaves me speechless. I know the active speaker and have heard it several times before, but this is my first experience with it in the manufacturer's listening room. The large hall is hardly a studio – it has a lively character without excessive reverberation and represents a solid real-world living space. Yet it seems as though the Royale is performing on a custom stage.

But my visit is actually for another protagonist: the active AP1, which would never have existed without its role model, the Royale. The collaboration with Bugatti was intended to push boundaries, and it resulted in a truly superlative active monitor. The Royale's unquestionable authority stems primarily from its literally monolithic construction. Janczak designed a flowing form into which amplifiers and drivers integrate organically. This is made possible by a complex (and extremely expensive) molded casting made from either one piece (Monocoque) or two pieces (Duotone). Embedded into the casting is an internal matrix of the company's proprietary TIRALIT material – a mixture of HDF and polymer ceramic that braces the cabinet into a massive structure. The approximately 220 kilograms of a Royale behave as though they weigh two tons. In turn, the loudspeaker is a perfect match for Bugatti's uncompromising standards. To this day, the Royale occupies a class all its own. However, such a sound sculpture priced at around half a million euros per pair cannot – and does not – intend to serve the broader market. Its design is too exotic. These considerations prompted Janczak to return to the drawing board and create a derivative of the Royale – something based on traditional loudspeaker architecture, and that is significantly less expensive, yet sonically not too far removed from the Royale.

I realized that he had succeeded in this threefold challenge when I realized the AP1's conspicuous absence during my visit to Erftstadt. The first production run had already sold out, and a second was only just ramping up. A few doors away, I watched TIDAL Audio employees working on seven AP1s in various stages of production, revealing valuable insights into the construction of this enormous loudspeaker. Unlike the Royale, the AP1 relies entirely on TIRALIT. And this material is no joke: the four, thick internal cabinet braces alone weigh 40 kilograms. That leaves 160 kilograms for the rest of the speaker, the heaviest part of which is its exoskeleton. As is tradition, it is covered in such a thick layer of sound-deadening polyester lacquer that the massive metal plate with company logo is completely embedded. Applied in multiple stages, the lacquer weighs 25 kilograms before sanding. Despite the AP1's extreme complexity, the cabinet can be manufactured far more cost-effectively than the Bugatti speaker's enclosure. Although the conventional cabinet design does require one compromise: to approach the Royale in bandwidth, stamina, and composure, the AP1 must be significantly larger than its inspiration – but this suits it perfectly. ▸

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Tonally neutral, musical, and limitless performance: **TIDAL's Royale** concept works superbly in the slightly scaled-down AP1 as well. This is one of the finest active loudspeakers available.

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CHALLENGING =
INTUITIVE =

A component is 100% intuitive if you can exploit its potential to the full intuitively.

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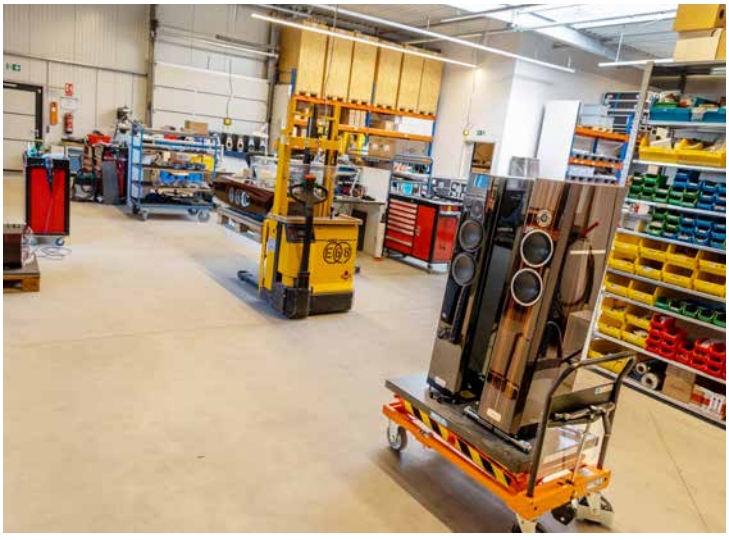
On the page to the right, the amplifier module stands with its connections, as well as the bolted feet and their Teflon-coated isolators. Above are front and rear views of the Contros Media Center – a versatile combination of preamplifier, discrete high-bit DAC, and network player. The latter is fully equipped, supporting Tidal, Qobuz, and Spotify Connect, and it benefits from regular updates. This superbly crafted all-in-one component is priced at €49,000. The manufacturer also offers matching signal and power cables. The result is a completely integrated system.

A lacquer-sealed TIRALIT cabinet is nearly indestructible and even resistant to tropical humidity, but the drivers aren't just screwed into it. On an already veneered AP1, metal rings serve as the actual mounting structures. These absorb considerable material. The 30 mm diamond tweeter shares a polished stainless-steel frame with an 80 mm midrange driver, both mounted in a decoupled sub-enclosure. Directly below sit two 170 mm woofers with aluminum/ceramic sandwich diaphragms, which are responsible for the upper bass range and are borrowed directly from the Royale. Mounted on the cabinet sides are four 26 cm woofers, each fitted with protective grilles specially developed by TIDAL Audio for low-frequency operation. The other front-mounted drivers were also designed according to Janczak's specifications, but they are manufactured and supplied by Accuton.

As it turns out, the integrated TIDAL hybrid amplifiers are based on the same principles as the Royale's amplification system. However, as with many details of his loudspeakers, Janczak is not inclined to reveal too much. At their core are high-end Class D power amplifiers that have been heavily modified and refined for use in the AP1. Janczak says he identified and eliminated several critical weaknesses – the rest was painstaking detail work. Standing before an open amplifier frame, he explained that even the power supply with its pragmatic onboard connectors was a challenge. Two runs of symmetrically routed pure-silver wiring replace the usual ribbon cables, exemplifying the extensive customization. The amplifier modules mounted in the rear of the cabinet deliver less power than those in the Royale (4.5 kW). Yet at 3,500 watts each, the AP1 can still push any household electrical system to its limits and easily earns the label "over-engineered."

The absence of the active heavyweights in the Erftstadt listening room was unfortunate but hardly a deal-breaker. Several weeks before my visit to the Rhineland, Janczak had delivered a black piano-finish review sample to our editorial offices. It was surprisingly easy to remove the combined 440 kilograms of material from their shipping crates and position them in the listening room. This was due to not only ingenious packaging but also the AP1's feet with their Teflon coated undersides. Simply give the speaker a firm push to get it moving, and it glides across the floor with remarkable ease. In a separate package we found the Contros Media Center. The AP1 can operate without it, but the streaming DAC preamplifier (see sidebar) streamlines these active monitors. Contros is a fully modern DAC and network player equipped with all contemporary streaming services and complete smart-device control, but it also features an immense, tactile volume knob alongside a matrix display that demonstrates the precise details when you press Play.

After maneuvering the AP1s into roughly the right place and connecting all necessary cables, Janczak hurried off to another appointment. "You'll figure it out," he said, regarding the first sounds floating through our listening room. Several weeks later, I understand what he wanted to demonstrate: like the Royale, the AP1 is entirely DSP-free. Its powerful amplifiers and ultra-rigid construction form an inseparable unit capable of launching even the deepest bass notes into the room without stress or vibration. I experienced this vividly with "Turquoise Hexagon Sun" by Boards of Canada, a minimalist track composed almost entirely of low mids and bass frequencies. On less capable speakers, it's practically unlistenable – not because it sounds terrible, but because weaker ▸



TIDAL Audio recently moved into a newly constructed company headquarters. Directly adjacent to a stylish reception and meeting area is the listening room. Visitors and customers can first listen and then discuss the individualized finish of their TIDAL model. Incidentally, this fantastic listening room isn't actually used as a development environment. According to Jörn Janczak, every one of his loudspeakers is intended to work in any environment, and relying on a single, all-defining reference room would be counterproductive. In the photo, the Bugatti speaker appears almost comically small next to the La Assoluta and Sunray. However, sonically, there is no question who is in charge.

In the production facilities, we spotted not only a sneak preview of a new Piano series generation and numerous AP1 units in production, but also the original Royale design study. It was somewhat rough and unfinished, and fitted with wooden feet. However, all the essential bits were already there.

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These are the AP1's tonal adjustment controls. The left (or lower) control adjusts bass presence in five steps from –2 to +2. These numbers do not represent decibels but instead alter both level and frequency tuning in what the manufacturer describes as "practically relevant increments." The second five-position control is labeled "TIDAL" and adjusts the lower cutoff frequency of the front-mounted bass drivers from 40 to 80 Hz. The standard setting is the "D" in TIDAL, corresponding to 60 Hz.
The second photo shows one of the AP1 speakers under construction, where it is already fitted with the beautiful veneer and elaborate multilayer lacquer finish. Clearly visible are the internal structure, which weighs 40 kilograms all on its own, and the thick bolted metal rings that will later hold the bass drivers. On the right side of the image, you can see the mounting frame for the high/midrange assembly, which is installed in the front baffle but supported from the rear of the cabinet – this is isolated from the vibrations generated by the six bass drivers.

speakers cannot properly separate the deep, dark, resonance-heavy electric piano from the sluggish drum loop. The AP1 has zero difficulty with this task, reproducing the Scottish brothers' music with remarkable ease and momentum. It is simply breathtaking – once again. The family resemblance to the Royale is not merely present, it is unmistakable.
Of course, after a couple of days of break-in, we began moving the speakers around the room. Increasing the distance in between noticeably opened up the soundstage, making it more expansive and atmospheric. Moving them closer together sharpened focus as expected, tightening the interplay between bass and drums in George Harrison's "My Sweet Lord," while the doubled acoustic guitars appeared to extend beyond the room itself. Positioned much closer to the wall – less than 40 centimeters away – the AP1 emphasized its abyssal bass capabilities without disrupting the tonal balance. This impressed me particularly with Carl Finlow's "Convergence." The cool ambient track features a pulsing bass drum that lives more in the upper bass than in the deepest registers. Furthermore, the album *Introspective* is mixed and compressed so aggressively that it occasionally borders on distortion. What normally only works in a car stereo also sounded excellent through the AP1. It doesn't magically erase flaws in the recording, but the bass reinforcement from wall proximity softens the effect slightly, making the songs sound wonderfully rich and velvety. All other placement experiments – toeing in, letting them play straight into the room, nearfield listening, etc. – produced exactly the expected results without revealing any clear "better" or "worse" choice. Just like the Royale, the AP1 is a monolith. Even without luxury ingredients such as the 127 mm diamond midrange driver (which alone costs more than some midsize automobiles), it possesses a pure neutral character, superb clarity, and stunning detail. You may shift subtle nuances through positioning, but you never disrupt its coherent sonic identity. In other words, the loudspeaker adapts to the listening room and works with its environment rather than demanding that the room accommodate it. This is lifestyle perfection. The promised "we build emotions" is delivered by the AP1's unshakably precise timing. It sends rhythm directly to the cortex and occasionally provokes involuntary statements from listeners such as, "Just one more track." But don't worry – that's exactly what the designer intended! ▪

Active Loudspeaker | TIDAL Audio AP1 | Concept: 4-way active loudspeaker in a sealed enclosure | **Driver complement:** 1 × 30 mm diamond tweeter, 1 × 80 mm ceramic midrange, 2 × 170 mm aluminum/ceramic bass drivers, 4 × 260 mm aluminum long-throw woofers; all drivers by Accuton | **Amplifiers:** One TIDAL hybrid amplifier module per speaker with 3.5 kW output, no capacitors in the signal path | **Connections:** 1 × XLR (analog), 1 × XLR pass-through, LAN input for TIDAL Remote (power on/off) | **Special Features:** Multi-chamber TIRALIT enclosure, protection circuit (not in signal path), 5-step frequency/level tuning, 5-step bass frequency tuning | **Finishes:** TIDAL piano black lacquer or various veneers with clear lacquer coating, polished stainless-steel metal parts; additional finishes available on request | **Dimensions (W/H/D):** 59 × 163 × 64 cm (including feet) | **Weight:** 205 kg | **Warranty:** 5 years | **Price per pair:** around €189,000

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