

Eastern gem

Small loudspeakers from the East don't usually shine, but the small Usher S-520 is a real gem, Adam Smith finds...

Founded in 1972, Taiwanese manufacturer Usher are gradually becoming a force to be reckoned with. Their range of loudspeakers is quite extensive, stretching up to the flagship Dancer and Horn series. But it is the small S-520's we are interested in here, from the other end of the scale. They retail for around £265-£285 depending on the finish you choose and are available in the pleasing birch wood effect of the review samples, or alternatively gloss black or white, giving excellent potential for matching with a similarly finished Rega or Pro-ject turntable for a really eye-catching system!

Finish and build quality of our review samples were superb. The cabinets feature a front-ported 5in bass/mid driver and a 1in soft dome tweeter. Two pairs of gold plated binding posts per speaker plus removable black grilles complete the picture.

SOUND QUALITY

The first thing that captured my attention was clear and detailed treble. All too often the subtle background percussion effects that many bands like to sneak into their songs can be washed over by budget speakers but they were there loud and clear with the Ushers. On a variety of material the high frequencies continually proved themselves to be more than capable - ultimately not as smooth or silky as a more expensive tweeter but never harsh or unpleasant.

Midrange detail retrieval was excellent; Diana Krall's piano on 'They Can't Take That Away from Me' was almost uncannily larger than life in its presentation and the Ushers proved equally adept at reproducing her vocal style with great flair. Moving to a live recording by Johnny Cash and Willie Nelson, their instantly recognisable voices were strong and centre-stage and, even more impressively, the applause of the audience



was loud and clear. I have heard this particular aspect descend into a messy blur through more than one loudspeaker but the S-520's took it all in their stride.

The bass of a small loudspeaker is often where a compromise occurs between trying to wring as much output as possible from the space available, or not even bothering and concentrating on upper bass detail. Naturally the bass from the S-520s isn't going to destroy foundations or upset your neighbours unduly if you start spinning heavy dub reggae, but Usher have struck an excellent balance. There is a definite hint of gentle bass lift at certain frequencies but it never became boomy or unpleasant, and merely served to underpin the detailed and agile upper bass with just the right amount of authority. My only caveat would be that a partnering amplifier with a modicum of low frequency composure is probably a wise idea to ensure that this is maintained.

CONCLUSION

Usher have come along and thrown an impressive curve-ball into the UK market, serving up a composed and detailed, yet exciting and dynamic budget loudspeaker. The nominal 8 Ohm impedance

SECOND THOUGHTS:

These were lovely! Clear natural midband with depth, great with vocals, and nice sheeny treble. Best of all for the size though was believable bass: tight, supple and punchy. Anyone would like this 'speaker I feel. Top value. NK

and reasonable sensitivity will ensure wide amplifier compatibility and the S-520s were a pleasure to audition. I feel they are more than good enough to make some of the more established British players in the budget loudspeaker market sit up and take note - highly recommended!

HI-FI WORLD

VERDICT £

An excellent small loudspeaker, offering detail and dynamics in a conveniently small package.

USHER S-520 LOUSPEAKER £265

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FOR

- detail and dynamics
- value for money
- build quality

AGAINST

- nothing at this price!

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

Much as in the way they sound, measurement of the Ushers gave an excellent and even result. The frequency response is largely flat across the spectrum with only a small rise in output at the top end, which gives the detail heard clearly when listening. Bass rolloff is -6dB at 48Hz which is a very good result for such a small speaker, and the port extends this down further still.

The impedance curve is generally quite benign with no 'nasties' and is helped by the fact that the impedance never dips below 7ohms. Despite a measured sensitivity of 84dB, the Ushers will not be difficult to drive.

All in all, a well designed and competent loudspeaker. NK

