

Pint-Sized Mind Blower

Usher S-520 Mini-Monitors

Back in the cartoon-watching days of my youth, I was a big fan of Mighty Mouse. Something in my personality really responded to the idea of the little fellow performing heroic deeds far out of proportion to his size, and that same something is probably what makes me love good mini-monitor loudspeakers today. I get a real thrill when I hear a small, affordable speaker produce an almost impossibly big sound, and one such is the \$300/pair Usher S-520 that is the subject of this review.

Since Usher is not yet a household word among audio and home-theater enthusiasts in the US, perhaps some background is in order. Usher Audio Technology is a relatively large high-end audio company based in Taiwan; its primary products are loudspeakers and a growing line of electronics. The firm's hallmarks are a passionate commitment to sound *and* build quality (both of which apply from the most to the least expensive models in the product line), serious expertise as a manufacturer of world-class speaker drive units, and—last but not least—a rock-solid dedication to building products that offer great value for money. I was favorably impressed when I reviewed **Usher's \$2100/pair CP-6311 floorstanding speaker** in *AVguide Monthly* Issue 6, and I came away from that experience curious to find out how far Usher's entry-level S-520 speakers might push the performance/dollar envelope.

Before we delve into the particulars of the S-520s, though, let's take a moment to consider some of the pros and cons of mini-monitor designs in general. On the

plus side of ledger, the best mini-monitors are known for superb "disappearing act" imaging and soundstaging, for midrange and treble performance that rivals that of larger and more expensive speakers, and for their



ability to produce at least a modicum of enjoyable bass. For obvious reasons, mini-monitors make a great fit for smaller rooms and apartments, and in some cases sound better in those environments than would larger speakers that could "overload" the room. Finally, mini-monitors not only make a great way to get started in the high-end audio game without spending a fortune, but they also offer the possibility of a

clear upgrade path through the addition of supplemental subwoofers (see Tom Martin's review of the **ProAc Tablette mini-monitor used with a REL subwoofer** and Jim Hannon's review the **Snell K7 mini-monitor and companion B300 subwoofer** to get an idea of how well this approach can work in practice).

For any mini-monitor, however, the key to success is producing sound that is dynamic enough, and near full-range enough, that listeners will find the speaker satisfying in its own right (that is, without really *requiring* a subwoofer to get decent results). Mini-monitors are in a sense fighting an uphill battle against the laws of physics in both areas, partly because their small drive units and enclosures are not conducive to producing deep bass, and partly because those small mid-woofers must cover an awfully broad range of musical frequencies (where the inevitable tradeoff is that small monitors can be tuned either to go low or to play loudly, but not both at once). Thus, the art and science of good mini-monitor

design lies in juggling parameters so that listeners will hear bass that sounds reasonably full and accurate (even if not deeply extended), and will hear dynamics that express much of the life of the music (even if the speakers cannot reproduce a full orchestral crescendo at realistic levels). As we'll see in a moment, Usher's designers have done a great job balancing these kinds of design tradeoffs in the S-520.

In truth, though, the very first thing a new S-520 owner will notice is not the speakers' sound, but rather their exquisite,

gem-like build quality. At this price point, most manufacturers would give you speakers with vinyl-clad cabinets equipped with modest drive units and with a single, inexpensive pair of binding posts, but Usher gives you lovely cabinets veneered with real wood on all sides (even on the back), high-quality drive units (including a clear, molded thermoplastic mid-woofer reminiscent of the drivers used in some of ProAc's exotic small monitors), and two sets of beefy, gold-plated brass binding posts (to facilitate bi-wiring). Wherever you look, small construction details suggest the S-520s could probably fetch three or four times their

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\$300/pair asking price (as, indeed, many small high-end monitors do). In short, this is a *lot* of speaker for the money.

Beauty is as beauty does, of course, but I found the sound of the S-520s every bit as appealing as their outward appearance. This speaker's strong suit is an articulate, lively, and energetic sound that is delivered with excellent imaging and with much better bass extension than you might think possible from a speaker this size. In contrast to classic mini-monitors of British origin, the S-520 offers a slightly more forward presentation, giving a "closer to the stage" listening perspective than you would hear from, say, the benchmark **Epos ELS 3** (an award-winning British mini also priced near \$300/pair). Let's take a closer look at some of essential elements that comprise the Usher's sound.

Articulation: The Usher S-520 does a great job of reproducing fine, small midrange and treble details—something you'll notice and appreciate whenever you listen to the attack, decay, and upper harmonics of high percussion, piano, strings, wind instruments, voices, and so on. The

Ushers present small inner details and musical textures in an explicit and intelligible way that precious few speakers in this price range can match (though the slightly more expensive Epos ELS 3, which I had on hand for direct comparison, comes very close). For a good example of what the S-520 can do, listen to "En la Orilla del Mundo (At the Edge of the World)" from Charlie Haden's *Nocturne* [Verve]; the piece opens with a beautiful (and very exposed) piano solo, then unfolds to acoustic bass and violin accompaniment, and finally adds the solo voice of a tenor saxophone. At each point in the song's development, I was struck by the almost crystalline clarity and purity of the Ushers' sound, and by their faithfulness to the timbres of each instrument in the mix. Just before beginning this review, I had been listening to my reference pair of Magnepan's \$1725/pair MG1.6/QR planar magnetic speakers (one of *the* great bargains in high-end audio), and I was really surprised to see how well the S-520s acquitted themselves in comparison to this more expensive classic. Were the Maggies better? Yes. But was the qualitative difference a large or disruptive one? No, not at all. As my wife observed, "No way do these sound like they cost only \$300 a pair."

Dynamics: From my earlier experience with Usher's CP-6311s, I learned that accurate reproduction of dynamics is a high priority for Usher's design team, and sure enough, the little S-520s handle large and small-scale dynamics with more authority and grace than most speakers their size and price. Obviously, the S-520s won't give you the huge, unbridled dynamic capabilities of horn-type or other high-sensitivity designs, but within their more modest performance envelope they handle dynamic shifts in music beautifully. In part, their performance goes back to the issue of articulation; the Ushers can reveal small dynamic shifts (for example, subtle changes in the intensity of attack on notes within the saxophone solo on "En la Orilla del Mundo")—shifts most small, inexpensive speakers would either smooth over or miss altogether. But another aspect of the



S-520's solid dynamics involves the volume-handling capabilities of Usher's drive units. While the S-520s cannot play *extremely* loudly (that would be an unrealistic expectation), they can more than fill a moderately sized listening room with sound, and they can handle heavily modulated passages and fast-rising transients (e.g., the acoustic bass volume swells and sharply punctuated banjo notes heard on "Woolly Mammoth" from Edgar Meyer and Béla Fleck's *Music for Two* [Sony Classical]) with much greater freedom from compression or constriction than their competition. I found, for example, that the Ushers managed to play cleanly at volume levels where the Epos ELS 3s were starting to show traces of audible compression. Subjectively, the S-520s sound "big," and one reason why is that they hold some dynamic headroom in reserve (unless you like to play music at "head-banging" volume levels, in which case this is probably not the right speaker for you).

Imaging, Soundstaging, and Three-Dimensionality: As a rule, most mini-monitors deliver good left-to-right imaging, and the S-520s are no exception. But what sets them apart is their ability to reveal layers of depth within recordings, to suggest the three-dimensional presence of instruments and vocalists, and to convey not only the width but also the *height* of soundstages (something not many speakers at *any* price can do well). To hear all these factors in play at once, try "The Panther" from Jennifer Warnes' *The Well* [Music Force]; this live-sounding studio recording paints an unusually convincing sonic picture of the recording space, with Warnes standing front and center at her microphone, and with sidemen spread around and behind her. Realism at this level is simply not common among speakers this price, a fact brought home to me when my wife observed that the S-520's three-dimensionality reminded her of the sound of the **\$2600/pair Gallo Nucleus Reference 3s**—which are terrific imagers (not bad company for a \$300/pair mini-monitor to keep, eh?).

Bass Performance: The S-520s do a creditable job of balancing bass tradeoffs, with taut yet reasonably full-sounding bass output that runs all the way down into the mid-50Hz range (which is a much lower frequency than most listeners think). These little guys can do an amazingly good job with well-recorded acoustic bass, beautifully capturing the instrument's dark weight, warmth, and growl as heard on the brooding, atmospheric track "Overcast" from bassist Viktor Krauss' solo debut album *Far From Enough* [Nonesuch]. And from that same recording, check out the energetic punch and "thwack" these speakers show on the kick drum heard in the opening bars of "Grit Lap." Small speakers aren't supposed to be able to do bass like this, but the Ushers do. True, these aren't the speakers you want if you hope to hear the full impact of pipe organs or concert bass drums, but within their quite ample low-frequency limits, they do very well.

There are really only few aspects of this speaker that could be perceived as drawbacks, and they mostly involve issues of overall tonal balance or voicing. First, there is a region in the upper midrange where the Ushers sound a little more forward than mini-monitors of the British

school, such as the Epos ELS 3. Depending on your tastes and past live-music listening experiences, you might perceive this emphasis as making the speaker sound just a bit bright, or you might interpret it as giving the speaker a more revealing and dynamically alive sound. Does this region represent an area of possible coloration? Perhaps, but if so, it is certainly not a major one given that the Ushers sound almost ideally balanced when fed well-recorded material. However, the area of forwardness *can* show up overly bright-sounding recordings for what they are, which—again

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depending on your point of view—can mean that the Ushers either seem accurate or perhaps just a tiny bit unforgiving. Second, the S-520's taut bass can, at some times and in some contexts, sound just slightly too lean. In comparison, the Epos ELS 3s' bass tends to sound warmer, richer, and fuller (which is surprising, given that the Epos is the smaller speaker); yet careful listening will convince you that the S-520s actually reach lower frequencies with more authority than the ELS 3s do. Having spent many enjoyable hours with both, I could build a good case for the tonal balance of either one; you can hardly make a bad choice between these two, since both stand a cut above most other speakers I've heard in this price range. One final observation: The Ushers need plenty of playing time before they become all that they can be (straight out of the box, they can sound somewhat bright and bass shy, but in time they will smooth out and their bass will improve markedly).

I would say Usher's S-520 is one the best-kept secrets in the audio/home-theater

marketplace; this speaker offers tons of performance at a more than fair price, and I expect it will rightly gain widespread popularity as it becomes better known in the US (you can't keep a speaker this good, and this affordable, a secret for long). How good is Usher's smallest speaker, really? Let's put it this way; I invited an audiophile buddy who owns an \$1800 pair of exotic mini-monitors to hear the S-520s, and after a few minutes he said, "The Ushers may not do everything as well as my speakers do, but I think nine out of ten listeners would prefer their sound overall—plus they make really *usable* bass." We all love an overachiever, and the S-520s are just that. Even Mighty Mouse would be impressed.

SPECIFICATIONS

Usher S-520 Mini-Monitor

Driver complement: 5" woofer, 1" tweeter

Frequency response: 55Hz-20kHz, +0/-3dB

Sensitivity: 86dB/2.83V/1M

Impedance: 8 ohms nominal

Recommended amplifier power: 50 watts

Dimensions: 7.1" x 9.85" x 11.8"

Weight: 13.9 pounds, each

Price: \$300-\$350/pair, depending on the finish.

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ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Musical Fidelity kW 500 integrated amplifier, X-DACV3 D-to-A converter, X-10V3 vacuum tube output buffer; Rega Planet CD player, Magnepan MG 1.6/QR loudspeakers; Richard Gray's Power Company 1200S power conditioner; Sanus Steel Foundation speaker stands; PNF Audio Icon interconnects and Symphony speaker cables