

## Great Sound, Awesome Build-Quality, Terrific Value

# Usher CP-6311 Loudspeakers

**W**hile Usher Audio has only begun to gain recognition in the US, this 30-year-old Taiwanese firm is an established high-end audio powerhouse that has achieved great success in its home markets and throughout the Pacific Rim. After spending time with the Usher people and briefly auditioning their speakers (and amplifiers) at CES 2004, I came away eager to review some of the products now being imported to this country. I think readers will find Usher impressive on several important levels.

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First, Usher products are characterized by terrific build quality. The company, for instance, designs and manufactures most of its own drive units, many inviting direct comparison with the finest drivers from Scandinavian, European, and US firms. Further, Usher's finished speakers, from the most expensive right on down to the least expensive models, have a certain gem-like quality that makes you want to run your fingers over their lovely exterior surfaces. Whether customers spend a little or a lot on a set of



Ushers, they'll come away with the (accurate) impression that their speakers were built by craftspeople who cared about what they were doing.

Second, Usher's engineering efforts are guided by Usher's President, Mr. Lien-Shui Tsai, and the legendary Dr. Joseph D'Appolito (best known for the popular "midrange-tweeter-midrange" configuration frequently associated with his name), with the result that Usher's speaker designs combine fresh, innovative thinking with careful adaptation (and meticulous evolution and refinement) of good ideas drawn from a variety of successful past designs. Tsai and D'Appolito plan new Usher models together, with Mr. Tsai handling driver selection, enclosure design and cosmetics, while Dr. D'Appolito takes responsibility for crossover design and final voicing of the speaker. You may see hints of apparent Sonus Faber and Thiel influences in many Usher models, but do not make the mistake of thinking that Ushers are pale copies of European or American speakers. Just a few minutes of listening will convince you that Ushers are legitimate high-end

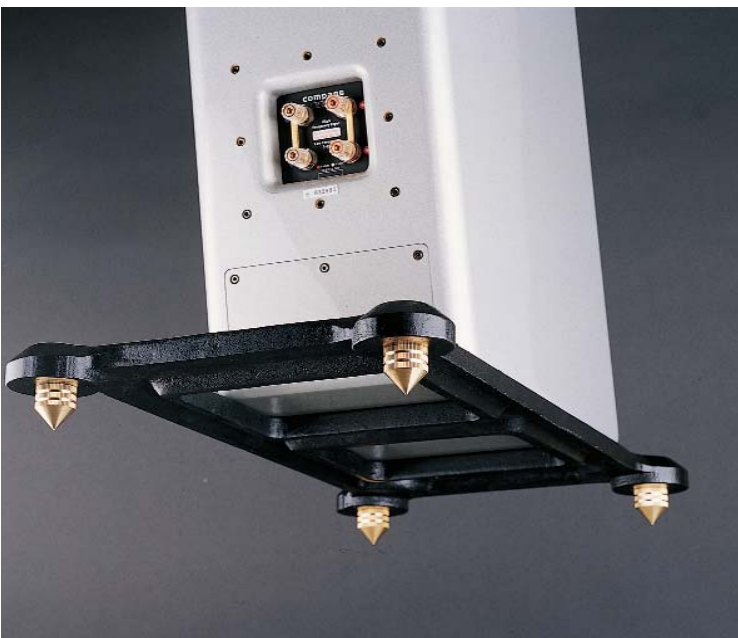
loudspeakers in their own right—speakers that can stand on their own merits in comparison to like-priced high-end products from just about anyone.

Finally, and this is the icing on the cake, Usher is deeply committed to delivering value for money (what's not to like about *that?*). At almost every price point in its product line, you find unexpected touches that make you want to ask, "How do they do it for the money?" In planning this review, I asked Usher's US distributor to select one model he felt best represented Usher's "value for money" philosophy, and he unhesitatingly recommended Usher's new \$2100/pair CP-6311 floorstanding models (well, actually there *was* some hesitation because Usher's new entry-level 5.1-channel surround speaker system also offers dynamite value, but we'll save those little jewels for a future review).

The CP-6311 is a relatively tall two-way, time/phase-aligned, bass-reflex speaker that incorporates several interesting design twists. Probably the first thing that catches viewers' eyes is the enclosure, which looks like a radically swept-back, Salvador Daliesque interpretation of a traditional tower-type speaker (the backward slope of the enclosure aligns the acoustic centers of tweeter and woofer). Because the towers are angled backwards quite steeply, Usher provides large, bolt-on *cast iron* skeletal floor-support frames that offer plenty of stability (the frames come with large knurled, solid-brass floor spikes). A 1" fabric dome, ferrofluid damped tweeter

(which looks somewhat like the familiar ScanSpeak Revelator tweeter, but is in fact an Usher-built unit) is perched at the very top of the enclosure, braced against a semi-conical shaped solid hardwood tweeter "nacelle" that flares out behind the mounting flange. Below the tweeter resides an Usher-made 7" woofer with a carbon-fiber filled paper cone (the unit bears passing resemblance to certain ScanSpeak woofers that use similar cone construction). Both Usher drive units are optimized for very low distortion at high sound pressure levels. The upper sidewalls of each enclosure are braced with sculptural hardwood reinforcement panels (reminiscent of the side panels on some Sonus Faber models) that look great and add extra rigidity in those sections of the cabinet adjacent to the woofer. The cabinet features a mirror-smooth lacquered finish (in black, silver, or white) that contrasts nicely with the satin-textured hardwood side panels and tweeter nacelle. Wherever practical, cabinet edges have radiused corners that help minimize diffraction. Finally, at the rear of the enclosure, we find the speaker's ducted port, dual binding posts that facilitate bi-wiring, and a chamber that can be filled with high-density damping materials. Overall, the CP-6311 is a well-executed package that's pleasing to the eye. But is it equally pleasing to the ear? Let me tackle that question by sketching for you a handful of qualities that define the CP-6311's sound.

Let's begin with tonal balance. The CP-6311's balance is generally neutral, but shaded ever so slightly toward the darker end of the spectrum. Two factors contribute to this overall balance. First, there is no excess brightness in Usher's fabric dome tweeter; and second, the speaker offers a prodigious amount of bass output in the mid-to-low 40 Hz range (more than is typical for



speakers this size). I consider the tweeter's smooth, unexaggerated sound a very good thing, since I regard excess brightness as not too different from torture, and my reaction to it is typically, "Aieee! Somebody please make it stop." Thanks to Usher's sweet tweeter, I found I could fully enjoy recordings that have sometimes sounded too "hot" or etched on speakers with upturned treble regions (e.g., Diana Krall's extremely close-miked *Love Scenes* [Impulse], an album that can be downright abrasive if its upper midrange and treble details are not handled properly). Through the Ushers, the recorded details and textures of my favorite recordings always seemed well defined, but without the punishing brightness, overwrought transients, or

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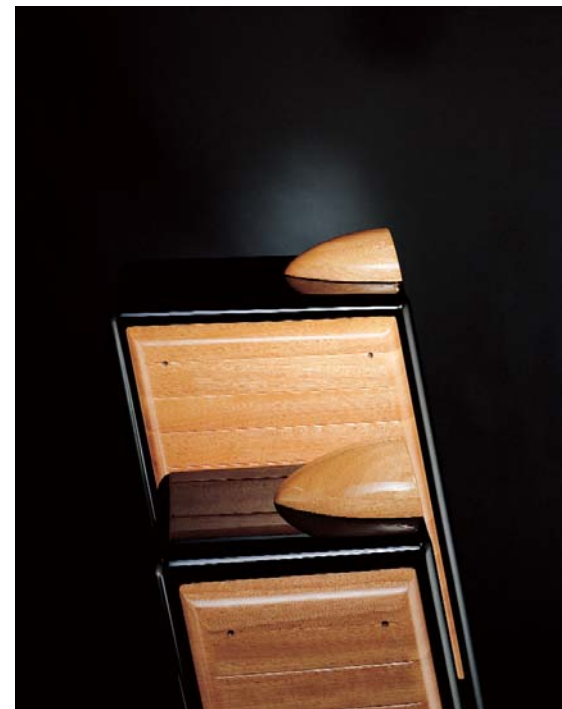
fatiguing glare you find in many "high-definition" tweeters. Depending on your listening environment, the CP-6311s' strong mid-to-low bass output might also be a blessing, though in some rooms and on some recordings it could also be—if not exactly a "curse," then a characteristic to be managed with care. On many recordings, the Ushers' vigorous bass balance sounded nearly ideal, but on some recordings imbued with extremely strong bass content (e.g., Holly Cole's *Temptation* [Metro Blue]), the lowest frequencies are occasionally pushed too far forward in the mix (this small deviation from accuracy is one some listeners might like, and many might find preferable to the paucity of bass encountered in some high-end speakers). Fortunately, the CP-6311's bass is

taut and well defined, so that occasional moments of forwardness come across more as pleasing low-frequency richness than as boominess or bloat. Interestingly, the speaker's balance sounded progressively more neutral as volume levels were raised (within reason, of course).

Another major aspect of the CP-6311's sound has to do with the overall resolution, focus, and texture. I really have to compliment Usher on the job it has done with this speaker's tweeter and mid-woofer. The tweeter, as I suggested above, pulls off the difficult trick of sounding at once smooth and highly detailed and finely resolved—qualities reminiscent of the sound of live music. The woofer, in turn, offers fast yet well-damped response to sharp transients and brief moments of dynamic emphasis, and it climbs right up to the top of its frequency range without the congestion you might expect from a driver its size. In practice, this means the woofer gives the CP-6311 an unexpectedly clear, supple, and responsive midrange (better, actually, than I've heard in several more costly three-way speaker systems). On Bela Fleck and Edgar Meyer's delightful *Music for Two* [Sony Classical], for example, the Ushers let me hear the smallest variations in Meyer's bass bowing techniques, and showed how Fleck regulates the intensity of each pick stroke to build tension in his banjo solos. What's most important, and really quite uncanny, is the way the Usher tweeter and woofer manage to speak with a common voice. Part of this is due, I suspect, to D'Appolito's decision to go with a time/phase-aligned design ("...an acoustic, 4th-order, in-phase Linkwitz alignment," says Dr. D'Appolito), but much has to do with the exemplary behavior of both drivers in the critical crossover region. In that region, the woofer and

tweeter match each other almost unbelievably well—speed for speed, texture for texture, and smoothness for smoothness. More than most two-speakers, this one encourages you to forget that you're hearing individual drivers, redirecting your attention to the overall sound of the music.

A third, and for me particularly appealing, characteristic of the Ushers is their great imaging and soundstaging. The CP-6311's imag-



ing is hands down better than that of most two-way floorstanders; these speakers have no trouble creating convincing lateral images that break from the surfaces of the enclosures to float freely in space above and between the speakers. Soundstage depth and width, too, are among the best I've heard from a speaker of this type (though perhaps not quite up to the almost eerily holographic standard set by Gallo's radical new Nucleus Reference III—which, in fairness, costs almost 25% more than the CP-6311s). Nevertheless, the Ushers offer excellent three-dimen-

sionality, and not just in terms of the placement of the performers and instruments on the stage; at times, they make you to feel as if you can discern the sizes and shapes of individual instruments, and the materials from which they are made. In a sense, a stereo pair of CP-6311s conveys something of the feeling you get from a good surround system; i.e., you're not so much "observing" a soundstage as you are sitting *within* one. Impressive.

Finally, the Ushers do an unusually good job of handling the



dynamic demands of large-scale orchestral works (and other dynamically taxing material). Many two-way systems sound somewhat flustered or overworked when you confront them with recordings such as the Abbado/Berlin reading of the *Mahler Symphony No. 9* [Deutsche Grammophon], but the Ushers seem almost to relish being pushed a little, answering reasonable requests for more volume with apparent glee (this is one two-way

speaker I think could do a creditable job of filling even a largeish space with sound). And as volume levels climb, the Ushers' robust bass characteristics do a great job of putting realistic, foundational weight beneath orchestras and large choral groups.

The only caveats I have about this speaker involve managing the amount of mid-to-low bass energy it can throw into your room, and with this thought in mind I'd like to offer three simple but important setup tips. First, position the CP-6311s well out from your walls, making sure the separation distance to the back wall is different from the separation distance to the side walls. Second, fill the damping chambers in each speaker with *at least* 25 pounds of lead shot (I did so to each of the review samples, and heard an immediate improvement in bass focus and clarity). However, the chambers are large enough to accommodate nearly 50 pounds of shot per speaker, so you may want to try loading the chambers even more fully than I did. Finally, consider driving your Ushers with a good transistor amp that affords plenty of woofer control (I tried the CP-6311s with an excellent tube amp, but found it could not adequately control their woofers). Apart from these tips, though, the best thing you can do for your Ushers is to give them plenty of playing time. The manual states, and I observed, that the speakers' sound gradually improves as playing time accumulates (but don't fret; mine sounded good straight out of the box).

Put all of these characteristics together, and you have a smooth, responsive, richly detailed loudspeaker that is remarkably easy to listen to for hours (I can't begin to tell you how many times I set out to listen to a single reference track and wound up listening to an entire album—always a good sign). While this speaker does not sound "spec-

tacular" in the self-aggrandizing way that some high-end models do, it conveys much of the warmth, mystery, and drama of live music—which is all we could hope any good speaker might do. If only for self-education, then, I urge you to go hear the Ushers before you buy anything else in their price range. But, once you hear them, you may need to take them home with you.

### Specifications

**Price:** \$2100/pair  
**Driver complement:** 7" woofer, 1" fabric dome tweeter  
**Frequency response:** 34Hz-28kHz  
**Sensitivity:** 87dB/2.83V/1M  
**Impedance:** 8 ohms nominal  
**Recommended amplifier power:** 80 watts  
**Dimensions:** 13.8" x 25.6" x 43.3"  
**Weight:** 84.9 lbs. each (including stands, but not add-on lead shot)

### Associated Equipment

Musical Fidelity Tri-Vista 300 integrated amplifier, Conrad Johnson PV-14L preamplifier, Conrad Johnson MV60SE power amplifier, Musical Fidelity Tri-Vista SACD player, Richard Gray's Power Company 1200S power conditioner, PNF Audio Icon interconnects, PNF Symphony speaker cables.

### Manufacturer Information

**Usher Audio Technology**  
 Taipei, Taiwan  
[www.usheraudio.com](http://www.usheraudio.com)

### Distributor Information

**Thee High End**  
 6923 Inwood Road  
 Dallas, TX 75209  
 (214) 704-6083  
[www.theehighend.com](http://www.theehighend.com)