

Usher Audio Technology Compass X-719 loudspeaker

Robert J. Reina, May, 2004

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I love attending *Stereophile's* Home Entertainment shows. I get to check out the latest gear, hobnob with manufacturers and writer colleagues, hear some live music, and play a little jazz with John Atkinson, Zan Stewart, and Immedia's Allen Perkins. Unfortunately, work commitments at my day job meant I couldn't attend HE2003, in San Francisco, so I directed my team of *Stereophile* scouts to find me some hot new budget speakers. Robert Deutsch was quickest to respond, the week following the show: "Bob, you've got to check out these new speakers from Usher Audio in Taiwan! They have a number of models within your budget." One phone call later, and a pair of Compass X-719 bookshelf speakers was on its way to me.

Although Usher Audio Technology may not be a household name in the US, the company has been designing and manufacturing speakers and electronics in Taiwan for more than 30 years. Only since 2003 has Stan Tracht, of Thee High End of Dallas, Texas, made Usher designs widely available to US consumers. The Compass X-719 was jointly designed by Dr. Joseph D'Appolito (of the eponymous midrange-tweeter-midrange driver array, now chief engineer at Snell Acoustics) and Usher's Tsai Lien-Shui, and is manufactured in Usher's factory in Taipei.



Both the X-719's drive-units are sourced from Taiwan. The 1" tweeter uses a silk diaphragm, with a moderate-viscosity magnetic fluid used in the voice-coil gap to dissipate heat and improve mechanical linearity. Usher claims that the tweeter is capable of reaching much lower in frequency than typical tweeters. The X-719 therefore features a lower crossover point than usual, 2kHz, which relieves the bass/midrange unit of the need to reproduce higher frequencies, which Usher claims results in superior definition. The crossover is a fourth-order acoustic design. The cast-aluminum-framed 7" woofer uses a paper cone filled with carbon fiber to increase stiffness and to damp resonances. Reflex loading is provided by a 2"-diameter port on the cabinet rear. The woofer motor has a T-shaped pole-piece with a copper sleeve and shorting ring, and provides for a peak-peak "throw" of 12mm.

The biwirable X-719's substantial cabinet has thick walls of MDF and interlocking internal braces. Actually, "substantial" is an understatement. At 37 lbs each, the not unusually large X-719 is by far the heaviest bookshelf speaker I've ever reviewed—and by far the most attractive. The cabinets have rounded edges, and my review samples were finished in an attractive black-gloss, automotive-like lacquer, with elegantly finished side panels of dark, real wood.

To ensure consistency with my continuing series of reviews of budget speakers, I set the X-719s on my trusty Celestion Si stands, declining Usher's offer to supply their own \$400/pair stands. After seeing a photo of Usher's RSW708 stand, however, I regretted my decision—when coupled with the X-719, the stand's combination of wood uprights and stone base makes a striking visual statement.

Ushering in a new sound

I tested the X-719s with their grilles on and off. Although Usher recommends leaving the grilles off for the most uniform and flat frequency response, and despite the fact that I felt the X-719 sounded more transparent and detailed that way, I preferred listening with the grilles on, which provided the best integration of bass, midrange,

and highs. The differences, however, were subtle.

I auditioned the Usher Compass X-719s using a wide range of vinyl, CD, and home-theater recordings. I was immediately struck by the speaker's natural, detailed midrange. Well-recorded female vocal soloists, such as Madeline Peyroux on *Dreamland* (CD, Atlantic 82946-2) and Aimee Mann on *Bachelor No. 2 or the Last Remains of the Dodo* (CD, SuperEgo SE002), were vibrant and rich. On his *Give It Up to Love* (CD, JVC XRCD 0012-2), Mighty Sam McClain's voice was reproduced with the requisite deep, resonant growl.

The X-719's detailed and delicate rendition of well-recorded instruments with significant midrange energy, such as woodwinds, brass, and acoustic guitar, made the speaker a good match for classical chamber works such as George Crumb's *Quest* (LP, Bridge 9069), and small-group jazz recordings such as Jerome Harris' take on Duke Ellington's "The Mooche" (from *Editor's Choice*, Stereophile STPH016-2). With every classical and jazz recording I played, the X-719s "disappeared," all instruments emanating from a wide, deep soundstage.

I enjoyed the Compass X-719 most with piano recordings, regardless of genre. Bill Evans' axe on *Live at the Village Vanguard* (LP, Riverside RS 3006) was reproduced with all its warmth, detail, and subtle dynamic inflections intact. On the opposite side of the spectrum, Toru Takemitsu's *Corona: London Version* (LP, Decca HEAD 4) uses a closely miked piano as a percussion instrument, with unusually wide variations of dynamics, from the subtle to the explosive, as well as considerable use of open space and air—the piece might as well be titled *When Pianos Attack*. The X-719's wide dynamic range enabled the piano on this challenging recording to bloom as in a live performance.

Higher in frequency, the X-719 took on a bit of a forward perspective. This was not brightness, harshness, or coloration but, with works that had significant high-frequency content, was equivalent to moving a few rows closer to the concert-hall stage. This perspective resulted in an attractively crisp presentation of percussion on classical and jazz works. Steve Nelson's vibraphone solo on "The Mooche" sounded vibrant and tactile, reminiscent of a live performance heard from a front table in a jazz club; and according to my listening notes, the marimba on Messiaen's *Des Canyons Aux Etoiles* (LP, Erato STV 70974-75) was "startlingly natural."

Although the Hammond B-3 organ on the Mighty Sam disc sounded realistic, during solos it seemed as if the instrument's 1' and 2' drawbars had been pulled open another notch. However, despite the more forward perspective, the X-719's high frequencies didn't sound as detailed or as delicately presented as its midrange, particularly with classical works. Moreover, when the speaker was pressed hard during highly modulated orchestral works, such as Elliot Carter's Double Concerto for Harpsichord and Two Chamber Orchestras (LP, Nonesuch H-71312) or the Messiaen track, strings, brass, and high-frequency percussion instruments tended to sound a bit steely and brash.

The X-719's bass performance was unlike that of any other speaker I've heard. With all recordings, the bass was forceful, forward, dramatic, and deep (JA's measurements will tell us just *how* deep). But in searching for a word to describe the bass, the only word I can think of is *buxom*. With every recording I used, I kept thinking of...Dolly Parton. Adrienne Barbeau. Kitten Natividad. That is: round, tight, well-defined, dramatic, warm, supple, but slightly larger than life. Scott La Faro's solos on the live Bill Evans recording bloomed with good definition, and although the bass presentation was rather round, there was no sense of coloration, overhang, or sluggishness.

When I played well-recorded electronic rock recordings at higher volumes, the Usher's bass performance was even more dramatic. On "Feel No Pain," from Sade's *Love Deluxe* (CD, Epic EK 53178), the portamento from the lower-register bass synth shook the room with extraordinary definition and with no trace of coloration, overhang, or strain. Recordings such as this demonstrated the X-719's seemingly limitless capabilities of high-level dynamics—by far the most impressive I've heard from a bookshelf speaker this size.



STAND/BOOKSHELF LOUDSPEAKERS

I decided to turn up the volume. The bass-synth blasts on "Electric Battle Weapon 6," from the Chemical Brothers' *American EP* (LP, Virgin/Astralwerks ASW 43338), are true lease-breakers. I cranked up the system to about 110dB. Walls were shaking. Floors were shaking. My dog began barking violently. But the Ushers didn't flinch—despite my predilection for listening to delicate piano recordings with these speakers, the Ushers could party hearty when asked to.

The X-719's most noticeable weakness became evident with busy recordings that have considerable program material in all frequency ranges. As the speaker's high-frequency and bass performances were both rather forward, the midrange sounded a bit laid-back in comparison, leading to a sense of disconnectedness. For example, in "When You Walk Into My Dreams," from Gary Wilson's *You Think You Really Know Me* (CD, Motel MRCD007), Wilson's rapid Fender-bass articulations cover the instrument's entire range. The bass's lower register was quick, forceful, and dramatic through the Usher, the upper register delicate and laid-back; at times, it sounded as if I was hearing *two* different bass players trading riffs.

This was not a problem with solo piano or vocal-and-guitar recordings, but the Usher tended to lose coherence across the frequency spectrum when reproducing densely orchestrated classical works. The recording that best illustrated the X-719's combination of strengths and weaknesses was Antal Dorati's performance of Stravinsky's *Firebird* Suite (LP, Mercury Living Presence SR 90226). The orchestra was portrayed as big, bright, dynamic, and vibrant across a wide, deep stage, not sounding for a minute as if I was playing a recording through bookshelf speakers. The bass-drum thwacks, although a tad larger than life and with a slight bit of overhang, shook the room with no trace of coloration or artificial resonance. However, during the densely orchestrated tuttis, the trumpets and upper-register trombones were a bit too forward and blatty, and the somewhat forward perspective of the Mercury Living Presence "sound" was quite apparent.

Do they compete?

I compared the Usher Compass X-719 with the [NHT SB-3](#), the [Polk RT25i](#), and the [Alón by Acarian Systems Petite](#). (The last two models had been discontinued at the time of writing.)

The Polk RT25i impressed me with its dead-neutral midrange, sounding even more natural than the Usher, but without as much body as the Usher in the midrange. The Polk's high frequencies were even more extended and delicate than the Usher's. Although the Polk's mid- and upper bass were less colored than the Usher's, the Usher's low frequencies were far more extended, and the speaker trounced the Polk in its ability to provide high-level dynamic slam without compression or strain.

The NHT SB-3 sounded sweeter and more romantic than the Usher. Its vocal reproduction was as rich, but more delicate, and its high frequencies were more detailed. The NHT's low-level dynamic articulation seemed more continuous and involving than the Usher's, and its integration of midrange, highs, and bass was far more coherent. However, the NHT's bass was not as bloomy or as forceful, and, at high levels, the SB-3 suffered from compression. Moreover, the NHT sounded more closed-down than the Usher, and like a much smaller speaker.

Finally, the Alón Petite was far superior to the Usher in overall neutrality, coherence, detail resolution, and delicacy across the frequency spectrum. The Usher's bass went far deeper, however, and the X-719 was much better than the Alón in terms of high-level dynamic articulation and sense of power without compression or strain.

Summing up

I enjoyed the time I spent listening to a wide range of program material through the Compass X-719s. Curiously, they performed best with delicate, simple acoustic music, such as solo piano recordings, *and* bombastic, electronic rock recordings. In addition, while its low-frequency character is more buxom than stictly accurate, the X-719's bass extension and high-level dynamic capability have set new benchmarks

for a bookshelf speaker.

Whether or not the Usher Audio Technology Compass X-719 is right for you will depend on your musical tastes, listening biases, and associated equipment. In any event, the drop-dead-gorgeous Compass X-719 is a welcome addition to the American marketplace. I look forward to hearing other Usher speakers.