



Five Live!

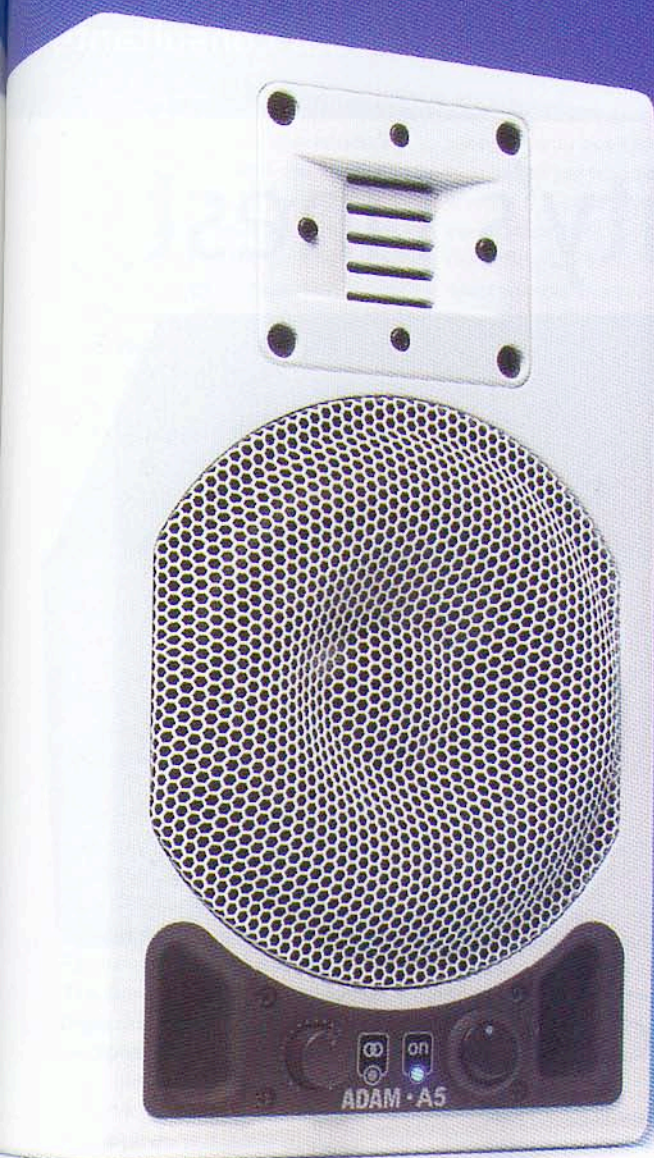
Adam Smith takes a listen to ADAM Audio's visceral sounding A5 active mini monitors...

Over the last few years, the basic way in which a hi-fi system can be structured has changed somewhat, with various new options open to the listener. It wasn't so long ago that the progression from one-box system, be it a nineteen seventies music centre or a nineteen eighties midi system, meant trading up for the succession of boxes that inevitably meant source-amplifier-loudspeakers. More recently however, the advent of

digital music servers, the options of wirelessly beaming music around the home and the rise in network music players has meant that this previous hierarchy is beginning to be deviated from somewhat. Particularly in the case of home music networks, having a receiver in each room in which it is desired to play music means that suitable amplification and loudspeakers are all that is required. However, the networked player is a neat solution in itself, and so why shouldn't we simplify and tidy up the actual chain

to the transducer itself a bit more? The obvious answer, of course, is to go active.

Active loudspeakers still remain something of an outsider in home reproduction terms, however. At the bottom end of the market there are many combined amplifier/loudspeaker units, most of which incorporate the obligatory iPod dock, and some of which are pretty ear-wounding. Conversely, in the exotica category, we have the likes of the Meridian DSP-8000s, Bang & Olufsen Beolab



"small and neat yet expansive and dynamic, the A5s are a fine showcase for affordable active speaker design..."

5s and ADAM's Tensor range of active loudspeakers, all offering impressive engineering, serious sound quality and price tags firmly out of the reach of most of us! What is needed, it seems to me, is a modern alternative to the likes of the good old Wharfedale Active Diamonds or Goodmans Maxamps; namely affordable, high quality active loudspeakers that will sit happily either side of a computer but that are also capable of cutting it in a 'grown up' hi-fi system. Well, ADAM Audio reckon they have the answer.

The A5 'Active Studio Multimedia Monitor' is just such a device, carrying a goodly proportion of the technology found in ADAM's larger models, but in a compact enclosure. This means a 5.5in (147mm) Carbon Fibre and Rohacell 'sandwich' bass driver allied to an ART tweeter operating on the folded diaphragm method originally

invented by Dr. Oskar Heil for his Air Motion Transformer, each driven by its own 25 Watt amplifier and active crossover. Inputs are available through balanced XLR and unbalanced phono connections and additional 'Stereo link' sockets allow the speakers to be linked together – each loudspeaker has its own volume control but, when linked, one speaker can act as the master to control the volume of both.

Also round the back are to be found controls for tweaking the response of the loudspeakers for optimum performance. One allows the bass level below 150Hz to be boosted or cut by up to 6dB, a second effectively acts as a +/-4dB volume control for the tweeter's output level across its entire range above 4kHz, and the last lifts or drops treble output above 6kHz by up to +/-6dB, measured at 15kHz. All are useful for fine-tuning the

A5s according to their positioning in order to obtain the very best from them. Finally, ADAM sell table bases for the A5s that support them correctly and tilt them upwards by a few degrees, and also make a matching subwoofer, the Sub7, for filling in the very bottom end.

The A5s measure a diminutive 285x172x200mm (HxWxD) but weigh in at a sturdy 5kg. They are available in both high gloss black and white finishes and both are absolutely immaculate. Being something of an eighties fetishist I would normally plump for the black in stylistic terms, but the female contingent of the Smith household gave the white the thumbs-up, and the cat sniffed round them and then started purring, so clearly I was outvoted [so the cat wears the trousers in the Smith household then? Ed.].



SOUND QUALITY

As an exponent of 'the bigger the better' school of loudspeaker design, I often find that evaluating a small speaker can be a nerve-racking event; consequently I was rather shocked when firing up the A5s. I am tempted to throw in some anecdote at this point about someone else wandering into my listening room and asking where the subwoofer was but, frankly, I had to pause for a moment to make sure I hadn't switched one on inadvertently! To state that these loudspeakers offer a scale that belies their tiny dimensions would be like saying that publisher Noel quite likes valves, or that the new 227mph Brabus-engined Mercedes CLS isn't exactly sluggish. I sat astounded as the A5s sang their little hearts out from atop my Atacama Nexus 6 stands and could only marvel at the way in which Beth Rowley's vocals sat before me with an incredible scale – five inch drivers in cabinets the size of a few hardback books simply don't do this sort of thing normally.

That main drive unit was clearly responsible for the sound I was hearing, and the way in which it handled bass lines was superb. Yes, those tiny cabinets meant that my floorboards weren't exactly being rattled, but even when fed with some truly hardcore low end action, the A5s never faltered. Jah Wobble's 'The Sun does Rise' on twelve inch single can make the gruntest of loudspeakers turn into a wobbly mess, but the ADAMs positively lapped it up. Granted it was clear that they weren't going to shake ornaments off my shelves but, at the same time, neither did they completely gloss over the powerful bass line underpinning this song. They made it clear that something subterranean was there but seemed to be saying, "we can't manage this as we're only small – sorry – but we're going to jolly well have a rollicking time with the rest of it" which, indeed they did.

What surprised me even more was the volume they were able to generate – the cabinets are small and 50 Watts per speaker isn't much, but the A5s went plenty loud enough and only betrayed their running out of steam by a slight midband compression – there was no sign of distortion at quite neighbour-unfriendly levels.

Across the mid and top, ADAM's ART tweeter once again proved its prowess by pulling every single detail out of the back of the recordings I played. As things progressed however, I realised that this unit is not quite as

forgiving as the X-ART unit used in the higher range Tensor models and noted that the A5s could become a little uncomfortably strident at times. Despite allowing them a good few days of continuous use to run in, it became clear that this was not going to go away. Consequently, it took a few steps to put this right. Firstly I corrected my schoolboy error of using the cables supplied with the loudspeakers, and substituted them for a 2m set of MIT AVT-SI interconnects which polished things up considerably, and then I took a good time to set the frequency adjustment settings on the rear of the loudspeakers. I left the bass control at its centre setting, as this was fine, but judicious adjustment of the two treble controls proved fruitful. Ultimately I found that the tweeter level control was best reduced by around 1.5dB and the high frequency lift raised by around 1dB – this exacerbated the slight forwardness noted, but added in a touch of top end crispness.

The results of this tweaking were very impressive. The A5s are sprightly, fast and crisp at all times, making some songs sound like they have been speeded up slightly, such is their tautness of rhythm and basic musicality. Equally, however, they can wind back and reproduce more thoughtful material with a dexterity, poise and atmosphere that is seldom found at this price point. The Fleet Foxes' 'White Winter Hymnal' positively filled the front of my listening room and 'I Can't Hide' from Jennifer Warnes' 'The Hunter' CD was laid out in a way that reminded me of my time with the A5's much bigger brothers, the Tensor Gammas. Once again, Jennifer was locked centre-stage and positioning the players around her was no chore at all. Equally, Jenny Jones' vocals on 'Brighton Pier' were astoundingly vivid and natural, and every intake of breath and swallow could be heard as she spoke the words to the song, but it was

clear that there were limitations to the way in which this track had been recorded. Ultimately, the A5s never stray far from their monitor heritage and can occasionally sound a little strident with poor material, but the key words here are 'poor material' – if the recording is less than good, the A5s won't draw attention to its deficiencies unduly, but equally they will not gloss over them.

CONCLUSION

The ADAM A5s are superb loudspeakers for the price. They are compact, versatile and can be used with any source from an iPod to a full-blown hi-fi system, and will offer the same sort of confident and dynamic performance to either. Take time to set the frequency adjustments carefully, feed them with a quality source and wire them up with good cables and you too could be looking for a subwoofer that isn't there!

REFERENCE SYSTEM

Garrard 301 turntable
Alphason HR-100S arm (Cardas wired)
Audio Technica AT-OC9MLII cartridge
Anatek MC1 phono stage
Marantz CD94 CD player
Naim Supernait amplifier (as a preamp)

VERDICT

Small and neat yet expensive and dynamic, the A5s are a fine showcase for affordable active loudspeaker design.

ADAM A5 £680
ADAM Audio UK
☎ +44(0)1992 525670
www.adam-audio.com

FOR

- superb dynamics
- excellent low end detail
- impressive scale
- versatile adjustments

AGAINST

- slightly strident at times

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

The Adam A5 is a small active design, needing mains power. It has three frequency response adjustments: bass equalisation, room equalisation and treble equalisation. With all set flat the A5 measures very flat, our stepped and gated sine wave response analysis shows. There's a small 'presence' dip around 3kHz that will slightly soften the delivery, but its subjective impact will be slight. Above 3kHz the ribbon tweeter gives smooth output that will likely translate into natural sounding treble.

A pink noise response shows that in a room bass peaks a little around 80Hz, but it is quite a narrow band effect and may add just a little to bass 'speed'. The port operates over a narrow band, being tuned to a high 70Hz, so Adam have not tried to force the A5 to go lower than it would naturally. This is reflected in low bass distortion figures too, below 2% above 30Hz. Above 100Hz distortion sank to 0.2% or less, a good result.

The bass adjuster introduces progressive lift or cut below 1kHz, peaking by +6dB below 100Hz. This will provide useful wall mounting compensation or a little bass boost to improve warmth and body. Likewise, treble lift looks potentially useful, producing plateau lift of +5dB maximum above 2kHz. The 6kHz room adjustment mimics the treble adjuster, so what it is meant to achieve isn't obvious to me.

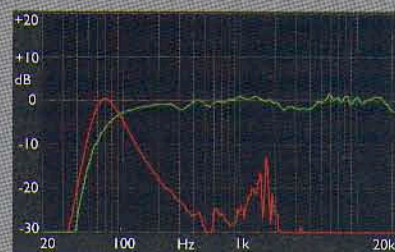
Sensitivity at max volume was high, just 200mV needed to generate

90dB (loud) one metre away.

The A5's long term spectral decay behaviour was unblemished, except at 80Hz. So there may be a slight bass overhang, but the midband and treble look very clean and uncoloured.

The A5 is a well engineered mini monitor that has a lot of built in adjustment to suit both taste and room positioning. It should provide fine treble and an accurate balance, plus fast bass. N

FREQUENCY RESPONSE



Green - driver output
Red - port output

SPECTRAL DECAY over 200ms

