

This review page is supported in part by the sponsor whose ad is displayed above

AUDIO REVIEWS

sixmoons.com



MAY 2005

USHER CP-6381



Reviewer: John Potis

Analog Source: Rega P9 turntable, RB1000, Benz Micro MC Silver, Rega Super Elys & Garrott Bros Optim FGS cartridges

Digital source: Pioneer DV-535 DVD player/ Bel Canto DAC2

Preamp: Shindo Partager

Power amp: Art Audio Carissa, Bryston 7B ST

Speakers: Ohm Acoustics Walsh 4 with 4.5 mk.2 upgrade, Hørning Perikles

Cables: JPS Labs Superconductor and Superconductor FX interconnects and speaker wire, DH Labs D-75 digital

Power cords: ZCable Heavys & Black Lightnings, JPS Labs Power AC, Analog AC, Digital AC and Kaptovator

Powerline conditioning: Balanced Power Technology 3.5 Signature Plus with ZCable Heavy Power Cord

Sundry accessories: Vibrapod Isolators and Cones, Ultra & Heavy ZSleeves, Auric Illuminator

Room size: 12' x 16' with 9' ceiling

Review component retail: \$3400/pr



Judging from their published photos, the Usher CP-6381 loudspeakers certainly *looked* to be well finished. A close look at the drivers made by Usher suggested that they were - well, *based upon* some very notable examples of the better drivers manufactured by some of the best driver manufacturers in the world. And let's be frank and not try to pretend that some of the speakers in the Usher line don't bear such an uncanny likeness to some of the better-known speakers in the world as to spell *copycat* - or at least strongly hint at it. I've got a fake Rolex upstairs that supports the theory that just because a speaker looks like a duck doesn't mean it's going to quack like one. These are certainly pretty speakers that will (at least initially) appeal to those who aspire to the speakers that inspired them. But surely the Ushers wouldn't have the temerity to compete on the basis of sound, right? That's what *I* wanted to find out.

The Usher CP-6381 is much larger than its photos suggest. It stands 50 inches tall, 16 inches deep and 13 inches wide. Ostensibly to time-align the drivers, the speaker cants rearward, making the speaker's effective depth closer to 22 inches. Additionally, the CP-6381 comes equipped with bolt-on iron bases that are about 25 inches deep and 14 inches wide. Each speaker weighs 143 lbs including the 30-lbs base. Given the 8-inch woofer, I anticipated a speaker two-thirds the actual size of the CP-6381 which was much closer to my old Silverline Sonata IIs sporting dual 10-inch woofers. As if this kind of mass weren't enough, the CP-6381 features a compartment at the speaker's bottom (accessed via a little trap door at the rear) that's designed to be filled with sand, one feature I didn't make use of.

The CP-6381 really is *exceptionally* well finished. The review pair came in a silver-metallic automotive-type finish though glossy white and black are available as well. To my roaming eyes, the finish was absolutely flawless and commensurate with products *thrice* the CP-6381's price - no kidding. The wooden cheeks were sanded smooth and covered by a light satin finish that complemented the high-gloss lacquer nicely though I would have preferred that the wood extend down to the speaker's base. Interestingly and like some metallic finishes, the hue of the CP-6381 varied with lighting conditions though it usually had a golden tint that fluctuated in intensity yet was always highly attractive.

The CP-6381 is a 3-way system using a 1-inch silk dome tweeter, a 7-inch mid-bass driver and an 8-inch woofer. Both woofers are of the doped paper variety. Around back are two pairs of WBT-cloned shrouded binding posts for biwiring (unlike real WBTs, you can unscrew these until the nut comes off in your hand). Usher claims 87dB sensitivity, a nominal impedance of 8 ohms and a frequency response of 29- 28kHz (-3 dB). Other than crossover frequencies of 323Hz and 2.6kHz, they don't spell out any further information on the network but they do specify a power handling of 160 watts.

Well-known speaker designer Joe D'Appolito has designed much of Usher's line of speakers though not all of them. However, only *his* designs are being imported to the US. D'Appolito is well known for the MTM (midrange-tweeter-midrange) configuration that bears his name. Interestingly, not a single one of his Usher designs is configured accordingly. I'm told that the reason for this is simple - a matter of cost. No, not simply the added expenditure of a second midrange/woofer. Think added expense of building, measuring and matching a second mid/woofer within an extremely narrow degree of tolerance. Some listeners have voiced dislike for the D'Appolito configuration by citing an unnatural midrange. There's good reason for that. If you

have two midranges talking at you, they'd better be speaking in *precisely* the same voice or the result isn't going to sound natural. Such matching of drivers is expensive enough. Now keep in mind that this is stereo. You have two speakers working and thus will need 4 precisely matched midranges. That's tough. Well, it's not as tough as it is simply expensive to do right. And God forbid something should happen to one of the drivers in your speakers. For that reason, D'Appolito has avoided the D'Appolito configuration in his own Usher designs.



In my small listening room, not only did the CP-6381s tower above me but I found myself looking up at their tweeter floating about 47 inches off the floor and about 10 to 14 inches above the tweeters of the last few pairs of monitors which these floorstanders displaced in my room. The speakers were placed such that those tweeters were spaced 89 inches from each other, 102 inches from my ears and 31 inches from the rear wall. Sidewalls were 43 and 51 inches away.

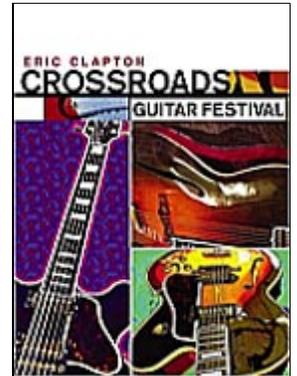
The CP-6381s also spent a lot of time in my 15' x 23' family room as part of my multi-channel system. In neither room were the CP-6381s what I would call difficult to place but in my larger room, they were downright amicable. Where bass balance is concerned, the CP-6381s filled my smaller stereo room with all the bass it could handle but really appreciated spreading their wings in the larger room. There they sounded absolutely superb, among the best to ever grace that room. Honestly. While they didn't plumb the lowest half-octave of bass, they were very solid down to around 30Hz, usually plenty of depth. On both movie and concert DVDs, the bass was nicely balanced, very articulate and completely satisfying. Dispersion characteristics were such that the Ushers



were easy to listen to from a wide array of seated positions. Even in stereo, concert videos were easy to enjoy. I also couldn't help but notice that while not perfect, they were a solid-enough match for my Magnepan CC2 center channel. For the most part I remained oblivious to mixing and matching up-front. Because the Magnepan is perhaps the most transparent and uncolored center channel I've ever used, that's high praise for the Ushers indeed.

The Ushers spent a lot of time as part of that multichannel system which often serves as the on-deck position for speakers about to move into the stereo room. One DVD that dominated the play list was Eric Clapton's *Crossroads Guitar Festival*. It's an extraordinary concert DVD that features a plethora of today's best Rock/Blues guitarists. It was recorded over the course of several days and on several stages and the Ushers were transparent enough to detail out the sonic

differences. From Fender Strats to Gibson ES 335s to the 13-string pedal steel, the Ushers delivered all the various string tones with aplomb and the general music with a natural smoothness that simply flowed. Some of my favorite aspects of the DVD are all its featured drummers. Their names may vary but they are, for the most part, energetic and powerful. The Ushers were fully up to the task of delivering that rhythmic power to my room. Overall, it's a very well recorded DVD and whether I was in surround or stereo mode, it always sounded fantastic. Fancy your music loud? The Ushers can be pushed hard. *Real* hard. Loud music not for you? No sweat, the Ushers can play at late-night volumes and you won't feel as though missing a note or beat. Of course, if they deliver both the power and grace of music (and they do), they will be more than up to the task of delivering movie soundtracks. Overall, the CP-6381s are one of the highest performing yet most affordable box speakers I've ever used in that system. Without a doubt, if I were assembling that system again today, the Ushers would be very high on my list of contenders.



I was so impressed early on that I had a few questions for Usher's importer Stan Tracht:



What were the design goals for the 6381 and how does one series of Usher speakers differ from the next (to hear these overachievers is to wonder what you'll get when you spend more).



The design brief for the Usher 6000 series was "a true high-end floorstanding speaker line that is compact and eminently affordable". In other words, no cutting corners whatsoever in all the performance-related aspects and with a cabinet design that is at the same time attractive, easy to live with and efficient to manufacture which is made possible only through the tremendous R&D efforts invested. Technically speaking, a flat on-axis response and broad uniform horizontal polar response

were the two primary design goals. These goals do differ a little from one series to another. The Dancer series, for example, is cost-no-object though still an incredible value and therefore free to utilize the ultra-expensive beryllium drivers.



Who is Usher's targeted market? I'm curious as to how Usher caters to -- or anticipates -- the tastes of listeners around the world. Do tastes still vary from one geographical region to another? Where most manufacturers would seem to cater to their home audience first, I would imagine that Usher was intended from the start for worldwide distribution and I'm wondering how that affects the whole process if at all.



At Usher, we don't anticipate different tastes of the reproduced sound in different parts of the world. At this level of performance, it's just not an issue. We *do* see differences in taste for the cabinet design, however. That's one of the reasons why we have more models than most other high-end speaker manufacturers.



Back in my smaller two-channel room, the Ushers were just about 5½ pounds of flour in a 5-pound sack. They loaded the room with all the bass it could properly handle. That's not to say the results didn't sound good or weren't fun. But I was constantly aware that the CP-6381s were giving me just a tad too much bass. However, this bass never became slow, bloated or overbearing. On the contrary, it sounded good. Strictly accurate and neutral? Probably not. If that's what you seek and you have a similarly sized room to mine, check out the next model down in the Usher line. As potent as the bass was, it remained sharply focused, highly detailed, suitably fast and *visceral*. And since it didn't intrude on the clarity of the midrange, it was easily characterized as harmless fun. What didn't change in this smaller room was that the Ushers retained a potent rich fullness that I wish my reference speakers had through the upper bass.

If the whole review process was in any way disappointing, it was with regard to the fact that I couldn't point out any significant flaw in these Taiwanese value leaders. I thought that I could certainly manage to point to at least a treble performance that, while extended enough, would perhaps be a little harsh, a little scratchy or a touch too hot? I mean, so much speaker for so little money, one would expect -- or at least excuse -- *some* small chink in the armor, right? Alas, it was not to be. There's *nothing* about the performance of this speaker that I can really be critical of. There's certainly nothing wrong with its treble

performance. It's smooth, extended and very well behaved. The dueling hi hats at the beginning of Joe Jackson's "Heart of Ice" [*Body & Soul*, A&M CD5000], problematic on some speakers when it comes to keeping the two hi-hats separate

and distinct, were well served by the Ushers as were the cymbals on "Loisaida". What's more, the Ushers produced all the energy of the featured brass instruments without becoming edgy. Chimes and bells all had excellent presence as well.





Moving down through the midrange, the Usher maintained a consistent personality. It's clean, reasonably uncolored and smooth. Boxy colorations? While the Dancer series may possibly be better, there were no obvious colorations I could detect from the CP-6381s. These speakers are musical, too. Transparent, open and plenty detailed, they nevertheless never slice or dice the music. One can listen to them all day without undue fatigue. They are the kind of speakers that allow you to forget the equipment and listen to the music.

Be it Joe Jackson, Peter Gabriel or Eva Cassidy, the CP-6381s did voices nicely. They are so well balanced from the upper bass through the midrange that you can't make vocals sound chesty or boomy or even strident or honky - unless that's what's on your disc of course. Of particular fun was Chanticleer's *How Sweet The Sound* with Bishop Yvette

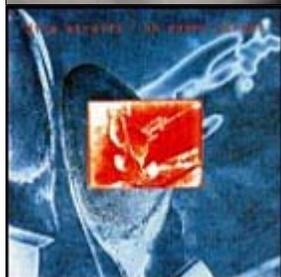


Flunder, a recording of spirituals and traditional gospel music [Warner R2 60309] or -- as Marc Mickelson said when he recommended the CD to me -- "gospel with attitude". It's a

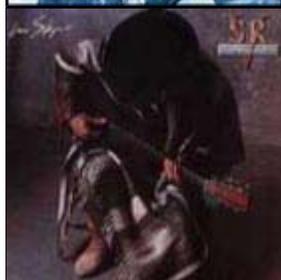
must-have disc for lovers of vocal music and the general genre and it threw the CP-6381s' strengths into sharp relief. The various choral voices explode in a kaleidoscope of colors like fireworks across a darkened July 4th sky, each separate and distinct yet part of a united whole. And when I say explode, I mean *explode*. These superb singers evidence truly excellent diction and the Usher's snappy dynamics showed it off well. And check out those bass vocals. Such balance and low levels of coloration and resonance are not easy to come by. For sure, the Ushers served the music well - and vice-versa.



The CP-6381s are lithe dynamos, too. I've already discussed how they can play loud and satisfy while playing softly. They rocket between the extremes very nicely as well. On paper, they are easy to drive and while I did use 500 watts of Bryston power, believe me when I say that I can discern when a speaker needs plenty of power and when it doesn't. The CP-6381s exhibit a combination of power and agility that less amplifier-friendly speakers can't muster.



On Dire Straits' title track "One Every Street" [Warner Bros. Records 47772], the Ushers demonstrated a neat and tucked-in demeanor. They produced a wide and deep soundstage, quick concussive bass lines, smoothly articulated vocals and saturated electric Fender tone. But when I set to spinning Peter Gabriel's *UP* [Geffen Records 49338], I knew that the Ushers had merely been playing the part. The Gabriel disc unleashed a very different kind of bass power and hedonistic heft. Ditto for a soundstage that swelled to monstrous proportions. Usher's smallish woofer in a big box proved a recipe equally adept at reproducing both discs. From the unexaggerated lower registers of the piano from Dire Straits' "One Every Street" to the growling and indistinct gut-penetrating bass lines on Gabriel's "Sky Blue" to the opening bass riff on "No Way Out", each differs in its tonality and tunefulness and in the way you can almost count the bass cycles.



Where soundstaging was concerned, the Ushers did something interesting. Some speakers tuck the stage from corner to corner in front of me and in a straight line across my room (that's not to say that spatial information doesn't fill the room but I'm talking about the location of the stage itself). Other speakers form a panoramic and *arched* stage in front of me that partially wraps around the listening chair. The CP-6381s did both. What I got in my room varied completely with the discs being played. What didn't vary was the CP-6381s remaining two of

the most visual speakers I've used in a while. I could almost see the performers in the room. However, while rock-solid, the performers didn't have the extreme focus that better speakers do. Listeners can and will debate which is the more natural presentation.

The Ushers did an excellent job of disappearing in the room and overall their imaging and soundstaging left nothing to be desired once one considers their class. I confess to listening to Stevie Ray Vaughn's "Riviera Paradise" [*In Step*, Epic EK 65874] over the Ushers way too many times. It was just so well balanced, so engaging and so big that I couldn't resist. Stevie's guitar was as big as the man's legend. I could sense the tension on the drum skins and Shannon's bass lines were deep and powerful, in perfect contrast to Layton's ride cymbal that seemed to originate on the other side of my front wall. Simply superb. Throw in some of Reese Wynan's soulful keyboards and one can only contemplate what Stevie would be doing if he was still around today as one listens to the cut over and over and over.

Conclusion: Stating the obvious

The build quality and high degree of fit and finish of the CP-6381s is downright incomprehensible for the money asked. It makes me glad I'm not in the business of speaker building and don't have to compete in today's aggressively competitive market. But ultimately, that isn't what's most important - consider it mere icing on the cake. What is more important and what I liked best about them is their sheer *listenability*. Listen to them from

behind a curtain where you can't see how much speaker your dollar is buying and where their finish can't influence you. What you will hear is a speaker that's dynamic, relatively full-range, smooth and musically satisfying. These are the kind of speakers that will allow you to spend the day at your friend's house listening to his ultra-expensive speakers and then come home to perhaps -- just maybe -- hear what his speakers can do that yours can't but at the same time not really care.

Yes, more highly detailed speakers exist as do more liquid ones; those that will lift your house off its foundation with <20Hz bass and those that will take up a lot more space in your room. But they won't impress your friends with how smart of a customer you are. They won't really make the music more enjoyable or your life more meaningful. They won't leave as much in the kids' college fund. At their price, the Usher CP-6381s aren't cheap but for the high level of fit and finish as well as their unflappable musicality and unusually high degree of panache, they are both a stone-cold bargain and my first recommendation for a Blue Moon Award of 2005.

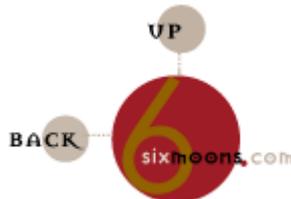
John Potis



FOR:

STELLAR FIT'N'FINISH, UNFLAPPABLE MUSICALITY & PANACHE

• IN THE <\$5,000 FLOORSTANDING SPEAKER CATEGORY •



Manufacturer's [website](#)