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Audioengine A2+ Desktop Speakers Review

Written by Andre Marc
Monday, 07 July 2014

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I have been into computer audio since the time it meant ripping your CDs into lossy files to either load them up on your mp3 player or to play them back over plastic computer "speakers." The evolution of digital file playback has rendered that scenario quaint, as cheap storage, lossless codecs, high-resolution audio, and USB DAC units have changed the landscape. Many audiophiles use their computers as serious digital front ends in reference systems. Those with more modest means and tighter spaces, and yet still crave quality audio reproduction, pair computers with outboard DACs and powered, so-called "desktop speakers."

A recent trend has seen manufacturers equip these active speakers with consumer friendly inputs. Many have on board DACs. It must also be noted that the term "desktop speakers" is one of the more abused around. Some look like stand-mount speakers to me, and fitting them on a desk would be an absurd proposition. That is why I was eager to evaluate **Audioengine** projects. Based in Austin, TX, with warehouse operations in Burgaw, NC, the company caters to computer audiophiles who are not willing to compromise on quality, but demand a good value. Audioengine has a distinct reputation of offering great-sounding, versatile products at very fair prices. I've heard Audioengine set ups and at audio shows and

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have always been impressed with build, sound, and a welcoming attitude. They have been on my To Review list for a while.

My own desktop system doubles as my audio workstation where I rip CDs, purchase downloads, edit recordings in Audacity, and listen to music while I work. When the time came to find small active speakers for accurate monitoring and musical enjoyment, Audioengine supplied me with a sample pair of their A2+ monitors, which sell for $249, in black. They are also available in white.

The A2+ is a variation of the A2 model, the difference being a built-in DAC. The speakers are demure, with dimensions of 6"(H) x 4"(W) x 5.25"(D). The left speaker houses the 60W amplifier and weighs a half-pound more than the 3.0 Lbs. right speaker. Around back, the left speaker includes a pair of RCA inputs, a mini jack input, and a USB input. The USB input handles 16 bit, 48 Khz data. To connect the left and right speaker, a pair of binding posts allows for use of a single run of speaker cable. A volume knob on the back panel of the left speaker completes the picture.

It is important to review some of the technology and design consideration that have gone into the A2+. One would be under the wrong impression thinking that desktop speakers optimized for computer audio is just a matter of scaling down a regular speaker and adding the appropriate connectivity. There is far more to it. First, Audioengine manufacturers drivers and other important internal components in-house. This allows them to control quality and provides for more efficient assembly, which keeps costs down and streamlines manufacturing. Secondly, special attention is paid to cabinet design. With solid internal bracing, the goal is to control reflections and diffraction as much as possible. The cabinets are also shielded in case the A2+ speakers are to be used near video monitors, computers, and other digital components.

A bit more about the drivers. According to Audioengine, the company uses "*audiophile quality, ferro fluid cooled, silk dome tweeters with neodymium magnets. Silk tweeters hold up well under high power and the edge-driven design gives very smooth response. The custom woofers are Kevlar woven glass aramid composite with rubber surrounds. Kevlar is obviously very strong, which means that the woofer retains its shape when being driven at high levels. The speaker materials and construction are very robust, therefore speaker grills aren't needed. In other words, we did our homework on the speaker drivers and they will sound and look great after many years of use.*"

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Internal amplifier quality is often overlooked in active speakers. Audioengine says, "*the amplifiers in Audioengine speakers are located in the left speaker and are a very conservatively rated analog design. Each subsystem is tuned together for all models, which provides a much more efficient system requiring less power than passive speakers and separate amplifiers. Circuit boards for the power and preamp sections are vertically mounted for maximum mechanical shock protection (a good thing).*"

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Set Up & Listening

The A2+ took up residence on my office desk that houses an HDMI monitor, a 2011 Mac Mini running O/S Mavericks, with 8 GB of RAM. I did all the necessary connections between speakers, and initially decided to use the headphone output of the Mac Mini into the mini jack input of the A2+ for the first half of the review. I also toed them in slightly to get the best center image. The music stored on my hard drives spans everything from standard Redbook to DSD. Playback of all music files was with Audirvana Plus, Korg Audiogate, and various other sound sources from the web, including Spotify. Volume control was via Audirvana and with the O/S using an Apple remote unit.

I first opened up the A2+ volume control all the way, and then gradually found a notch about three quarters of maximum as the perfect spot which gave me plenty of usable range. Your mileage may vary depending on your source. I found that opening the volume all the way introduced too much idle noise, from the mac mini headphone jack, in the form of a faint hiss that was audible only when music was not playing. Unfortunately most computer analog outputs are not the quietest.

Once settled in, I was treated to enjoyable sound that far exceeded any previous desktop

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experience. No matter what genre of music I called up, the A2+ speakers were extremely well balanced, imaging accurately beyond what one would expect at this price point. As a matter of fact, they imaged terrifically, period.

Another area that was impressive was soundstage depth. The presentation was very spacious, despite a near field set up. Separation of instruments, and dynamic contrasts were excellent. Listening to hours of and hours of CD rips was not fatiguing and, believe it or not, the speakers improved over time, with more bass extension and silkier highs as the drivers loosened.

I also listened to higher-than-CD-resolution downloads, varying from 96 Khz to DSD, for an extended period, and was easily able to tell the difference on better, less-processed recordings. The A2+ also exposed less-than-stellar high-resolution offerings; some, unfortunately, are nothing more than expensive, glorified CDs. Offering up this kind of nuance and resolution was impressive for a so-called entry-level product.

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I also used the A2+ during for a personal project that spanned much of the review period. I have been archiving vintage, commercially produced 7.5 ips reel-to-reel tapes to 192 Khz, 24 bit PCM and DSD via a Korg MR-2 digital recorder, and editing the results with Audacity on my Mac Mini. The A2+ speakers turned out to be essential tools, allowing me to make pinpoint, surgical edits, and monitor recording quality, and locate any defects. I had total confidence in the A2+ and their ability to provide a complete sonic picture.

Toward the end of the review period, I switched over to the USB input on the A2+, using a WireWorld Ultraviolet USB cable. Since it tops out at 16 bits, 48 Khz, I had Audirvana do a corresponding downsample. I really heard no sonic penalty. Quite frankly, the majority of all digital music collections for discerning listeners are still Redbook CD quality, so nothing will be missed here. If you have the high rez bug, Audioengine offers several desktop outboard DACs you can use, and there certainly is no shortage of portable DACs on the market.

My experience was a bit surprising. I preferred the A2+ internal 48 Khz, 16 bit DAC over the analog output of the Mac Mini, even though its internal DAC does 96 Khz, 24 bit. I really could hear no ill effects of downsampling. It seems to me the A2+ onboard DAC was not just thrown in for convenience; it offers very good fidelity.

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Conclusion

The Audioengine A2+ speakers are a stone cold bargain: true desktop speakers that pull off the trick of actually fitting on a desk, and sounding great. Actually, better than great. They offer flexible connectivity, and built in USB DAC. Audioengine is a company I will be following closely in the coming years. They have been innovative, but more importantly, they make products with great functionality for folks who want *plug and play*.

I will wholeheartedly recommend the Audioengine line for those who want to put together an excellent-sounding system that saves space, looks great, and will leave you plenty of extra cash to buy some good music. I very much look forward to exploring other areas of the Audioengine line. As a reminder, they make DACs, amplifiers, cables and accessories, and larger speakers than the A2+. They also make passive speakers. Another area they have entered into is wireless audio, which is gaining major steam. Audioengine is on my list short list of audio companies that do away with the marketing slush, and bring the goods.

The Audioengine A2+ come with **my highest recommendation**.

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