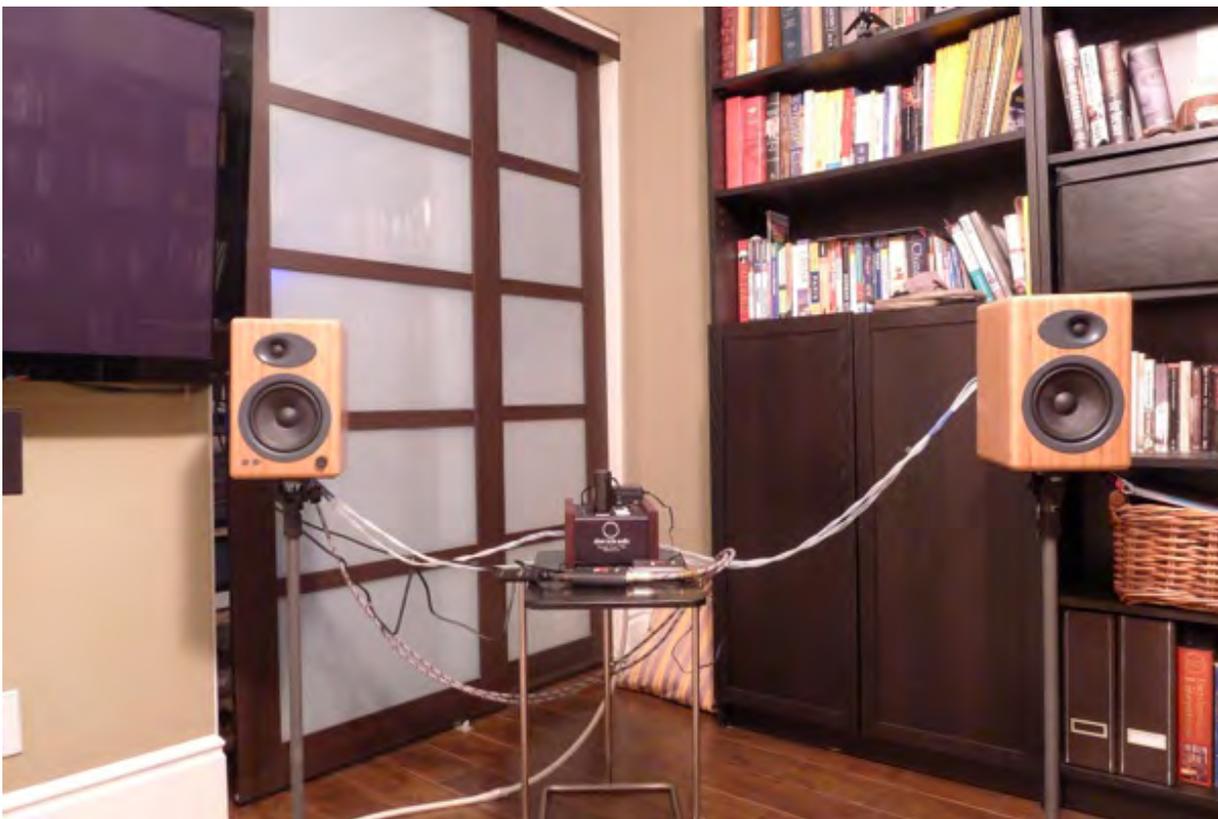


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An Epic Mini-System *by Pete Davey*



The other day I was thinking about some equipment that I had in the queue to review and had an epiphany... Let's build the ultimate mini-reference system! My movie / theatre room is quite small (12 x 10) with a nice comfy couch and I thought, this might be the perfect place to set this up and check it all out at the same time.

The first thing in order are the AudioEngine 5+ active speakers (\$469 a pair in bamboo). Holy smokes when I first saw these at CES I could not wait to hear a pair of these. A beautiful pair was en route to my place of residence in no time.

As you can see here, they sent me the pair in their optional Caramel Carbonized Solid Bamboo finish. Quite the stunner; am a sucker for the natural wood look and man these are gorgeous. At this point I'm

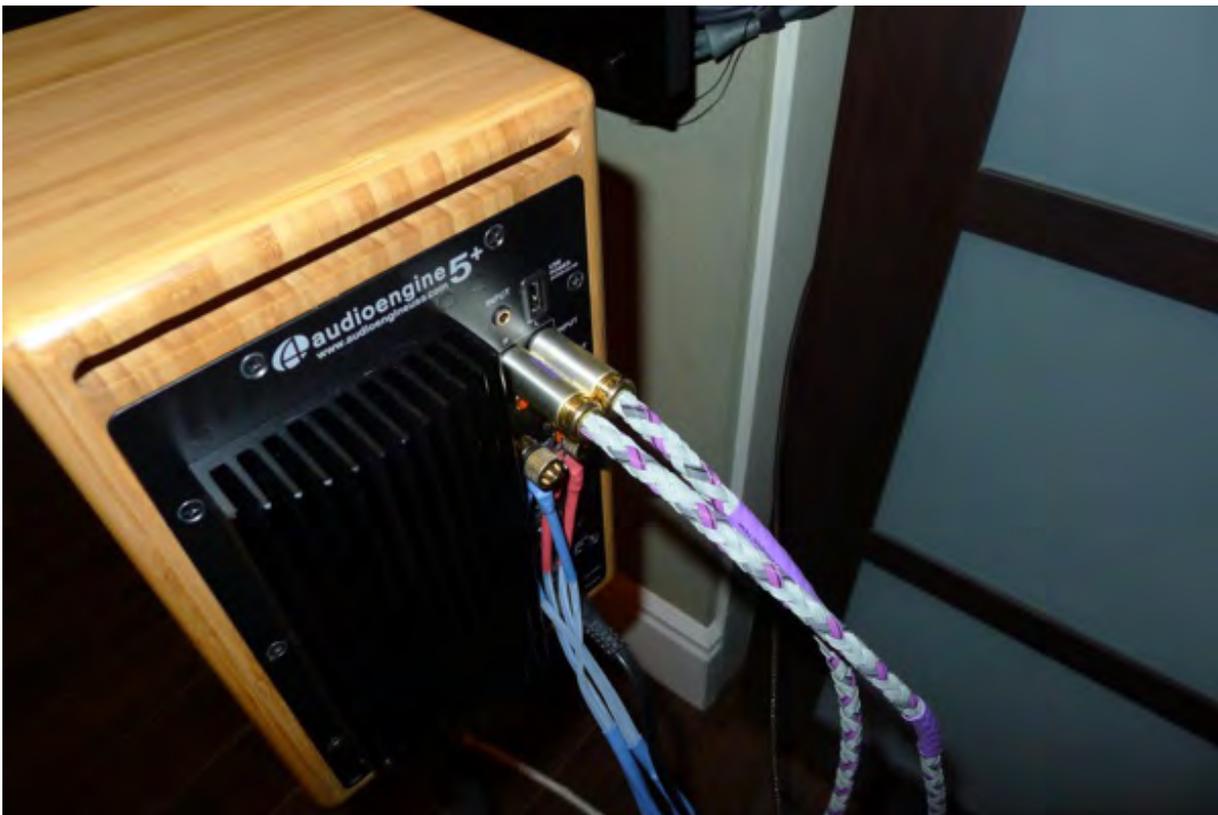
hoping they sound as good as they look! More on that later. They come in the box as a turn-key solution with everything needed to get set up and playing music. All you need to provide is the source and AC power.



Included with them are the power cable, audio cables to plug your listening device of choice in, speaker cable to connect the left side to the right side, remote control (hell yes!), and some really trick cloth bags to store them in when not in use. The remote control is super simple: volume up/down, mute and sleep.



The Class A/B amplifier resides in one of the speakers; the other speaker is connected with the supplied speaker cable to 5-way binding posts. Naturally, you can use cable included in the box or any cable you choose. The amplifier uses a nice linear Torodial power supply and puts out a peak of 150-watts of acoustical power (75-watts RMS). This is plenty of juice for these guys and man do they rock the house with a nice subtle finesse.

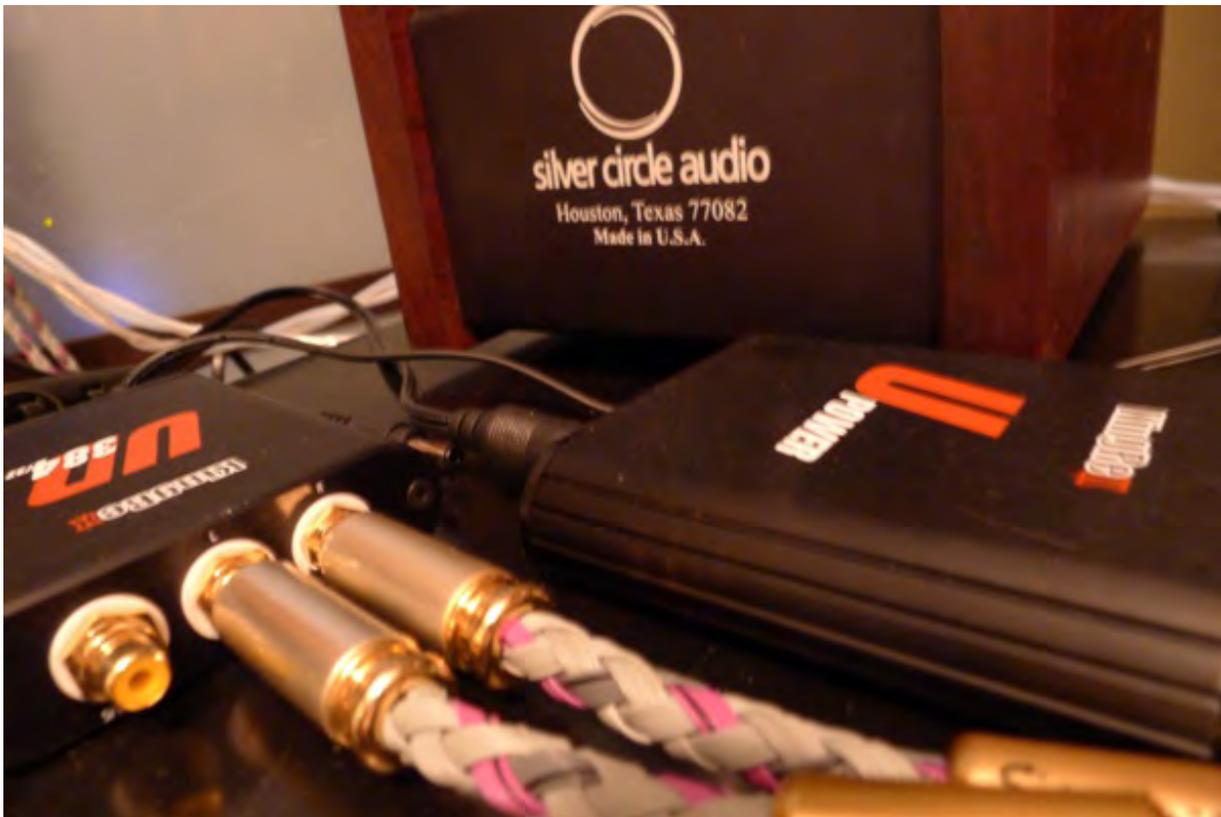


The amplifier also has a USB port that supplies a place to charge your device of choice. This is really

cool if for instance you are using an iPod! This is for charging only, not for audio duties.



Now that I've got the speakers and a place to put them, why not step it up a notch and connect them to an outboard USB DAC made by King Rex. The UD-384 (\$479 for the UD384 and \$189 for UPower) really took me by surprise; it's small, compact and will decode all the way up to 32bits/384KHz. That is major! On top of that, I also have the optional U-Power Lithium Ion external power supply so that I can completely disconnect it from the grid.



To judge a component by its size would be poor in this juncture, even so, I was amazed by the sound that came out of this unit. It handled any bit/sample rate I could throw at it with ease. The optional U-Power battery supply was the icing on the cake. As soon as I switched it over things started to really come into focus. After several hours of listening, I forgot how small of a system this really was and once I came back to reality, I noticed that this thing was still on battery power! Eventually I switched it back over to the mains so that it could charge and get a break, but it's nice to know that there will be no interruptions in listening just because you're using a battery as a power source.

I tried this DAC on both my Mac Mini and my Windows 7 PC. I would say that the device seemed more seamless using the Mac since it required no drivers. On the PC however I had to hunt down the drivers since I misplaced the little USB memory stick that came with it. This wasn't easy, their web-site leaves a bit to be desired. Eventually I stumbled upon a Facebook link of theirs that had a repository of old and new beta drivers. At first I tried the new beta driver and my PC didn't like it as the drivers were not certified, but once I reverted back to the released drivers I was in business.

The DAC itself contains its own master clock which is a low jitter (1PPM) TCXO that works in asynchronous mode. It played quite nicely on my PC using all sorts of front ends including Foobar, J-River, and iTunes. On my Mac I had no issues with either Amarra or Pure Music.

Then, of course I needed an elegant solution as to where to plug everything in! No audiophile wants to use a cheap power strip! Introducing the Juice Box One by Silver Circle Audio. This box really fits the ticket! To save on costs, it does not include a power cord—which is nice because then you can pick and choose which one you want to use. For this exercise, I opted to use the XLO S3-10 Signature cord (\$800/1m).



I noticed an immediate improvement when using this as my power distribution device. Silver Circle created a network of proprietary filtration consisting of various capacitors and resistors and put a nice finishing touch on dampening. This box is tough! I was really tempted to open it up to take a peek as to how they accomplished this but didn't feel like electrocuting myself. Maybe another day. The best part

about this box is that you get 6 filtered outputs, which should cover quite a large system! I was really blown away by this piece plus it retails for only \$799.95. After listening to it for several hours I took it out of the chain and wow, I experienced all sorts of noise from my power grid. I couldn't wait to put it back!



I connected the power and line-level ports all via XLO Signature gear. The XLO S3-10 cord is really perfect for the 'bang for the buck audiophile' who is looking for a rich sounding experience that won't break the wallet. For the single ended connection between the DAC and the speakers, I used the S3-1 cable (\$840/1m). This is the cable I count on when I need a place to start when building a system, it never lets me down and paints a very realistic picture of the equipment I am using as it's a very straight-shooter.



Now let's not forget the USB connection! Why go through all this trouble and use some generic cable? Here I chose to use Audioquest's latest Diamond USB cable with the DBS (dielectric bias system); made of 100% silver for the core. I was introduced to this cable while at the Newport Audio show where I was given a demo by swapping this cable with a generic USB cable... and the difference was quite audible! I'll admit this is one of the coolest USB cables I've ever encountered; the lower noise floor surprised me whenever I pushed the button. This causes an electrostatic field that saturates and polarizes the molecules of the insulation to minimize energy storage in the dielectric. The result is claimed to be much greater dynamic range, lower background noise, and reduced phase distortion. (\$650/1.5m).



The icing on the cake was when I introduced the Qv2 Line Harmonizer by QRT (\$350 each). I know, most people might look at this like some sort of audio jewelry, but when I connected one into the Silver Circle Power distribution block and the other into the wall outlet there was a subtle change. I felt the sound stage went a bit deeper which is perhaps due to the 'quieter' black background. At this point the system was virtually noiseless—which isn't an easy feat in my house with a shared electrical grid! The Qv2 Line Harmonizer by QRT is housed in an ultra slick carbon fiber case with a tiny blue light on top.



OK, so now that I've got it all connected, I fire up iTunes and start playing some music I'm familiar with. I started off with some James Blake—which is a great way to warm up your ears. In your face vocals, punchy bass lines, clean and clear production value. My jaw dropped. I could not believe my ears. The sound coming from this system... these speakers! It was so... BIG! The sound stage was omnipresent and wrapped itself around me. I then put on some HIM (local jazz group) which is known for its amazing recording/production quality and of course great music—I couldn't stop listening! Soon enough I noticed that it was dark outside and several hours had gone by. That says it all!

This tiny system really trumped some of the larger systems out there costing thousands more. I have had friends over and could not wait to put them in the sweet spot to hear what it can do with one's music. Every time I saw the proverbial dropping of the jaws, eyes getting wider, etc. One friend insisted that I had a subwoofer hidden somewhere. The bass that comes from these speakers is tight, controlled and accurate. I typically don't like ported enclosures but it all really worked out well here.

I want to say that I haven't really visited my larger system in several days. I find it just so convenient and easy to plop down on the couch, hit the button on the remote to wake up the speakers and start playing music. I have even thought of replacing my entire large system with this set-up... so much less fuss! For the price, you just can't beat it. For the sound, well, you be the judge. If you can take my word for it, this system is so synergistic it really put a new perspective on high-end audio and now how good it's gotten while not breaking the bank. OK, so maybe the cables I used were a bit over the top, but hey, I just figured, why not?

If you're on the fence about jumping into this hobby, this is a great place to start. Hell, it's a great place to finish, too.

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