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# Equipment Report



## Totem Acoustic Element Fire V2 Loudspeaker

### Punching Above Its Weight

Andrew Quint

**I** learned recently that my 34-year-old nephew would be relocating from the Midwest to the large eastern city where my wife and I live, in fact to a neighborhood near ours. It's welcome news. He's a wonderful person—smart, funny, and generous—and it'll be great to have him around for all those reasons. But there's also, I'll admit it, the whole speaker thing. Finally, there will be somebody nearby to help me move large loudspeakers.

Seriously, that's one of the problems with big speakers—they're big. Unpacking them and getting them into the ideal position in a room (if there even *is* an ideal position) often requires the assistance of another person who can confidently maneuver a heavy, bulky object without harming that object or himself. It's worth it, we remind ourselves, for low-frequency extension, coherency at high volumes, and the potential to approximate realistic musical scale. Smaller speakers, in general, have trouble with those things. Nonetheless, even if you'll be leaving a large floor-

stander in one place for an extended time and thus don't need a nephew for periodic assistance, you may still yearn for the well-known virtues of smaller transducers. These include their greater flexibility in terms of placement and their ability to render acoustic space, as well as their greater aesthetic appeal to non-audiophiles. We shouldn't pretend otherwise—you must be willing to forgo some dynamic impact and deep bass. But not all small loudspeakers are created equal: When it comes to “loud and low,” some can punch considerably above

their weight class. The Totem Acoustic Element Fire V2 is one such speaker.

The second generation of Totem's Element models—there are two, the Metal V2 floorstander (\$17,000) and the Fire V2 (\$7500) considered here—were introduced in 2019. On casual inspection, the Fire looks like an unobtrusive rectangular box but, in fact, the enclosure eschews parallel walls to prevent the propagation of internal standing waves. The backward slope of the speaker's top surface represents the most apparent asymmetry; the Fire V2's height is about 16.6" in front but just 14.6" to the rear. Totem fabricates the cabinet from varying densities of  $\frac{3}{4}$ " MDF, the internal surfaces coated with borosilicate to fortify the enclosure structurally and to increase its longevity. A consumer has a choice of two colors for the beautifully executed gloss finish, “ice” and “dusk,” otherwise known as “white” and “black.” Matching magnetic grilles are provided.

Both drivers in this ported two-way are designed, manufactured, and assembled in Montréal. The 1" titanium dome tweeter gets its own sub-enclosure and takes the Fire V2 out to 22kHz. It's the 7" Torrent mid/woofer that Totem is especially proud of. Unlike a typical driver chassis that is stamped, molded, or cast, the Fire's motor structure is machined from a substantial chunk of an aircraft-grade aluminum alloy, with the finished driver weighing in at close to 10 pounds. Totem states that it takes seven hours to fabricate one of these drivers and costs them \$1000 to do so. The



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## Specs & Pricing

**Type:** Two-way dynamic loudspeaker system

**Driver complement:** 1" titanium dome, 7" Torrent mid-range/woofer

**Frequency response:** 30Hz–22kHz

**Impedance:** 8 ohms

**Sensitivity:** 88dB

**Dimensions:** 8.8" x 16.6" x 11.7"

**Weight:** 32.4 lbs.

**Price:** \$7500

### TOTEM ACOUSTIC

9165 Champ d'Eau

Sty. Leonard

Quebec, Canada

totemacoustic.com

woofer employs 17 neodymium magnets, each 2.5" in length and having a purpose-specific claw shape that completely surrounds the voice coil, assuring interaction with a consistent magnetic field. The voice coil itself is wound with copper wire having a square profile to eliminate air gaps.

Designer Vince Bruzzese was aiming for simplicity with the Fire's crossover, a first-order, high-pass filter centered at 2.7kHz. The electromechanical characteristics of the 7" Torrent driver eliminate any need for a low-pass filter, and the woofer operates full-range. Bruzzese maintains that the crossover design optimizes phase and dispersion behaviors, and that the "prodigious" 17Hz free-air resonance of the Torrent woofer (with its potential for a 1" excursion) contributes substantially to the perceived speed, control, and spatiality of the finished product.

Around back are two pairs of WBT binding posts with a polished platinum finish. The length of wire connecting the two sets didn't inspire confidence, resembling an opened-up paper clip. This didn't matter to me, as I chose to bi-wire the Fire V2s, but those using a single pair of speaker cables may want to consider more robust after-market jumpers.

The manufacturer supplied a pair of British-made stands, intended for use with earlier Totem speakers and modified for the purpose of this review. They are not for sale; Totem considers them commercially unviable, as shipping costs became prohibitively high. I am confident, however, that any number of popular 24" stands, preferably with the potential for mass loading, will do just fine.

In my 225-square-foot room—the ceiling height varies from 10 to 12 feet—the Element Fire V2s ended up eight feet apart from dust cap to dust cap and ten feet from my ears. Canted in toward the listening position, there were 16 to 19 inches from the ceiling-to-floor CD shelves behind them. According to Totem, the Fire V2s can be sited as little as six inches from the front wall, depending "on electronics and room acoustics." This will certainly be advantageous to audiophiles lacking authorization to position loudspeakers out into a room that's a shared space.

The Totems were powered by Pass XA 60.8 monoblocks. I opted for a bi-wire connection, employing two pairs of T+A Speaker Hex cables, after A/B comparisons with a single-wire configuration of Transparent Audio Ultra cables left me with a preference for the former. The 60.8s were preceded in the audio chain by a Pass XP-22 line-stage. I used both Baetis Reference 3 and 432 EVO Aeon music servers to render files; a Sony UBP-X1100ES served as a disc transport. All three digital sources delivered their zeros and ones to an Ideon Audio Epsilon Absolute DAC.

I have a Roon playlist of 30 music tracks selected to test some aspect of sound reproduction as I work through what TAS reviewer Anthony H. Cordesman has referred to as "the sonic checklist." Maybe I was just feeling lazy or passive, but one day I navigated to the playlist on my tablet, pressed "play" on Track 1 (the opening Allegretto of Shostakovich's Symphony No. 15 performed by Bernard Haitink and the Concertgebouw Orchestra) and just let it run until, several hours of music later, I got to Track 30 (Antônio Carlos Jobin's "Águas de Março," sung by Elis Regina and the composer himself). My expectation was that I'd skip the tracks that were not working out with the little Totems and thus zero in on their strengths and limitations. As it turned out, I listened to all 30 cuts all the way through and enjoyed every one.

The biggest surprises were the selections that were the most demanding when it came to loudness and low-frequency information. The two pipe organ selections on the

playlist—tracks from the Saint-Saëns "Organ" Symphony from Philadelphia/Eschenbach (Ondine) and Jean Guillou's 2-CD Franck album (Dorian)—both conveyed a good measure of the music's grandeur. Rock and pop recordings with well-recorded electric bass and kick drum delivered the requisite "sock" necessary for the music to satisfy—"Wrapped Around Your Finger" from Kevyn Lettau's *Songs of the Police* and "Too Proud," sung by Terry Evans on the treasurable *Bluesquest* collection produced by Joe Harley. And when the 13 saxes, trumpets, and trombones of Gordon Goodwin's Big Phat Band play full-out on the title track from *Act Your Age*, the Fire V2s rendered the chart at a quite enthusiastic volume without losing its composure.

This capacity to sound like a much bigger loudspeaker was apparent as soon as the Totems arrived and got better over the weeks that followed. Totem's literature states that the Fire V2s require 200–300 hours to break in. This kind of thing annoys some audiophiles who feel that components, speakers, and wires ought to be fully "ripe" when they get them, but it's true. I take some basic measurements from the listening position with almost every speaker that comes for review using a Dayton Omnimic V2 System. The reason, actually, is to adjust the settings on my Magico S-Sub to optimize its integration with the speakers being reviewed but, first, the main speakers alone need to be measured before the sub is turned on.

Yair Tammam, Magico's CTO who guides me with these measurements, noted

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that with a bass-reflex loudspeaker, the port is tuned to the output of a driver or drivers *that have been broken in*. When we made fresh measurements after some weeks of break-in, enough had changed that it was necessary to lower the crossover frequency by 25Hz. Some patience is necessary with the Element Torrent driver (as it is with most quality loudspeakers) to fully realize its potential, and there's really no way for a consumer to accelerate the process. "Nine women can't make a baby in one month," Yair observed soberly. He cited Jewish tradition as to the source of the proverb, though the Internet appears to attribute it to Warren Buffett.

The Fire V2s also handled rapidly changing dynamics impressively, what is sometimes referred to as "jump factor." One example, ubiquitous at audio shows, is Nils Lofgren's virtuosic live performance of "Keith Don't Go," which has the artist accompanying himself on an electrified Takamine 12-string acoustic.

The guitar practically leaps out of the little Totems.

With other audio parameters, the kind stand-mounted monitors typically excel with, the Totems did not disappoint. Detail? Is there really a meticulously devised part for woodblock on "Why Worry?" from Dire Straits' *Brothers in Arms* that I've missed for a few decades? There is. Color? Joel Frederiksen registers as a true *basso profundo* and not a mere bass when he sings "Whittingham Faire" on *The Elfin Night*, a song most of the world knows as "Scarborough Fair." Musical texture? Check out the Hagen Quartet playing the slow movement of Beethoven's Op. 18, No. 3. It won't surprise you that this group's been playing together for more than 40 years with just two personnel changes. Speed? With Marc-André Hamelin performing his own Étude No. 6, a tribute to Scarlatti, the Totems keep up with the pianist's jaw-dropping technique yet somehow reveal that there's a

person behind the playing and not a machine. Imaging and soundstage representation are first rate. With the Shostakovich performance referenced above, one can readily discern that the solo bassoon sits a row behind the solo flute within the Concertgebouw's woodwind section. From the standpoint of musical scaling, the Fire V2 accurately sizes the seven instruments performing Stravinsky's *L'histoire du soldat* under the direction of Paavo Järvi.

How did integration with the subwoofer work out? Better the second time around, after a month of break-in and a downward reset of the crossover frequency between Fire and S-Sub. Still, there was a strong contrast between my SW experience with the Element Fire V2 and the one I had with another stand-mount I liked very much, the Audiovector R1 Arreté. With the Danish loudspeaker, I felt that providing additional bass support was usually beneficial with most musical genres. In the case of the Totem speaker, I appreciated the additional weight that the S-Sub brought to large-scale symphonic music and, yes, the most over-the-top French organ music achieved a full measure of Gothic majesty. But with most pop/rock and with acoustic bass in small-group jazz, subwoofer augmentation was often a mixed blessing with a loss of LF clarity and top-to-bottom continuity.

My own listening environment can accommodate fairly large loudspeakers. Products like Wilson Sashas, Bowers & Wilkins 801 D4s, Von Schweikert Audio Endeavor E-5s, or my current Magico M2s have worked out a lot better than you might have anticipated, I think because of the high ceiling, plus the presence of a hallway off to one side. I know now that I *could* continue to listen with pleasure to the large-scale music that matters to me if, for some reason, the big speakers had to go. The Totem Acoustics Element Fire V2s would do the job in my room and, I suspect, quite a few real-world spaces out in the world. For the time being, it'll continue to employ large speakers as my reference transducers. But my nephew could easily decide to return to the Midwest in a few years. I now know that I can deal with that. **tas**

