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Audioengine A2+ Review (Page 1 of 4)

*By: Jonathan Kwan
May 2, 2014*

To the angel of the church in Laodicea, Revelation 3:15-16 says, "I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm -- neither hot nor cold -- I am about to spit you out of my mouth." While I am not about to dig into some theological exegesis on this passage today, here is one thing we can all live by: Either you don't do it, or you go all the way. (If you come from a Chinese background, this is an also a rough dynamic translation of an old saying, "一不做, 二不休".) So with a small fusion of Biblical wisdom and a good old Chinese saying to start off your day, where am I going with this? Well, sitting on my desk right now is a set of Audioengine A2+ powered desktop speakers. As a bunch of discerning audio enthusiasts, over the years, our team here at APH Networks has reviewed quite a number of audio products. There were a handful of such that we have held in high regard, but at the same time, we have not one -- but two -- tying for the lowest score awarded of any products reviewed in this history of this website. When I first heard of the Audioengine A2+, I was excited. When you see something that looks like a pair of compact bookshelf speakers, comes in a boring black or white enclosure designed by someone with a ruler, has nothing visible other than a woofer and a tweeter, and costs almost as much as my pair of my budget-but-decent Polk Audio Monitor 65 tower speakers in my living room, you know this is serious business. Ladies and gentlemen, these are not your \$20 desktop speakers. Taking it all the way to \$250 at press time, will the A2+ blow you away in sound quality, or will its price tag blow you away from the store? Well, let us find out.

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Unlike the majority of products that arrive here at APH Networks for review, our review unit of the Audioengine A2+ did not come from California. In fact, it is not even from the United States. Instead, it came from the marijuana capital of Canada, Vancouver, which explains some unidentified white powder on top of the box. (Just kidding -- I made the last part up.) Audioengine's Canadian distributor, Atlantia, provided us with the sample for review. Using a custom branded brown corrugated box, and traveling via Purolator Ground, everything arrived in excellent condition to us one province over in Calgary, Alberta for our evaluation today.

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To be honest, after so many years of being a reviewer, there are not many products that I am truly excited about when they arrive. I have had products where it has remained in its shipping box until the week I review it, but the Audioengine A2+ certainly was not one of them. In fact, I was so excited for the Audioengine A2+, I literally opened it and got everything set up on the day it landed on my doorstep. This really tells you something. So when it comes to the retail box, how much of it do I remember about? Absolutely nothing; until I took a look at the photos again until now, because I was too excited about the speakers. As you can see in our photo above, Audioengine keeps the packaging simple, just like the speakers. All you will get is the branding with model in the top left corner, a slogan with a photo of the speakers in the middle, and a line that tells you what is inside at the bottom. That is it. On the other side, you will get the exact same thing, except the A2+ is white in the photo. Stuff like a feature list, color checkbox, and more photos can be found on other sides of the box.

Before we move on, let's take a look at the specifications of the Audioengine A2+, as obtained from the manufacturer's website:

Type: 2.0 powered (active) multimedia desktop speaker system
Amplifier type: Dual class AB monolithic
Power output: 60W peak power total (15W RMS / 30W peak per channel), AES
Drivers: 2.75" Kevlar woofers, 3/4" silk dome tweeters
Inputs: 3.5mm stereo mini-jack, RCA, USB
Outputs: RCA variable line-out
Main voltages: 110-240V 50/60Hz auto-switching
SNR: >95dB (typical A-weighted)
THD+N: <0.05% at all power settings
Crosstalk: -50dB
Freq. response: 65Hz-22kHz \pm 2.0dB
Input impedance: 10K ohms unbalanced
DAC: TI/Burr Brown PCM2704C
Input bit depth: up to 16 bits native
Input sample rate: up to 48KHz native
USB device class: type 1.1 or above
Protection: Output current limiting, thermal over-temperature, power on/off transient protection
Dimensions (each): 6"(H) x 4"(W) x 5.25"(D)
Weight (LEFT speaker): 1.6Kg/3.55lbs

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Weight (RIGHT speaker): 1.4Kg/3.15lbs
Shipping weight: 4.6kg/10lbs per pair
Shipping box dims: 10.5" (H) x 15" (L) x 7" (W)



Out of the box, you will receive everything you need to get you started. In addition to the Styrofoam brackets, you will also find both speakers, cables, and power supply all come in a reusable microfiber drawstring bag. I have to say, that is pretty classy, haha. With that in mind, here is a list of what you will receive in addition to the Audioengine A2+ speakers itself:

- Speaker wire (16AWG), 2 meters (~6.5 feet)
- Power supply
- AC power cord
- Mini-jack audio cable, 1.5 meters (~5 feet)
- USB cable, 1.5 meters (~5 feet)
- Microfiber speaker bags
- Microfiber power supply bag
- Microfiber cable bag
- Setup guide
- Product line brochure

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If you do not know what I meant when I said the Audioengine A2+ is clearly by someone with a ruler in the introduction of this review, the above photo should clear up any confusion. The 6" high, 4" wide, and 5.25" deep cabinet is exactly what its dimensions suggest; no surprises here. Being the little brother of the A5+, it is significantly smaller than its close relative, so it will fit better on your desk. Our particular unit comes in black, but if you want, you can also get a white one as well. As simplistic as it looks, we can never judge acoustics by the way it looks, so we will talk a little bit more about the internal construction in just a moment. You know, it is not as simple as you think it is.

From the front, both the left and right speakers look identical. At the bottom is a 2.75" Kevlar woven glass aramid composite woofer with rubber surrounds, and at the top is a 0.75" ferro fluid cooled silk dome tweeter with neodymium magnets. Together, their frequency response is rated at 65Hz-22kHz ± 2.0 dB, but despite its studio monitor looks, do not expect flat response all the way down to 65Hz. We will talk about that in our evaluation on the next page. The use of high end materials for construction allows reduced distortion at high volumes, and Audioengine says it alleviates the need for speaker grilles as well. That said, it will still be wise to keep your three year old kid away from your \$250 speakers in my opinion, haha. Signal to noise ratio is specified at 95dB, THD+N at 0.05%, and -50dB stereo crosstalk. One major complaint I have is Audioengine did not include any front audio controls for the A2+. The volume control knob is at the back, which is quite unintuitive. I agree it makes the speakers compact, good looking, and symmetrical, but you will have to sacrifice some functionality for that.

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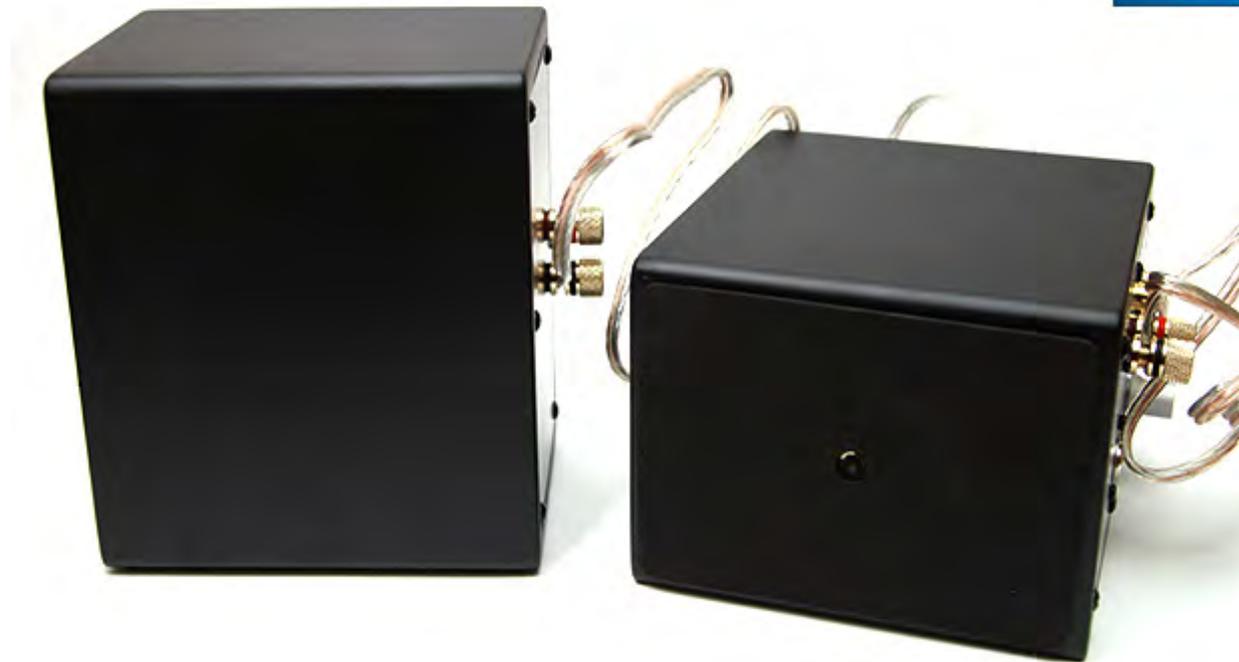
Here is a shot at the back of the Audioengine A2+ powered desktop speakers. By "powered", it means it comes with an internal amplifier. What we have here is a dual class AB monolithic amplifier located inside the left speaker -- shown in the right, as you can see in our photo above -- that provides 15W RMS and 30W peak per channel. As such, the left speaker weighs almost half a pound more than the right; where Audioengine specifies a weight of 3.55lbs and 3.15lbs, respectively. Power is supplied by an external brick. The Audioengine A2+ also comes with a digital to analog converter, which its predecessor did not. The TI/Burr Brown PCM2704C DAC can sample at 16-bit 48kHz. This is not exactly the most powerful DAC out there, and you can even pick one up yourself for just over \$8 at a popular online electronic component distributor. But if you do not own a high end sound card or an external DAC, then this is definitely a welcomed option. It would have been nice if the Audioengine A2+ had an S/PDIF input as well, but they will probably need a different chip.

As you can see in our photo above, Audioengine offers a generous array of input and output connectors on the A2+. On the input side, we have a 3.5mm stereo mini-jack, RCA, and USB. For my particular setup, I used the 3.5mm stereo mini-jack for input from my personal computer, since I have an [Auzentech X-Fi HomeTheater HD](#) sound card. The RCA plugs are hooked up to my cable box, which I occasionally use. Like most powered computer speakers with multiple inputs I have used in the past, if multiple sources are active, the Audioengine A2+ will simply mix the signals together, and output both. The Audioengine A2+ also features stereo line level output via a pair of RCA jacks. This allows you to send audio to other speakers using an optional wireless adapter. For most people, it will probably be used for a subwoofer, which I have done so in my setup.

The volume control knob is located at the top right corner when viewed from the back. When turned all the way down, the speakers will turn off at the click. The knob is not placed in a particularly poor location, since it is close to an edge, and it is near the top. Unfortunately, it is at the back of the speaker, which is quite inconvenient. While it is possible to simply leave your speakers on at a constant volume setting at all times and adjust the volume from the source, as it will go into standby automatically when no signal is detected, it is just not the same thing. For example, my Motorola DCX3200 cable box does not have volume control, which will require volume adjustment at the output. Also, when my PC turns off, the sound card will cause the speakers to pop momentarily, which causes my connected subwoofer with an automatic on/off circuit to turn on. The subwoofer will emit a very light hum until it turns off a few minutes later. Since the Audioengine A2+ sits in my bedroom, and I turn off my computer almost right before I go to bed, it is slightly annoying. The way I see it, it is just better to have an easily accessible volume control in front. I understand it is a packaging compromise, but I think most people will prefer a front volume control, even if it means a slight increase in enclosure size.

If you are familiar with home theater equipment, then the speaker connectors should not be new to you. In fact, the Audioengine A2+ uses standard 16AWG speaker wires to connect the left and right unit together. The included cable is two meters long, which should be more than enough for most people.

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The Audioengine A2+ is built with 18mm thick, high resin reinforced MDF cabinets. Internal sound dampening material is implemented to reduce undesired internal sound reflections. The speakers are also magnetically shielded; while non-magnetically shielded speakers will definitely not fry your hard drives anytime soon, it is something nice to have, especially being computer speakers. (Just for reference, if you ever want to damage any hard drives using magnets, you will need pretty much military grade stuff.) Audioengine claims each pair of speakers are tuned and tested together when sold together.

Our photo above shows the bottom of the A2+, which has a thin layer of foam to dampen it from the surface it resides on. This is most likely your wooden or glass desk, which can be very useful. A standard 1/4" insert is present for wall mounts. Meanwhile, an accessory DS1 wedge can be purchased from the manufacturer to tilt the speakers up slightly. This will further dampen vibrations between your desk and the speakers, and bring the tweeters closer to ear level for improved soundstaging. Too bad they are not included out of the box!

With all this in mind, it is now time to put the Audioengine A2+ through APH Networks' infamous subjective audio tests.

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Reviewing audio devices require extensively trained ears and lots of experience. Even for audiophiles, it may prove challenging at times to obtain an accurate evaluation of a product without a thoroughly familiar product to use as a simultaneous reference. While I am not going to even try to claim that I am the only trustworthy or best reviewer for sound, it is fact that most computer review sites have editors that are insufficiently trained in reviewing audio equipment. Give them practically anything and all you will read about goes along the line of "good bass, nice midrange, awesome treble, really clear sound, 10/10". While there are many knowledgeable audio reviewers at various respected online media outlets, these are by far the minority.

As I have mentioned in my past audio reviews, there are really no true objective measurements for speaker sound quality. As the reviewer, however, I will put it through a series of subjective tests to try to come up with the most objective rating possible (Yes, it's quite a paradox haha). The tests were conducted primarily with the [Auzentech X-Fi HomeTheater HD](#) sound card with the Audioengine A2+ plugged in directly to the 3.5mm front output. (Creative CA20K2 DSP/APU, National Semiconductor LME49720NA OpAmp, JRC NJM4580 signal buffers, Cirrus Logic CS4382A DAC, Nichon MUSE ES capacitors.) This sound card is probably one of the best consumer/prosumer computer sound cards out there in the market today, and will reduce its potential to be a limiting factor in our benchmarking today.

After over 100 hours of break-in time (Well above typically required period), we put the Audioengine A2+ to the tests. All tracks are uncompressed CDs, FLAC, or LAME encoded MP3s at 192kbps or higher.

Where should I start? Without giving away too much right off the bat... okay, who am I kidding: The Audioengine A2+ speakers are

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amazing. Here at APH Networks, we have pretty standard criteria for evaluating speakers. If something is good, we will tell you *why* it is good. In the same way, if something is bad, we will tell you *why* it is bad. But even if you are not a discerning audiophile trying to get picky about the A2+, all I can say is, "it just sounds good". Thoroughly enjoyable to listen to. Of course, if I stopped here, you might as well just head over and read some Amazon reviews now.

So what makes the Audioengine A2+ amazing? Before we talk my auditioning results, let me clarify on some expectations. The fact is, these are compact speakers with a 2.75" woofer and 0.75" tweeter. If you want bass, you will need big drivers to move lots of air. There is no way around physics. I did a frequency sweep on these speakers, and while there is response as low as 40Hz, it is barely audible. You will not hear much until 80Hz. Generally speaking, it really drops off below 120Hz. I do not believe it is unreasonable to expect owners of the A2+ to buy their own subwoofers, which is exactly what I have done. A low pass filter set at around 80Hz to 100Hz is probably a good idea, but make sure you own a good unit that can handle relatively high frequency bass.

With these expectations in mind, let us go over the big three: Bass, midrange, and treble. The bass is light. I dare say it -- it is weak. Even if it was there, it lacks punch. But as I have just said, there is no way around physics, and I am very happy the way Audioengine's engineers tuned the A2+. Sometimes, for speaker manufacturers to try to hide limitations of their design, they will overdrive certain frequencies, resulting in disastrous effects. Audioengine did not attempt make those 2.75" woofers work harder

than it should in the bass area, which is excellent. For the little amount of bass you do get, it is smooth, defined, round and fairly articulate. At the end of the day, the A2+ will not shake your room, nor should you expect them to. You will need a subwoofer. I cannot emphasize this enough.

Here is where the good news is. The A2+ really shines through in its midrange and treble performance, which is what they are really designed to do. As far as the midrange is concerned, I don't know a term better than what I frequently see in the tomato sauce section of my local supermarket, and that is, "thick and rich". It is very natural and warm; saturated throughout the entire range, with no noticeable missing layers. The first time I heard it, I was absolutely immersed by its brilliant performance. The vocals were incredible. The instruments were incredible. It was just an incredible experience. For its treble, I have great things to say about it, too. It carries almost all the characteristics of what makes good treble sound good, and that is sharp, distinct, and wet. At the same time, it is not overly bright. Even if we count it is slightly recessed, its definition is very well refined. I would like it to sound a little more immediate, but for the \$250 they want, this is amazing. More often than not, poorly tuned treble will hurt the listener's ears. The Audioengine A2+ is pleasant to listen to all the time, much unlike talking to me in real life.

Once you start listening to the details, you can definitely see where Audioengine is coming from when they say the A2+ is tuned as a pair from the factory. The sound is imaged precisely to the center. If you close your eyes while firing up the music, you would swear there is a center speaker -- except you don't. Now, this is not an entirely realistic reproduction, but these are not studio monitors. For audiophiles listening to music, I think this is a desirable effect, and it creates a very enjoyable listening environment. In my setup photo above, I am watching TV with these speakers, and they are simply great.

Deriving from my assertions regarding the treble performance and imaging characteristics of the Audioengine A2+, I think you can probably make a very good educated guess regarding the soundstaging properties of the Audioengine A2+. Close your eyes, and you will imagine something much bigger playing in front of you. The soundstage is relatively wide for its size. Soundscaping is also impressive for a pair of stereo speakers; it carries a surprisingly reasonable amount of depth and direction to the music playing.

I am extremely impressed by amount of precision and detail the Audioengine A2+ is able to reproduce. The layering comes in at a very detailed resolution, yet each frequency layer is distinct and extremely well separated. If there is a better word for "clean" that roughly carries the meaning of "super duper clean", I would use that word. At the same time, the transition between each layer is smooth and cohesive, making everything sound very harmonized and immersive to the listener.

These are not studio monitors. The frequency response is not exactly flat. But it does not matter. To the discerning audiophile, I am absolutely blown away. Even if you are not an audiophile, you will still be blown away. The Audioengine A2+ simply rocks in sound quality.

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Page 4 - Conclusion

It does not happen frequently here at APH Networks that the conclusion was already in my mind right from the start. For me, audio is a very special breed of product to review. It sure would impress me to see a video card deliver graphics output at unprecedented frame rates, or gain a non-sarcastic "wow" from me when I watch a processor whoop through benchmarks effortlessly to gain high scores. But hearing good sound shoots straight for the heart. It will tingle a sense of passion that simply does not resonate the same way when anything else is tested. It will feel right, and I will recognize it the first time I hear it. The Audioengine A2+ is one of those products. It took some time to break them in, but once that phase was done, and I sat down and listened to them seriously, I knew. I knew they were the one from that moment. The Audioengine A2+ simply sounds incredible. In the beginning of this review, I proposed the question, "Will the A2+ blow you away in sound quality, or will its price tag blow you away from the store?" Well, let me make it clear to you. The question is not whether or not the Audioengine A2+ is worth the \$250 price tag. The question is if you have \$250 in your pocket right now. Simply put, the Audioengine A2+ is worth every penny. Sure, there are some imperfections in design, like its unintuitive rear volume control. A slightly better built in DAC would be nice, too. Including the desktop wedge rather than making them optional will definitely make the package more appealing. But if you are looking for a set of compact powered desktop speakers with sound that will blow you away, pick up a pair along with a subwoofer of your choice, and be blown away.

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Atlantia provided this product to APH Networks for the purpose of evaluation.



APH:Renewal Award | **APH Review Focus** Summary:

8/10 means *Definitely a very good product with drawbacks that aren't likely going to matter to the end user.*

7/10 means *Great product with many advantages and certain insignificant drawbacks; but should be considered before purchasing.*

-- Final APH Numeric Rating is **7.8/10**

Please note that the APH Numeric Rating system is based off our proprietary guidelines in the [Review Focus](#), and should not be compared to other sites.

Some say seeing is believing. For the Audioengine A2+, you have to hear it to believe it. This compact 2.0 speaker set is incredible; bar none.

Do you have any comments or questions about the Audioengine A2+? Drop by our [Forums](#). Registration is free, and it only takes a minute!

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