Taking Advantage of a Vantage, By George!

George Johnson recently part-exchanged his 2019 Aston Martin Vantage for a brand-new 2025 model. He had high ambitions for the system in this one and wanted to repurpose some of the existing equipment from his last Aston, and why not! We visited George at his home in Kent to experience the new installation.



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We first met George back in issue XI. Entitled "Aston Martin, Audio Medicine", you can read the article detailing George's background and connection to his interest in music, from an opera-singing mother and an old radiogram, through to his first full system while in student digs, through to his current colossal Naim/B&W home Hi-Fi in its own bespoke listening room.

George was a scientist during his career and is a scientist by nature. He is extremely analytical and can offer fascinating insights into why things are the way they are. I like this sort of person. What we discovered this time around is that his wife shares many of these attributes. We also learnt that she makes a great cup of tea.

We were privileged to be invited into George's home, where he showed me around the many pieces of music-related paraphernalia that are his greatest pleasure, including his grandparents '1890s Swiss cylinder music box. He also showed me an exact replica of the original 1965 Corgi Aston Martin DB5 model, as driven by James Bond in Goldfinger, a major inspiration for his interest in the Aston Martin brand.

George tells me that his latest Aston Martin was purchased largely in response to the Governmental policy to ban the sale of petrol cars by 2030. The car is a V8 Vantage Coupe and we just loved the colour! He was careful to exclude the £6,000 Bowers and Wilkins upgrading when ordering his vehicle. Later in the day, George let me sit in the passenger seat while we headed out to Chilham to take some nice pictures. I can confirm that it has a mighty engine note and yet remains very comfortable to travel in. Before we headed out, however, George let me have a listen to his home system. A pair of B&W 803 D3's dominates what would under normal circumstances, be described as a "box Room", simply occupied by a sofa and the Hi-Fi system. I was keen to have a listen to get some context for the type of sound he wanted from his car.

The system is extremely accurate, with superb mid-range and high-end detail as I expected. This was a very enlightening listen, as I felt that this home system might inform the one in his car.

Since George's audio upgrade in his 2019 Vantage, he was interested in exploring how his installer of choice, Enhance Car Audio and Security in Sittingbourne, could take his Audison Forza, Thesis mid-range speakers and tweeters, with Hertz woofer-based system to 'the next level'. Simon, the proprietor of Enhance, loves a challenge and suggested installing a considerably-sized Audison Thesis Venti class A amplifier in a custom cabinet on the bulkhead behind the two seats.

George and Simon felt that driving the Audison Thesis midrange speakers from two pristine class A amplifier channels would offer a vast improvement over the previous install, and so work began. This took a good deal of dedicated time and effort. I have experienced Thesis Venti amplifiers running home Hi-Fi speakers, and their sonic performance goes way beyond paper specifications. They are mighty and clean, and are worthy of their reputation as being one of the finest amplifiers ever designed for in-car use.
Unfortunately, this bold gamble did not pay off.



George took the freshly installed car to an Aston Martin event at their base in Gaydon, a considerable drive from his home in Kent. On that fine day, the heat from the Venti amplifier overwhelmed the car's air conditioning. Due to the amplifier's proximity to the seats, the cooling fans were audible enough to be intrusive. George had to, therefore, reluctantly ask Enhance to remove the Venti.

What remains is an 8-channel Audison Forza AF M 8.14 bit amplifier, which sits in a cleverly constructed amplifier rack, concealed behind the passenger seat. It is accompanied by both a Forza AF M 4 D amplifier and an Audison SR 1.500 Monoblock. The 8.14 powers a pair of Audison Thesis 1.5 II Violino tweeters, mounted in pillar builds, which look quite excellent. A pair of Thesis TH 3.0 II midrange speakers sits in the dash, mounted in the OEM Tweeter positions, firing up toward the windscreen. The amplifier also feeds a two-way active centre channel, consisting of an Audison VOCE II tweeter and midrange. This same pairing is installed behind each seat in refabricated quarter panels. These are run passively via a pair of Audison Voce II AVCX 2T crossovers.

The Forza AF M 4 D runs two Hertz Mille Legend ML1650.3 woofers, mounted under the dashboard and firing down in a bridged configuration, offering good, solid bass up front. A Hertz Mille Legend ML 2000.3 8" subwoofer in a custom enclosure in the boot is run from the Audison SR amplifier.

My first listen was on George's driveway. The last time I visited George, he had downloaded some (32) Hi-Res renderings of some of his favourite tracks from Qobuz. We decided to stick with these for this audition. I still have a clear memory of his last car and thought a direct comparison would help me see what improvements had been made. His 32 has also become a favourite playlist for me. The program material is varied and, as mentioned, is rendered beautifully.

George uses an Astell & Kern DAP Android streaming device with LDAC on board. He streams from this directly into the B-Con Bluetooth receiver. Simon has given George a Toslink option for connecting the Astell & Kern directly into a digital interface on the Forza amplifier. Both of these options allow George to stream Hi-Res audio. My instinct is always to go with wires however, I get the attraction of convenience!

Installing the Audison B-Con receiver allowed Simon to get around the annoying engine noise, which Aston Martin and other manufacturers feel is necessary to pump into the factory audio system. Seriously? At least make it defeatable for grown-ups!

First up was "In the Air Tonight" (2015 remaster) by Phil Collins. This is a particularly detailed version. The mid-range and tweeters revealed all of the intricacy. It sounded excellent, although perhaps a bit toppy for me. This was not the case with other tracks, so it was not a system error. The famous drum entry was thunderous! No sense of distortion or overdriving, it was just sudden and violent, which I guess is what Phil was going for! The subwoofer integrated well with the woofers, given their physical distance from each other. The stage centre is set in the middle of the dashboard. Given the presence of the centre channel, this is all for the best. When I jumped into the passenger seat, the image was not unbearable, as it often is with everything coming from the left!

Next up was "Angel" by Massive Attack. A long-time favourite test track for me. The low bass note I felt was a bit woolly, nothing that can't be dealt with in setup. The snare drum is the thing to listen out for, and that was excellent! On this point, the way a system is set up is full of compromise and is informed by genre preference. It is often not possible for a system to excel with all music types. George is by no means a bass head, and I suspect he felt I was being overly picky in pointing this out.

Our final track while parked up was "Hey Now" by London Grammar. Bizarrely, the bass was much better on this track despite there being so much of it! The real star here is the reverb. This goes on forever, the Thesis mid-range and tweeters doing their thing perfectly. I wasn't getting much from the rear fill and felt that raising the level a little might help spread the soundstage wider. Once again, this is an easy thing to address in setup.

We swapped places, George fired up the engine, and we drove to the nearby village of Chilham. On the way, we listened to The Doors' 'Riders on the Storm". The storm under the track is a thing of constant wonder to me, returning during every quiet passage. The Fender Rhodes Piano and bass were rendered really well. Jim Morrison's vocals were upfront and heartfelt. A couple of drum breaks, although quiet in the mix, do wake the listener up and add percussive interest. Again, excellently played and recorded.

Overall, we had one of the best days we have had on a Driving Sounds assignment. George and his wife's hospitality was much appreciated, and the musical experience was once again a complete joy!

Well done to George for seeking sonic perfection in both his home and in his car, and congratulations to Enhance for bringing his dream to life!

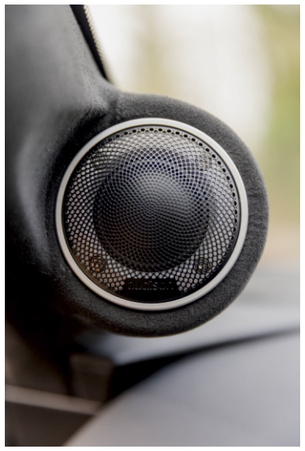
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Equipment list

AUDISON FORZA AF M8.14 bit DSP amplifier
AUDISON FORZA AF M4D - 4 channel amplifier
AUDISON SR 1.500 - Monoblock
AUDISON Thesis TH 1.5 II Violino - Tweeeters
AUDISON Thesis TH 3.0 II Violino - Midrange
AUDISON VOCE II AV 1.1 II - Tweeters
AUDISON VOCE II AV 3.0 II - Midrange
HERTZ Mille Legend ML 1650.3 - Woofer
HERTZ Mille Legend ML 2000.3 - 8" Subwoofer