

Audioengine P4 Bookshelf Speaker (Playback 45)

<http://www.avguide.com/review/audioengine-p4-bookshelf-speaker-playback-45>

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June 8th, 2011 -- by Chris Martens

Source: Playback

Audioengine is perhaps best known for its critically acclaimed, self-powered, desktop monitors, such as the mid-sized model A5 (\$349/pair) and the smaller but—in its way—no less impressive model A2 (\$199/pair). But the firm's newest speaker, the P4 bookshelf speaker (\$249-\$325/pair, depending on finish) is a passive design. Why would a company that evidently specializes in self-powered speakers choose to add a passive model to its lineup? Audioengine supplies several answers in the following statement that can be found on the company's website:

"The AP4 passive speakers are full-sounding bookshelf speakers in a satellite-sized package. The goal with AP4 was to design a small but powerful bookshelf speaker for people that already have surround receivers or amplifiers and are looking for the same Audioengine sound and quality in a passive loudspeaker."

While this explanation certainly makes sense, I can think of a couple of other reasons for wanting to create, or to choose, the P4. One reason would be size, where the P4 neatly slots in the size gap between the very tiny model 2 and the considerably larger model 5. Another reason involves sheer sonic flexibility, where the P4 gives owners the freedom to mix and match amplifiers with the speaker to achieve subtle changes in overall system voicing characteristic to suite their personal listening tastes. A third reason involves superior placement flexibility, since the P4 lends itself equally well to wall-mount, stand-mount, or tabletop/bookshelf applications (by contrast, note that the rear panel of self-powered model A5 provides audio inputs, outputs, a power cord socket, and an on/off switch, which makes stand or wall-mounting a daunting proposition at best).

Put all of these factors together and the P4 stand as a compact speaker that offers the right sound and the right size for most desktop (or surround-sound) applications, and at the right price.



How best to power the P4? There are, of course, many different options, but the one Audioengine naturally hopes that listeners will consider is its own N22 Premium Desktop Audio Amplifier (covered by a separate review in this issue of *Playback*). For my listening tests, I drove the P4's both with Audioengine's N22 amp and with the also excellent NuForce Icon 2 DAC/amp.

FEATURES

- The P4 is a compact, 2-way, front-ported bookshelf type loudspeaker.
- The P4 driver complement includes a ¾-inch silk dome tweeter and a 4-inch Kevlar mid-bass driver.
- The cabinet of the P4 is magnetically shielded and typically fashioned from ¾-inch thick slabs of MDF (although there is an extra-cost to have cabinets made of a laminate of solid carbonized

bamboo).

- Available P4 cabinet finish options include satin black or high-gloss white (\$249/pair), or the option of having the cabinets made of solid carbonized bamboo (\$325/pair).
- The cabinets of the P4s sport gold-plated 5-way binding posts, are fitted with threaded brass inserts (two on the rear panel, one on the bottom panel) to accommodate popular wall-mount brackets and floor-stands.
- As a thoughtful detail touch, the bottom panels of the P4s also come fitted with thin rubber foam pads that prevent the speakers from scratching desk to table tops, and vice versa.

SONIC CHARACTER

As Audioengine promotional copy for the P4 proudly proclaims the speaker does indeed embody many of the core sonic qualities that together represent what might be termed the “Audioengine house sound.” Exactly what qualities are those? Allow me to provide a brief descriptive sketch.

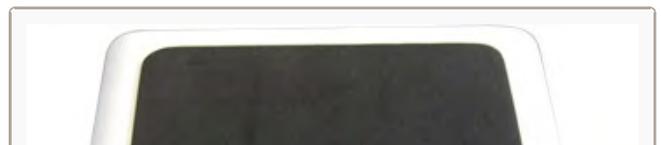
First, I would say that the P4 offers a sound that is very revealing and detailed, yet that carefully refrains from pushing the outermost edges of the “resolution envelope” to a point that could become distracting, obnoxious, or even punishing. If you listen carefully to the P4 for extended periods of time, you may come away—as I did—with the sense that Audioengine’s engineers are to be thanked for in essence knowing when to say “when.” What I mean by this is that the little P4 treads that oh-so-fine line where it manages to reveal plenty of subtle inner detail in the music, yet stops just short of carving the edges of transient so sharply and fiercely that they could become painful (or could make less than ideal recordings sound simply dreadful).



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Second, the P4 delivers quite impressive purity of tonal colors and unusually robust dynamics for a speaker of its size and price. Many compact speakers have—let’s be honest about this—a sound that seems thin and anemic, with dynamic capabilities that are underwhelming at best. Happily, the P4 has none of these problems (a trait it shares with other Audioengine speaker designs). Instead, it sounds vibrant, alive and engaging. The benefit is that you are able to listen through the P4 without constantly being reminded of its compact size—even on musical pieces that feature large-scale dynamic swells. In practice, this means that the P4 is more than just a “desktop” speaker, though it of course fills that role quite nicely. Instead, the P4 makes a very serviceable “whole-room” speaker, provided that you listen in a small to perhaps mid-sized space. Naturally, when push comes to shove, there are limits to the absolute output capabilities of any speaker this size; it’s just that those limits seem noticeably less obtrusive in the P4 than in many speakers its size.

Third, the P4 offers surprisingly solid bass output down to a claimed lower frequency roll-off point of 58 Hz. 58 Hz may not sound like much to those who are used to the spectacular specifications of, say, high-



performance headphones, but it is very respectable low-frequency extension for a speaker this size. What is more, the P4's bass output *above* its low-frequency cutoff point is quite vigorous and punchy so that—for the most part—you typically don't miss the really deep low-frequency information found in the bottom octave and a half (which, realistically, the P4 cannot reproduce). The P4's bass voicing is artfully calculated to provide, I suspect, a touch of mid-to-upper bass lift—nothing overblown or boomy, but rather just a dab of emphasis that helps to create the illusion that the P4 can go lower than in fact it really does.



This, by the way, is a time-honored practice that designers of classic mini-monitors (think of the famous Rogers LS3/5A, for example) have been using to good effect for years. The art of the game, of course, lies in figuring out how to enable a small speaker to convey a sense of full-bodied foundational mid-bass (and upper bass), while still providing a presentation that generally sounds neutral and uncolored. Finding that desirable sweet spot in the middle is something the Audioengine team understands better than most, so that what you get with the P4 is a small monitor that offers a good measure of low frequency resolution and pitch definition, yet that sounds more full-bodied than many of its competitors do.

Imaging and Soundstaging: The P4's imaging and soundstaging can be quite compelling subject, however, to two provisos. First, the speakers need a good 30+ hours of run-in time in order to achieve both optimal bass extension and treble smoothness. Second, the speakers should ideally be driven by very smooth-sounding electronics in order to give of their best. When powered by somewhat somewhat edgy, rough-sounding electronics, the speakers invariably report those rough edges, and imaging and soundstaging will suffer as a result. This doesn't mean the P4 is finicky, but rather that it is revealing enough to accurately reflect the character of the components with which it is driven. Once these two requirements are met, however, the P4 can cast eerily compelling soundstages. Indeed, I found my brain struggled at times to process what I was both seeing and hearing from the P4's; my eyes told me the speakers were positioned only about two feet from my desk chair, while my ears told me the soundstage I was enjoying stretched far, *far* beyond the back wall of my listening space. Pretty cool, no?

MUSICAL EXAMPLES

To hear the richness, tonal purity, and soundstaging of the P4 in action, try listening to the track "Tumbao No. 5 (Para Charlie Mingus)" from *Cachaito* [Nonesuch], the debut album from the Latin bassist Orlando Cachaito Lopez. The track captures much of the lively, rich, dark and resonant feel of a beautiful old recording studio in Cuba, so that as you listen to Cachaito and his sidemen play through the P4, you can help be feel yourself transported from your desktop environment to another time and place. In particular, the little P4's do an amazingly good job with both the earthy yet articulate sound of Lopez' bass, whose Mingus-like solo statement opens the song. But note what happens a few measures later on, as a Latin percussion ensemble joins the mix. Suddenly, the full depth and width of the soundstage becomes apparent as you hear the team of percussionist spread out in a wide arc, positioned well behind the bassist. Few small speakers can unlock the depth and width dimensions of recordings as effectively as this one can.

Source: Playback

Part of what make the P4 so effective, though, is its tonal purity. To appreciate what I mean, listen for the distinctive sound of a cowbell and then the lingering shimmer of a high-pitched cymbal to ring out, about one minute into the track. A few seconds later, note the seductive, reedy sound of a sax as it enters the mix, contributing a new solo voice to the ensemble. The effect is not unlike hearing the sonic equivalent of a master chef adding spices and flavorings until the mix becomes almost unbelievably rich and exotic. These kinds of vivid, believable tonal colors, which are a real strength of the P4s, do much to pull you into the music and to hold your attention.

Interestingly, and I think very importantly, the P4 doesn't necessarily require well-made recordings (such as "Tumbao No. 5") to be enjoyable. To prove this point, I put on a favorite track from way back in my teenage years; namely, "Strange Brew" from Cream's *Disraeli Gears* [Polydor, remastered reissue]. Realistically, this is a recording made decades ago on not terribly sophisticated equipment, and even with Polydor's remastering efforts it still would not qualify as being audiophile-grade by any stretch of the imagination. Even so, the P4s managed to accentuate the positive while not making the tracks rough edges (of which there are more than a few) sound painfully harsh. In particular, the P4s did a good job with the Jack Bruce's lithe,



syncopated bass lines, even though a plainly overdriven, old school bass amplifier is carrying the sound of Bruce's bass. Similar, the P4's did a beautiful job of capturing the wailing/singing qualities of Eric Clapton's solo electric guitar lines, while contrasting those qualities against the hard, sharp, choppy-sounding bark of Clapton's occasional strummed accent chords. My point here is that, even when recordings are far from perfect, the P4s enable you to wade through the occasional raw spots and rough edges to find and to savor the soul of the music.

Unlike finicky speakers that demand a steady diet of audiophile recordings in order to work their magic, the P4 instead invites you to choose your own music, because it can provide serious musical enjoyment even—and perhaps especially—under less than ideal circumstances. The cool part is that the P4 is revealing enough to show you what makes great recordings great, and yet forgiving enough to enable you to find enjoyment in records that are, frankly, quite imperfect—a quality music lovers (note that I did not say "audiophiles") will appreciate more and more in the P4 as time goes on.

CONCLUSION

Consider this compact bookshelf speaker if: you want a well-built, right-sized desktop speaker whose overall tonal balance and voicing represents a truly artful blend of strengths and cleverly calculated compromises. By this I mean that the speaker sounds detailed yet not edgy, full-bodied yet not "sugar-coated" or lugubrious, and offers good mid-bass (and upper bass) punch and vitality without sounding boomy or colored. You can spend more on small desktop speakers, but once you hear the P4 you may not feel the need to do so.

Look elsewhere if: you require a self-amplified speaker (in which case other Audioengine models will better suit your needs), or if you are looking for speakers that push the "resolution envelope" even harder than this one does. But as the old adage goes, "be careful what you ask for, because you may get it." True, you can find small speakers that do more, but they'll typically cost a lot more and may even give you "too much of some good thing."

Ratings (compared to similarly-priced bookshelf speakers):

- Transparency and Focus: 9.5
- Imaging and Soundstaging: 9.5 (at a distance)
- Tonal Balance: 9.5
- Dynamics: 9.5
- Bass Extension: 9
- Bass Pitch Definition: 9
- Bass Dynamics: 9.5
- Value: 10

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The Audioengine P4 is a well-priced, well-made, and thoroughly lovable little desktop speakers that offers compelling and very well balanced strengths--clarity, tonal purity, very good imaging and soundstaging, and a surprisingly full-bodied presentation. What is more, the few points of compromise that any small speaker will inevitably entail have been, in the P4's case, very artfully managed. The P4 also offers extremely good value for money.

If your budget can handle the extra expense, do consider the P4 version with solid carbonized bamboo enclosures (the bamboo cabinets look great and are said to be extremely rigid, as well).

SPECS & PRICING

Audioengine P4 Premium Passive Bookshelf Speaker

Type: 2-way, front-ported bass reflex bookshelf speaker

Driver Complement: one ¾-inch silk dome tweeter, one 4-inch Kevlar mid-bass driver

Frequency Response: 58Hz -22 kHz

Sensitivity: 88 dB

Impedance: 4 Ohms

Dimensions (H x W x D): 9" x 5.5" x 6.5"

Weight: 14 lbs./pair

Warranty: 3 years, parts and labor

Price: \$249 - \$325/pair, depending on finish

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