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FACTORY TOUR



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Walnut+audible pleasure.

It's not that I'd complain about being a reviewer. Au contraire. I feel lucky having turned a hobby into a quasi profession. But when in December a spontaneous invite to visit Italy arose, more precisely Brescia in the Lombard region - that was a highlight. I packed my bags and quickly accepted Alessandro Schiavi's offer to pen a Diapason factory tour. Okay, confession time. To me Italy is a crown jewel: the never boring landscapes; the varied vegetation; the pulsing old and new culture; cities like Rome, Milano, Venice, Syracuse, Florence, Naples and Messina. Now add their cuisine and wine. God must have been Italian to be so generous to one country. No other offers this much pleasure.



Alessandro Schiavi, owner/operator of Diapason

Doubling as cheap airline hub over Milano, it's midday when I touch down in Bergamo. Schiavi, owner and mastermind of speaker house Diapason and Rainer Israel, German importer under the name *Friends of Audio*, await me in the terminal. Our first destination will be Vicenza to check out the wood shop which fabricates the trademark solid Walnut chassis which distinguish Diapason speakers. Still spellbound by my final descent which led over the old town of Bergamo atop a hill, I start to gush but my enthusiasm is quickly damped by Alessandro Schiavi. Sure, Italy has its sunny sides *but...* and over the next two hours I learn about complicated Italian attitudes which must weigh between how decisions influence one's personal domain against sundry implied obligations and favours. And that's before other aspects intrude, always last amongst those the really practical arguments. Herr Schiavi takes pride in running his business more Teutonically

than Italiano which, he believes, is one reason for his success. He documents things with various anecdotes to illuminate the paradoxical outcomes of the Italian way across all facets of society, from family to economy to politics. I feel quickly disillusioned.

But my mood revives at a highway rest stop. What winks at me from behind the display cases you'd not find in Berlin even at our posh delicatessen *Butter Lindner*. Panini, focaccia, tramezzini, cibatta and assorted savory snacks plus plenty of cakes and tortes and other sweets. And the cappuccino! *Kimbo*, my favourite brand. Very hard to find in Germany and certainly not on the autobahn. Granted, I'm promptly informed that Kimbo has displaced competitor Lavazza with some questionable manoeuvres to vacate the highway rest stop business. Hmm. Back on the road, Schiavi points at the approaching sky. Smog. This inversion layer hangs above the town he lives in and works out of: Brescia. I learn that the Po delta from Milano to Venice hosts Italy's largest industrial corridor including heavy industry; that development of a functioning infrastructure is permanently at odds with vested interests; and that environmental protection only happens when a controller shows up who isn't broadly related to one's family or otherwise friendly. I begin to wonder whether the culinary benefits I still have on my tongue can make up for such chicanery. I somehow sense that Schiavi is devilishly keen to demolish my romantic notions about his country. Whenever my enthusiasm revives about *anything*, he immediately hits me with its shadow side. Very Germanic if you ask me.



This changes when we enter the smoggy umbrella of Brescia. Now it's Schiavi's turn to romance. I learn that Brescia is the region's most influential industrial centre. Besides which the town is very old though industrialization has left little by way of its cultural inheritance. But a few highlights remain. Overall the town offers a high standard of living and from here one quickly gets into the country side to the mountains and lake Garda. Endless bicycle tours beckon. I ask whether he favours a street or mountain bike. The latter. This is quickly followed by a list of models he owns and which one he fancies for what route. He's clearly a big fan of the *Rocky Mountain* brand but its older Marathon models whose rear tyre shock sat lower.

Clearly appraised where a talk on bicycles can lead with Mr. Schiavi, Mr. Israel interrupts to remind us that my reason for visiting are Diapason speakers. Quite so. I do want to know how Schiavi arrived at speaker manufacture particularly now that he's explained how tough it is to get any type of business off the ground in Italy. He laughingly admits that he never planned on this career. He began his studies at Brescia's music conservatory. During his dealings with recorded music he became troubled that no speakers existed which recreated the authentic timbres of acoustic instruments. So he began to develop a speaker that would. Another question which haunted him during his conservatory days was why instruments from the very same maker could sound so different. With Brescia home to a long line of luthiers—during the second half of the 16th century Gasparo da Salò founded the local school for violin crafting which at the time enjoyed a higher renown than Cremona which would later birth Antonio Stradivari—he dove into the subject to realize just how vital enclosures are for the sound of any instrument. This became host to a notion to deliberately apply traditional construction principles of instrument building to loudspeakers.





His creations resonated with friends and colleagues to lead Schiavi to formalize that career. Initially he meant to focus on the professional sector of recording studios and musicians who'd likely be more attuned to his priorities than the current audiophile tastes of *amantes de la alta fidelità*. But there was a partner involved. Suddenly the story begins to thicken and hard to follow. The essential fact? Today Alessandro Schiavi is a sole owner/operator who primarily sells to hifi enthusiasts.



It's afternoon when we enter a Vicenza suburb to arrive at Mr. Loris' wood shop which builds the cabinets responsible for the special sound of Diapason speakers. The range topper Astera plus the reference models Adamantes, Karis and Kentron rely on solid Walnut which here gets shaped into the trademark boxes. No sooner do we enter the small hall containing the shop that we stand knee-deep in storage. Everywhere there are neat piles of carefully stacked Walnut planks. Diapason sources its woods partly in Europe but for the majority from the US today. Whilst all of it arrives industrially dried, it stores for another few weeks before being worked on. It's an ongoing part of the manufacturing process that wood is left to cure between each step to acclimate to the latest shape. Only such patience guarantees that quite sizable chunks of solid wood remain stable in various climates; noticeably more stable and reliable than most enclosures made from Plywood or MDF adds Schiavi. He proudly recounts a client whose home suffered high-water flood damage to return his speakers for repair. Diapason only had to replace the crossovers and drivers. After drying, the boxes could be reused without any additional work. I ought to imagine what'd happen to an MDF box after a few days of soaking in water.



To achieve such results naturally relies on very careful manufacture. First the incoming raw planks get sorted before being marked for specific parts based on grain and markings. Then each piece is cut and routed to size, left to cure for a few weeks, then paired up to matching side walls, bases, fascias and rear panels. First assembly glues up the bases, tops and cheeks, followed by more beauty sleep. When the front and back glue up a few weeks later, there's also a

and cheeks followed by more beauty sleep. When the front and back glue up a few weeks later, there's also a comprehensive treatment of the insides with triangular braces plus a rough textile liner over all surfaces. Those details Schiavi has borrowed from instrument making. More weeks of curing pass before the final shapes are applied. The Reference models visit a precision circular saw to achieve their trademark facets. The Astera shape is so complex that it ends up in a multi-head CNC router of a nearby shop. But in either case, final sanding is by Master Loris' hands followed by an oil treatment which hardens the surfaces and brings out the glorious wooden markings.



Team Diapason

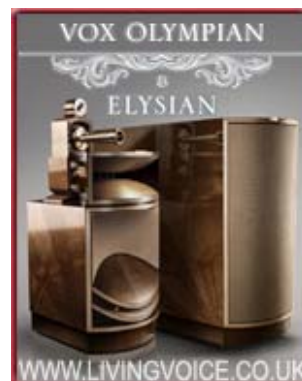
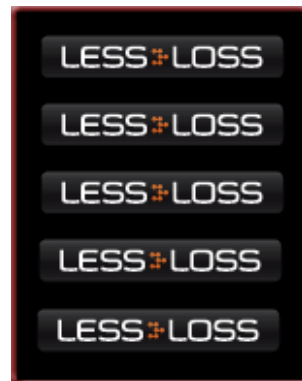
I confess to being mightily impressed by such luxurious enclosure work. Once I think on how easy it is by contrast to glue up a few panels of MDF into a rectangular box, I seriously question how Diapason gets away with their very fair pricing considering such luxury. This question I pose to Schiavi during Prosecco in the bar around the corner. Wow, a village bar that serves up truly excellent Prosecco without drawing blanks! He laughs. If one knows how, one of the advantages of Italy's convoluted economy is running small to micro businesses. Teaming up with the right partners to create interdependence (Diapason for example owns part of the Loris shop) can result in very slim operational margins without hefty administrative overheads. Particularly for smaller outfits such synergies are often highly advantageous.

As I wonder out loud just who else might need solid Walnut boxes, Israel corrects me. Loris also crafts amplifier enclosures trim. Israel in fact only met Diapason after having already imported the Vicenza-based Mastersound valve manufacture. One day their twin owners Luciano and Lorenzo Sanavio bring him to this wood shop where he encounters raw Diapason boxes to get curious. And Lorenzo Sanavio would be our dinner date that evening. Which obviously involves a prior visit to his factory. Over extensive culinary pleasures we then chat about the Italian hifi scene. I ask how Unison Research fits in given that they cover a similar market to Mastersound *and* operate from not far away. I learn that in the past both firms indeed overlapped in various areas. But by then the story gets too Italian again and I lost in all its serpentine implications. By the time we're done it's pitch black outside. Back into the car and to Brescia where I sit down in my hotel room to digest a flood of impressions and information and to pen a few reminder notes.





The next day starts early. With Israel and Schiavi plus his wife Charia Galinotti (in Italy women keep their family names) we're due to inspect the second half of Diapason's production. Ringing the door bell, nobody answers. A few seconds later Israel's mobile phone rings. We ought to meet in the bar around the corner for coffee. Over cappuccino I have opportunity to get to know Mrs. Galinotti, CFO. Post caffeine injection it's down into the basement which doubles as driver and crossover parts storage, assembly area, test station, packing and shipping hub. Schiavi explains that Diapason today exports nearly around the globe. China is very busy because Italian products enjoy a terrific reputation there.



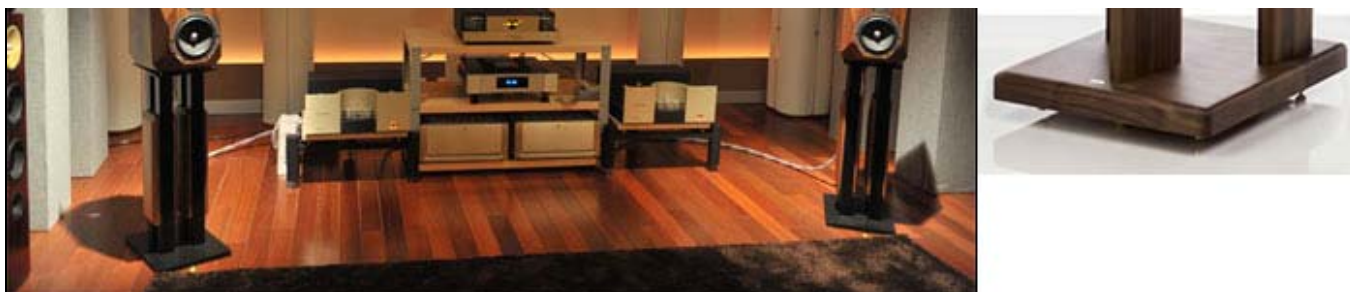
Whilst I learn that regional or at least domestic suppliers are preferred—a Brescia firm for example builds high-quality foil capacitors exclusively for Diapason's crossovers—I can't fail to register disappointment. I'd somehow expected a sound room to finally associate actual playback with these carefully conceptualized and realized loudspeakers. Their Karis model which I'd [reviewed](#) a while back had really left a lasting impression. Since then I'd been curious about the larger models. And isn't a maker's own sound room the ideal place and *sanctum sanctorum* to encounter a hifi firm's house sound under ideal conditions? Israel calms my concerns. There'd still be plenty of opportunity to sample the entire Diapason oeuvre. And no joke, after our factory tour it's time indeed for the *Sound Center*, a hifi boutique Schiavi runs on the side. He also co-owns part of an import company which supplies the domestic dealer network with internationally renowned brands like Canton, Transrotor and Blumenhofer. Which still leaves him time to develop sound systems for multi-media furniture makers; cut his own recordings; *and* design sound reinforcement systems for live performances. *Plus* attend to room acoustic solutions for his better clients and commercial outfits. I wonder how one man can cover it



Sound Center isn't merely another business leg to stand on but first and foremost his R&D lab. Its three sound rooms contain a stout collection of international hifi. This enables him to test his speakers with a good cross section of electronics and compare them to his competition. He also values feedback from his clients. By now he has a cadre of owners whose systems and tastes he knows well to incorporate their feedback after handing out short-term prototype loaners. This gives him far broader data mining than a solitary optimized sound room with reference electronics could. Here finally is my chance to hog the hot seat and run through the Diapason catalogue from the Astera to the newest

Neos. I quickly realize that there is no Diapason house sound. Each model sounds different and offers up its own perspective on the musical action. Schiavi confirms it. He wants each model to serve a specific taste and situation. Why build a speaker that already exists? Improvements of current models, yes. But any new development mandates a very specific new design goal.





That such thinking has legs is proven by the Adamante III [reviewed [here](#) - Ed]. It today goes by Adamante 25th in honour of the 25th company anniversary and as the most current iteration was especially readied for the occasion. This makes it both the oldest and newest model in the portfolio. Now Schiavi announces a surprise for this summer's anniversary celebration. I spend some more time with the Adamante as my favourite of the bunch. Schiavi opines that this model is his personally strongest expression of the original founding goal to reproduce acoustic instruments as realistically as possible. But all the other models have their own raison d'être. I concur but stick with my Adamante flames until it's time to catch my plane. Before I leave, I caress the wonderfully oiled wooden contours one final time. Oy veh. Viva Italia...

Martin Mertens

Diapason [website](#)



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