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## ONHIFI

November 15, 2005

### Usher Audio CP-6391 Loudspeakers

#### The Usher Showroom

At the 2005 CES my vote for "Best of Show:" went to Usher Audio, a diversified hi-fi manufacturer from Taiwan. Despite a milling crowd, the sound in Usher's room was promising.

A pair of exquisitely finished loudspeakers produced a vast, airy soundfield with sweet harmonics. But filtering out the pedestrian footfalls, conversations, and bodily obstructions in order to form a meaningful impression of the demo was impossible. Besides, who could sit still in a room arrayed with works of audio art?

Lining the walls and gracing tabletops were marble-smooth forms of modern sculpture. Reserve gave way to glee -- like a kid in a toy store, I had to touch the merchandise. With permission of an Usherette, I hefted a gleaming block of faux granite -- a 520S minimonitor in piano black. Although a basketball player could palm it, I found myself needing two hands to lift the little Usher off the table. Though it measures a mere 7" x 10" x 12", the 520S weighs almost 14 pounds! The illusion of granite had substance. The low retail price (\$300 and change) made me reel in disbelief.

Greedily, I began touching other Usher models and asking their prices. My palms soon itched. Learning that the gorgeous pair of "Dancers" on demo cost ten grand *less* than anticipated made me feel like Scrooge McDuck in a jewel vault. If these speakers sounded as classy as they looked, they'd ruin the market. The notion of forsaking all others for these beauties crossed my mind. I *had* to audition Usher Audio speakers in my system

Following CES, I contacted Stan Tracht of Thee High End, Usher Audio's Dallas-based US distributor. After I explained my situation (impecunious, smalltime, but enthusiastic importer), Stan generously agreed to take me on.

He accepted my order for a pair of 520Ses and the largest model in Usher's handsome "6" series, the CP-6391 (\$4500/pair USD). Later, I brought in a pair of smaller 6-series speakers, the CP-6371s, that a friend, on hearing the CP-6391, had ordered on the spot. After six months of listening to Usher Audio loudspeakers, I am thrilled to discuss the CP-6391, as well as offer impressions of the two other Usher models that have passed through my hands.

#### Why Usher Audio?

Besides the visual impact of their products, Usher Audio had piqued my interest for other reasons. First, the company's profile is impressive. The founder, Tsai Lien-Shui, began repairing test equipment more than 30 years ago. In the mid-1970s he switched to building electronics, and eventually to loudspeakers. Tsai's given name sounds like *usher* in English. Hence,



Jim Saxon is a world-famous audio dealer (well, in Latin America at least) and mixes a mean margarita. The products discussed here may be sold, distributed, or otherwise promoted by Jim. Read at your own risk!

in 1979, the name Usher Audio was adopted. Usher is now the biggest-selling loudspeaker brand in Taiwan, a crossroads for competitive goods from around the world.

That Usher designs and assembles its drivers in-house was great to know. I've been disappointed by companies that were unable to replace broken parts because their suppliers had ceased production. Although I respect lonely geniuses who assemble fine loudspeakers from catalogue items, I prefer to buy from manufacturers who control their own destinies. To an extent, this means vertical integration. A growing practice among speaker companies is to import cabinets made in China and stuff them with ingredients at home. I don't know if this is the case with Usher's heirloom-quality cabinets. At the moment, my position is don't ask, don't tell.

Another factor is that one of my hi-fi heroes, Joseph D'Appolito, is involved in Usher Audio's current work. In the early '90s I purchased a speaker kit, the Swan IV, designed by Dr. Joe. This was my first exposure to the now-famous "D'Appolito configuration": midrange, tweeter, and midrange drive-units, in that order, combined with a fourth-order crossover. The Swan IV remains one of my fondest hi-fi memories. Oddly, no Usher Audio speaker uses the D'Appolito configuration, but why quibble? As long as the good doctor fine-tunes Usher's crossovers, that's pedigree enough for me.

Finally, I was impressed with Stan Tracht's seriousness of purpose. He is gung-ho to win Usher Audio a major share of the US market. I like his chances. Stan's venture-capital background encourages sound business planning and lends the hardnosed experience to implement it. In order to restore an image damaged by Usher Audio's previous distribution scheme, Stan and his brother Carter have bought up the unsold inventory in dealer hands. The days of dumping and price-cutting are over. That may sound like bad news for consumers, but it isn't. The only way a foreign manufacturer can thrive is by having a strong local distributor. In my dealings with the brothers Tracht, I have been impressed by their high level of professionalism. With Thee High End leading the way, I think Usher Audio is here to stay.

### **A mid-priced flagship**

In choosing my Ushers, I was attracted to the 6 series' ratio of price to performance. The line's specifications were impressive. With four models ranging in price from \$2100 to \$4500/pair, I could sample an Usher without high risk. Natural acquisitiveness plus the size of my room dictated a choice of the biggest model, the CP-6391. My listening space (15' x 35') contains a wall of windows with a cement ledge below. Jutting out 2' into the room, the ledge requires that speakers be placed well into the room, denying bass-reinforcement from the back wall. Consequently, I prefer speakers that go low on their own. Usher rates the 6391's low-frequency response as -3dB at 24Hz -- a great place to start, since my seating arrangement is also bass-averse. For best imaging, the sweet spot is in a low-frequency null, which is fine with me. I prefer the eye of the storm to a standing wave. SPL measurements show that loudspeakers lose about 10Hz off the bottom in my room. Since I am *loco* for ambience retrieval ("bass makes space"), mid-30Hz in-room capability is desirable. And its driver complement favored the 6391 -- the speaker's 10" woofer had a chance of winning the Battle of Jim's Null.

Unpacked and installed on iron bases (a two-man, one-maid job), the 6391 is a stunner. Some box speakers align the drivers by angling the front baffle. The 6391 goes one better by raking back the entire cabinet. The gravity-defying parallelogram is uniquely poised -- without a base attached, the speaker would topple backward, adding tension to the design. High-end products that follow aesthetics as well as function are scarce on the ground. The 6391 could grace a mansion.

The black-gloss finish is ritzy. Wood dampers embellish the impression that a pair costs ten grand. Their actual retail price invades the realm of fantasy. The speaker's size, appearance, and weight (153 pounds with base) create unfair performance expectations: The temptation is to compare the 6391 to speakers costing thousands more. Yet the boys at Thee High End welcome the handicap like railbirds who know a secret: the CP-6391 is not your ordinary five-grand contender.

First, the drivers are of a quality found in flagship designs. The silk tweeter uses a patented ferrofluid said to allow operation over a larger bandwidth. In an age of rare-metal tweeters, my old ears like how silk handles digital glare. At a low 2395Hz, the tweeter hands off, via a fourth-order electroacoustic crossover, to the 8948A, a lightweight, 7" mid-woofer newly designed for Usher's more expensive Dancer 8571. In the Dancer, the mid-woofer must pace a lightning-fast tweeter coated in beryllium oxide. The "slower" silk tweeter in the 6391 is a snap to handle. The mid-woofer's treated-paper cone (love the sound of paper cones) has a shallow shape that covers a wider frequency range than a deep-dish profile.

Like the mid-woofer, the famous 8948A bass driver uses parts sourced from a company in Germany. The cone's distinctive "rumpled" appearance led some to think the 8948A was a copy of a Scan-Speak model. However, the similarity is only skin-deep -- both companies buy their carbon-impregnated paper cones and surrounds from the same supplier. The way the two companies assemble their drivers is different.

Usher uses a proprietary moving magnet system, as well as a patented technology called Symme-Motion that resulted from

years of correlating measurements with listening tests. For driver assembly, S-M ensures optimal response symmetry and linearity. Applied to pairs of loudspeakers, S-M enables channel matching within 0.2dB. Wow. I've been told that cutting-edge speaker-distortion measurements by Klippel of Germany support such claims. My ear suggested that the 6391's midrange had a smooth, edgeless quality normally found in three-way speakers costing upward of 20 grand.

When the CP-6391s first arrived, I knew nothing of Symme-Motion or of painstaking channel matching. But merely eyeballing the Usher's fit and finish convinced me that it devastated similarly priced competition. Why would anyone build such a high-class looker without being sure it performed? My quest, therefore, was to determine whether this pair of svelte light-heavyweights could sonically challenge the pricier cruiserweights of lore. Toward that end, I surrounded the CP-6391s with top-quality components, cables, and accessories. In judging the Ushers by higher standards, it seemed fitting to partner them with products of similar capability, even if they cost far more than five-grand speakers normally see. Worth noting is that some of the excellent companion pieces are also inexpensive (e.g., Grover Huffman's brilliant interconnects). These are wonderful times to be an audiophile.

### **Burning in, perchance to dream?**

The CP-6391s entered service in March and have been gainfully employed ever since. In my experience, loudspeakers take time to mature. Although I question whether electronics and cables require long burn-in periods, I'm convinced that speakers improve from months, if not years, of use. I have also found that mothballing them for a while necessitates another brief period of burn-in. Over the past six months, the 6391 gave way to other loudspeakers on occasion but never went more than a week without a signal coursing through their carbon-impregnated veins.

Although Symme-Motion's linearity should negate the need for burn-in, I trust my ears in this matter. Moreover, I suspect that crossover parts and wire harnesses burn in at different rates from cones. Because of Symme-Motion, I liked the 6391 right out of the box. Notwithstanding Symme-Motion, I think the speakers acquired through use a seamlessness that wasn't quite there at the start. Others may say I am dreaming.

### **To the manner born**

When I moved into my present digs five years ago, my reference loudspeakers were Wilson Audio WATT/Puppy 6s. Properly set up, the Wilsons provide pinpoint imaging and powerful bass, but optimizing their locations in a difficult room took biblical patience. When frequencies and images finally locked in, I taped outlines of the speakers' footprints on the floor. These demarcations have served as the starting points for floorstanding speakers ever since. The Wilson experience has served all but one pair of speakers. Luckily -- their long bases are awkward to shuffle around -- the Ushers clicked in the Wilson spots. Occasionally I tampered with toe-in or adjusted the ebony discs on top, but basically, the Ushers were a set-'em-and-forget-'em proposition.

This led me to a threshold appreciation of the CP-6391. It was both the kindest and the most critical transducer I have ever used. Its forgiving nature indulged all but the wildest errors of partnering equipment. Yet, when components or cables were truly revealing, the Ushers imparted a "jump" factor like I'd never heard before. During the past six months I have replaced everything in my system except the Theta Carmen digital transport and the Audio Aero Prima DAC 24/192. Some gear measures up, some doesn't. Telling which is which was never easier than with the Usher 6391.

In addition to Theta and Audio Aero pieces, the starting lineup for this report included the Audio Research Reference 3 preamplifier, ARC VM200 monoblocks, Grover's balanced interconnects, Xsymphony speaker cables, Mpower AC cords, and a wonderful 20A power-line conditioner from Zero Surge. I also use specialized software. That is, I've been copying my CD collection using a BPT-modified Alesis Masterlink 9600 CD recorder set to 24-bit/96kHz input. I never listen to originals anymore, only copies. Who needs vinyl?

During the research period, the 6391 turned the tables on me time after time. Its precision lulled me into judging everything *but* the speaker. For instance, when I installed a new preamp, expecting tighter bass, I wound up pondering the science of updates and the business of model changes. The speakers just sat there and purred. While my hefty investment in tube gear produced commensurate performance gains, I was able to economize on ancillaries revealed as better than costlier predecessors. The Ushers saved me money!

An anecdote typifies the CP-6391's resolving capability. When a new amplifier arrived for testing, I hooked up two pairs of cables in a way that dictated a flip-flop at the speaker terminals. Consequently, a so-so banana plug went into the midrange/tweeter section of a speaker, while a more capable spade lug fed its woofer. I was aware that the banana plug was sub-par, but had no idea it could so skew the proceedings. Noticing that bell tones decayed too rapidly, I blamed the new amp until I realized that high notes emanating from the left channel hung in there just fine. Searching the mental database, I

recalled the banana plugs on the right-side tweeter. Hard to imagine a mere contact could matter, but it did. As soon as I swapped spades for banana plugs, tinkling bells regained their normal tail-off. I had never "heard" a connector so dramatically.

Golden-eared readers may smirk at my naïveté, but the Ushers uncovered whopping changes from subtleties normally beyond my patience to discern. As one who looks for any advantage in demonstrations, this is a blessing. My system has never been more enlightening. I thank the Ushers for educating me to the "sounds" of silver, copper, Teflon, and beryllium, not to mention the effects of capacitance, radio-frequency interference (RFI), and proper grounding.

### **Minimal needs -- Biwiring**

The Usher CP-6391 comes supplied with heavy brass-plated jumpers. These should be stored in a dry, safe place: the Ushers beg to be biwired. This awareness did not come easily. Assuming that a single run of megabuck cable with factory jumpers would always outperform two runs of nice-price cables, I leaped to a wrongful conclusion that the speaker was better in the upper midrange than the lower. Negligently, I had only one pair of the pricey cables on hand and couldn't have biwired if I'd wanted to.

When a load of Xsymphony samples arrived, I was curious to try a pair of Infusion XP-OCC speaker cables. With jumpers still in place, microdynamics improved but the sound was drier overall. Having more sets of Infusions on hand and nothing to lose, I decided to biwire. Eureka! The second run of cables was a tonic to cure all ills. The soundfield expanded left and right, electric bass throbbed with menace, piano notes bubbled like champagne, cymbals splashed and respired from a greater distance.

Oh, really?

You betcha, Red Ryder! Biwiring filled in a small frequency gap between woofer and mid-woofer. Yet the added bass heft enhanced *all* performance parameters, including high-frequency response. Usher dealers would be well advised to biwire for demo purposes. Potential buyers should insist on it. The Xsymphony experience attests that two reasonably priced runs of wire on the 6391 outperform a single run selling for ten times as much.

### **Maximum desire -- Biamplication**

Early on, a buddy insisted I demo the Ushers with Pink Floyd at 105dB. The results were not convincing. Despite a sensitivity rating of 90dB, the CP-6391 craved power. My setup at the time featured an experimental 70W amplifier hooked up via silver cables. The Ushers sang but would not dance. Salsa was prickly not *picante*. Reggae resembled calypso. I wondered if the speakers had a cultural problem. Cranking the volume was not the answer. For the Ushers to hammer, the woofers needed more current, voltage or damping factor -- *something*. A bigger stereo amp invigorated, but biamplication made the 6391 genuinely ruthless. After I installed 100W top and bottom, James Mason turned into James Bond. Refinement went violent at the slap of bass. I was reminded of Sam Tellig's classic appreciation of "balls, balls all over the place." Here were *pelotas grandes*.

The transformation from lean to mean was unprecedented in my experience. Over the years I've detected meaningless changes from biamplication, saving me the cost of a second amplifier. The Ushers are the first speakers I've heard that justified investment in another amp. As happy as I am presently, I wonder how the Ushers would sound with *four* monoblocks instead of two. Stay tuned, rock fans. Such a setup is in the making.

### **Midrange to the fore**

Because most people do not have or want a biamp setup, may I hasten to add that one can enjoy music on the CP-6391s with a 50W stereo amp that's strong for its size? When it comes to driving a 10" woofer with the precision required of Symme-Motion, wimps of any output rating need not apply.

At normal playback levels, the Usher's impregnated paper cones richly rewarded low output of high distinction. For instance, I like to listen to groups that "fit" into the front of the room: jazz combos, string quartets, unplugged pop artists. I raise the volume until the voices and instruments scale to actual size. The final setting probably dissipates a single watt.

What the Ushers did with that watt was most impressive. They projected a harmonic fullness whose complex textures defied the term *inner detail*. It wasn't a case of *plinks* here or *tinkles* there. The entire midrange was tactile. It was like comparing 80-grit sandpaper to fine linen. Unlike speakers that rely on brightness, the 6391 revealed filigree within a balanced sonic

structure. The result is greater veracity. Tom Jones growling the blues sounded less disguised. Kari Bremnes trilled with chesty passion rather than throaty hysteria. The frequency extremes conformed to and enhanced the midrange, rather than dominated to impress the showroom crowd. As a bonus, the response linearity created properly sized images that floated free of the cabinetry. Rarely do large floorstanders "disappear" as entirely as did the 6391. That's the effect of one great watt. Of course, 100 great watts would allow more flexibility in program material.

From the first moment of play (Jean Manuel Serrat's *Sombras de la China* [BMG 743216 14792] fueled the startling debut), I was struck by the Usher's harmonic ambitiousness. This speaker was meant to sound real. In a complementary setup such as mine, it often did! While the Usher's highs, lows, and transient snap were first-rate, its vivacious midband suspended my disbelief. Lifelike voicing is a goal that speaker builders sometimes neglect in a quest for parameter bragging rights. With a low-distortion amplifier of sufficient grip, the 6391 conveyed natural tones in equal proportion from top to bottom. Loudspeakers this accomplished are hard to find at any price. At a mere 4500 simoleons per pair, they're miraculous. If someone wants bare-bones detail or rock-concert bass, there are plenty of brands to choose from. But for music with a breath of life, few examples surpass these Taiwanese towers. They are the essence of refinement.

By comparison, my other loudspeakers have had at least one flaw to brace for on every track of music. In *The Pink Panther*, there's a scene where Sir Charles screws up his face, expecting Princess Dala to slap him. I know the look. A photo once taken of me during a listening session shows a man flinching. Most likely, I was waiting for a chanteuse to screech or a violin to scrape. By contrast, the CP-6391 coped so well with edgy recordings that I could sit back and let my face sag where it would. In the future, I may grade speakers by Flinch Factor. On a scale of 0-10 flinches per recording, where zero is best, the 6391 scores less than a fraction. The average loudspeaker scores 11.

### Midrange squared -- CP-6371

Bargain hunters take note: An Usher Audio 6-series speaker with an as-good or better midrange than the CP-6391 costs a lot less! The CP-6371 (\$2900/pair) uses two 7" mid-woofers instead of the single 10" one found on the 6391. Though their diameters are equal, the 6371's two mid-woofers have different model numbers. In order to grasp the distinction, I consulted Usher Audio's website. Being a driver manufacturer, Usher lists specifications and measurements for its entire product range. If only other companies offered this valuable feature.

For numbskulls like me, it's just as well they don't: I couldn't interpret the graphs. Perhaps the mid-woofer in the CP-6371 has higher distortion numbers but a smoother frequency response than the 8948A. Could doubling up on the 8945A lower the midrange distortion to less than that of a single 8948A? Whatever, my ear perceived a see-through quality that may not be surpassed at any price. Through the CP-6371, sopranos were extra-chilling. Piano was properly plangent. Violins keened toward heaven. Someday I'd like to try the CP-6371s with a nimble subwoofer like the Paradigm Seismic 12. For \$100 more than the cost of the 6391, I could enjoy a glorious midrange along with bass extension to 17Hz! Of course, matching one manufacturer's satellites to another's subwoofer can be a futile chore. I'm surprised that Usher Audio has no subwoofers in its model range. They build amplifiers; how difficult can it be to design a powered subwoofer? Maybe it's a philosophical issue. I should ask Tsai Lien-Shui about it some day.

### Midrange cubed -- 520S

The littlest Usher was a huge surprise. On a pair of massive stands, the tiny 520S sounded like the 6 series! The lower midrange was leaner, and ambience retrieval was less -- there's no fooling Mother Physics -- but the 520S had an unmistakable 6ness to it. With my eyes closed and music of limited dynamic range, the family resemblance was uncanny. Usher isn't kidding about Symme-Motion. No matter the cone size or the driver configuration, the consistency of voicing suggests that if you like one Usher model, you'll like them all.

### End notes

What, no disc-by-disc journey of discovery? Well, to paraphrase gin-joint philosopher Rick Blaine of *Casablanca*, I don't think my listening amounts to a hill of beans compared to that of Tsai Lien-Shui. Imagine spending more than 30 years measuring, listening, inventing, testing, measuring, etc., in an effort to build the perfect loudspeaker. Not saying that Usher Audio has gone that far -- can perfection ever be achieved? -- but they've obviously taken the right tack.

I wish I had known of Usher Audio before now, but better late than never. Besides, great hi-fi companies take time to evolve. Staying power in this tough business requires a progression of two steps forward, one step back. Steady determination like Tsai Lien-Shui's is the path to long-



term success. I am grateful to sample the fruits of his labor. With Joe D'Appolito and Thee High End on Usher's side, I anticipate the brand's success in the US. Odds are that you, gentle reader, will soon have an Usher dealer nearby. Whether you fall under the spell as I have is not important. At least, you can judge if this Taiwanese company rivals -- nay, surpasses -- the giants of Europe and North America. Any audiophile worth his test records should audition the line. These loudspeakers are *really* outstanding.

...Jim Saxon

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