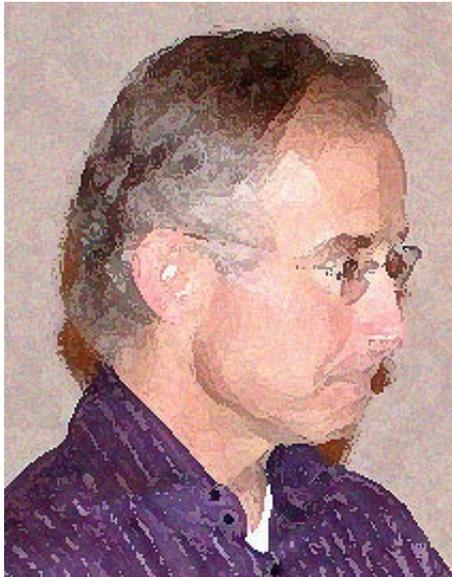


audio

The Neoteric Listener... and the Audioengine N22 Premium Desktop Audio Amplifier and the P4 Premium Passive Bookshelf Speakers

by Dean Seislove



Not to sound like the Sun King or anything, but I'm all right with the cost of high end audio. My automated teller may not agree, but it doesn't bother me in the least that high quality commands a huge price. A Lamborghini and a clunker both take you to your Uncle Pug's house, but there's a big difference between style and sty, so I say ride captain ride in the fanciest ship coin and conscience can broker. No, it's not the [hypothetical] money I begrudge in audio; rather, the real squeeze comes in the loss of living space.

The extremes are out there. "Oh, we don't enter by that door, that's where the power conditioner sits. Just step on the crate and toady through the side window," or "Sorry, we only have one chair now that we have the new mono blocks, but take a comfy seat on the room treatment floor cushion." We've all seen systems in pictures that probably sound fantastic, but there's no way we could live in that space without feeling like we were on Hoarders and buried in a mound of newspapers and old product manuals. Being an unreasonably spoiled consumer, however, I also want music in every square inch of the house, yards both back and front, and piped out of the mailbox by the gate...without giving up use of the gate.



Nowhere is this battle between sounds and inches more intense than in the world of desk top audio. Thank goodness, then, for the emergence of the new Audioengine N22 Premium Desktop Audio Amplifier (\$199). Readers of this column know that I tabbed the Audioengine A5 powered monitor for a 2009 *PFO* Writer's Choice Award, so I admit that I had a favorable predisposition to review the desk top audio combination of the N22 and a pair of Audioengine P4 (AP4) Premium Passive Bookshelf Speakers (\$249). The problem I have with many desk top audio systems is the same problem that I have when facing some opulent system and wondering what happens when one of the kids whips a Wham-O Superball through the woofer or paints the tubes with fingernail polish because it looks cool all lit up: Who besides a hermit living in a museum could use this thing? People with scrupulously obedient children only need apply, I guess, but when I see desk top systems with a pile of boxes and a bigger pile of zeros on the price tag, I think about how I'd feel if the cat pushes some of it over the side or if I splatter it by repeatedly spilling the Diet Coke can.

What's more, many desk top systems leave you with more system than desk, and unless you've got a grand table suitable for signet rings and presidential seals, you get squeezed out of room in a hurry, to the point where your laptop only fits on your lap. Fortunately, with dimensions of 7"(H) x 2.75"(W) x 5.5"(D), the N22 is small, compact, and generous with the work space. It's relatively tall and narrow, but comes with a sturdy base that keeps it from tipping over, even when, ahem, somebody repeatedly taps it to see if it'll fall on its side. But electric pencil sharpeners are pretty small, too, and the sound they make is obnoxious, so ergonomics means little unless the music is up to snuff. To that end, even as an inexpensive desk amp, the N22 employs dual class A/B amplification, and is rated at 80W peak total (22W RMS/40W peak per channel), so somebody's obviously been paying attention to design. I had no trouble getting tremendous volume not only from the P4s, but also my Tannoy Eyris 1s and Nola Boxers (although really pushing the Boxers made for a more strident sound than I like). Having heard the A5s quite a bit in a home theater setting—and I can't emphasize enough how wonderfully they work in this capacity—I assumed that the P4s have a similar sound (true), so my initial eagerness was for trying out the N22.

Connected to my Arcam CD82 compact disc player and played at very low volume, the N22 coaxed

a good impression of the overall sonic signature of each speaker, but it takes a little more roll of the volume knob to get the most out of the Audioengine amp. Put simply, it needs to be at a level most people would set when working or casually listening to music to produce a satisfying musical presence. The P4s, naturally enough, produced the best sound of all the speakers at soft volume, but it shares the family trait of the N22 in that the P4s like to be opened up a little to sound their best. I imagine Audioengine would counter that, if you really need to keep things on the quiet side, the N22 is also a fine headphone amplifier, so plug in and stop tip-toeing around your music. As proof, listening with a pair of Beyerdynamic T1s to Norah Jones's collaboration with The Little Willies on "Love Me," the headphone amp may not have the depth and detail of my CEntrance DACport, but it is clean, musical, and absent of grain. Anticipating the question, no, it doesn't sound "cheap." Sounds mighty good, actually, which pretty much describes the sound of the N22 amp itself.

For the most part, I used the N22 as it should be used: as a desk top or bedroom amp, and it was in the latter capacity that I was able to enjoy all of the odd songs being spit out by my eccentric iTunes program. Typing emails, out tumbles Annie Lennox singing the Temptations' "Can't Get Next to You." Sorting the laundry, I'm listening to Chico Buarque performing "Sempre." Lambchop's "Grampus" provides the macabre soundtrack to my ritual bloodletting while shaving. LL Cool J's "Big Ole Butt" makes an unexpectedly loud and unsurprisingly brief appearance. No genius or shuffle employed, it's a mystery trip, but the N22 and P4s unerringly reproduce each tune to the extent of its merits. Some songs thrill, some songs suck, but the sound is nicely balanced and well-defined. The P4s sound a lot like the A5s, and that's a compliment. Great detail, little coloration, and exceptional bottom end for small, very affordable speakers. Strike that. They sound great even at twice the price, but that's still less than one fading Eyris 1, so go ahead and add a big tip, and the P4s are still a bargain. Personally, I prefer the high-five wallop that the A5s can deliver, but the P4s should be loud enough for all but the most boisterous bedrooms or unbridled work desks.



Not surprisingly, the N22 and P4s worked really well together at all volume levels, especially when sourced directly with the CD82. Switching to the larger, more expensive Tannoy Eyris 1s produced a more expansive soundstage and smoother midrange, but the difference wasn't one where you had to have the one over the other at any price. Interestingly enough, paired with a pair of cheapie Pioneer SP-BS21 speakers, the sound was still amazingly absent of artifacts and grain... and absolutely listenable! For such a tiny amp, the N22 enabled the speakers to have plenty of bottom end heft... well, as much heft as you can expect from desktop monitors, anyway. Clearly, the N22 can be paired with speakers from disparate price levels and build quality and do the job nicely. So if you're looking

for an excuse to resurrect your beloved JBL-100s or if you have a favorite pair of monitors that have been dumped for the latest bit of flash, the N22 gives you a perfect excuse to renew old acquaintances for less than \$200.

Turning to the P4s, much was to the good, as well. Like all Audioengine products, they have a host of nice features. Magnetically shielded, with gold-plated binding posts and silk dome woofers/Kevlar tweeters, they boast integrated inserts enabling them to be wall or ceiling mounted. Their recommended amplifier limits are 10W to 125W, so it's tough to choke them out or blow 'em up. Finally, they come in black, white, and something called "Solid Carbonized Bamboo" (which is the color I'd choose because I'd get newsprint on the white and black is just too practical to fit in with my "work" area).

Brought into the main room and paired with the Virtue Audio Sensation, the new amplification produced tangible sonic benefits in all areas for the P4s. Still, they were no match for the Boxers, nor should they be at this price point. Conversely, the N22 paired with the Boxers fared very well, but when compared directly to the Sensation/Boxer combination, it was obvious that the N22 couldn't keep up. The Sensation plainly drove the speaker better, delivering a noticeably fuller, detailed, and involving sound, especially at higher volumes. That said, even when taken off the desk or dresser and placed in the center arena, the N22/P4 combination wages a wonderfully fierce battle for respect and gets it, but I don't imagine many people reading *PFO* seriously intend to make the N22 their main source of amplification. Still, the N22/P4 combo could be a fine first start for budding audiophiles with a small room and smaller budget...or for the audio weary who just want something that sounds swell with no BS.

Back on the desk top, the N2/P4 set up kicks out the jams at rock bottom prices. Many of these systems almost force you to choose between performance and practicality, but both the N22 and the P4s deliver excellent sound and solid build quality. The N22, for example, utilizes a passive convection system for heat dissipation, so hands, forearms, and paws are protected from nasty lessons of experience. The P4's have pads at the bottom to keep them from skidding across the table every time you bump them with a folder or dinner plate. Both speakers and amps are rounded at the corners, which you think would be a matter of course for this sort of thing but I know personally of at least one model that can cut the *bejofuss* out of you if you're not careful reaching for a CD.

Another really useful option for the N22 is adding the Audioengine W1 Premium Wireless Adapter to connect an iPod, computer, game console, and a myriad of other sources. Unfortunately for me, my music files are entombed in an antiquated external hard drive that I can only access when physically connected to my MacBook Pro. It's a royal pain to deal with, so I really appreciate being able to plug the W1 sender into the computer's USB port, connect the W1 receiver into the N22's USB port, connect both W1 and N22 via a mini-jack cable, and then enjoy listening to my music files from the back room while my computer sits unperturbed in the front room. Granted, this is not such a big deal in the shack, as I can pretty much hear my music in every room from any spot, but you get the idea. The wireless connection sounded really defined and accurate, too, with none of that Mr. Microphone boom and bloom effect that ruins so many wireless products produced for the audiophile market. The W1 will run you another \$100, but that still brings the total below \$600, and if you already have an iPod loaded with tunes, then you're absolutely good to go, as all of the Audioengine products come with the necessary cables and attachments.

All this chat about practicality, however, should not obscure the main point that the both the N22 and the P4s (and the W1, for that matter) produce lively and thoroughly enjoyable sound. Could you spend a lot more and start up the audiophile magical-musical-*moneycal* machine to buy a host of high end products to serenade your computer? Yeah, I guess so, but that doesn't leave much room for work or for the main system or a million other things. Besides, the Audioengines sound darn good, are reasonably priced, and do exactly what they're supposed to do, which is more than I can say about quite a few other audiophile products. If you're looking for a desk top system that will give you great musical satisfaction for a long time with no hassle, you can't go wrong with the N22 desktop amplifier and the P4 passive bookshelf speakers... and be sure to look into the W1 wireless adapter while you're at it. Recommended for all three products.

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