

Audience 42 C



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.



Home Theater, June 2001

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.

The Audience 42C center channel uses the same two drivers as the main Audience 42. Note that I said two drivers. That's right: Unlike most center speakers that have two woofers flanking the tweeter (seemingly in a desperate attempt to preserve symmetry), the 42C gets along just fine with a single woofer and probably benefits from a wider listening window because of this approach. The problem with side-by-side woofers is that an off-center listener is going to hear rather ragged midrange response, due to the comb filtering created when two drivers reproducing the same signal are different distances from your noggin. One way to get around this issue is to make a three-way center channel, which allows the crossover to the woofers to be low enough so that it won't matter as much, but I actually like Dynaudio's approach more. As this speaker is more likely to be used in a cabinet near a TV set, the company decided to move the port from the back to the front, and again there is a foam plug you can stick in the port to dampen the woofer's movement in the low bass.

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 sub woofer, 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 ensembles 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.



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Dynaudio Audience Home Theater Speaker System
Well Balanced for Your Audio Protection
By Mike McGann

In a small factory in Denmark, Dynaudio has spent most of the last 17 or so years turning out speakers, slowly. In an average year, only about 30,000 speakers leave the factory. Like a fine wine, Dynaudio takes its time. Such patience has won the company fans, including the BBC, which is using its drivers for monitors in its recording studio in London. Sony, of all companies, uses Dynaudio speakers in its studios in New York and Tokyo.

In fairness, this high level of quality has generally come at a pretty high price. Thankfully, the company has slowly and quietly been moving toward somewhat more affordable price levels, without resorting to mass production methods. This introduction of the Audience line of speakers a couple of years back was a nice foray into the mid-priced speaker market.

We were able to get the new, updated Audience 62 towers (which replace the well-liked 60s), with Audience 42 monitors for the surround, matched to the 42C center-channel speaker. The low-end grunt comes from the Audience 20A sub, which features a 90-watt amp powering a front-firing 10-inch driver. While the entire system, at just under \$4,000 is not exactly budget minded, it makes sense to spend a bit on speakers if you've already spent \$3,000 to \$4,000 on electronic. I matched the new Audience system to Onkyo's TX-DS989 a/v receiver, in art for its ability to handle six-channel DVD-Audio inputs.

Not being the patient type, I put off my usual testing of the system in stereo mode and instead dove right in using JVC's wondrous XV-D723GD DVD-Audio player (reviewed elsewhere in this issue). Using Emerson, Lake & Palmer's Brain Salad Surgery, an album programmed into my head by my older brother Jim back in the days of Nixon, I was completely blown away.

In part, I was wowed by the whole DVD-Audio thing, which I address elsewhere inn this issue. Mostly, I was seriously impressed at how well integrated this Audience system is. A lot of the first DVD-Audio releases use pans and rotation, as John Kellogg of Dolby did in his loving remix of this title. If the rears of centers are not perfectly matched to the mains, it would be pretty obvious quickly.

Thankfully, Dynaudio's 42 and 42C work exceptionally well with the 62s. It took a bit more work with the 20A subwoofer to get it to sound good, mostly fiddling with the crossover point and the gain (volume). Since you can't easily fix any speaker system shortcomings with your receiver (the DVD-Audio path runs directly through tot he amps, bypassing the digital-to-analog converters), this Audience system is perfect for matching with your brand-spanking-new DEV-A player.

Eventually, I did get around to listening to primitive two-channel audio, resorting to my usual test discs, Queen's A Day at the Races completely cooked, with warm bass and a strong midrange. The sound stage was very deep and wide, and detail was nothing short of miraculous. Once in a great while, I did notice a bit of spittiness on the high end, and some vocals, such as Freddie Mercury's in Somebody to Love , sounded a tiny bit brittle, but not enough to really bother me.

Not surprisingly, I found the Dynaudios even better with movie soundtracks, such as Star Trek: first Contact and Dances With Wolves. The 42C, with its single woofer, delivered sharp and clear dialogue and kept audio pans around the front very smooth. I did notice that the sub seemed t lack punch slightly once in a while, something that seemed more noticeable while watching movies that wen listening to music. If it were up to me, I'd have probably opted for the slightly more powerful 30A sub, which would probably resolve my issues. The 20A seems better suited to a smaller system, maybe on made up entirely of Audience 42s.

The more I used these speakers, the more I found they lacked any serious weakness, no matter how I used them. Considering the number of systems I've heard that are either excellent for music of movies but merely competent for the other, Dynaudio has done a nice job creating a product that seems to suit any audio purpose.

While I picked a couple of very minor nits, rest assured that the Audience system is right at the top of the class for this price range. I've heard systems that are better, but only at prices that would drain the blood from you face in a nanosecond. Keep in mind, I've heard system that cost more than twice as much as the Dynaudios but don't sound half as good.

If you've been thinking about upgrading to an audiophile-grade home theater system, the Dynaudio Audience speaker line is a great place to start, although opt for the bigger subwoofer. From what I heard, you'll be very happy, whether you love movies or music.