

# Tech review: Audioengine's N22 desktop amplifier and P4 loudspeakers are great for small spaces - Courant.com

<http://www.courant.com/business/custom/consumer/hc-hunt-cons-0210-tech-audio-engine-20110211,0,7979996.column>

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Here's the plan for the home office makeover.

An Oval Office-style Resolute desk, a top-of-the-line Xten Ergonomic Office Chair (anthracite, please), a MacBook Air, a [Francis Bacon](#) for inspiration and, for sustenance, a rent-a-nanny to serve the noontime tunafish sandwich.

Finally, to show a little restraint, we'll audition Audioengine's N22 desktop amplifier (\$199) and P4 loudspeakers (\$249) for the daily playlists, genius mixes and soundtracks that get us through the day.

Audioengine, which already offered powered loudspeakers that connect directly to a computer, recently added the N22 to its lineup of desktop and bookshelf speakers and wireless adapters. Matched with Audioengine's P4, a compact bookshelf speaker, it's a dynamic little music system that excels at near-field listening — up to 3 or 4 feet away — but lacks both the wattage and speaker size to peel the paint off the walls.

For the office or den, though, it'll feel right at home. That's exactly what Audioengine co-founders Brady Bargaenquast, a former project manager at Apple, and Dave Evans, a designer, had in mind with the N22.

For it to fit on a desk, even JFK's Resolute, the N22 couldn't look like the typical big-box amplifier. Think of a hardcover Merriam Webster dictionary, upright. That's the N22.

It's a real, old-fashioned amplifier, too, the same Class AB amplifier in a massive audio-video receiver. The N22, though much less powerful at 22 watts per channel, dissipated extreme heat, a class AB byproduct, through vents at top and bottom, aided by additional vented slots on the back panel.

Other diminutive desktop amplifiers might use Class D technology, switching amplifiers controlled by digital circuitry, that run much cooler. Others called Class T, are powered by a computer chip. Class T amps like Trends Audio's \$179 TA-10.1 ([www.trendsaudio.com](http://www.trendsaudio.com)), especially, have an alluring, euphonic midrange but no clue about delivering bass you can actually feel. That's fine for many listeners, including this one, but a Class AB design can give more faithful sound reproduction from top to bottom. "We have listened to just about every digital amp on the market, both class D and T, and even done several sample designs ourselves," says Dave Evans, "and we just have never achieved the smoothness and fidelity of the class AB amp."

Audioengine, a Hong Kong company with the Bargaenquast -Evans team as U.S. anchors, keeps it simple. The all-black N22, with its unusual hand-finished wood (fiberboard) cabinet, has only a power indicator light, a volume/power knob and, look closely, a headphone jack. Don't miss it. As a headphone amplifier, the N22 is way ahead of the average audio-video receiver.

The N22, however, has only two inputs — for computer, [iPod](#) or maybe a [DVD player](#) — and no input switch to toggle between devices. So when I played [Mississippi John Hurt](#) from my iPod and a Clifford Jordan CD simultaneously, out came Mississippi John Jordan. The remedy: Do not multitask.

The N22 does, however, have a preamp-out connection for a subwoofer or a wireless adapter, like Audioengine's, that will receive music from a TV, DVD player, or iPod wirelessly. I also connected an iPod to the N22 with a minijack cable, charging it with the amp's USB power port. Adding an even more useful USB input for direct hookup to a computer would have pushed the N22 over

Audioengine's \$199 target price. Maybe next time.

The P4, equally minimalist, arrived in basic black — it's also available in Apple white and exotic Bamboo — with no speaker grille. The 4-inch Kevlar woofer, the same material in bulletproof vests, was safe, but I'm not so sure about an exposed silk-dome tweeter in a home full of curious kids.

The N22 showed some guts, more than the P4 — harmonically rich speakers but lacking any bass — so don't be afraid to experiment. (Even with the towering Axiom M60 v3 tower speakers, an obvious mismatch, the N22 put up a fight until finally withering at higher volumes.)

Back with the P4, at comfortable listening levels, the N22 showed that some home-office dreams can still come true.

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**What:** Audioengine N22 desktop amplifier (\$199) and P4 bookshelf speakers (\$249), [\*\*audioengineusa.com\*\*](http://audioengineusa.com)

**Hot:** Superb sound, compact size. Easy to use, set up. Speaker wires, cables included.

**Not:** No input switch, no USB input.

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