

Audience 122



The Perfect Vision, High Performance Home Theater, May/June 2001
Dynaudio Audience Series Home-Theater Loudspeaker System

As one of the world's foremost manufacturers of both raw speaker components and complete speaker systems, Denmark's Dynaudio has a well-deserved reputation for delivering both quality and value to its customers. And with the release of its newly updated Audience Series, which includes tower, bookshelf, powered subwoofer, and even wall-mount designs, Dynaudio unfurls both attributes with aplomb.

The Dynaudio sound is known to be natural and relaxed, with a warm tonal balance; the newly designed Audience Series reviewed here doesn't veer from this course. What's remarkable is the degree to which the Audience lineup maintains this performance for such a moderate price \$4,000.

Features and Stuff

In order to insure a uniform voicing from speaker to speaker—something crucial for home-theater use Dynaudio uses the same (or only slight variations of the same) driver complement throughout the Audience Series. Great attention has also been given to crossover frequencies, slopes, and parts quality, as well as to each speaker's nominal impedance and sensitivity. All Audience Series bass drivers incorporate lightweight 3" aluminum voice coils for improved sensitivity, power handling, and linearity, while the single-piece cones, molded of MSP (magnesium silicate polymer), are said to reduce intermodulation and group delay distortions. In addition, bass and sensitivity are both enhanced by front or rear-firing ports that use rounded openings for a smoother, and hence less colored, airflow; and optional foam port plugs are provided to reduce output—depending on placement and personal preference. All Audience models (subwoofers aside) employ identical 1.1" soft dome tweeters with pure aluminum wire voice coils, magnetic fluid damping (for higher power handling), and damped internal chambers. Speaker enclosures are extensively cross-braced and damped (for reduced coloration) with rounded front edges to minimize diffraction off the front baffle. Connections are via all-metal gold-plated five-way binding posts—no bi-wiring option is included.

These speakers are nicely built and come in three standard finishes: "black ash," "rosewood," or "light cherry" vinyl (wall-mount models also come in white). The review samples arrived in the black ash finish and though not bad looking (the profile of the floorstanding models is quite handsome), they were plain-and unobtrusive. (One very cool touch: All floor-standing models are fitted with an additional set of rear-mounted grille fasteners, so listeners who prefer the sound with the grilles off will have a handy place to store them.)

Lavishing this much care in the design process makes it easy for dealers and consumers, as well as critics, to mix and match models within the Audience Series. So when it came time to assemble the review system two goals were established. First, the speakers were to be optimized for small-to-medium sized rooms. Second, we were looking for a package that would total roughly \$4,000—a popular price point. The six-piece array that met both criteria consisted of a pair of the sleek front ported Audience 122 towers (a two way design employing a single soft dome tweeter, flanked by two 4.75" polypropylene woofers), the Audience 42C center, and a pair of the bookshelf-sized Audience 42s for surround. (The 42 and 42C are two way designs employing one soft-dome tweeter and one 5.25-inch driver. The 42C is front-ported, while the 42s are rear-ported.)

In contrast, the Audience Sub-30A powered subwoofer is something of a country boy-on the brutish side. Although it isn't especially large by American subwoofer standards, it was a bit of a surprise lined up beside the other models. But then big bass generally does require large woofers, cabinets, and amplifiers. Here, however, the amplifier rating is ambiguous; Dynaudio's spec simply states that the maximum power output is 90 watts RMS. No matter. The Sub30A never broke a sweat or otherwise came close to running out of steam. The recipient of this power is a 12", one-piece MSP cone complete with Dynaudio's die cast basket and 4" aluminum wire voice coil. The Sub-30A enclosure uses an extra-thick 1.25" Medium Density Fiberboard (MDF) composite baffle and, as with other Audience cabinets, is rigidly cross-braced and Bitumen damped. Around back are two ports and variable level and crossover (60-120Hz) adjustments, plus two unusual features. One is the phase control, which is variable from 0°-360°—as opposed to the standard 0/180 switch. The other is dubbed "Utility" in/out and is for use with a pair of Sub-30As in discrete multichannel systems (such as DTS, Dolby Digital, and MPEG-2), where all five channels can be driven full range. In this case, the two subwoofers are driven by a single mono signal.

Two-Channel Performance

I always like to listen to Multichannel systems a step at a time before plunging into the complete system. Here, I began with stereo sources over the Audience 122s, then added the Sub-30A, and finally the 42 surrounds and 42C center. I also used the 42s as front left and right speakers in order to get a sense of what a quartet of them might be like for those with tight space or budget constraints. Driving the stereo rig were Balanced Audio Technology's VK-3i preamp, VK-200 amplifier, and VK-D5 CD player, while the multichannel electronics were Proceed's AVP processor and AMP 5 separates, and later a B&K AVR 307 receiver (review, Issue 34). Sony and Kenwood provided the DVD players, and

cables were by Monster.

As I said earlier, Dynaudio speakers are generally warm, easy, and natural. They never bite, nor do they induce listener fatigue. But that doesn't mean they aren't detailed; and unlike some other designs, I wouldn't call them polite, just lacking in electronic glare. For example, Steve Earle's rendition of his own "Goodbye" (Train a Comin', Warner Brothers) was particularly alive sounding, with a strong presence and exceptionally vivid textures-be it the distinctive snap of a gut-string guitar, ringing metallic voice of a Dobro, or plucky weight of an upright bass. Earle's sour-mash voice had great clarity and good focus. But those into the laser-like spotlighting of images-think Wilson Watt/ Puppy-won't find it here, because the Audience 122's focus is just ever-so-slightly vague, as is the case most often with live acoustic music. And that softdome tweeter is a marvel of purity and honeyed extension.

The 122's bottom end was initially a little too Rubenesque for my taste. But a minor tweak in room-placement and the insertion of the foam port plugs made the balance just right, with a lovely expressiveness and enough fullness to create the sensation of a hollow wood-bodied instrument.

Turning next to Maurizio Pollini's recent release of the Chopin Ballades (DGG) allowed the Audience 122s to show off their spectacular range of tone colors. Dynamics, on the other hand, were good but lacked the dramatic flare and dynamics I'm used to with my reference Martin-Logan Scenarios (review elsewhere in this issue). This reticence is not unexpected from an array of small drivers, and I found myself happiest with the Audience 122s when I cranked them up a bit louder than I normally would. Fortunately, as I heard with Lucinda Williams' Car Wheels on a Gravel Road' this dynamic coyness does not impede the speakers' sense of drive or the sweet crunch of electric guitars.

Finally, I should mention that the Audience 122s throw a very wide soundstage, extending far outside the edges of each speaker; they are quite capable of layering depth, too.

I wasn't terribly surprised to discover that-bass extension and fullness aside-a pair of Audience 42s sounded much the same as a pair of Audience 122s, albeit with the slightly tighter focus and diminished dynamics typical of small monitors. This confirmed my suspicion that for \$1,800, a quartet of 42s and a 42C would make an excellent affordable system.

Adding the Sub-30A was a slightly more complicated task than normal (owing to the extra adjustments) but well worth the effort. Despite its size, this is a subwoofer of considerable finesse. No "one-note wonder" here, the Sub-30A is airy and textured with considerable detail and the ability-when properly placed and tweaked- gel with the rest of the speakers in the Audience line. (I later had a brief chance to try it with my reference Martin-Logan Scenario, Script, and Cinema center system with equally excellent results.) But that elegance doesn't mean the Sub-30A is a pantywaist, as I'll describe below.

The Whole Enchilada

Setting up the complete system was relatively easy and I encountered nothing irksome or out of the ordinary. Because the Audience 42 C center and 42 surrounds have a limited frequency range, I crossed them over at 80Hz while running the Audience 122 towers full range. The qualities I heard and liked with stereo sources were immediately evident with Suzanne Vega's "Caramel" from The Best of Sessions at West 54th DVD. Vega's voice and acoustic guitar, as well as the electric Fender jazz bass, cello, accordion, and clarinet all displayed a feeling of warmth, ease, and a rich and lovely tonal palette. Surround tracks, which are in general tastefully applied with this disc, were well integrated from speaker to speaker, and the applause of the studio audience carved a deep and layered space behind the performers. A surround music-only disc, such as Telarc's DTS sampler, ranged from convincing (as with the antiphonal choir and Baroque trumpets in Monteverdi's Vespers) to gimmicky, if fun: On Maria Muldaur's "Think About You," her voice emanates from the left, right and rear L/R speakers, but not center, bringing a disembodied quality to the sound.

The coherence, clarity, and ease of the Audience system really pay off with movie sound, which, as we all know, is generally mixed with a boost in the treble. One particularly beautiful surround mix is the DVD of Martin Scorsese's Kundun. The soundtrack opens with the barely audible whistle of wind that ramps up in volume just before all channels explode with the guttural voices of chanting monks and the staccato beating of wood blocks, drums, and other percussion instruments. This complex sonic mix was especially well suited to the Audience Series' strengths, conveying an immense, enveloping acoustical space that was also beautifully integrated. The Sub30A brought an exceptional feeling of weight and drama to the percussion, without losing control, sounding discontinuous, or making its presence felt as a separate entity. This was also true with RZA's jazz-infused hip-hop score to Jim Jarmusch's Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai, with its throbbing bass notes. It is possible that those who feast on a steady diet of action flicks may want a more aggressive-sounding system, but I found forays into Three Kings and Gladiator territory plenty explosive and exciting.

Conclusion

This assemblage of Dynaudio Audience Series speakers offers plenty performance and excellent value. It will appeal to those with an ear for the natural as opposed to the spectacularly impressive, yet I must again underline that it isn't polite, in the negative sense of that word-i.e., wimpy. And music lovers will be pleased that with this system they can enjoy their favorite music just as much as their favorite films. I certainly did.



What Hi-Fi, May 2001
Dynaudio a Hit with big Audience

With multichannel music around the corner the need for speaker packages able to play a tune as well as rattle the sofa has become ever more pressing. The Dynaudio 122 package, made up from the Danish company's acclaimed Audience series of hi-fi speakers, aims to do this.

Unlike most home cinema specialist, Dynaudio eschews multi-directional rear surround speakers in favour of conventional designs, namely the Audience 42W rears (the 'W' stands for wall-mount). In essence these are compact versions the Audience 42s, with a shallower cabinet (18cm, against 25cm for the conventional designs). A fixing allows these to be hung from the wall, too.

considerable effort has been expended on the design of the front three speakers. The floorstanding Audience 122s (also available separately at £920 a pair) sport a single 28mm soft-dome tweeter flanked by a pair of 15cm mid/bass drivers, while the Audience 122C centre uses exactly the same configuration, though mounted in the cabinet. All three are magnetically shielded, so even the stereo pair can be used close to your TV set with no fear of distorting the picture, but there's no provision for biwiring.

Though it takes some time to bed in fully this is a wonderful speaker package. Each driver integrates seamlessly, while the sheer presence of the sound from the front three speakers is exemplary. What's more, the Audience 122s have ample bass – certainly enough for normal listening levels – which means they deliver a full, muscular tone with Amistad's deep vocal pitches. Only very deep bass eludes the package, but then the sheer energy on offer with the rest of a movie soundtrack is infectious.

Switching to music, and a five-channel remix on DVD Audio of Deep Purple's Machine Head, and the balance is both expressive and thoroughly well focussed, complete with frenetic guitar picking on 'Lazy'. Those same virtues are equally applicable with stereo listening, using solely the 122s. Indeed, you'll find few more communicative, exciting yet poised speakers at this price.

Drawbacks? Not many. Home cinema headbangers may well wish to add a subwoofer, while none of the speakers is an easy load. Stiff 4ohm impedance coupled to 86dB/W/m sensitivity could cause some low-powered multichannel amplifiers a few palpitations, but you're unlikely to have any problems with most comparably priced designs. Our only real gripe is that the rear speakers lack the wraparound ambience of a good pair of dipoles, but then that's the price you have to pay for musicality, and this package carries that role off superbly.