

STEVEN SAILER'S PURSUIT OF PERFECTION

On the face of it, Steven Sailer's SL55AMG Looks as standard as you would expect for a £120K + supercar. Open the doors and boot though, and you will see some major clues to an amazing audio system that has taken him 600 hours to complete at an approximate retail cost of £50K.



We were approached early in 2022 and asked if we would be interested in covering the car in *Driving Sounds Magazine*. This is not really the kind of car we cover. But, after some debate, we decided that we could not afford to ignore this car due to the amount of effort that had gone into its creation and the anecdotal evidence to the quality of the music it reproduces. Good friend and magazine designer Brian Parton and I flew over to Germany to meet with Steven in September of the same year. Steven Sailer is an extremely affable chap and a highly successful car and home audio specialist of 32 years standing. His car is testament to the value that his business has generated over the years. Car audio is a very niche business. Quite often, car owners do not realise how great the audio in a car can be made to sound unless they actually hear one that has been upgraded. It requires specialist knowledge and extreme skill in order to establish the reputation required to draw in a sometimes cynical, consumer. Steven has clearly worked very hard to gain a reputation for excellence through hard work and endeavour.

Steven was born to Austrian parents who had emigrated to Canada in the 60's. This was his home until the age of 8 years old when they returned to Austria. Having always been interested in how things work, he enrolled in a college where he studied TV, Radio and Electronics. However, it wasn't until sometime later that he saw a car audio magazine and decided that this was what he wanted to do. His first upgrade was a Blaupunkt Berlin head unit. In those days these cost in the region of 3000 Deutschmark (£300). His boss at the time thought he was crazy spending so much money to upgrade the audio in his car!

He began to create installations and compete in events run by the International Auto Sound Challenge Association (IASCA). His equipment choices came from everywhere as there were many brands to choose from at the time.

In 1996, Steven installed a complete system into a VW Golf and after entering and winning many European and British ISACA competitions, decided to try his luck in America. He got a 2nd and 3rd Place in the Pro Unlimited Class at an event in South Carolina and the respect and credibility this achievement gained him, took his career to new heights.



"The Doors"



"The Boot"



At 55 and with two grown-up children, Steven is now in a position to worry less about the commercial aspects of his business and focus on his hobby, creating the perfect audio system in a car without compromise.

His Mercedes is the closest he has come to his goal. Clearly very proud of what he has achieved, I asked him where his interest in music came from. "I don't have a musical background. We didn't really listen to music much in the family home and it wasn't until I became obsessed with car audio that I was really exposed to music in any form" Steven told us.

So, what does he look for in his installs? Steven continues; "I like to uncover detail in music. I have varied tastes and am always amazed at how much more there is to a piece of music once it is played on a good system. Imaging and dynamics are key for me as they help to create the soundscape required to unpick all of the sounds in a recording."

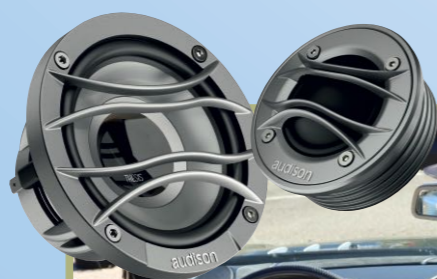
"Compared to competition cars, I was very much looking for the emotion in music to come shining through. Emotion does not have a technical specification. One of my finest moments with this car was demonstrating to a music lover at a show and her actually crying tears in the seat beside me."

Steven describes his work on the Mercedes as over-the-top. "For instance, I machined brass speaker rings for woofers, mid-range and tweeters to ensure that there is absolutely no resonance or sound absorption." He told us. He has used three layers of sound deadening in the doors. These are now 25Kg heavier than that of a standard SL55. When I knocked the doors of this car with my knuckles it was like knocking concrete blocks.

Steven has built door pods to accommodate two pairs of Audison Thesis Sax 6.5 woofers. At high levels, you can feel the air from these pounding your knee. The 3" Thesis mid-range and 1.5" Thesis tweeters have been built into an extremely well finished trim on top of the dashboard. Under the tear-drop grilles, the speakers have been angled toward the listener to put them on axis. The build quality is so good that those unfamiliar with the interior of this car eye would struggle to see where the original Mercedes finish ends and Steven's excellent work begins.

The amp rack that Steven fabricated contains three Audison

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"The Dash"



Thesis amplifiers including a Quattro, a Due and an Uno. Each has its own dedicated LiFePo battery. It is also home to an Audison bit ONE Virtuoso so is necessarily large as a result. Despite this, it does not totally dominate the boot space. With a false floor in place there would still be enough depth to accommodate some lightweight luggage if required.

To achieve this, Steven removed the spare wheel. We wanted to explore what Steven thought about the result. Steven commented; "If anything, the sound is too powerful. It is like standing in front of a drum kit. The sheer levels available are shockingly loud" Although we didn't try this during our visit, we asked Steven how the system performed with the roof down, "If anything it is even better. I had to trial it and have driven the car at speeds up to 250kph with the roof down. Because of the power and volume levels achievable, it still sounds perfect."

Steven's uncompromising approach to this install was such that during the build he had a major change of heart with regards sub bass. Originally the car was fitted with four Hertz Mille ML 2000.3. These 8" subwoofers are famous for achieving low bass while taking up little space. The box he built to accommodate these is an impressive piece of art and matches the vehicle perfectly even though it dominates the space behind the seats.

However, before the car was unleashed on the world, Steven was introduced to the brand-new Hertz super flat subwoofer, Mille Pro MPS 250 S2. This 10" subwoofer is revolutionary in that it has a mounting depth of less than 3.5". Steven replaced his four 8" subs with a single MPS 250 mounted in the front foot well. I am pleased to report that



"The Old Sub Enclosure"



"The New Sub Enclosure"



"Originally the car was fitted with four Hertz Mille ML 2000 Subwoofers"



the now redundant sub box is still in place and provides handy additional storage space.

Due to some incredibly intricate box building involving the relocation of the washer bottle and the tricky build of a three-chamber box inside the front wing Steven has managed to now upgrade to a 12" Hertz Mille MPS 300 subwoofer. He told me; "The bass is so much smoother, more forceful and musical than the four 8" subwoofers that I have now disconnected. It reaches lower too. If I were to make any changes at all to this vehicle it would be to try to get another flat subwoofer in the other side." I can confirm that he absolutely does not need to do this. There is plenty of sub bass available at kidney rattling levels.

Obviously, having photographed the vehicle and spoken to its creator, both Brian and I were keen to have a listen. I got in first and was treated (by Steven) to segments of a number of tracks. This is not my usual approach. Although I do recognise the value of listening to the preferred choices of those who have upgraded their car audio, in order to make my own opinions, I generally carry some tracks that are well known to me.

I am not convinced I am quick enough to make a qualitative judgement based on shortish bursts of many unfamiliar tracks. Having said that, Steven was selecting hi-res files from a compilation someone had made for him. They were definitely selected to reveal the detail and dynamics achievable by the system. The musical highlights for me included a blues track which sounded very good. There was quite a bit of electronic music and a killer drum solo. The latter was obviously live and Steven played it very loud. It was thunderous. The separation and dynamics were incredible. However, I was itching to try my usual method of listening to a track I know well, in its entirety.

Following a bit of a battle getting my Android phone to play, we ended up having to stream via Bluetooth. For some reason, Steven's Pioneer head unit did not like the USC cable I was using. It is the one I use all the time without issue in other vehicles, but could possibly have had some kind of contact contamination or something. I chose to go with a 24bit 96kHz rendering of "Lover, You Should've Come Over" from Jeff Buckley's seminal album, Grace. This track is gentle compared to those that had been played to me so far. I discovered a third guitar in the intro that I hadn't noticed before. Certainly, the detail was astonishing. The track seemed a little dry until I turned the level up somewhat when suddenly the reverb on the snare drum and vocal became apparent. The track builds

quite slowly and as it did so, the system continued to provide an incredibly balanced and detailed sound. It is as if the system is designed and set up to play loud.

Overall, I was incredibly moved by the system. Its accuracy and dynamics were

very notable and the emotion in Jeff Buckley's plaintive vocal shone through. I felt the sound stage was a little restricted but this could be because I am not so used to listening to cars that have been set up with the centre of the dash as the centre of the image. Most cars I listen to these days are set up for driver listening and the centre stage is right on top of and in the middle of the steering wheel. It would be interesting to hear the car with a second preset that gave me that so I could compare directly.

Everything was there and the sound had a somewhat magical quality. I have been listening and playing music from the age of three and this was definitely one of my best experiences. Brian and I compared notes later over a beer (or maybe two), we agreed that this is without doubt a very special car. We would strongly recommend you experience it if the opportunity ever arises.

The presence of a bit ONE Virtuoso signal processor allows almost endless tweaking possibilities and I am certain the temptation to adjust and change EQ setting etc. is a constant nagging for Steven. All the physical parts of the installation blew me away and I take my hat off to Steven for investing a career's worth of experience and knowledge into this vehicle. □

Steven's Top five tunes

- Hey 19 - Steely Dan
- For You - LadyNsax
- Waterfall - Neelix
- I've Got You Under My Skin - Joyce Partise
- Almost Like The Blues - Leonard Cohen

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Equipment list

- PIONEER AVIC-Z920DAB
- ASTELL&KERN / High Res. Player
- 1 X AUDISON THESIS QUATTRO - 4-channel amplifier
- 1 X AUDISON THESIS DUO - 2-channel amplifier
- 1 X AUDISON THESIS UNO - Monoblock amplifier
- 1 X Pair AUDISON THESIS TH 1.5 II Violino - Tweeter
- 1 X Pair AUDISON THESIS TH 3.0 II Voce
- 2 X Pair AUDISON THESIS TH 6.5 II Sax
- 1 X AUDISON bit ONE HD Virtuoso
- 1 X Hertz MPS300 S2

