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Benjamin Button
(A Curious Case)

Crimbo Schwaaag Giveaway! Win STUFF on page 52!

ALISTAIR MCGHEE finds himself victim to a syndrome that no Doctor can cure. Not that he'd want to be cured, in any case.



THE REVIEWER

ALISTAIR MCGHEE began audio life in Hi-Fi before joining the BBC as an audio engineer. After ten years in radio and TV, he moved to production. When BBC Choice started, he pioneered personal digital production in television. Alistair is now Assistant Editor, BBC Radio Wales, but is allowed out occasionally.

When you get to my age it's hard work not to start every review with "Many years ago...", and on this occasion I'm not even going to try to resist that temptation. Many years ago when I worked in hi-fi, I came across a pair of loudspeakers featuring the revolutionary Heil air transformer tweeters. I remember a fine top end, but not much else about the sound. I do remember how the technology worked – air is squeezed from between

the on-board amp, and a gain trim. Personally I'd like a full range volume control, but you can't have everything. The first test of any new speaker is: does it produce NMS? NMS (or New Monitor Syndrome) is vital – when you drop in a new speaker it should always excite you in a musical way. By that, I mean you can't wait to listen to your Travis Barker remix, or Californication, or Between the Buttons,

ADAM S2A

Studio Monitors

the accordion-like folds of the Heil driver, the folds provide a large increase in surface area, which in turn results in an increase in driver efficiency. I think they were expensive imports back in the early 80s and never really made a big impression in the crowded UK hi-fi market. Maybe integrating the tweeter with conventional woofers was a problem.

Sahara Surprise

A couple of years ago I had a pleasant surprise coming across Heil-equipped monitors at Sahara Studios, and I made a note at the time to look up ADAM loudspeakers. I haven't exactly been quick off the mark, but better late than never. Unity Audio (the UK distributor) kindly supplied me with a pair of ADAM S2A monitors, representing the middle of their high quality range of near fields, if you see what I mean. To look at, the S2A are quite the business in black with some neat cabinet work around the Heil driver. At the bottom of the front panel are some EQ settings for

or all of them at once. New speakers should entice you to remix the last thing you were working on and the first thing you ever mixed. You should be digging through your hard disk back ups looking for that tune on which you never quite got the balance right.

Of course NMS doesn't mean the speakers are great, but no NMS means they almost certainly aren't. One good measure is how long does NMS lasts – if you're still digging out mixes after a couple of weeks, then you're on to something.


Taking It From The Top

The other dimension I find key is the whole issue of the top end. I can forgive much below 200 but very little above 2k. For me it's about how tiring a speaker is. Everyone knows that a speaker with a hot top end will sound extra detailed on a quick listen and will jump out of the line up in an ABC demo, but you pay for that when you spend hour after hour in front of your



basement, you might need to look for something bigger. I don't think you'll get much better bass of a speaker this size – it's a physics thing.

The Need To Tweak

So there you have it – a great mid/top and a decent bottom end, nice enough cabinets, and they do loud. "But what of the built-in EQ?", I hear you cry. Well, to be honest, I never felt the need to tweak, except turning the gain down a bit to match my Merging Dua. It's there if you want it. And in the end I even forgot about the clever technology of the Heil driver – it's the sound after all. It's hard to have anything but enthusiasm for the ADAM S2As, I would very happily mix on these five days a week and twice at the weekend. This quality doesn't come cheap, so don't expect to snag a pair for a couple of hundred quid, but after a month I'm still getting a healthy dose of NMS, and for me that's worth paying for. 

INFORMATION

Ⓜ GB£1,128.00 (inc.VAT)

Ⓐ ADAM Audio GmbH, Ederstr. 16, D-12059 Berlin, Germany

☎ +49 30 863 0097 0

☎ +49 30 863 0097 7

🌐 www.ADAM-audio.com

✉ info@ADAM-audio.de

Ⓐ UK Distributor: Unity Audio

Ⓐ The Elms Barn, Baythorne End, Halstead, Essex CO9 4AB

☎ +44 (0) 1440 785843

☎ +44 (0) 1440 785845

🌐 www.unityaudio.co.uk

✉ sales@unityaudio.co.uk

monitors actually working. This is especially true when balancing speech. The upshot of it is that much like the rest of me, my old ears get tired easily and I'm very unforgiving of any unforgiving HF.

I've had the ADAMs in my system for a month or so now, and they are very, very good. I like to think that good monitors, like good lenses, offer increases in detail, contrast, and tonal accuracy. I found myself constantly hearing things in old familiar recordings that had slipped past me with other speakers. I know from past experience that often if I return to the previous monitors, I will be able to hear what had previously eluded me. But I 'heard it here first', if you know what I mean.

"To be honest I don't listen as loudly as I used to, but for many of us, the ability to generate high SPLs without racking up distortion is a significant plus. I found the S2As coming through with flying colours, staying clean at all the levels I would want to listen to."

From Way Up High

The third area of monitor design that is often a problem is performance at higher levels. As you whack the gain up, all sorts of non-linearities start to pop up. Resonances bloom, curves run off the knee, and saturation and compression effects begin to manifest themselves. To be honest I don't listen as loudly as I used to, but for many of us, the ability to generate high SPLs without racking up distortion is a significant plus. I found the S2As coming through with flying colours, staying clean at all the levels I would want to listen to.

Listening loud, I did begin to ponder the question of bass extension. ADAM's literature quotes 35Hz +/-3dB, and that does seem like a long way down for what is not, after all, a huge box. One of my few reservations about the S2As would be that if a lot of your mixing is down in the