

Audience 42 W



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Dynaudio Audience 82 / 122C / 42W / SUB-30A
Home-Theater Speaker System

Reviewed by
Anthony Di Marco



I was very excited when I heard that I would be evaluating Dynaudio's Audience line of loudspeakers. The Danish loudspeaker company's reputation amongst audio lovers is one of almost mythic proportions. Unfortunately, many fans have been deterred from owning these speakers because of their lofty price. For a long time the least-expensive choice was the Contour series. In response to those seeking more affordable Dynaudios, the company created the Audience series, of which a \$5885 USD system was assembled for review here. After countless refinements Dynaudio believes that they have a design that strikes the perfect balance between affordability and fidelity.

The latest refinement to the model line addresses one of the few complaints the Audience product line has received: the finish. These speakers are now available with real-wood veneer in place of the previously available vinyl-wrapped enclosures. But while customers may think that this is simply a cosmetic upgrade, Dynaudio maintains there is more below the skin.

They arrive

The smallish size of the Audience 122C center-channel took me off guard as I pulled it from its box. Its heavy and well-assembled cabinet is attractive, but not lavish. Starting around back there is a bass-reflex port and a single set of binding posts. At first the moderately substantial posts looked similar to those used on Canton's Ergo line and other speakers I've seen. But closer inspection revealed that these were true five-way binding posts that accepted everything from bare wire to banana plugs. Dynaudio is known for their raw drivers almost as much as their finished speakers. Although these drivers used to be available to do-it-yourselfers and other manufacturers, if you want 'em now you'll have to get them in their finished products. The driver complement of the Audience 122C includes two 15cm ESOTEC midbass drivers with massive 75mm voice coils and one 28mm soft-dome tweeter. According to Dynaudio the tweeter is a shielded version of their legendary D260 ESOTEC driver.

The "W" in the Audience 42W indicates a wall-mountable version of the Audience 42. Stretching and squishing the enclosure not only achieves a slender profile with the same internal volume, but also permits the bass-reflex port to be mounted to the front of the cabinet. Inset into the top rear of the cabinet is a sturdy metal eyelet that allows the speaker to be hung on a wall like a picture. Also included are small spikes, which decouple the 42W enclosure from the wall. The Audience 42W includes the same ESOTEC midbass driver as the Audience 122C along with a 28mm tweeter.

Like its smaller siblings, the Audience 82 features excellent fit'n'finish. The three-way floorstander also uses the same ESOTEC tweeter as the Audience 122C -- but this is where the similarities end. Although they may look similar from the outside, the ESOTEC midrange driver on the Audience 82 uses a voice coil that is roughly half the size (38mm) of the ones used in the 42W and 122C -- you can optimize each driver when you build your own. From there, two 20cm bass drivers enable the speaker to reproduce frequencies down to a claimed 26Hz!

Another unique feature of the Audience 82 that struck me as both brilliant and simple was four grommets affixed to the rear of its enclosure. For those who would rather gaze at the Audience 82's handsome array of drivers, these grommets offer a means of securing the grille out of sight and harm's way. The only issue I had with the Audience 82 was related to the wood hardware inserts that retained the supplied carpet spikes. These barbed inserts had a tendency to separate from the bass plinth if the spikes were accidentally screwed-in too deep. This resulted in the

Audience 82 developing a bit of a wobble to its stance. I have never come across this problem with designs that use threaded inserts.

Considering the other speakers in the Audience line, the Audience SUB-30A's cosmetics fall short of my expectations. Its black vinyl suggests a product not commensurate with the rest of the system. The 12" driver used in the SUB-30A has a 4" voice coil and is powered by a 90W amplifier. The control panel includes variable phase and crossover to dial the sub into your system.

In order to accommodate the new wood finish of the Audience line, changes in the manufacturing process prompted a complete redesign of the cabinet structure. Included in the new Audience speakers is a granite-like baffle fabricated from lead-impregnated MDF, which affords the driver elements improved isolation from resonance, and according to the company, has yielded a measurable improvement in sound quality.

Movie sound

The first DVD I sampled was *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* -- Platinum Series Extended Edition. The hurricane-like howl that surrounds Frodo each time he slips on the ring can possess an uncomfortable edge on a forward or bright system. The Dynaudio system not only gave this effect a smooth and open quality, but also convinced me that I was submersed in Sauron's world alongside Frodo.

Chapter 13 of the same movie sounded just as realistic. The scene where Frodo senses the Ringwraiths approaching was bone chilling due to the way the Audience system reproduced the sounds of the forest in my room. In addition, the extended "Council of Elrond" scenes revealed how adept the Audience system was at placing and reproducing intelligible voices. The Audience 122C in particular, not only kept voices anchored perfectly when they appeared center screen, but also integrated seamlessly with the 42W and 82s. This had the effect of allowing sounds to move out into the room rather than staying stuck to the walls. However, the greatest surprise came as Borimir succumbed to the power of the ring. The Audience 82 speakers flexed their muscles and produced powerful bass that caused my wife and me to jump.

The Audience 82s had no problem reproducing the deeper bass effects during *The Hunt for Red October*, which made it seem as if submarines were moving through my living room. Although I have seen the film several times, the soundtrack still surprised me. The Audience loudspeakers had enough shimmer and speed in their treble and midrange where "quick" effects like the zip of a torpedo through water, or the metal clank and reverberation of a hammer on a steel bulkhead, startled me without causing aural discomfort. I was also able to hear deeper into the effect and discern between the initial impacts of the hammer as it hit steel, and the ripple of overtones that followed. Some speakers don't have the control or integration between their drivers to reveal such harmonic subtlety. Many lesser speakers simply cram these details into one unidentifiable boom. Not the Dynaudios. Everything from the slightest breath to the largest explosion was crystal clear.

The Audience system did not sacrifice transparency for the sake of smoothness. The recently remastered director's cut of *Amadeus* demonstrated how well the Dynaudios are at revealing the seams within a sound mix without ruining the overall experience. The 122C rendered voices perfectly as Antonio Salieri is being carted off to the hospital. And it doesn't take a trained ear to spot the forced dynamic range of orchestral music or pick out some poorly produced foley effects.

Well-integrated drivers also empowered the Audience system to produce a seamless image. If bullets flew from screen left to surround right, the sound of the bullet cutting through the air moved consistently in that direction. If a person moved from one end of the room to the other, his footsteps would not miss a step during their travel. The synergy of the 82s, 122C, and 42Ws along with the low-bass capabilities of the center and surrounds kept sounds clean and well integrated within the surround image.

The added bulk of the Audience SUB-30A in my room contributed little to the sound quality of the 5.1 setup, such as the bass present with the Audience 82s. I found that bass from the 82s went deep enough and loud enough to satisfy me in most cases. Crossing the 82s over at 60Hz did earn the SUB-30A some points by adding a little more punch to explosions and slightly better definition. But in my setup I concluded that it wasn't worth the extra floor space or cash it consumed.

Music sound

The Audience 82 belted out Peter Gabriel's "Big Time" (So [Universal 493284]) at levels that, according to my Radio Shack meter, approached 100dB. I didn't listen at this level for long, but I was impressed at how clean, smooth, and undistorted the music sounded. Gabriel's voice remained solidly anchored while instruments retained their distinctive sounds. Given adequate power, these are speakers that will get a party going and the neighbors running.

Next up was the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra's rendition of Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana* [Telarc CD-80056]. Although some consider Robert Shaw's interpretation to lack depth, this recording serves up some startling dynamics. The concluding movement, "Fortune Emperor of the World," sounded superb through the Audience speakers. The line between massive drums, a powerful choir, and the quiet moments never got lost. When the drums came charging in I could feel the wave of low-frequency energy hitting me in the chest. Through the Dynaudio system the dynamic range of music was perfectly preserved.

Moving on to the DTS recording of Sting's Brand New Day [DTS 91061], the Audience system enveloped me in a three-dimensional soundstage. Sting's voice was smooth with nice weight, while instruments appeared with distinct outlines and accurate tonality. Guitars sounded full and palpable while at the same time sidestepping the artificial weight some speakers add to each pluck of a string. I had a hard time pulling myself away from this recording. The subtle atmospheric effects in songs like "Desert Rose" and "Ghost Story" created a very intoxicating presentation through the Dynaudio speakers.

Each vocal reinforced my opinion of the Audience system's very detailed midrange. Where other speakers would lose track of leading or trailing consonants and vowels, the Audience speakers would complete every word. I started hearing "ma" turn into "man" and "mine" prove to be "mind." The ability of a song to tell a story lies not only in the music, but also in the words of the lyric. The Dynaudio system's ability to capture these lyrics correctly made a song more complete and therefore more enjoyable. What the Dynaudios did not exhibit was a euphoric or tube-like quality to their upper frequencies that made female vocals and strings more seductive. What I experienced was a speaker that preferred to let the music speak for itself.

Danes versus

The Dynaudio Audience system came into my home right after Canton's Ergo system. I was very impressed with the Cantons and ultimately purchased them as my reference. The Cantons and the Dynaudios are, however, voiced quite differently.

The Dynaudio system's midrange sounds slightly more refined and coherent to my ear. Voices and strings are a tad warmer. The Cantons have a little more energy in their upper midrange and treble that is relatively unforgiving of poor recordings. Vocals on early '80s pop have a tendency to sound thin through the Cantons, whereas the Dynaudios' smoother character adds warmth, which has the effect of beefing-up harmonic structure.

The Canton system's upper-midrange sparkle added excitement to brass and strings without becoming harsh. When cymbals crashed, the Canton's aluminum-alloy tweeter filled the room with startling attack followed by a natural decay. The Dynaudios exhibited excellent detail and decay but without the immediacy that raises the hairs on the back of my neck. This immediacy furnishes the Cantons with a more involving sound, but made them more sensitive to equipment with less-refined high frequencies.

Bass from both of the front speakers is first-class, but different. The Dynaudio Audience 82s have punch and extension while the Canton Ergo 900 DCs are subjectively leaner and tighter. There were times when I thought the Dynaudio's powerful bass lacked definition since the Cantons pulled more information from complex bass lines. I also found the fuller bass of the Dynaudio Audience 82s required at least three feet from back and side walls. Otherwise, their bass had a tendency to get muddy and boom.

Impressive build quality and tuneful bass singled out Canton's AS 2 SC as the subwoofer of choice. Of course the Audience 82's bass capability made subwoofers a non-issue in my room. Larger rooms may even benefit more from using four of these formidable floorstanders with a high-power multichannel amplifier, rather than a sub.

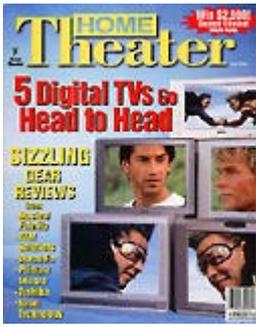
Conclusion

Dynaudio's newest Audience line will not only provide a very compelling home-theater experience, but also very involving music reproduction. The standout of this group is by far the Audience 82: Its combination of powerful, extended bass, refined midrange, and treble detail are a steal at the price. If you've thought about the Audience line in the past, but the vinyl finish turned you off, you can now have the bonus of real-wood veneer. The bottom line is that Dynaudio's Audience speakers deserve a strong look from anyone seeking a system in this price range.

Review System

Speakers - Canton Ergo 900 DC (mains), 300 DC (surrounds), CM 500 DC (center-channel), AS 2 SC (subwoofer)
Receiver - B&K AVR 305
Sources - Panasonic RP82S DVD player, Rotel RCD-991AE CD player, Sony CDP-XA7ES CD player
Cables - BetterCables
Monitor - Mitsubishi WT-46809 rear-projection widescreen monitor (with Duvetyne modification and red attenuation)

Link to review above - HomeTheaterSound.com



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Dynaudio Audience 42 Speaker System

It's not how big it is but what you do with it.

by Michael Trei

One thing that those of us who deal with equipment on a daily basis tend to forget is that the people who actually buy the stuff we evaluate live real lives, in real rooms, and often have real spouses and families to contend with. Back when I was working in a retail store, it was usually the guy who wanted the huge speakers and the wife or girlfriend who was hoping that all of the equipment could somehow just disappear. Let's face it: Most of us don't have the space for a dedicated home theater room, and we still need to live in our living rooms when we're not watching movies. To avoid having our home theater system take over our living space, many of us end up settling for a puny home-theater-in-a-box or, even worse, a shelf system. What if you could get a setup that had most of the qualities of

a big home theater system but that didn't dominate your space? As long as you're willing to make certain compromises, it can be done.

I've looked at several tiny speaker setups. In almost every case, the diminutive size of the speakers is due more to cost restraints than a wish to make something in a small package that will perform impressively. The Audience 42 is Danish manufacturer Dynaudio's least expensive system, yet it could hardly be called cheap. There are plenty of packages with huge speakers that you could get for the same amount of money, but they wouldn't approach this level of quality. Dynaudio's goal was to make the speakers smaller, not necessarily cheaper. Most of the cost concessions are in cosmetic areas rather than performance-related ones.

If you browse through a directory of hi-fi companies, you'll see that anyone and his brother can start a speaker company. All you need to do is slap some drivers and a crossover in a box, then go find some sucker to buy it. Dynaudio, on the other hand, is one of the few speaker manufacturers that makes all of their own drivers. These raw drivers are so widely respected that they are used by some of the best high-end companies around, including Wilson Audio and Totem Acoustic. The five main speakers in the Audience 42 system all use a 5.75-inch woofer that incorporates a characteristically huge 3-inch voice coil, along with a custom-designed version of Dynaudio's famous Esotec soft-dome tweeter. Although the main, center, and surround speakers have been carefully designed to perform best in a specific role, by using the same driver complement in all five speakers, the timbral match is likely to be excellent.

Although some people like to use in-wall models as stealth-like surround speakers, getting their sound to blend properly with the front speakers can sometimes be quite a challenge. Dynaudio's solution is the Audience 42W, which they describe as an on-wall speaker. This specially designed model uses a wider, shallower cabinet, allowing the speaker to be placed on the side walls without sticking out too far into your room. Again, the ports have been moved around to the front, and the bass can be further tuned using the provided foam plugs. Although the wider baffle is likely to make pinpoint imaging more difficult, this is not such a critical requirement for surround speakers, where you typically want a more-diffuse image. The 42W can be hung directly on the wall using the keyhole on the back or mounted using a bracket available from Dynaudio. The review samples were finished in the same petroleum-based cherry as the other speakers, although any of these models can be ordered in a white laminate with white grilles (for an additional cost), making them even less conspicuous.

I've always enjoyed the sound of a good two-way mini-monitor in my stereo system, and the Audience 42 certainly fits that bill. As I was breaking in the other speakers, I spent a week with the Audience 42s in place of the usual Quad Electrostatics in my two-channel setup, and I never really found myself missing my regular speakers. What struck me immediately was how refined the sound was. The high frequencies, in particular, had a combination of impressive detail and exceptional smoothness that you only hear in a speaker with an exceptional tweeter. As you would expect with a speaker this tiny, bass was somewhat curtailed, dropping off quickly below about 60 Hz. Up to that point, however, the bass was tight and tuneful, and the speaker was very communicative, tuneful, and engaging. Midrange detail was a strength, lending a transparency to the overall picture. With the wrong material, though, the upper midrange could sound a little forward at times. Little boxes are usually a good ingredient for achieving a focussed stereo image, and the Audience 42 delivers with an open, spacious sound capable of impressive depth.

Luckily, in a home theater system, we can hand the bass-playing requirements over to the subwoofer, and I found that I needed to play all five speakers in the small mode to get the best overall balance from the system. Sensitivity is not the Audience 42's forte, so don't get the impression that you can drive these little speakers with some puny little receiver. Because of the exceptional dynamic demands of many movie sound-tracks, I'd suggest a minimum of about 100 watts per channel to get a good sense of dynamic punch. Even then, dynamics are not going to be the Audience 42 ensemble's strong suit.

As I found with the two-channel setup, this system was at its best with more-natural-sounding movies and music, rather than when it was attempting to be an aural assault weapon. A movie like *Fight Club*, with its amazing surround effects and ambience that changes dramatically from scene to scene, really takes on a naturally relaxed quality that makes it simple to listen to for hours without suffering fatigue. This sense of ease was especially impressive with the center channel, and dialogue like Mr. Hand's voice in *Dark City* was amazingly clear and articulate. This center-channel speaker would perform well in many systems, even if the rest of the speakers were not from Dynaudio.

After considerable experimentation with the level and phase controls, and in getting the best possible placement, I found I was able to get an essentially seamless blend between the SUB-20A and the rest of the speakers. It's a pity that Dynaudio doesn't allow you to bypass the internal crossover in favor of the one in your pre/pro, as this would probably make the adjustments somewhat easier. Once you do have it locked in, the SUB-20A does a good job of

filling in the bottom two octaves, although without the air-moving capabilities of some of its competitors. As with the main speakers, the SUB-20A's strengths are its tunefulness and pitch accuracy—a far cry from some of those 12-inch cube woofers that have become the rage.

For someone trying to fit a home theater into a real living space, the Dynaudio Audience 42 system fits well into the often-neglected niche of really small speaker systems that don't skimp on quality. While it won't rouse the neighbors or assault your eardrums quite like some bigger systems, I suspect that these are not the qualities a potential purchaser will be looking for. Recommended.