Although my first encounter with the ProAc Tablette was over 20 years ago, it took but a quick memory jog to recapture the event. TAS colleague Paul Seydor was using a pair of Super Tablettes (the second iteration of the original) back in the early 1980s. Just a few minutes of listening and I understood why this deceptively simple two-way was causing legions of audiophiles to reexamine their perceptions of small loudspeaker performance. Physically diminutive in the extreme, it had uncanny musicality and superb midrange dynamics, almost as if Houdini had secreted some sleight of hand in its design. In the years since its 1979 debut, the Tablette has undergone various driver and cabinet changes at the behest of designer Stewart Tyler. The larger Tablette 2000, for example, was produced for the nascent home-theater market, where greater bass extension and power handling were demanded. Loyalists to the original remained hopeful for a return to the Tablette’s roots.

Now in its eighth incarnation, the 2003 Tablette Reference Eight1 restores the original cabinet specification and

1 A Tablette Signature is also available, adding a more costly mid-bass driver, complete with neodymium bar magnet, copper rings, and phase plug, and a larger surround for the silk-dome tweeter.
recaptures much of the excitement of the original Super. Some changes include replacing the original 3/4" tweeter with a custom-spec Vifa 1" soft-dome with specially formulated ferro-fluid damping. The new tweeter is paired with a higher output 4.5" Seas mid-bass driver. The bass-reflex design positions a pair of rear-firing ports above the dual set of binding posts. Interestingly, the Tablette Eight also marks a return to marine birch plywood after a lengthy flirtation with MDF. Tyler prefers the resonant properties of the plywood in the small volume enclosure of the Tablette.

The character of the Tablette has evolved over the years, but this iteration is, to me, the best-sounding model yet. It restores the original’s energizing presence and immediacy. Given the cabinet’s modest volume, its signature is a light one, with a stronger emphasis in the midband and treble regions. The tonal balance is slightly forward in the vocal range, but soundstaging in orchestral material is uncompromised. Naturally, the magnitude of an orchestra is reduced, but Corgi-scale miniaturization this is not.

Low-frequency-restricted speakers can create the impression of treble emphasis where there is, in actuality, very little. I think this is mostly the case with the Tablette. Although I perceived a trace of spotlighting in the lower treble, the soft-dome ring radiator opens the highs with extension rather than heating them up with brittleness. The way the ProAc distinguished a pair of piano recordings makes a good example. Evgeny Kissin’s reading of Pictures at an Exhibition [BMG] had a steely, high-tension tone that initially made me question the Tablette’s accuracy. However, when I switched to Bill Cunliffe’s grand piano in Live at Berrie’s [Groove Note SACD], the mood changed radically. Here was a warmer, softly pedaled piano reproduced in a way that was reminiscent of my reference system.

With the center of the small drivers only 4.5" from one another, point-source coherence becomes fact rather than wishful thinking. The tiny, rigid enclosure seems to exude energy rather than absorb it, thus radiating a single sheet of boxless sound. Image detailing has an almost tactile element. There was, for instance, a fleshy component accenting the conga-drums finger rolls or the ping of guitar harmonics in James Taylor’s “September Grass” [October Road, Columbia SACD]. Further distinguishing the Tablette from other pint-sized pretenders is its low-level resolution. The decay of brushed cymbals or the air encircling a set of castanets are resolved as well as I’ve ever heard them. This speaker creates an arresting sense of dimensionality and liveliness.

In an acrobatic display of vertical soundstaging, a strong central image like Sonny Rollins’ sax was positioned a foot or so higher than the top of the Tablette. Not what I would have expected from a short speaker on 24" Target stands. Likewise, soundstage depth was enhanced in my room to a degree far greater than most small speakers—due in part to a tiny front baffle that effectively reduces reflections.

Dynamic behavior is somewhat frequency-dependent, with finer gradations in the middle and treble ranges and less dynamic muscle in the upper bass and lower frequencies. But the net result is a sense of authority greater than the speaker’s pint-sized parts. Even as the midbass region rolls off audibly below about 80Hz, there is discernable output into the 60Hz range that enables the speaker to blend with any well-executed subwoofer. The Tablette’s volume envelope is not as elastic as that of some larger compacts, and the loudest levels harden the sound somewhat. The compression of big rock kick-drum like those on David Bowie’s Heathen [Columbia SACD] showed where the game little Tablette was overmatched. Still, within its limits, it continues to cast a beguiling spell. Placed at two to three feet from the back wall, the Tablette gets some measure of bass reinforcement—which it needs—without diminishing the imaging and soundstaging it has become famous for.

Because of its transient speed and quick reflexes, the original Tablette suffered when partnered with slow or loose-sounding subwoofers. One thing that has changed with the explosion of multichannel and home theater is the prevalence of affordable yet high-quality subs. A number of good models from REL, Sunfire, Velodyne, and others should serve the speedy Tablettes well.

The ProAc Tablette Reference Eight is, like its predecessors, a loudspeaker for the connoisseur who prizes the petite precision of a Piaget or a Fabergé egg. It is capable of musicality out of all proportion to its size. Certainly there are speakers in this price range with broader shoulders, but the Tablette experience remains as unique in the dynamic-driver universe as Quad is in electrostatics or Magnepan in planar-magnetics. The Tablette Reference Eight should be required listening.

SPECIFICATIONS
Two-way bass reflex
Drivers: 4.5" long-throw midbass and 1" soft silk-dome
Frequency response: 40Hz–30kHz
Sensitivity: 86dB
Nominal impedance: 8 ohms
Dimensions: 10.5" x 6" x 9"
Weight: 10 lbs.

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT
Sota Cosmos Series III turntable; SME V pick-up arm; Shure V15VxMR cartridge; Sony C222ES SACD; Sony DVP-9000ES; Plinius 8200 Mk2 integrated amp; Placette Volume Control preamp; Nordost Valhalla & Blue Heaven cabling; Kimber Kable BiFocal XL, Wireworld Equinox III, Wireworld Silver Electra power cords; Richard Gray line conditioners

MANUFACTURER INFORMATION
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