

Audience 52



What Hi-Fi? Sound and Vision, September 2001

Try it with these: We build a system around the Dynaudios

Any system costing over two grand needs to be special, and that's exactly what this Roksan/Arcam/Dynaudio combination is. And we're not just talking straight sonic performance here: build, finish and the day-to-day usability are top notch, too.

The Caspian CD player may have been around a while now, but constant internal upgrades have enabled it to maintain its competitive edge among the sub f1000 competition. The move to Mk II status indicates that the player has undergone more significant changes than usual – though you'd never guess it as the casework is unchanged. The improvements are all to be found inside, and include an all-new circuitboard, packed full of upgraded components, plus an uprated analogue filter. The idea is to wring the last drop of performance from an already excellent design.

This Caspian is a lovely player to use. Its symmetrical button layout not only looks neat, but it's intuitive to operate, and the machine as a whole oozes class. Meanwhile, digital output is limited to electrical, the company choosing to use a BNC socket rather than the more normal RCA type on the grounds this gives better results.

While we could quite easily have gone for Roksan's matching Caspian amplifier, instead we've plumped for Arcam's terrific A85 for reasons of cost and features. This all-new design marks a real step forward for the Cambridge-based company, particularly when it comes to the manner in which the amp handles dynamics and low-level detail. Factor in a range of useful facilities, such as twin tape loops, switchable speakers and the option to upgrade to multichannel – though without on-board Dolby digital/DTS decoding – and the A85 makes a formidable case for itself.

Completing the system is our star turn: a pair of Dynaudio's superb Audience 52's. These speakers may be just mildly upgraded versions of the Award-winning Audience 50's, but the improvements are enough to keep them at the top of the pile in their price sector. Sure, we could complain about the rather plain aesthetics and vinyl wrapped cabinet, but when it comes to sheer sound they're untouchable at this price point.

Want plenty of detail with the sort of insight that lets you spot a production error at 10 paces? The Dynaudios deliver. Like to play music loud? No problem either, the 52s stay clean and dynamic long after most rivals have degenerated into aggressive, congested shadows of themselves. Just as importantly these monitors have no trouble going low without sacrificing the tunefulness and agility that all good standmounters possess. In short, the Dynaudios come closer to being all things to all people than any rival.

In combination these three components possess the same all-around competence, there being not a single area in which they perform below par. Spin the infectious hip-hop of Nelly's Country Grammar and the system's taut and tuneful low frequencies hit hard with sledgehammer solidity. A finely detailed midband allows the St Louis rapper's flowing vocal style to shine though, while the resolution ensures that his rapid delivery is decipherable – a real achievement considering how few systems can manage this.

An even-handed balance combined with excellent dynamics makes larger orchestral works such as Bruckner's Symphony No. 7 a joy to listen to. There's enough headroom to cope with wild crescendos and the sort of insight that allows the listener to follow the instrument of their choice without losing the musical thread of the piece. That's the real joy of this system: it lets you do exactly what you want without penalties. Poor recordings are revealed for what they are, yet even here this combo's innate musicality puts the musical message first. This trio may not be cheap, but it brings music to life in a priceless manner.



What Hi-Fi? Sound and Vision, September 2001

Speakers f450-f650

Dynaudio Audience 52

Rating: 5 Gold Stars

For: Terrific dynamics; timing abilities; low-end punch.

Against: They're no lookers thanks to that plain vinyl wrap.

Verdict: A formidable array of talents means the Audience 52s will prove hard to beat in this test.

The 52's are Dynaudio's revamp of an Award-winning design – the 50 Mk II's. The differences between the two models are subtle indeed, amounting to little more than a fine-

tunes crossover and mid/bass driver, plus a strengthening of the vinyl-covered enclosure.

The Dynaudios are certainly no lookers, that plain vinyl wrap being the reason, but the changes result in a mild gain in transparency and bass control, and are enough to ensure that this design is at the leading edge in terms of sonic ability.

Set up on solid stands and positioned at least 30cm from the rear wall, the Dynaudios produce a soundstage that's impressively expansive. The integration between the in-house drive units is immaculate, resulting in a cohesion and openness that really draws the listener into the music.

Play Missy Elliot's latest set and the combination of terrific dynamics and pinpoint rhythmical precision insures the music storms along on a wave of thumping basslines and hard-hitting drum machines.

Unlike most rivals here, these speakers are perfectly happy at higher volume settings too, and have no trouble coping with the Gladiator soundtrack at kidney-vibrating levels.

The Audience 52's are hard to fault. Take care to partner them with an amplifier that's punchy and dynamic and they could well blow you away.

The disappointments here are B&W's CM2's and Monitor Audio's Studio 2's. True, the B&W's look great and are packed full of proven technology, but they fail to satisfy. As do the Monitor Audios, which despite a mild crossover rework and a £100 price cut still prove a real letdown when matched with the best this group has to offer.

The likes of the Cyrus CLS 50's, Mission 781's and Linn Katans only just miss top honours. Both the Cyrus' and Missions fall short due to their low frequency performance while the Linns provide exciting, if slightly lean, results.

This leaves the ATC SCM 7's AVI Neutron III's and the Dynaudio Audience AVI's. The AVI's provide a fantastic amount of information without ever letting the limitations of their size intrude excessively. Ditto the ATC's, except more so. These tiny tots equal the AVI's in terms of midrange and treble performance, yet manage to add a greater degree of insight to the mix along with better weight at lower frequencies.

However, the best speakers here are the Dynaudio Audience 52's. They aren't pretty, but they sing ever so sweetly. And they're great with all musical genres, which makes them worthy winners.



What Hi-Fi? April 2001
Tight tunes from 52s

For: Great dynamics and punch; excellent resolution and timing.

Against: Finish is still a vinyl wrap.

Verdict: A great design that's just been made even better. Highly recommended for all types of music.

Think of the Audience 52s as the Award-winning Audience 50s with a mild makeover and you've hit the mark. Dynaudio has carried out mild tweaks to the crossover and mid/bass driver, and has strengthened the cabinet, all of which results in tighter bass performance and a small increase in transparency, without sacrificing the all-round competence of the old model.

These single-wired speakers storm through pop tracks such as Sugarbabes' infectious 'Overload' with real enthusiasm. There's plenty of slam to the low frequencies, which remain tight and tuneful, while the midrange is pleasantly open giving great insight into the group's vocals.

A spin of Prokofiev's Romeo & Juliet proves that the Audience 52s remain coherent across the frequency range. The 17cm polypropylene mid/bass driver has no trouble delivering the sound with verve, while the 28mm silk-dome tweeter produces one of the most detailed high frequency performances this sort of money will buy.

The really great thing about these rear-ported speakers is that they're not particularly fussy about positioning. Keep them at least 30cm out from the back wall and away from side walls and they'll be happy. Good dispersion from the tweeter means that toe-in isn't essential, although doing this does firm up the imaging a little.

A sensitivity of 86 dB/W/m is pretty much normal for this type of speaker, though the 4ohm nominal impedance means that an amplifier with a good current supply, such as Roksan's Caspian or Musical Fidelity's A3, would be a good choice.

As you'll have gathered by now, we really like the Dynaudio Audience 52s. They're great at communicating the musical message and at this price there are very few rivals that produce a more coherent and appealing sound.

Audience 50 Reviews (previous model)



TEST LOUDSPEAKERS: Dynaudio Audience 50 £577
Extract reprinted with permission from **July 1998 – WHAT HI FI?**

It's never wise to make snap judgements when choosing hi-fi, but some speakers you know are right the moment you hear them. Dynaudio's Audience 50s are among them, their big, detailed sound being instantly beguiling. More to the point, their appeal is just as strong many hours of listening later.

In the context of the Dynaudio range, these are affordable speakers. The cabinets appear just a little bland alongside the company's more upmarket designs, but what they lose in aesthetics they make up in engineering. There's a 28mm silk-dome tweeter, and a 17cm polypropylene cone with an unusually large centre, driven by a similarly well-sized voice coil, the manufacturer claiming improved dispersion and resonance control.

While size (33x20x26cm) is second largest only to the Operas in this test, their sonic scale is second to none. Real substance, a sense of drama, and impressively wide bandwidth - of all the speakers here these are most able to fill large spaces without getting lost. Their open and expressive midrange helps spread music far beyond their cabinet confines.

Their weight and slam delivers Nirvana with real depth and power, and their ability dig up the copious quantities of bass on the Massive Attack CD is unparalleled here. In fact, there are times when they deliver a little too much bass - in too small a space or too close to room boundaries, they have a tendency to boom. In free space, however, their weight is wondrous. And with more spacious and delicate recordings - Cowboy Junkies' The Trinity Sessions and Fauré's Requiem - the Dynaudios prove captivating.

We found the Audience 50s quite a demanding load for amps, as their 4ohm impedance and 86dB/W/m sensitivity suggests. Also, they can sound a little hard at times with compressed, low-fi recordings (indie and dance fans take note). But for musical satisfaction with amps of a similar calibre, this is truly a sound of substance.

Sound: 5-stars Build: 3-stars Compatible: 3-stars Verdict: 5-stars

Conclusion

Standmounters may not carry off the sheer bass extension or volume of floorstanders, but for sonic balance and focus they're often considerably more accomplished than their larger equivalents. Almost all the designs here came up trumps, and a long audition is wise. Our favourites are the captivating Dynaudios, just nudging the Harbeths into second place.

SKANDERBORGIAN NIGHTS

By Wayne Garcia

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Skanderborg, Denmark, is a craggy hamlet surrounded by a wealth of forests and lakes. It rains a lot there, too (something we El Niño-soaked North Americans can relate to). What Skanderborg lacks is inhabitants: just under 8,000 people call it home. As you might imagine, there isn't a whole lot to do in sleepy Skanderborg. And so it happened that an odd cult developed among its citizenry. Not a cult of any strange religion, nor one devoted to overthrowing the government, nor the worship of an athletic shoe. Instead, the good folk of Skanderborg developed an obsession with loudspeaker design. So strong was this obsession that some twenty years ago they started a speaker design and manufacturing company and called it Dynaudio.

Today, Dynaudio is one of the foremost suppliers of "raw" drivers to manufacturers of home and studio speaker systems. It's possible that the speakers you're listening to as you read this article use Dynaudio drivers. Yet, building drivers for other companies is but a small part of Dynaudio's business. What it mostly builds-and would like the world to know about-are complete speaker systems (there are fifteen models in the current Dynaudio lineup).

When I say Dynaudio "builds" speakers I mean it really builds speakers. Talk about obsession-the natural glue used in the cabinetry was developed in-house and the damping materials used inside the cabinets are made with natural fibers, a far more costly alternative to synthetics, but better for the environment-and for you.

The \$899-per pair Audience 50 is a familiar looking stand-mounted, monitor sized speaker. Unlike its more costly relatives it comes wrapped in "rosewood" "black ash" and "light cherry" vinyl - not one of the aged, hand-selected and finished veneers the company boasts of so proudly (though the 50's innards are built to the same high standards as the top speakers in Dynaudio's line). The Audience 50s are supplied with oversize foam corks for plugging the rear-firing port when the speakers are placed near a wall. I recommend forgetting about them and accepting the fact that this speaker-like pretty much all the rest of 'em-needs room to breathe. (I did try them close to a wall and, though useable with or without the plugs, they weren't at their best and sounded closed-in and somewhat hoarse, as if suffering from a summer cold.)

What you will get by putting them on a nice rigid stand, roughly three feet from the rear wall, is a speaker very much like many another of its type - that is, impressive bass down to 45 - 50 cycles, a bigger-than-it-looks stage, pinpoint imaging, and quite a good sense of depth. There is, however, one important difference between the Audience 50 and others of its ilk - it sports a dome tweeter made of fabric, not metal (today's ubiquitous choice). Now, I'm not one of those critics who believes all metal domes sound like metal-cold, bright, and ringy - though many of them do. But once you've spent a bit of time with a good fabric dome, and Dynaudio's are among the best to be had, you notice an undeniable ease in the upper octaves, a smooth, extended sweetness that is most appealing.

What puts the Audience 50 in a class above most of them is its fabric dome tweeter, which, alone with the speaker's warm tonal balance, allows one to listen for hours at a time.

Try a recording like Mary Stallings' *Fine And Mellow* [Clarity], one of the most realistic sounding jazz vocal discs I know of. This is a tricky record because it is so good that it can make even mediocre stuff sound better than it really is. But it's also got enough booby traps in it so that once you get used to it you can use it as a reference disc. On the track "Lazy Afternoon," there is a shimmering tree of bells that appears here and there throughout the song that can sound hard, pingy, or glassy, depending on the tweeter. With the Audience 50, the sound was extended, yet it didn't ping. It floated and shimmered with none of the edgy bite you'll hear with some metal domes. Likewise, Jimmy Cobb's cymbals, the upper reaches of Miles' muted trumpet, and the tenor and alto mirlans whipped up by Coltrane and Cannonball on *Kind Of Blue* were all quite natural; they had force but never caused me to wince or rush to lower the volume.

Stallings' voice, which has a natural reediness, a smoke-sexy rasp to it, was warm and chesty, always smooth, and ever-so-slightly caramelized-romantic, but very pleasing. This quality was evident with a range of vocalists from Renata Tebaldi to Frank Sinatra to Rickie Lee Jones.

In its useable bass range the Audience 50 has the slightly plasticky sound one often hears with polymer cones, good (if not super) definition, and pretty impressive wallop for a little fella.

There are a number of speakers (especially from England) in the Audience 50's size and price range that share many of its strengths in the bass and mid frequencies. What puts the Audience 50 in a class above most of them is its fabric dome tweeter, which, along with the speaker's warm tonal balance, allows one to listen for hours at a time. Just the thing for those long Skanderborgian nights.