

## Best Stereo Under \$5k Series: Cabasse RIALTO Bookshelf Hi-Fi System

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With their nearly full bandwidth response, the repressed Wisconsinite within surfaced with a – ‘c’ripes almighty’ – when I called up the first track on the Cabasse RIALTOs. If your budget allows, the Cabasse RIALTO Bookshelf Hi-Fi System warrants *serious* consideration.

Ak, I’m an uncultured suburban Wisconsinite with little to no Italian heritage – I’m stickin’ with RIALTOs.

I’m Jason Methfessel, and many of the products that I review for THE ABSOLUTE SOUND are what we consider to be options for individuals who are just entering the world of foreground music listening.

If your budget allows, the Cabasse RIALTO Bookshelf Hi-Fi System warrants *serious* consideration.

Grab a cup a coffee, some tea, or a glass of wine and settle in while I share what I heard when auditioning the RIALTOs

### OVERVIEW

Where my time with the RIALTOs landed on the calendar got me thinking (my time with them spanned the onset of the holiday season, which included Thanksgiving).

If – as an audiophile – you could identify with the Pilgrims – that is, as a puritan – you might just skip this review. These speakers are likely too much fun for you.

I must admit, I maintain a seemingly perpetual war within my *own* thoughts. I can, one day, be convinced that a pure, unadulterated signal is the god to which I bend a knee and on the next day sit-down on the couch in my listening room with something like the RIALTOs and think, certainly God wouldn’t be *mad* at me for how much I’m *enjoying* this. I guess that’s what confession’s for.

These speakers have a lot packed into their small frames, so I’m gonna take a little more time than usual with this overview. After all, these are a streamer, DAC, pre-amp, amp, and speakers “all in two.”

If you’re not interested in the overview, feel free to skip ahead to the Sound Quality section in the chapter list below.

Before getting into the minutiae, I feel I may need to review something we have all – undoubtedly – come to learn, and that is, in life there are compromises. This is especially true in hi-fi.

So, *you* need to decide for *yourself* where you're willing to compromise. And if you're unwilling to make compromises on sound quality, it's likely those compromises will be found in your wallet.

So, why do I bring all this up when reviewing the RIALTOs? (That's a loaded question.) Obviously if you decide to purchase a pair, there may be some *compromises* to consider.

You're probably familiar with the "Technology Adoption Curve" but to be clear it breaks down a product, technology, or innovation into 5 segments.

On the left are innovators – making up roughly 2.5% market share, then early adopters – at 13.5%, and next early majority, with 34%.

Based on my experience with the RIALTOs if you find yourself in the second half of the curve, that is, late majority or laggards, you may end up frustrated with these speakers.

There is a lot of technology going on here and having the mindset of the early majority or even early adopter may be necessary when tech hiccups occur.

Hiccups aside, an *inherent* trait with the RIALTOs that may grate on some listeners is the lack of gapless digital playback. I wasn't able to familiarize myself enough with the speaker architecture to understand why this is, but by listening it was clear that the 'primary' speaker needed to relay data to the 'slave' speaker between each track. This was heard as quiet ticks and short dropouts.

By switching from the Cabasse StreamCONTROL app to a generic UPnP app and utilizing *its* gapless rendering setting, I was able to lessen the gap. Though, even here, playback was not void of gaps between tracks.

If you primarily listen to playlists or singles, this may be a non-issue for you. However, if you prefer seamlessly listening to your favorite albums. You'll be restricted to the analog source of your choosing, using the RIALTOs' single-ended analog input.

I should probably back up a little bit. I fear I've been overly presumptive that you even know what the Cabasse RIALTOs are. It's unlikely that you've made it to our channel without knowing what an active speaker is, but as we're trying to make an appeal to people previously unfamiliar with high-fidelity equipment, let me not presume that either.

I'll keep this short, but feel free to skip ahead if this is a review (or seems patronizing).

Most hi-fi loudspeakers are passive – meaning they require a separate external means of signal amplification. Commonly, a pre-amp is wired to a power amp which is then wired to the speakers. This is sometimes simplified to an integrated amp which is a pre-amp and power amp in one box.

Conversely, an active pair of loudspeakers have their means of amplification built in. The RIALTOs are like this; each speaker plugs directly into a wall outlet.

What sets the RIALTOs apart from *typical* active speakers is that, not only do they have amplification on board, they have an on-board streamer, a DAC (or digital to analog converter), *and* room correction.

This product is a true 'all-in-two.' Simply download the app, plug each speaker into the wall, pair to a Wi-Fi network following the instructions, link the app to a streaming service of your choosing and you're off. No other equipment is needed.

If there's a fair bit of distance to the Wi-Fi router or if you prefer a more reliable connection, simply run an ethernet cable to the port on each speaker.

Rounding out the inputs on the RIALTOs are Bluetooth, USB, Optical SPDIF, the aforementioned Analog RCA, and HDMI eARC. More on the eARC in a bit.

The RIALTOs are relatively compact speakers at just over 10 inches high, around 8 inches wide, and about 9.5 inches deep. They do, however, have a bit of *heft* for their size at around 22 pounds apiece.

The complement of drivers consists of one forward firing 5-inch mid-tweeter coaxial driver (for enhanced performance in the time domain) and one 6.7"-inch rear-firing woofer employing Cabasse's HELD technology – High Excursion Low Distortion.

High Excursion is no joke; when I first heard the bass output of these speakers, they had me questioning many of the things I learned in high school physics. Then, I walked around to look at the woofer on the back of the speaker. I was relieved, physics is *soundly* intact.

Having 1,050 watts of *built-in* amplification per channel allows Cabasse to apply this after the crossover meaning they can be a bit more strategic about where to use the power on tap.

In the treble range 300 watts are allocated per channel, which is the same as for the midrange. And the bass range, well, that gets 450 watts per channel.

If you're here for my notes on sound quality, apologies for the long preamble, but these speakers have a lot packed into them.

The RIALTOs are available in a matte black or matte white finish and – If I may – the fit and finish is executed in a manner that makes the roughly \$4,000 US per pair price tag feel quite reasonable.

## HOW'S IT SOUND

As I get into my notes on sound quality, now would be a good time to touch on the 'Room Correction' built into the RIALTOs.

From the Cabasse app, this is relatively easy to set up. Ensure your room is free from any abrupt loud noises while its running and select 'Start.' A number of tones will begin to play from each speaker; these tones are picked up by the microphone built into each speaker and the app runs its magic and tunes the speaker.

My listening room is heavily treated. Still, the change in sound quality was noticeable even if subtle. The correction pulled some of the glow out of the bass response making it tighter and more definitive.

Getting into listening notes, I first wanna go back to that eARC connection I mentioned in the overview.

This is the first product that came through my listening room with this input, and I felt that, although we are not a home theater channel, it would be a disservice to any prospective buyers if I didn't share any feedback.

After all, the RIALTOs are likely to share the same space as your TV and if using them as the sound source for said TV is as simple as connecting an HDMI cable and changing some settings, why wouldn't you choose to use them over the speakers integrated into the TV.

Using the RIALTOs as your television speakers will require using the included Optical SPDIF cable between the speakers via their 'link' i/o. Relying on your *network* to get the signal from the primary to the slave speaker creates considerable latency.

I watched a number of clips, and the bass response was significant and offered quite a believable sonic rendering of what I was seeing on screen. A scene that stood out to me in this regard was from the latest film in the James Bond franchise, *No Time To Die*.

In the sinking ship scene, James is tending to Felix in the bilge of a fishing trawler with its engines purring in the background. It was quite remarkable how realistic this felt and sounded on the RIALTOs. Additionally, their voices were easily distinguished and resolute – something lacking in many full-blown home theatre set-ups. [PAUSE]

And now getting into what this channel is all about. How do the RIALTOs sound for hi-fi dedicated listening? Well, given that they're not shy about DSP, the listener has a lot of control around that.

There are a number of 'Audio Customization' settings in the Cabasse app. There are three settings for listening position relative to the rear wall: Distant, Intermediate, and Near. With the 'distant' setting offering a more significant bass bump.

Then under advanced settings is 'Audio Spectrum.' Choices here include Neutral Tone, High Tone, Low Tone, Very Low Tone, and Outdoor Mode.

Additionally, there is a Low/moderate volume dynamics optimization (DFE). With this feature toggled on, a gain slider is enabled that ranges from -18 to +18 and is graduated by 3s. In my room, making adjustments here primarily affected the bass output of the speakers at lower listening levels.

After playing around a bit, I settled into a +3 gain on the DFE setting, with the audio spectrum set to Neutral, and for the listening position relative to the rear wall setting I selected, Near.

The first track in the queue – which elicited that initial, cripes almighty, was Rauw Alejandro's *Tú Con Él*.

The horns jumped right into the room with me, and when Alexis Perez comes in with the bass line, I was floored. There was so much meat on the bone without it sounding dominant or overbearing.

These speakers hold their own with tight distortion-free bass well down to the advertised roll off at 30 hz. And based on my listening, the roll-off is not particularly steep. If a full-bodied bottom end gets you excited, the RIALTOs are not gonna let you down.

Panning out, overall the frequency balance is – as you might have guessed – tilted towards the bottom end. I wouldn't call the treble range lacking, but it is certainly laid back.

I noted this most clearly when listening to Mahler's 6<sup>th</sup> *Symphony*. The army of double basses comes in and the RIALTOs, once again, do their job rendering a tight realistic representation of this. Where the previously mentioned tilt was most noticeable was on the introduction of the violins.

Whenever I listen to a live performance of violins, there's a subtle harshness to the attack of the bow on the strings. That harshness was very gently rounded off with the RIALTOs.

Another instrument that caught my attention in the opening movement of the 6<sup>th</sup> was the snare drum.

Again the snare drum caught my attention when listening to an electronic track on my playlist – albeit this time in its sampled form.

After *these* experiences, I called up Paul Simon's *50 Ways to Leave Your Lover*. Where, in the intro, the snare is presented in all its glory and I found that – yep – my ears hadn't failed me.

The RIALTOs' rendering of low-level detail combined with the pitch-black background offered up the snare in such a realistic fashion.

The snare's wires were palpable as they playfully interacted with the bottom head. The only thing missing was that shoulder raising harshness of the stick's attack on the drum's surface.

The pitch-black background was – again – noteworthy on a new (to me) track from Jain, *Cosmic Love*.

The track starts out with some cloudy or veiled synth playing at a relatively low level. Unfamiliar with the track, I used the volume to ask a little more from the RIALTOs when Jain appeared – out of the darkness – with her vocals.

The black background left for an incredibly resolved image. There was clear definition between performers without it feeling segmented and unreal. This blackness also meant that if there was any noise present, it was in the recording.

Therefore, if the artist wanted some low-level details, the RIALTOs will let you have it – unveiled. Now, this also means that if the quality of the original recording was poor, the RIALTOs will not be particularly forgiving.

There was also a more homogenous layering present when I was listening. On Vandellux's *Paper & Glue* the vocals often sound as if they're placed on top of the music. With the RIALTOs, the music and vocals felt like a more cohesive unit.

Vocals, *generally*, sounded clear and believable on the RIALTOs; something I would attribute – in part – to a smooth frequency response throughout the midrange.

I've already touched a little on imaging but want to expand on that. The RIALTOs had no trouble at all extracting the image from the speakers. In fact, when using them in concert with the TV, if it weren't for that bass response and black background – I might have been convinced they weren't even on. Because the image was presented on the screen, *not* as coming from the speakers?

A track that I enjoy listening to for understanding how equipment images is *Sur* from Perila's Intrinsic Rhythm Album. The spaciousness was smile inducing as I felt the wind blowing the storm in around me. And when the rain started – with their ability to render low-level detail, a vast and deep sound stage, and an enveloping soundspace – it was as if I could feel the temperature drop in the room. It's as if you're there!

## CONCLUSION

Alright, I know this one got a little long winded – and thanks for hangin' in there with me – but there's a lot going on here. If you were to break the RIALTOs down into separates, you would be hard-pressed to come up with a system that sounds as good as this for under \$4k.

Although it may not have the forward presence in the treble range that some listeners may prefer, this set of speakers sure is a lot of fun. They have a balanced sound that is slightly elevated in the bass, as many people want, and they smooth out rough treble a bit, again, as many listeners would like.

In addition, the settings that adapt them to your room makes it far more likely that in *your* room you can hear something like what I heard.

Now, with quiet ticks and short dropouts between tracks, there may be a little more user-experience refinement needed until this product appeals to the late majority or laggards.

But for those of you who are willing to risk an occasional technical hiccup for the payoff of an easy to use, packed full of fun, home stereo and – for all intents and purposes – home theatre audio set-up, I think these are the speakers for you.

## **OUTRO**

Again, thanks for being here and letting me share what I heard when listening to the Cabasse RIALTO Bookshelf Hi-Fi System