

Little voice

USHER S-520 (£265)

The small speaker is back, at a reasonable price, to redefine music making for a small system. We dust off the bookshelf references



Tested by Andrew Harrison

Small speakers do not always command small prices – look at the excitement caused by some mini monitors like the Acoustic Energy AE1, vintage LS3/5A, or Totem Acoustic Model 1 Signature. But small speakers like the classic Wharfedale Diamond used to signal the entry-level when it came to good hi-fi replay. Now we have the Usher S-520, a modestly-sized and modestly-priced two-way bookshelf design, with the potential to become something of a classic itself.

The finish options available from the UK distributor of this Taiwanese brand are piano black, white or real birchwood. The high-gloss black pair I tried had a superb finish, with no visible blemishes to the mirror-like cabinet walls. At the back is a regular bi-wire recessed plate for cable binding, and at front of the 180 x 250 x 300mm box are two drivers and a reflex port, with the tweeter offset-mounted to give handed pairs.

It's possible to see right into the cabinet thanks to the transparent cone of the '5in' mid/bass driver (actually closer to the 110mm of an LS3/5A), and to see the cast alloy frame of the main driver. The tweeter uses a soft 25mm dome behind a fixed metal gauze cover, on a large aluminium face plate.

PORTS IN

Sited on heavy Target stands, the S-520 gave a good, almost 'boxless' sound, with a very open soundstage not constricted by speaker positioning. I found the best sound with the speaker sited with tweeters set on the outside and ports inside, toed-in to point directly to listening seat for best centre focus and sense of 'air'.

Bass was nimble and musical, with no major lift engineered like some small speakers, although there is perhaps a little euphonic voicing here to preserve life in the sound of a necessarily bass-limited design. Bass was not over-damped nor too dry either, having the ability to breathe with the music without sounding at all wanton. A seemingly gradual roll-off in room means there was actually little sense of loss of low end, even at low volumes when small loudspeakers can sound at their most anaemic.

There's maybe a little presence lift in the lower treble, which can help vocal projection, and of note was the generally good cohesion of sound from different listening positions, either side-to-side and up and down.

Overall, the S-520 gave a very tactile and articulate sound, especially to vocals, and little spit or fizz from tweeter to exaggerate sibilants – a soft-dome tweeter sound with no metal nasties.

Play Goldfrapp's 'Crystalline Green' and you'll still hear all the sultry vaudeville, the cheeky but emphatic bass synth, choral harmonies and high-resonance analogue synth echoes; the rude sawtooth buzzes of 'Train', without losing the raunch, without adding cheap PA blare.

The Usher S-520 could maintain pace and excitement, without being brash and colored. It remained both lively and listenable, with a very tidy sound, showing little in the way of frayed edges to intrude into music. ☺

'The S-520 gave a very tactile, and little spit or fizz from tweeter'



LEFT: Tweeter uses a soft 25mm dome behind a fixed metal gauze cover. BELOW: Remove the links and the Usher is bi-wireable



SPEAKER TEST

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So where does it lose out to better, more expensive models?

Compared to established classics like the AE1 and LS3/5A, it was not quite as filigree and detailed, nor quite as even-handed with different styles of music. It loved pop and rock, plenty of jazz and much classical, although it could sound a little outclassed with large orchestral pieces, lacking the cohesion and smoothness of a classier design.

Taken as a whole though, and at this reasonable price, it really is a superbly balanced design, skillfully juggling the compromises of sensitivity, bass extension, damping and 'tunefulness'. It comes highly recommended. ☺



FOR:
Dynamic,
involving,
balanced

AGAINST: Outclassed with orchestral

BELOW: Transparent cone of the mid/bass driver means its possible to see right into the cabinet of the Usher



Verdict

USHER S-520
£265

Just because this little bookshelf model is modestly priced should not deter anyone in the market for a super quality compact monitor from putting it at the top of their audition list. Indeed, thanks to a tight and tuneful presentation, plus a fulsome and expansive soundstage, this well considered design is destined to become a budget favourite. What's more, the Usher is able to slot into budget or high-end systems without embarrassing itself – either aesthetically or sonically. Impeccable finish quality alone is virtually unheard of at this pricepoint. Overall build and individual component quality is very high, and sound quality is engaging and well balanced. True, with complex classical works the Usher can sound a little outclassed at times, but this is in absolute terms, making it a must-listen favourite at under £300.

SPEC/FEATURES



SOUND QUALITY



BUILD QUALITY



VALUE FOR MONEY



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OVERALL RATING

Manufacturer's specifications

TWEETER	1in
MIDBASS	5in
FREQUENCY RESPONSE	55Hz-20kHz (-3dB)
CROSSOVER FREQUENCIES	2.0kHz
IMPEDANCE	8 ohm
SENSITIVITY	86dB/W
POWER HANDLING	50 watt
WEIGHT	6.3kg
DIMENSIONS	30x25x18cm (hdw)
FINISHES	Piano black, white, real birchwood

Contact numbers

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Review system breakdown

SOURCE Meridian 808i CD player, Naim Audio DVD5 DVD player, Naim Audio AV2 processor
AMP Leben CS600 integrated amp, Music First Audio pre-amp, TAG McLaren 100X10R power amp
CABLES Chord Co Odyssey speaker cable

We listened to

GOLDFRAPP
Black Cherry
Mute 196

GORECKI, MARKEVITCH, ETC
Music At The Edge
RCA 26855

NILS PETTER MOLVAER
Khmer
ECM 1560

T.A.T.U
Lyudi Invalidi
Universal
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