

WHAT FLAVOUR IS YOUR AUDIO?

inner ear

DISCOVER HIGH END

2 Digital Players

EMM Labs
NAD Master Series

Sonus faber
serves up
some tasty
Italian treats



**Cables leave you stranded?
Here are three that will
leave you 99.99999% sure**

\$7.95 CDN \$6.95 USA



CD reviews / Savvy Audiophile
Speakers: System Audio & Coherent
Amps: Bonasus & NAD / Lavry Engineering DAC & more

ROCK ON

SYSTEM AUDIO EXPLORER LOUDSPEAKERS DO A LOT OF THINGS WELL, BUT THEY'RE KILLER ROCKERS

BY ERNIE FISHER



FACTS

MODEL
SA Explorer

MANUFACTURER
System Audio AS

FINISH OPTIONS
Maple, Cherry and
(optional) custom
satin colours

WEIGHT
30 kg

DIMENSIONS
48 (h) 7 (w) 13 (d)

RATING
3.5

PRICE
\$6,500/pr US
\$7,999/pr Cdn

CONTACT USA:
Sonic Integrity
(562) 949-0955

Canada:
KonnectSon
Canada Inc.
905.372.3548
System-audio.com

FOUNDED IN 1984 by Ole Witthoft, Danish manufacturer System Audio began making waves with a loudspeaker design that earned accolades from the Danish press as a "speaker that sets new standards." The company name was chosen to describe the manufacturer's belief that loudspeakers, when inserted into a system configuration, will take on a unique personality. The design under review is a bit different from other speakers in the marketplace (see Technology sidebar).

Appearance

THESE ENCLOSURES AREN'T much different from any other six-sided loudspeakers, except that the fit and finish is typically European, resulting in a tall and slim cabinet with immaculate veneer resting on larger plinths.

The Sound

TO ESTABLISH A loudspeaker's merit, I usually connect it to as many amps as I have in-house. I connected the Explorers to my in-house Wyetech Lab Topaz amp (reviewed in Vol. 13, No. 2)/Opal preamp (reviewed in Vol. 10, No. 2) system, the Simaudio Moon Evolution system (reviewed in the last issue) and the Musical Fidelity kW integrated amp (reviewed in Vol. 17, No. 1). The sole source component used was the Simaudio Andromeda CD player (reviewed in the last issue), JPS Labs Aluminata (reviewed in the last issue) and Nordost Valhalla (reviewed in Vol. 13, No. 2) cables, the Nordost Thor power distribution centre (reviewed in Vol. 16, No. 4) and the Exact Power EP-15A line conditioner (reviewed in Vol. 16, No. 3) completed the set-up for all my auditioning sessions.

First up, I used the Simaudio amp/preamp combo to drive the Explorers, playing back some raunchy blues. I took the volume level

slowly up to about 110dB and was surprised how the speakers handled both low and high volume with the same ability — steadfast and resolute across the entire frequency range. While not achieving absolute realism, the sound was quite spectacular. Classical music featuring large orchestras didn't fare quite as well as the numerous instruments merged a little too much, packing the sound stage with the performers without enough air. However, smaller ensembles, such as quartets — strings in classical music and piano, drums, bass and horn in a jazz arrangement — finished without flaws and with the appropriate time and space elements to make the music quite realistic. When it came to sophisticated and cerebral musical material, such as Bach's organ arrangements, Vivaldi's The Four Seasons or Handel's Messiah, I thought the Explorers did a very respectable job in all but the very top frequencies. These I found a little too much in my face, albeit without jarring or unpleasant shrillness.

Next, I tried the Musical Fidelity amplifier and achieved similar results. While resolution was a bit diminished, musicality scored very high. This was an easy-to-listen-to combination, providing the kind of listening thrill that makes one savour the music. Not surprising, the efficient Explorers sounded great when I inserted the Wytech Labs Topaz/Opal combination into the system. The signature smoothness of the Topaz and its ability to blossom with the right speaker combination were clearly evident. I liked the sound of this configuration best for it provided all the good stuff that I appreciate in high-end audio: immaculate imaging, resolution through all frequencies, loads of space/air around instruments and great transparency.

The Explorers' bass appeared to be quite good, with resolution down to about 35Hz, although not very well defined below that frequency. My initial beef was that the bass sounded detached from frequencies above it, and I was about to grumble when I remembered the small opening on the front baffle, through which the enclosures can be filled with lead-shot or sand. Well, I filled them with kitty litter, and — bang! — there it was, a much more coherent all-round sound. The bass now had weight and, in addition to extending resolution to about 30Hz, blended well with frequencies above. In fact, the audible

frequency range became somewhat better tempered, especially noticeable in the top frequencies.

I enjoy listening to music at approximately the same volume levels I'd experience at a live concert. However, it wasn't until I hit rock-concert levels that the Explorers sounded most realistic with all amps employed for this review. When I increased the gain until volume hit 120dB and played back heavy rock, the speakers captured the essential dynamics of the drums, the texture of the electric bass, the sound of an electric keyboard as well as the pitch of voices — all without a trace of distortion. There was no distortion. All in all, the Explorers' best performance was achieved when the loading cavity was filled with kitty litter, but I have a hunch (based on my past experiments with loading) that a combination of lead shot and sand would have provided even better sound.

Synopsis & Commentary

EVERY LOUDSPEAKER MANUFACTURER has a story, and some have opinions they'd like you to accept as biblical truth. I, for one, like to listen to the stories, but disregard the opinions when it comes to my auditioning sessions. I will, however, leave no stone unturned to discover what the equipment is all about.

System Audio recommends placing the enclosures close to a (rear) wall, which is said to enforce bass energy, reconcile frequency variations at the listening position and, ultimately, improve the viability of system set-up in a small room. If you have read some of my earlier editorials you will know that I do not generally buy into this set-up procedure. However, having put it to the test during this evaluation, I was forced to admit that it worked, albeit with front-to-back imaging limitations. I then positioned the loud-

The tweeter is one of System Audio's new designs in which an extremely thin membrane reacts rapidly to incoming signals, it weighs only 80mg



speakers according to my own set-up technique — six feet from the rear wall and three feet from side walls — and was rewarded with front-to-back dimensions, focus on instruments and voices and space, as well as solid bass. In other words, my set-up achieved what I wanted of the Explorers without diminishing

performance at all. In the end, it's what you, the end-user, prefer; all I can do is guide you by telling you what to expect. So expect a very good loudspeaker that works very well with all music genres, but may be the best rock'n roll loudspeaker I have yet auditioned. Try a pair; they are worthy of your attention.

TECHNOLOGY

I BECOME NATURALLY suspicious when I see many drivers popped into an enclosure; my skepticism is rooted in past experience with similar designs that often resulted in a kind of disconnection of high and low frequencies. However, in this case my concerns were uncalled for, as you'll see in my evaluation of the sound.

The System Audio Loudspeakers Model Explorer are two and one half-way, ported designs using four 5½-inch

drivers and a tweeter between the top and second driver, in a quasi D'Appolito arrangement. Two ports on the rear of each enclosure are arranged to complement the design's single chamber.

Noteworthy here is the driver array: the tweeter is one of System Audio's new designs in which an extremely thin membrane reacts rapidly to incoming signals. It weighs only 80mg (likely the world's lightest

membrane) and is set into what is called a wave guide, to control its dispersion. The company calls this XS technology, whereby the reflections are steered away from the enclosures and distributed over a large listening area. The four woofers were developed specifically for System Audio and feature, in addition to very light cones, a new motor system with two voice coils.

In this design all four woofers reproduce bass;

upper bass utilizes only one voice coil while low bass is handled by the dual voice coil arrangement. Midrange is reproduced by the two upper woofers. Frequency range is from 30Hz to 35kHz; sensitivity is 90dB watt/metre; crossover points are 900Hz and 3,000Hz; impedance is 4 ohms.

The enclosures are immaculately braced and offer a solid resonance-inhibiting environment for this multiple driver design.