

# REVIEWS

## Aspire Audio Belgravia Equipment Rack

Details Edgar Kramer Reviews 15 March 2023



Coincidentally located in the Blue Mountains not far from *SoundStage! Australia* HQ, in a village 10 minutes away and a couple of elevation notches down towards Greater Sydney, new company Aspire Audio brings to market Belgravia, a wisely and maturely conceived first-spawn product. At this neonatal stage, Aspire Audio is solely dedicated to producing hi-fi racking systems of impeccable quality at the mid-tier price bracket. For this review, we gently placed our cherished vibration-sensitive valve preamplification and disc players upon the Aspire Audio Belgravia rack to determine whether music can indeed soar as it's freed from the potential fuzz of droning vibrational distortions.

### On Point

Aspire Audio founder Richard Moore's love of music and resultant interest in hi-fi kit led him to discover a dearth of upper mid-level, high quality, manufactured in Australia, audio component support systems. In his view, there were very few locally made products at the top-end (count them in less than one hand?) and a number at the lower-end, however, Moore felt there was a gaping void in the middle tier. It's true, that observation could be applied – with some mid-tier adjustments – to audio equipment support offerings in general.

With that in mind, he set about designing his own take on audio racking systems. His self-imposed mandate was to create robust, yet elegant audio racks aimed at providing objectively evidenced and subjectively noticeable sonic benefits and performance improvements. In addition, the aesthetic and build quality had to be top-notch. Oh, and parts were to be locally sourced, as were CNC machining and metalwork electroplating. Quite resoundingly, these products were to be crafted by artisans in Australia. I'm glad to state this is somewhat of a growing trend across Australian brands who are increasingly mustering manufacturing back to our shores and utilising our high standards of craftsmanship.



Aspire Audio offers Belgravia (named after the swanky London area) in a selection of pre-designed standard configurations with various option levels. A customer may have a specific configuration, shelf dimensions and finishes in mind which Aspire Audio can cater to via custom-specified orders. Computer documents and graphics are drawn by Aspire Audio illustrating the custom configuration prior to client sign-off and subsequent manufacturing.

The standard Belgravia options include single shelf (for amplifiers, for example) and right up to 4-shelf units. Spacing between shelves is dependent on the heights of the metal posts/uprights, of course, which are available in standard lengths of 125 mm, 200 mm and 250 mm (custom sizes are offered too). Each metal column/post features a conical end, where it couples to a precision metal receptacle on the shelf below, and a threaded end where it screws into an insert in the shelf above it. It simply stacks that way. Said metal columns/posts are beautifully finished via a high quality electroplating procedure and can be optioned in mirror-like 'Bright Chrome' or in deep 'Black Satin'.



The Belgravia shelves/platforms are precision CNC machined in Australia from solid timber and are attractively chiselled-faceted. Aspire Audio offers a wide range of beautiful American-sourced timber options (except for the Australian Jarrah option) finished with “Osmo Polyx-Oil”, a durable German ‘Hardwax’ oil of very high quality. Custom Dulux paint finishes can be ordered for bespoke racks. Standard shelf dimensions are 620 mm wide by 520 mm deep (they are a solid 35 mm thick), a size which would suit 90% of electronics. Custom sizes are available to order. Where they screw onto each other, the shelves are decoupled from the metal uprights via a custom washer/ring concoction of high density polyurethane, acting in tandem with the coupled column point/spike in order to further combat vibrational distortions.

In addition to the solidity and potential sonic benefits on offer, the Belgravia racks have some further simple, yet intelligent practical features which augment design and potential performance aspects. For these, Aspire Audio has applied for patents.

Firstly, each shelf features three precision-bored circular cut-outs, on the rear side, which serve as a cable management system (they can be used to separate AC, interconnecting and speaker cables). A set of notches on the cut-outs’ open side are designed to house one or more rubber ‘O-ring’ loops which acts as a stopper, retaining the cables in place within the cut-outs. So simple and elegant. See below – pictures paint a thousand words.





Cable routing can provide sonic benefits – by separating high signal from low signal cables – while also making the installation much neater. The Aspire Audio racks' cable management system can take wire gauges right up to garden hose girth.

The second trick up the metal sleeves of the Aspire Audio racks is a coupling/footer system, upon which the entire rack sits, which is designed to further mitigate vibration. Provided in finishes matching the column uprights, a deep, large diameter receptacle, or 'puck' for want of a better term, is the interface point between rack and with your room's flooring. The puck features a precisely-machined minimal contact point which acts as a receptacle for the lower shelf's sharply-pointed spike. The coupling of spike and puck is designed to dissipate vibrational energy into thermal energy – heat, in other words – and is machined to very high tolerances. This is a critical design aspect of the Belgravia racking system.



Aspire Audio sought the services of an independent acoustic laboratory in order to obtain empirical evidence which would confirm the company's own findings. A number of measurements were conducted using a variety of high profile, widely used audio products. The controlled testing procedure started off by placing the components upon a generic glass shelf entertainment unit. Accelerometers were positioned at various points in order to measure vibrational distortion at several SPL settings. The measurements were then juxtaposed with those obtained with the same components atop Belgravia. The results were rather telling... The claim is a 1378% reduction in acceleration artifacts. That's a rack-load of vibration suppression.



Even if not heard within the context of a particular system, the evidence is clear enough to warrant serious consideration in terms of enabling a component's full performance potential.

When excited, every material and construction has an inherent vibrational signature at varying magnitudes of amplitude at a particular frequency/frequencies. Aspire Audio attempts to minimise these distortions by using very stiff materials and sheer mass (the rack is reasonably heavy). "Cross-sectional area" is purposefully capitalised on by the specific dimensions and the density of materials used on each shelf. Once again, this is aimed at controlling vibration amplitude. I've already mentioned the damping effect of the polyurethane washers and the coupling effect of the column spikes and bottom shelf point/puck coupling system. It's a cumulative grouping of strategies.

### **Solid Sound**

In the context of this review, it's worth noting I use rather upmarket audio racks also manufactured in Australia. The philosophies and design principles behind the two brands have their points of difference despite sharing a common goal for an improved performance outcome. While the aim is to bar the influence of deleterious vibrational distortions from affecting the potential performance of components placed upon them, one brand employs multiple strategies encompassing both isolation and coupling across its framework and platforms while Aspire Audio selects a stiff, predominantly coupled strategy. Both architectures have merits as evidenced within the context of my reference system.

The provided review unit was a standard 3-shelf unit finished in elegant Cherry with chrome uprights in standard 200mm. It bears repeating here that the overall parts and construction quality is of a very high standard. Belgravia can be assembled in minutes and, through that process, you could commend the individual items' machining and finish quality while also appreciating the precise coupling/inter-relation of the various parts.





It's most commonly accepted that valve-based components are the most prone to vibrational distortions and, therefore, the most likely to benefit from a solid operating platform. To that end, I placed my Supratek Cortese preamp/phono section and its separate valve-based power supply upon two levels of the Belgravia rack. I also auditioned the excellent Soulnote S-3 Reference SACD player/DAC through its visit at *SoundStage! Australia* HQ (review coming soon). While guiding the various required cable connections, I appreciated the cable management's ease of use and complete effectiveness.

Over a few weeks, I listened to a variety of my go-to auditioning recordings along with a mix of music purely for my own pleasure. I was pleased to find the levels of background silence, micro-detail and leading-note transient attack were on par with what I'm used to via my own more expensive rack.

Placing the same components on a small table and also an MDF platform on castors showed a subtle loss of bass heft and a smearing of micro-detail. The soundstage seemed shallower while imaging lost its precise focus. Dropping it all back onto the Belgravia rack reinstated the smaller nuances in the music and expanded the soundstaging dimensions while locking-in instrument and vocalist imaging.

These differences were more evident in acoustic and live recordings. If you've been reading my reviews for some time, you'll know the recordings I'm talking about. The powers of the Aspire Audio were manifested most positively via the live concert production wonders of Ani DiFranco, Ryan Adams, Harry Belafonte, Jeff Beck, The Ray Brown Trio, Trio Hadouk, Thin Lizzy, Tony Dagradi Trio, The Aristocrats, Jackson Browne and so, so much more.



Like all these non-electronic and non-acoustical components, the differences are noticeable and repeatable but not chalk and cheese, night and day, etc., etc. That's not to say that the gains you *will* reap are not worthwhile. By no means. If you've invested even a modest amount of dosh in a quality audio system, you'd be diminishing its full performance *potential* by failing to place each component within a properly designed support system.

### **Conclusion**

The necessity of a good support system for your audio components is an accepted thing. How far you take the concept is both a product of the proportionate quality of the electronics under support and your obsessiveness (yes, insert smiling emoji here). Many enthusiasts supplement a good rack with all sorts of aftermarket isolation and coupling products featuring all manner of strategies and design architectures. In my opinion, a well designed audio rack can, in a wide range of scenarios, but not in all, render many of these sorts of tweaks redundant. Automatic music-purchasing funds access, right there.

In the case of Aspire Audio's Belgravia, you have an Australian made product from a young company hitting the market with a very refined first offering. What's more, Aspire Audio has gone to some lengths to provide independent testing and measurement results to evidence its product's efficacy. Of note is the fact that manufacturing in Australia is a very costly undertaking even for companies with full in-house control of fabrication at all stages (there are some exceptions here).

The Aspire Audio Belgravia component rack features an immaculate level of finish while its precision-cut shelves are available in a wide selection of high quality timbers. Further, the metalwork is expertly machined and finished. The standard configurations will cater for a very wide assortment of electronic component sizes. In addition, Aspire Audio is happy to provide solutions for custom configurations. Add to all that the clever, yet simple coupling schemes and you have a hi-fi racking system of an elevated standard which many-a-competitor would, umm... aspire to.

Excuse me Mr Einstein, Aspire Audio may just be affirming that everything in life need *not* be vibration...

... Edgar Kramer

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### **Associated Equipment**



- **Speakers** – Wilson Audio Alexia V, Axis Loudspeakers VoiceBox S (nearfield monitor), Vermouth Audio Little Luccas Mk.II, Atacama stands
- **Amplifier** – Gryphon Audio Antileon EVO
- **Preamplifier** – Supratek Cortese, Totaldac d1-triunity (direct to amplifier)
- **Sources** – **Digital:** 432 EVO Aeon Reference Music Server/Roon Core, Yamaha CD-S2100 transport, Totaldac d1-triunity DAC. **Analogue:** Transrotor Crescendo with Konstant Studio controller, Reed 1X Tonearm with upgraded internal wiring, Shelter Harmony cartridge, The Funk Firm Houdini cartridge decoupler, Supratek Cortese & REDGUM Audio RGPH2 phono stages
- **Processor** – DEQX PreMate (part of arsenal/casual use)
- **Cables** – VYDA Laboratories Orion Silver Reference HFC IC and speaker cables, PSC Audio custom design XLR, Vermouth Audio Reference loom, ZenSati Zorro loom
- **Audio Rack** – SGR Audio Statement Model V, Aspire Audio amplifier platform (customised for Gryphon Audio Antileon EVO)
- **Acoustic Treatment** – Vicoustic Multifuser Wood, Wavewood Ultra, Cinema Round Premium and Super Bass Extreme
- **Miscellaneous** – Silent Angel Bonn N8 Pro network switch, GigaWatt PF-1 EVO power strip, Voodoo Cable Iso-Pods, Les Davis Audio Viscoelastic CLD discs, VRC Vinyl Record Cleaning system plus miscellaneous accessories

### **Aspire Audio Belgravia Equipment Rack**

**Price: AU\$2500 per level (AU\$7500 as tested)**

**Australian Warranty: Lifetime (“Less usual wear and tear”)**

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