



USHER S-520

Having been bowled over by the little Ushers in the December issue, this group test came about partly because we wanted to double check that really are good even when pitted against the latest competitors.

To recap, the Ushers are diminutive boxes measuring 300x180x250mm (HxWxD) and weighing in at 6.3kgs (13.8lbs). Their driver lineup consists of a five inch (125mm) bass/midrange driver with an eye-catching transparent polypropylene cone and a one inch (25mm) soft dome tweeter. The S-520s have two pairs of binding posts and use a front-mounted port for bass reinforcement. Although supplied in a Birch wood finish, the Ushers are also available in gloss black and white and we have recently received word from the distributor, Hi Audio, that the options of 'Ferrari' red and 'Lamborghini' yellow are now to be made available to the UK market as well.

SOUND QUALITY

Fortunately, it appeared our ears had not been deceiving us two months ago when we first tried out these speakers. If you closed your eyes you would never guess that these are the second smallest speakers in the test apart from the ALRs as they have a big, healthy soundstage and fantastic depth. Allied to this sense of scale was an open and detailed midrange which made excellent work of vocal and

acoustic material.

Treble was clean, clear and sweet and, as suspected, the gradual rise in output up to 16kHz does indeed add detail and sparkle. This served to endow vocals with clarity and helped bring everything to the front of the soundstage, putting vocal and lead instruments right in my lap. One concern this raised was whether this was an artificial 'sheen' being added, but my fears were assuaged with the help of Nigel Kennedy's violin. The violin is an instrument that will reveal any artificial aspects of high frequency performance and it can sound artificial and harsh through unsympathetic loudspeakers. Once again, however, the Ushers sounded fine.

At the lower end of the scale, their lower bass is pleasingly weighty and upper bass is taut, agile and detailed. The S-520s never sounded strained or boxy and made excellent work of whatever bass line was sent their way, be it acoustic, electric or synthesised.

CONCLUSION

After a good listening session, the Ushers impressed all over again with their scale, composure and superb sound quality. The competition have certainly not been standing still in terms of development and new products, but the Ushers really are a breath of fresh air into the budget loudspeaker market and I personally like them very much.

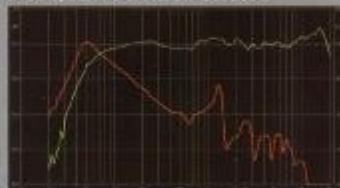
MEASURED PERFORMANCE

Yet another good flat frequency response from the final candidate in the test. The Ushers have no areas for concern and the gentle rise in treble output towards 16kHz will help add detail and liveliness without the risk of harshness.

Bass roll off starts at around 70Hz and is reinforced by the port at 50Hz. There are other speakers in the test that go lower but Usher have resisted the temptation to try and force the S-520s too low and out of a comfortable performance region.

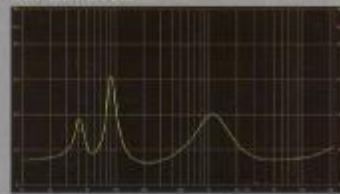
The impedance curve shows no concerns and measured impedance is high at 9.1 Ohms, dipping to a minimum value of 6 Ohms. Despite the measured sensitivity of 84dB, the Ushers will not be difficult to drive and will match an output designated for 8 Ohms well, but 40 watts is an advisable minimum for good volume, however, AS

FREQUENCY RESPONSE



Green - driver output
Red - port output

IMPEDANCE



VERDICT

Dynamic and exciting, yet composed and detailed. Excellent loudspeakers!

USHER S-520 £265

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FOR

- dynamic, exciting sound
- grand sense of scale
- value

AGAINST

- still nothing!

As an exponent of the 'there ain't no substitute for cubic inches' theory when it comes to loudspeakers, I have always been pleased to stumble upon a pair of small loudspeakers that buck the trend and give an enjoyably big sound without the less enjoyable big looks. Fortunately, I appear to be finding more and more of these, and the number of worthy small loudspeakers seems ever-expanding, as ably demonstrated by our candidates here. None of them make nasty noises, and all offer their own particular slant on music making.

Of the group, I'm afraid that first off the shortlist for me would be Mission's M60is. On the upside, they are the cheapest loudspeakers here, but you'd never know as they are thoughtfully designed and well made. Auditioned on their own, they are not a bad choice, but in this company the lack of imagery and coarse midband makes them the least preferable.

Moving to the middle ground there are five loudspeakers with varying audio styles. First off, the Acoustic Energy Aelite Ones are bold, dynamic and exciting, but could veer into harshness on occasion. If your system currently needs a bit of a wake up or your amplifier of choice is a more laid-back unit (possibly valve!) that needs lively loudspeakers, then the AEs may just be the injection that you need to bring verve to your music.

The tiny little ALR Jordan Classic Is are another loudspeaker that I feel will find many happy owners. They are clean, detailed and have a generally sophisticated sound to them. Their downside is the fact that their small size limits not only their bass output but also how hard they can be pushed before signs of distress start to creep in. However, if headbanging and upsetting the neighbours are low on your priority list, then they are well worth checking out.

On the other hand, however, if headbanging and neighbour baiting are something in which you like to indulge, the B&W DM602 S3s will do nicely. If you can live with the fact that you can probably fit three of the ALR Jordan Classic Is into each of the B&Ws cabinets, then they reward with punch, detail and superb bass depth! There's a little boxiness and lower midrange chestiness that accompany this depth, minimised by using a high damping factor amplifier like Audiolab's 8000s, but they are still a thoroughly enjoyable and grin-inducing loudspeaker.



Maintaining the enjoyment factor are the Monitor Audio RS1s. Another detailed and dynamic design, they never fail to reveal the life and scale of recordings, but partnering equipment needs to be chosen carefully in order to avoid a hard sound.

Moving back to the more 'sensible shoes' end of the spectrum, the KEF iQ3s are relatively sober and restrained compared to the B&Ws and MAs. Veering toward accuracy these days KEF have in the iQ3s nonetheless a well integrated loudspeaker with superb imagery courtesy of their point-source Uni-Q technology.

Imagery is often top of the list for Tannoy enthusiasts as well, and the Sensys DC1s do not disappoint in this respect. Their combination of Dual Concentric driver and Supertweeter works wonders on midrange and soundstage and avoids the somewhat 'cuppy' nature of some of the larger Tannoys. Downsides are

Treble and midrange were more than a match for this. The only aspect that kept them from really giving me a headache over deciding who should take top spot was a hint of edginess with some vocal material, which I feel is due to the bass unit. That said, it will go unnoticed most of the time and never detracts from their thoroughly enjoyable performance.

Finally, and without fear of headache, that leaves the Usher S-520s. They came out of nowhere to impress us in our December issue and lo and behold, they've walked off with top spot here! Usher really have hit the nail on the head with these loudspeakers and it was almost a struggle to objectively assess them because, as soon as you put any music on, they are just so enjoyable it almost seems a shame to have to sit there and analyse them. They take any kind of source material in their stride and are equally content to pour out the emotion of a string quartet, hammer out the pace of a

"the Ushers are so enjoyable that it's a shame to sit there and analyse them..."

rather inconsistent treble quality and bass, that while taut and detailed in the upper registers, could be a little unruly down at the very bottom.

This then leaves us with the final two contenders, and the five globe candidates. First of these are those visions of gloss beauty, the Quad I1L2s. Putting aside the superb finish for a moment - if I must - leaves behind a pair of truly competent loudspeakers. I feel that their bass is very probably the best in the group as it was tight, deep and detailed, with no boom or sense of being 'forced'.

good rock guitar solo or pound out a dancefloor classic.

As mentioned in the introduction, this whole test came about because we wanted to check out the Ushers' similarly priced competition and also double check that we hadn't been a bit over-excitable when enthusing about them on our first encounter. We hadn't - they're brilliant. All the same, measurement and listening shows that, these days, rivals are not so far behind and none of the contenders we have featured will disappoint.