



USHER S-520 £320

Something of an old friend here at this magazine, the Usher S-520s are the starting point of the Usher range, one that meanders through the weird (the range-topping D2, featuring two 15in drivers and a big horn) and the wonderful (the rather spiffing new Dancer Beryllium range), covering around twenty nine different models!

The S-520s are compact standmounters measuring 300x180x265mm (HxWxD) and tipping the scales at a healthy 7kg. At their heart is a 5in (130mm) transparent XP-coned bass driver and a 1in (25mm) soft dome tweeter, connected via a crossover that operates at 2kHz and allows for biwiring. An excellent range of finishes is available, including Mahogany Cherry and Golden Cherry woods, plus some striking gloss colours that add to the price, namely White, 'Enzo' Red, 'Gallardo' Yellow, Silver and the rather lovely Black of our review samples.

SOUND QUALITY

It is often with some trepidation that we revisit an old favourite, just in case it turns out that our memories have been playing tricks and we end up thinking, "how ever did we like that?" But from the opening bars of Sarah McLachlan's 'Building a Mystery' I knew I was going to enjoy time with these old friends, and so it proved to be. Quite how Usher have come up with

a compact budget loudspeaker that sounds like something bigger and much more expensive I don't know, but I am delighted that they have.

The S-520s simply take what ever you care to throw at them and immerse you in it completely. Soundstages stretch wide and deep, but also project out into the listening environment like a much larger design. Vocals and instruments sound unfettered and natural, with the Ushers capturing the core essence of whatever they're asked to play.

Across the top end, the soft dome tweeter is crisp and sweet, adding detail and atmosphere but

without obvious artifice. Violins had palpability and emotion without screech and cymbals rang across the performance beautifully.

Even down below, the Ushers excelled, never seeking to stretch more extension than is comfortable from their compact cabinets. All the same, they kick out a punchy, tight and solid low end without the slightest hint of boxiness. Indeed, they capture the essence of different bass instruments with an almost contemptuous ease. All in all, they manage a fine overall result, sounding far bigger than you'd expect from a box of the size, but smooth and engaging too.

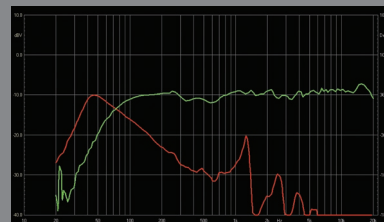
MEASURED PERFORMANCE

Nothing major has changed on the Usher S-520s since we last enjoyed them and they still turn in a very good measured performance. Generally flat across their output bandwidth, which bodes well for an even-handed presentation, there is a little lift at around 15kHz which will add a touch of sparkle to proceedings.

Bass from the small driver rolls down below around 80Hz and is helped out by the port, which has a narrow area of operation centred around 50Hz. Port output is clean, which is best when a front-firing design is utilised, and I would expect the S-520s to be nicely tight and punchy at the low end.

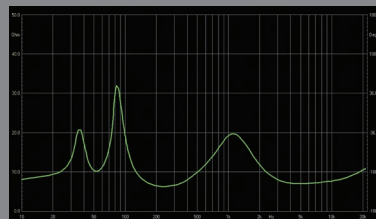
Electrically, the S-520s offer an average measured impedance of 9.1 Ohms, reaching a minimum of around 6 Ohms in the 200-300Hz region. They are not a difficult load to drive and with a respectable sensitivity figure of 84dB, should work well on a wide variety of amplifiers. AS

FREQUENCY RESPONSE



Green - driver output
Red - port output

IMPEDANCE



HI-FI WORLD

VERDICT

Captivating and thoroughly capable loudspeakers that still punch well above their weight.

USHER S-520 £320

Hi Audio Distribution

+44(0)8450 525259

www.hiaudio.co.uk

FOR

- dynamic nature
- superb scale & composure
- tight and solid bass
- value for money

AGAINST

- still nothing...

So, with another interesting group test completed, it would appear that we audiophiles are in no way being short changed by the miniaturisation of our equipment that I alluded to in the introduction. If these little loudspeakers are anything to go by then one could almost ponder the point of going for anything larger, as all turn in an impressively larger-than-life performance. It appears that the days of small, insignificant loudspeakers making similarly small and insignificant noises are well and truly past - a good thing, say! But in true, non-PC tradition, we at Hi-Fi World have no truck with that old 'it's not the winning; it's the taking part' silliness, and the important thing is to find out which pair are going to take the chequered flag...

Sadly, the first contender to limp back to the pit lane with an overheated gearbox are the Quad 9L2s. Certainly they are very well made and beautifully finished, and I had high hopes for them after thoroughly enjoying their larger brothers, the 11L2s, last year. Unfortunately, whilst the 9L2s do indeed do a very good impression of much larger boxes, they struggle to pull the details from music and seem to add a noticeable colouration to vocals that makes singers sound rather strange at times. Their uneven frequency response seems to suggest that the 9L2s are not tuned quite as well as they could be and, whilst I would suggest that the little Quads have all the basic ingredients of a successful design (sturdy build, quality driver components etc.), a little more work is needed to really fulfil their potential.

Moving up the leader board we find the ALR Jordans and the Mordaunt Short Avant 902is. Personally I find that it really is impossible to do anything other than admire ALR Jordan loudspeakers as they are all superbly designed by a gentleman who really knows his onions, Karl-Heinz Fink, and I have found their designs nothing less than composed and enjoyable to listen to in the past. The Entry Si is no exception and turns in a very well controlled performance that will add a touch of cultured polish to any system. Where they are rather limited in this company is purely as a result of their size. This curtails bass extension, even in comparison to the other, hardly large, contenders and does mean the ALRs can be a little shy when it comes to really letting their hair down.

Such shyness is not something

the Mordaunt Short Avant 902is suffer, from however. These loudspeakers are confident, assured and with highly commendable punch for their size. They thrive on detail and will bring absolutely everything out of your recordings that you need to hear. They strike an excellent balance between not sugar-coating any recording deficiencies but at the same time not reducing bad recordings to a complete and utter mess. Where they fall slightly behind, both here and in comparison to their larger brethren, is that they do seem to add something of a sheen to the very top end, making vocalists just that little too husky and breathy at times. They could also do with a touch more bass detail, but still represent astounding value for money at £150.

Very similar in character to the Avants are the Acoustic Energy Aegis Neo 1s. This is something I have noticed before with the pre-'i' Avant 902s and the Aegis Evo 1s and it still holds true here, to my ears at least. This is definitely no bad thing, as the AEs proved to be equally enjoyable but added in a better level of clarity and see-through insight to the top end. This removed the Avant's sheen and gave a clearer window into the music which, along with an impressively capacious soundstage meant the Neo 1s really are very impressive and would be worthy winners.

Sadly for AE, the Usher S-520s weren't having any of it. Despite a recent price increase to £320 these are still absolutely astonishing loudspeakers that basically sound far more expensive and sizeable than they have a right to! From the taut and solid bass, through the composed, detailed and emotive midrange and topping out in a sweet and crisp treble, I really can think of no area to which I can point a finger and complain. They have an even-handed neutrality to them which means they do not favour any type of music over another - they love it all.

Ultimately, the competition is hot on the



heels of the Ushers and there are some very accomplished compact loudspeakers on the market, as this test shows. However, for the time being, the S-520s still maintain their top spot on the podium.

HI-FI WORLD

NOEL SAYS -

Usher's S-520s are still a great choice, I feel. What hit me immediately on hearing them again for this review is their superb bass; I have never heard such good quality, nor such depth from a cabinet so small. The bass line opening Angelique Kidjo's 'The Sound of the Drums' strode forth with a liveliness and strength out of all proportion to the S-520s diminutive size: it was difficult to match differences in scale between the two. This is the S-520s most conspicuous strength, a low frequency performance out of all proportion to size and price.

Vocals and instruments seemingly lack any form of intrinsic colour. I found vocals utterly convincing in this respect. Also obvious was superb resolution of the different timbral properties of instruments; the speaker doesn't get in the way with its own sound.

Getting critical - and personal - there are a few details to watch out for. I like a smooth, integrated sound and if I had to live with the S-520s I would break out the soldering iron and pull the tweeter down a bit, for it is just a little 'obvious'. I detected the slight grittiness of crossover distortion in our (otherwise excellent) Anatek A50R, something treble lift emphasises. Swopping in a Naim SuperNait cured this, but the S-520s remained well lit at high frequencies and demand a smooth amplifier.

This effect and, I suspect, the distance of the tweeter from the woofer, made Nigel Kennedy's violin sound a little reedy and divorced from accompanying instruments. To put this into perspective though, most modern loudspeakers fail to handle violin properly.

I noticed too that Jackie Leven's rich vocals seemed a little leaner and drier than I know them, due I suspect to a plateau dip in frequency response from 300Hz-600Hz. Again, this was a small point, and I am being critical.

In identifying small weaknesses I am attempting to give you the full, unexpurgated picture of what to expect from Usher's superb S-520. Loudspeakers costing many times as much are commonly more blemished than this excellent mini. It will do justice to fine partnering equipment and, for the price, gives you some leeway to partner it well. Enjoy. NK