

# System Audio saxo 40

Best known for its 'silverback' speakers, SA also has a range of affordable, compact 'saxo' floorstanders

Review: Mark Craven Lab: Paul Miller

**S**ystem Audio's product catalogue, although spanning only three loudspeaker 'families', aims to offer a solution for almost every eventuality. The Danish manufacturer, based in Roskilde, west of Copenhagen, makes on-wall models, including the legend 7.2 [HFN Mar '22], AV-specific centre channel enclosures and subs, plus various standmounts and floorstanders. Many can be bought in active 'Silverback' guise (or upgraded at a later date), their potential then expandable via DSP 'RAM tweaks' and a WiSA-based wireless streaming hub [HFN Aug '21]. There is, to put it mildly, a lot going on.

Even the affordable, passive saxo 40, tested here, feels a little unusual. A two-way floorstander, its mission statement is 'big sound without big speakers'. We've heard this objective parroted before by many brands, but System Audio appears keen to take it to the extreme, resulting in a speaker that measures a meagre 85cm high, not to mention just 16cm wide, excluding its plinth stand. It's by far the most diminutive tower speaker that's ever graced my listening room, albeit part of a new breed of down-sized models that want to bridge the divide between standmount and floorstander [see boxout, p73].

## SMALL TALK

It's best to remember that System Audio has left out the word 'relatively' when discussing that 'big sound'. The moment you see the saxo 40, and its £999 price tag, you'll realise that it isn't going to challenge larger (and costlier) speakers when it comes to soundstage scale, output or full-range ability. Temper your expectations, however, and you might find it's just the ticket in a room where space is limited, or the general belief is that hi-fi should be heard but not seen.

Adding to its discreet charms is a clean, unobtrusive – and, dare I say it, Scandinavian – aesthetic. The saxo 40 is available in white or black satin finishes (given multiple polishes for a nice sheen), with all-black driver materials/fixings and

no company branding on the cabinets. The supplied grilles, in both black or white allow you to best match your décor, and carry an 'SA' badge. The cost-conscious saxo range loses the gentle curves of the legend models, and the outrigger feet, but otherwise feels cut from the same hand-built-in-Denmark cloth.

There are nine other models in the family, with the top spot taken by the larger, three-way saxo 60 (£1450). Below this is another floorstander, the saxo 50 (£1299), which approaches the compact speaker idea from another angle, measuring a more conventional 105cm high but an ultra-slim 13cm wide. Filling out the rest of the range are bookshelf, centre, on-wall and active models.

## PLINTH CHARMING

The saxo 40 features a pair of 140mm treated paper bass/mid drivers, working together across the same frequency range, and with output bolstered by a rear-facing bass-reflex port. A 4th-order crossover ties them to the loudspeaker's T25DXT Ti tweeter, a 25mm soft dome design framed by a patented 'DXT' acoustic lens/waveguide that aims to improve the speaker's high-frequency directivity.

Rated sensitivity is 89dB, and nominal impedance is given as a broad '4-8ohm'. Taken at face value, these figures might suggest an easy enough drive for an amp [see PM's Lab Report, p75] although System Audio does also say the speaker should be used in a 'good music system'.

Meanwhile, installation is as easy as it ever gets for a floorstander. The saxo 40's slim plinth stands are pre-attached, which both saves you time with Allen keys and screwdrivers, and gives you something handy to grip on to while you lift them into position (not that they are in any way heavy, weighing a moderate 12.2kg). Rubber feet and spikes are supplied.

**RIGHT:** The two 140mm 'treated paper' bass/midrange units marry up with a 25mm soft dome tweeter fitted with a DXT lens/waveguide (developed with the Danish patent holder)



## SPACE SAVING

It can be easy to think of domestic loudspeakers falling into two clear camps – floorstanders and standmounts – but System Audio's saxo 40 is one of a number of models that takes the design of the former to challenge the appeal of the latter. Buyers get the small footprint they desire without needing to budget extra for stands, plus a more visually elegant solution. Manufacturers, meanwhile, can use the additional cabinet volume to accommodate more or larger drivers, improve bass response and sensitivity.

Fellow compact floorstanders include Scansonic's 935mm-tall M20 [HFN Sep '21], Cambridge Audio's 950mm SX80 [HFN Apr '21] and B&W's 985mm 603 S2 Anniversary Edition [HFN Jan '21], all models that take the basic tower speaker form factor but slim it down for easier installation. UK company Neat Acoustics, with its Iota Alpha and Explorer [HFN Oct '16 and Jul '18], has instead upgraded its Iota standmount to 'mini' floorstander status. Both feature a bass/mid driver and AMT tweeter on an angled baffle to 'lift' the output to typical ear height, even while the cabinets (*sans* spikes) reach a mere 450mm and 740mm, respectively. Down-firing bass drivers – plus isobaric loading with a second driver on the larger model – are on hand to deliver a full-range performance.

Where to put them? Those rear-firing ports might give you pause about siting the saxo 40 close to a rear wall, even if the recommended distance is 5cm to 35cm. That said, this is one loudspeaker that I found clearly benefited from some boundary gain, and the installation I ended up with gave them 20cm clearance. System Audio also recommends a distance between the cabinets of 2.5m to 3m. I opted for the minimum, finding this – plus toe-in – yielded the best central image.

## STAR TURN

Many will admire the saxo 40 for its bijou construction but wonder if its size limits its performance, and when it comes to soundstaging it does, to a certain degree. However, System Audio's double contingent of bass/mid drivers means it never sounds small or shy – this speaker feels like it has an awful lot of heave and ho in reserve considering it sells for just under a grand. Indeed, its bass handling is often its star turn, even while the saxo 40 has been tuned to deliver a top end that sparkles without sounding overly bright or brittle.

Give the speaker pairing a push from a reasonably proficient amp (there's not the feeling of valve-friendly sensitivity here) and you're rewarded with a lively, dynamic sound that you might not be expecting. Such a performance came with Arch Enemy's 2017 album *Will To*

**LEFT:** The cabinet is available in white or black satin finishes with matching black or white fabric-over-board grilles. A spiked plinth improves the loudspeaker's stability

*Power* [Century Media 88985458362], which finds the Swedish metal group in typically assured form, mixing ferocious blast beats with euphoric melodies and plenty of distortion. 'Set Flame To The Night' needed the saxo 40 to separate the twin guitar parts – and wailing police siren in the background – to keep it listenable as the mix thickened. It then leapt gleefully into 'The Race', slamming out the million-miles-per-minute drums with appreciable heft and capturing the snarl of Alyssa White-Gluz's almost impenetrable vocals.

This isn't a piece that requires much in the way of subtle imaging or tonal acrobatics. Mike Oldfield's 'Cochise' [...

*The Best Of: 1992-1993*; Warner Music; Tidal MQA], on the other hand, is all about the variances in his guitar tones, the sedate pacing, and ethereal backing track. Notes are left to ring out, and the saxo 40 did a good job of intimating an open, airy mix. I did crave more presence in the midband, however, to really let me zone in on Oldfield's playing, while I also missed the upbeat nature the speaker had shown earlier.

## 'It slammed out the million-miles-per-minute drums'

Right on cue, my Tidal desktop app threw up another track named 'Cochise', this time by a duo named Orson Welsh and DJ Maus, from a compilation album titled *Big Room Bangers, Vol. 21* [44.1kHz/16-bit]. This, with its pounding kick drums, deep bass and male vocals, sounded hugely thrilling.

In his Lab Report [p75] PM notes the low position of the saxo 40's tweeter, and it does make this speaker one that's

## LAB REPORT

### SYSTEM AUDIO SAXO 40

**LEFT:** The saxo 40's two bass/mid units are reflex-loaded via a substantial rear port. The 2.2kHz crossover is not split so connections are made via a single set of 4mm terminals in a recessed panel

been designed to torture hi-fi systems, was revealing. Opening high-frequency keyboard whistles had a slightly gritty texture, sounding momentarily discordant rather than sweet and pure, but way below these the speaker latched on to the deep synthesiser hums.

#### ON A MISSION

Mark Knopfler's simplistic, two-note calling card was clean and clear, cutting through a little more than the background percussion. His vocals had an authentic texture, but what was perhaps most impressive was the saxo 40's presentation of John Illsley's bass playing, his runs up and down the fretboard sounding unencumbered by bloom or smear, and part of a bigger musical picture without dominating. System Audio doesn't supply any foam inserts to short the saxo 40's bass-reflex port, and the speaker doesn't need it.

The Dire Straits track ends with an extended outro where piano chords fight for space with crash cymbals, bass guitar and hard-hit snares, and the saxo 40 kept pace in terms of both rhythm and dynamics. And with Lorne Balfe's orchestral/electronic hybrid score for *Mission: Impossible – Fallout* [Paramount Music; 44.1kHz/16-bit download], which is packed with low brass and strings, dramatic crescendos and ratta-tat percussion, it sounded big, as advertised. Mission accomplished. ☺



both a little odd to look at and odd to listen to. I had no issues with it from my seating position, but standing up to leave the room brought a noticeable change in its frequency characteristic. The jangly guitars of The Bluetones' 'Talking To Clarry' [Expecting To Fly; Mercury 5316570] became somewhat dulled, and, more so than with other floorstanders, I felt I could peer 'over the top' of the soundstage. Back in the vertical sweet spot, however, singer Mark Morris's soft, pleading vocals enjoyed good projection.

Dire Straits' 'Telegraph Road' [*Love Over Gold*; Vertigo 800 088-2], a track that seems to have

#### HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

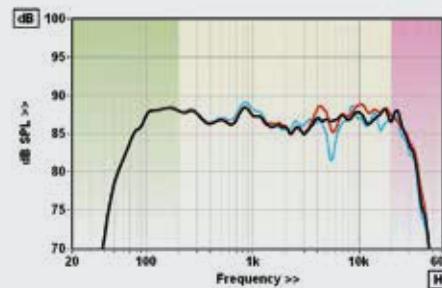
SA's compact floorstander isn't going to crush you with a wall of sound, but weigh this against its accommodating size and price point and it retains plenty of appeal. Thanks to its bass/mid twin-set, the saxo 40 has a low-end poise that belies its dimensions, coupled with a lively demeanour that makes the speaker a great partner for upbeat, full-range music. And you can put it wherever you want...

Sound Quality: 84%

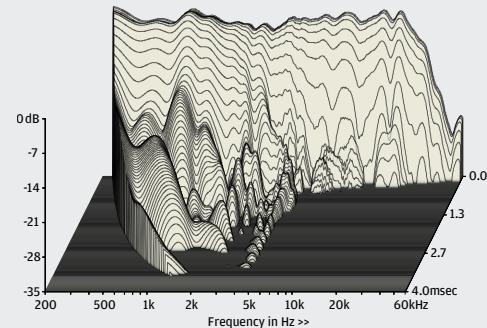


Unless you are slumped into a beanbag the nominal listening axis for the saxo 40 will be above the top of the cabinet, the off-axis uniformity of the T25DXTi tweeter being aided by System Audio's peripheral DXT acoustic lens. Measured a few inches above the tweeter, the saxo's forward response shows a gently declining output from the two W1408 bass/mid units up to the 2.2kHz crossover [Graph 1], after which there's a peak in output at 4.5kHz in one of our pair, possibly supplemented by an out-of-band resonance from one of these same drivers [CSD waterfall, Graph 2]. Above 7kHz the treble is well managed, extending to a creditable 34kHz (-6dB re. 10kHz). The overall response uniformity is a good ±1.8dB and ±1.7dB, respectively, but not for the first time we have SA speakers whose pair matching (1.7dB) is influenced by an irregularity in one sample – here between 4-7kHz. Either way, the grille (white or black!) introduces a deep -8dB cancellation notch at 5.6kHz [blue trace, Graph 1].

Bass is good to 65Hz (-6dB re. 200Hz) thanks to the identical 79-420Hz bandwidth of the two drivers, supplemented by the broad 50Hz tuning of the rear port. Deeper bass is achievable as you experiment with speaker placement near, but not too near, rear walls. The 87.3dB sensitivity is below SA's rated 89dB/1kHz, and the more representative 500Hz-8kHz average of 86.6dB is lower still, but this might be expected for a box and drivers of this size. Moreover this is offered without imposing too harsh a load – a min. impedance of 4.3ohm/190Hz but a tougher EPDR of 1.7ohm, partially mitigated as it occurs at a higher 3.9kHz after a big swing in impedance phase of -59° at crossover. PM



ABOVE: Response inc. nearfield summed driver/port [green], freefield corrected to 1m at 2.83V [yellow], ultrasonic [pink]. Left, black; right, red; w grille, blue



ABOVE: Resonance correlates with peak in response at 800Hz [see Graph 1] and driver modes at 2-5kHz

#### HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL/1m/2.83V – 1kHz/Mean/IEC)	87.3dB / 86.6dB / 84.8dB
Impedance modulus: minimum & maximum (20Hz–20kHz)	4.3ohm @ 190Hz 29.6ohm @ 96Hz
Impedance phase: minimum & maximum (20Hz–20kHz)	-59° @ 2.5kHz +44° @ 83Hz
Pair matching/Resp. error (200Hz–20kHz)	1.7dB / ±1.8dB/±1.7dB
LF/HF extension (-6dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	65Hz / 33.3kHz/33.6kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m)	0.7% / 0.25% / 0.65%
Dimensions (HWD) / Weight (each)	845x165x250mm / 12kg