

12 Questions for Paul Barton

Founder and Chief Engineer, PSB Speakers

Neil Gader



What got you into audio?

As a youngster, I had two areas of interest. One was my music – I studied violin from a very early age. My father was a classical tenor and we spent a lot of time with live and recorded music. When I was growing up, mono was just ending and stereo was just beginning. I never got into the mono high-end, but certainly the first decent pair of speakers was a pair my father and I built in the same workshop where he built my first full-size violin.

He built your violin?

He studied a lot of books and one of these highlighted the Stradavari “Messiah.” He built an exact replica. It took him a year to make the tools. He made all the molds and the next year he built the violin. He imported woods from Italy; it was quite an adventure.

What motivated you to build loudspeakers?

I liked the mechanical side of the hobby as opposed to the electronic side. It appealed to me a lot more. The speaker’s the reproducer of sound, and as time went on I realized it’s also the weakest link. There were two weak links in those days – the phono cartridge and the speaker.

The two transducers.

Exactly right. Turning one form of energy into another at both ends of the reproduction chain is the weak link.

PSB speakers used dynamic-driver cone-based technology exclusively. Did you ever consider going in a more esoteric direction?

I have designed loudspeakers with ribbon elements. One used a ribbon tweeter that Philips made. On axis it was good out to 60kHz, but everywhere else it didn’t do well. As time wore on it became clear that I want to produce social rather than antisocial loudspeakers.

Antisocial loudspeakers? Could you define that?

A planar loudspeaker has a very small sweet spot. With a planar loudspeaker the frequency response changes dramatically off-axis, so not only does the image collapse but so does the way it sounds. You really can’t appreciate a planar speaker unless you’re in the sweet spot. If more than one person wants to enjoy it, he or she has to sit behind the first listener. I call that antisocial.

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PSB is often described as affordable high end. Does that irk you?

It is a bit frustrating for me. I feel successful when I can produce good value. But it’s frustrating because some people dismiss it because of its price.

What music do you use to evaluate a project nearing completion?

I have a set criteria that includes a very well-established group of recordings.

Examples?

A little James Taylor, some organ pieces, *Pictures at an Exhibition* on the Dorian label, some Yehudi Menuhin, James Cotton – his voice is full of terrific chesty resonances.

What are the biggest innovations you’ve seen in your field in the last ten years?

In drivers, I would have to say tweeters. Today’s tweeters are much better behaved, stable, and consistent from one to the next. In general, the biggest improvements are the materials, the adhesives, and the ability to produce these things consistently. The manufacturing process has matured greatly over the years.

Advice for assembling a new system?

Because the speaker is the weak link, a significant amount should be budgeted toward it. If you choose your amplifier first and it doesn’t have enough power to drive the speaker you end up choosing, that’s a mistake that’s hard to fix. But going the other way you’re always safe, because the power requirement of the speaker is a known value.

What kind of playback sources will you be listening on in ten years?

I think you’re going to be listening to just hard memory – mechanical devices will be gone. It will all integrate with networking.