

Audioengine P4 and A5 Reviewed

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Active, otherwise known as powered, speakers are a tiny sub-set of the speaker market. They offer pros and cons compared to traditional “passive” speakers.

Audioengine offers a look at two different sides of the active/passive argument. With the A5 and P4, the company claims to have voiced them similarly, which makes things very interesting.

On a whole, powered speakers are a pretty nifty idea. Any given amp is going to interact with different speakers in different ways. You could have an amp that sounds great with speaker A, but it may sound bland with speaker B. Having the company, in a way, pre-pick the amp to go with the speaker certainly guarantees the speaker sounds like the manufacturer intends in your room (well, as long as your room isn't messing it up...).

Then there's the convenience factor of not needing anything but the speakers to get audio in a room. Hook up your iPod directly, or your computer. Don't get me wrong, I love finding a great amp/speaker combo, but there is something to be said about simplicity.

The active A5 has a 0.79-inch, silk-dome tweeter and a 5-inch Kevlar woofer powered by 50-watts RMS of internal amplification per speaker. The amps are in the left speaker, so technically the right speaker is a passive speaker, but whatever.

On the top is a USB jack (for power only), along with a mini-jack for audio. If you don't want to give your speakers an unsightly cable quaff, there is an additional mini-jack on the back, along with stereo RCA outputs and a power jack. The latter makes it easy to hook up Audioengine's W2 wireless adapter or a wall wart so the A5s can more or less function as your audio hub and not just the speakers.

The A5's I received for this review were finished in bamboo (you can get them in white, seen below, and black). This isn't just a veneer or crafty paint trick; this is actual bamboo, and let me tell you, it's gorgeous. You can get the P4s in bamboo as well, and I recommend it. Fit and finish of these, as well as the P4s, were excellent.

In one of their potential uses, as computer speakers, the P5s benefit from the expected “desk bounce” with the bass, and perform larger than their 5-inch woofers would imply. With my setup, one speaker was also in a corner. This ended up being too much and sounded a little boomy.

Taking them out of the corner, with just the desk and rear wall boost gave the A5s a full sound with strong bass response. They went surprisingly deep, even playing low organ notes with impressive volume. Speaking of volume, in this setup, 50 watts was more than enough, as I got far more distortion-free volume out of them than I needed.

So they sound great on a desk, but what about on stands in a room? I installed them as my main speakers in my two-channel setup and was quite impressed. Imaging was razor sharp. There was a slight dip in the upper midrange, but it wasn't too severe. The upper end of certain instruments like pianos and violins seemed just a little further back in the mix. More noticeable was this made the really high treble, like cymbals and such, seem a little louder. It's not a big deal and depending on your ears and tastes, it may not be a deal at all.

Audioengine claims the A5s will start rolling off around 50 Hz and that seems about right. You get decently deep bass, though of course if you want the real rumble you should add a subwoofer (not

surprisingly, they sell one of those too). If you're just looking for a simple two-speaker setup, though, you won't be lacking in the low stuff. I put on the Uninhabitable Mansions debut Nature is a Taker and rocked out to "Do you Have a Strategy" at high volume. Good stuff.

One thing: I wish there was a way to turn off the little blue "on" light on the front. It can be a little distracting depending on how you're using them.

The passive P4 has the same tweeter as the A5, and sports a slightly smaller 4-inch Kevlar woofer. The crossover is set at 2.8kHz, and Audioengine rates the sensitivity at 88 dB with 2.83 volts at 1 meter.

The P4s are cute little things—larger than your average sub-sat speaker, but still small enough to be inconspicuous if that's what you're going for.

As I mentioned earlier, Audioengine claims the P4s were voiced to sound similar to the A5s, and they definitely sound like they're in the same family. Overall sound is very similar. Compared to the A5s, though, the sound is a little more closed in, less open. They extended pretty deep, but not quite the depth or fullness of the A5s. Where the sub was pretty optional with the A5s, I'd recommend it for most uses of the P4s.

Brandi Carlile's "Turpentine" from her The Story album is a great recording full of guitars, bass, strings and drums. The top end of her voice had a little edge to it that I didn't hear in the A5s.

Don't take my comments as being harsh, though. Overall, the P4s are a far-better-than-average speaker for their price range. And given their size, they're even more impressive.

Passively Active? Sure!

It's probably the most trite thing you can say in an equipment review, but I have to say it. Both the A5 and P4 definitely perform better than their price suggests.

The A5s would be a great choice for a small, standalone two-channel system, given their built in amplification and additional plugs and such. Add an iPod, and you've got great sound with almost no footprint.

The P4s would be a great choice for an inexpensive sub/sat system. So in this case I'm going to side with active, but just because it's a little more flexible.

Many speakers in this price range are nigh-on unlistenable, it's heartening to find a company that takes the time to design and build some speakers that sound great, look great and are solidly build, regardless of price.

PRICE:

A5: \$349 (black or white), \$449 (bamboo)

P4: \$249 (black or white), \$325 (bamboo)

CONTACT: audioengine.com