



**G**erman company Adam Audio GmbH, are probably better known to the professional audio world than the hi-fi one. They started out in

1999 when Klaus Heinz and Roland Stenz got together and founded Advanced Dynamic Audio Monitors based in Berlin. Three years ago, having established themselves in the studio environment, the company decided to enter the domestic field.

The Pencil Mk 3s under review here are the smaller of two floorstanding speakers in the range, standing 1180mm tall, and occupying a floorspace of 230 by 300mm. The cabinets are made of MDF and come in either black gloss, walnut veneer, or the cherry veneer finish of these examples. The cabinets are handsome, with chamfered edges that help disguise the size of these units. At the bottom is a plinth, the corners of which contain the four carpet piercing, height adjustable spikes. Cups are thoughtfully provided for customers who have wooden or laminate flooring. At the back are four good sized binding

**Tony Bolton spends some time with Adam Audio's new Pencil 3 floorstanding loudspeakers...**

# Carbon Dating



posts, joined by thick wires rather than the more usual gold coloured strips of metal.

The grill is held in place by magnets, so can be removed without leaving the usual unsightly clip holes on display. Behind this grill are two bass/ mid drivers made of a core of honeycomb Nomex, coated on both sides with Kevlar. This is claimed to provide a very stiff structure which should be less prone to distortion than materials such as paper or polypropylene.

The Adam website explains that only one of the bass/ mid units operates all

the time, the second comes into use only when reproducing frequencies below 150 Hz to avoid over blown bass sounds.

Above these is the ribbon tweeter. This is a proprietary design known as Accelerating Ribbon Technology (or ART). The membrane is a pleated diaphragm in which the folds expand or compress according to the audio signal being applied. The folds result in a tweeter area that the manufacturers claim is 2 1/2 times greater than that of conventional cone tweeters. The Mk 3 version of the Pencils incorporates the latest development of this technology and is called the X-ART - the X standing for extended.

## SOUND QUALITY

After unboxing the speakers, not the easiest of jobs given their 23kg weight, I had a quick listen and found a very defined but extremely tight sound with very little bass. To run them in I set them up in the spare room, facing each other, with one wired out of phase. They then spent the next eight days playing alternate discs of classical music and the Isotek Burn-In disc. After this they were moved back into the front room where they took over from the Chario Ursa Majors, being driven by the ModWright 36.5 preamp and a pair of Icon Audio MB 90 monoblocks.

Settling down to play a classical compilation CD, I found that the running in process had certainly loosened things up a bit. A lot of the 'new unit' tightness had gone, and a more open and descriptive sound flowed from the speakers. I was impressed by the detailing, especially in the higher frequencies. Playing Scarlatti harpsichord sonatas showed this off, with the complex harmonics of the instrument being opened up and analysed in great detail. Behind

the resonances of the strings it was possible to hear odd sounds from the mechanism working, and I felt that I could almost hear each individual string being plucked, before the sound combined into the harmonious jangle that is a characteristic of this instrument.

At the other end of the frequency range, the bass was equally well described, although in a quite cool and analytical way. There was

that's so chewy you could almost serve it in slices, then these speakers are not for you. Continuing the wine analogy, I would describe them as a very crisp, well bred, dry white, with zesty touches of lemon.

With a tendency to focus on the fine detailing in sounds I was not surprised to find that the imaging was again quite crisp and precise. The harpsichord mentioned earlier was very obviously centre stage, and

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no perceivable overhang or bloom to the sound, but with this recording and amplification it felt a little underplayed, given the level of detail at the top end.

Curious to check out how deep the bass actually went I put on an LP of pieces by Pachelbel, Buxtehude and Saint-Saens played on the organ of Exeter Cathedral. Living only ten miles away from this church, I have attended numerous concerts and recitals there over the years and know the sound of the organ quite well. Again, I was impressed with the level of detail and analysis in the sound, but felt that a certain level of weight was missing at the bottom end. The bass notes went very deep, and were very clean sounding, but somehow didn't seem to have the impact that I know that they have in real life.

Rather than condemn the Adam Pencils for this, I tried changing amplifier, and brought into use my Leema Acoustics Tucana II. This proved a far happier match than the ModWright/ Icon Audio tube amp combo. The ModWright is a very revealing and detailed preamp, that is not backward when it comes to giving the listener a wealth of detail. Combining this openness with the extremely revealing sound of the Adams proved to be a little too much to be a really comfortable listen. The chunky solid-state Tucana produced a more controlled sounding top end, and seemed better suited to driving these speakers bass cones, adding a bit more substance to the sound. If you like your bass to be full bodied, rather like a heavy duty claret

occupied approximately two thirds of the space between the cabinets. Changing musical gear entirely to The Jam's 1980 LP, 'Sound Affects', and the track 'That's Entertainment' was





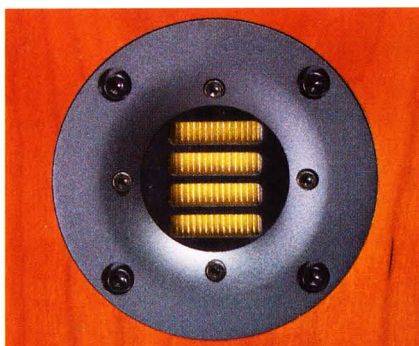
most interesting. The vocals on this recording are somewhat recessed, being surrounded by the music, rather than being in front of it, as in more conventional productions. The Pencils produced more detail around Paul Weller's voice than I think I have heard before from this record. He was placed about a foot ahead of the line of the speakers, with the, mostly acoustic, instruments lined up alongside him. I normally get the impression that he stood slightly behind the guitars, so that the music seems to be given the same weight as the vocals, rather than being an accompaniment to them. Through this set up I was aware of micro-details, such as the sound of lips parting just before a sound is made, or the point at which breaths were taken, along with subtleties in the style of playing of the guitars, both acoustic and electric.

Given the Adam's seeming ability to extract the last amount of detail from a recording I tried a recent CD purchase through them. This is a compilation called 'Chantons Francaise 1934-1936', and features recordings from the likes of Edith Piaf, Maurice Chevalier, Mistinguett *et al.* The recording quality varies from very good for the period, through to a couple where the engineer may have been having an off-day! The Pencils took no prisoners, and didn't flatter the poorer recordings, but did succeed in playing them all in a palatable manner - something that would not have happened with the previous amp set up. The less demanding nature of the Tucana II seemed to suit the Adams quite well, leaving the listener aware of every detail, but not at the expense of over-analysis of the sound, rather than reproducing the music.

I came to the conclusion that the Adam Pencil's studio heritage formed a fundamental part of their DNA. They proved very sensitive to both source and amplification choices, requiring something very smooth and not too overly analytical to drive them. The Stello A 500i, which I reviewed some months ago alongside the Tucana II possesses a slightly darker tonal quality than the latter, and seemed to blend with the Pencil's decisive nature even better than to Leema product. Any amp or source that is already a bit forward and revealing could easily upset the very precise balance between

detail and musicality of these speakers.

Given the right driving force and source, the Adam Pencil Mk 3s



are one of the most incisive and insightful pairs of speakers that I have had in this house. They are quite relentless in their quest to transmit the ultimate in detail to the listener, as befits a good studio monitor. Whether you actually want that level of detail in the domestic listening environment is very much a matter of personal taste. A lot of listeners would find the sound overpowering, but I know some who would revel in it. The four Ohm load makes them a bit selective about amplification, and they don't really work that well until the volume is turned up a fair bit. Then the sound suddenly leaps

forward out of the cabinets and plants itself in front of the listener, standing to attention and ready for inspection. These are definitely not loudspeakers for low late night listening, low volumes robbing the sound of a lot of energy and drive. Turn them up to a level where any conversation takes place with somewhat raised voices and a wealth of detail will start to flow.

## CONCLUSION

Build quality and finish are all that I would expect of a three and a half grand loudspeaker, and aesthetically they are very pleasing. Sonically I feel that they are very much a niche product, being too revealing for most listeners' tastes, and equipment, but when allied to the right partners can almost place the listener in the control room of a recording studio, for better or worse. Poor recordings are ruthlessly revealed, good ones are shown off. Both are fearlessly explored to their extremities. If you like this sort of precision sound and have suitable amplification that will not provoke the speakers, then these may be just what you are looking for. But do partner the Adams with great care, or the music will begin to take a back seat to the cerebral analysis of the sounds being reproduced.

## MEASURED PERFORMANCE

The large Pencil Mk3 Passive has a broad flat frequency response marked by a small amount of low frequency lift around 150Hz, which may colour the sound, and a small lift in output from ribbon treble unit, above 4kHz. Like any good ribbon the Pencil's measures fairly flat right up to 20kHz. However, output is lifted sufficiently for a bright edge to treble to be apparent, but coming from the ribbon driver this may well be more acceptable than (edgy) dome treble, adding speed to treble and hardening images. Lower bass looks well damped and should sound tight as a result. Whilst the Pencil will not sound bass heavy it does go low and looks very even in nature.

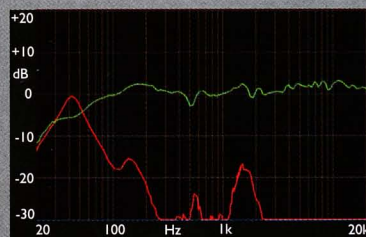
Sensitivity measured a normal 87dB, about normal considering this is 6.6 Ohms impedance loudspeaker with a d.c. resistance (that sets minimum Z) of 4.2 Ohms. The impedance characteristic is very well controlled in the bass and not too reactive, making the Pencil a quite easy load. Bass damping looks very well optimised.

Our 200mS decay spectrum shows there is a 'hot' region around that peak at 150Hz, with overhang, suggesting this is a cabinet return. Otherwise, across the midband and treble the Pencil is clean. Distortion was high from the port, measuring 13% at 40Hz, but forward output from the drive unit

very low at 1% at 40Hz. Distortion above 100Hz bumped along at around 0.3%, not low but not overly high either and unlikely to be a subjective problem.

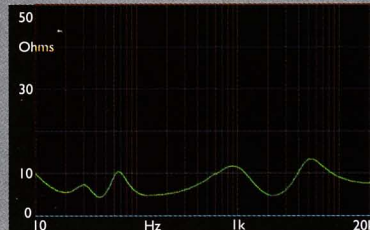
The Pencil Mk3 Passive looks to have well damped and extended bass, likely of excellent quality. The ribbon tweeter will be prominent, so the balance will be bright. Accuracy overall is good. NK

### FREQUENCY RESPONSE



Green - driver output  
Red - port output

### IMPEDANCE



## VERDICT

High quality floorstander with a musical yet highly explicit sound.

**ADAM PENCIL 3 £3,600**

Adam Audio

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## FOR

- crystal clear sound
- fine build
- aesthetically pleasing

## AGAINST:

- too lean for some systems
- damped bass