

The Online Photographer

http://theonlinephotographer.typepad.com/the_online_photographer/2012/02/open-mike-a-splendid-little-speaker.html

June 21, 2012

OT Review: *The Audioengine 5+ (a.k.a. the A5+)*

A year and a half ago I realized I was going to have to replace my only TV. The 26" Sony CRT we'd been using for 16 years was getting wonky. So I went shopping, and bought...nothing. Couldn't pull the trigger.

I was completely unfamiliar with the current state of the TV market, and it took me a while to understand my objection to today's TVs: they *look* great, but they *sound* bad. And, it turns out, there's a sensible reason for that: most people who buy flatscreen TVs hook them up to multi-channel receivers to create "home theater" systems. Since nobody uses the built-in speakers, naturally they're a perfect place for the manufacturers to cut costs.

So when the old TV appeared to die a number of weeks ago, off I went to the local Best Buy, where I chose a 36" LED Samsung. But there was still that problem of the sound. Sound quality is always important to me—a baseline need. Living with the harsh, bass-less sound of the built-in speakers was not making me happy, so I had to do something.

But what?

I'm not a big video guy—I like stills—and I tend to do things modestly anyway. The idea of adorning my small living room with five—sorry, "five point one"—speakers didn't appeal.

Other, simpler solutions that I fantasized would be common in that market didn't seem to be forthcoming. I could buy the store's solution—a "soundbar," which is an extra bank of tiny speakers in a bar-shaped enclosure meant to sit in front of the TV—but they all seemed overpriced to me and most of them sounded just wretched, like a clock radio on steroids or the car stereo in an '80s Toyota. You can buy various amplified computer speakers, but most of them don't have the crucial accessory for use with a television—a remote. I have a pair of old wood-veneered Dynaco A25's in the basement, and I could have used those, but to connect them to my TV I'd still need an integrated amplifier or a receiver. I have an old receiver, too, but not one with remote control—meaning I'd have to get up and go over to the television every time I wanted to change the volume, or else buy a whole new integrated amp with a remote. Not ideal.



This picture of the Audioengine A5+ shows the two features that make it really useful—the volume control on the speaker, which means that all you need for desktop use is a DAC, and the remote, which is the crucial feature if you want to use the speakers with a TV.

Then I remembered that [two and a half years ago I reviewed a small set of computer speakers](#) I'd heard and loved—the Audioengine A2's. I wondered if Audioengine had a solution to my dilemma. So I called them.

And they did—[the Audioengine 5+](#). It's the version of their top-of-the-line powered A5 that has remote control. My next call was to B&H Photo, which carries them. B&H has gradually been getting more and more into the audio and pro audio fields, as they're eager to expand their business in those areas, so they made me a nice offer—I could keep the review pair if I'd write about them.

Nice as that sounds, it actually isn't always an inducement to me. I don't want to feel beholden to write about anything in particular, for one thing, and, for another, I don't actually even want to keep things I don't really like. For ethical reasons I've kept almost nothing in the way of freebies over the years, with the exception of some Pentax stuff I've had on "extended loan" (a pre-production K-7 I don't use, for instance, and a few lenses I do use). If I don't like the product, whatever it is, I then have an obligation to

get rid of it ethically—which I commonly do by donating it to a college or high school. (For obvious reasons, I've never sold anything I've gotten from a manufacturer that didn't want it back. One of the problems of reviewing—worse in audio than in photography, but certainly not unknown in photography—is that some unethical reviewers choose what to review based on what they can get the best deal on. They write the [usually glowing] review, then sell the equipment for a profit. Can it please go without saying that I don't approve?) Disposing of review equipment without being able to sell it is another logistical hassle I'd usually rather not have.

Bottom line, though, I accepted the offer, and I'm glad I did.

Physical description

The A5+ is a two-way (that is, two drivers per box) stereo (two boxes total) speaker with a 5" kevlar "woofer" and a 0.8" silk dome tweeter. At roughly 11 inches high by 7" wide by 8" deep, the Audioengine 5+ is very big as desktop computer speakers go and very small as full-sized, other-side-of-the-room hi-fi speakers go. They contain a 50-watt-per-channel power amplifier inside the left speaker, which accounts for an extra 5.8lbs. of weight in the left box. They are clearly meant to offer the widest range of hookup/application choices as possible. You can read about those on [the manufacturer's excellent website](#), so I won't regurgitate all of it here. The only one that might be confusing is that the USB port is for powering a device only—it doesn't mean there's a DAC in the speakers.



Click to enlarge

The reason I put "woofer" in quotation marks above is that the woofer is really a mid-woofer, with response spec'd at 50Hz at 1.5 decibels down. But it's the big driver and handles the lowest frequencies, so we'll go ahead and call it a woofer. The A5+ has a bypass that enables you to use a subwoofer if you want to, and Audioengine makes a nice matching powered subwoofer, roughly a cube foot in size, called the S8. Like the speakers, it's available in [black](#) or [white](#). (You can also get the speakers in a light wood bamboo finish.) Note that specifying the bass to -1.5dB is unusually tight—most hi-fi manufacturers use -3dB or even -6 . More about the bass quality below.

So, like some other computer speakers, the way you hook them up is to route the signal to the left speaker, then run speaker wires from the left speaker to the right one. The left speaker has to be plugged into an outlet, the right one doesn't.

The basic inputs are RCA jacks and a mini-jack. Since most TVs have mini-jack outputs, that's the one I used.

Build quality and value

The A5+'s cost \$399, which is not expensive but also, for some folks, not exactly cheap, certainly not compared to run-of-the-mill computer speakers. Any reservation about value evaporates quickly, however, on opening the box. In fact, you feel almost guilty for being able to buy such an obviously

premium product for so little scratch—you just know that skilled Chinese people somewhere are working very hard for 60¢ a month (disclaimer: that's an exaggeration) to make such a deluxe product that costs you so ridiculously little. And I hope they're happy with whatever they get.



The speakers come beautifully double-boxed, with a well-written manual, with the speakers and all the bits contained tidily in velour bags with drawstrings. Not only do they include speaker wire and RCA interconnects in the box, you also get a mini-jack to mini-jack connector (that's it in the middle)—just what I needed to connect the speakers to my new TV.

The speakers appear to be very well built, with solid cabinets finished to a high standard. I didn't dismantle mine to inspect the drivers, but there's nothing about them that suggests the drivers are any

less than good quality.

I don't know any of the people behind Audioengine, but they seem to sweat the details and do everything right.

Oh, I almost forgot—the speakers have a very nice rubbery isolation pad built into the base of each cabinet. As you know if you've ever experimented with points or Blu-Tak or Vibrapods for your speakers, coupling to whatever the speaker rests on is important for the sound—not to mention that the pads protect your furniture too. A nice touch, one which seems typical of the company's attention to detail.

Sound quality

Different speaker designers "voice" speakers differently, and different listeners listen for different things. Without getting into this too deeply here, many audiophiles conventionally listen for "accuracy," by which they mean frequency-response accuracy (a flat response curve); but there are many other types of accuracy (for example, Klipsch speakers, which are often inaccurate in terms of frequency response and cabinet coloration and thus haven't been in favor in audiophiledom since forever, are much more accurate *dynamically* than something like a Dynaudio floorstander, which sounds flat in more ways than one by comparison). There are lots more examples which I could get in to but won't.

For whatever reason, I very much like the way Audioengine products are voiced. The designer, whoever he may be, clearly has good taste in my opinion. One of the channels I have activated on the TV is the jazz music channel, which I seldom listen to at any length but find useful like the radio used to be, for exploring new music I don't already know. I think it's telling that each time I flip past the jazz channel, even briefly, the sound from the A5+'s pleases me.

And what is that sound? Well, writing about sound is like dancing about architecture, but they remind me a little of the so-called "West Coast Sound" that was a meme years ago, exemplified in my younger years by the then-popular JBL! speakers—rich, full, sonorous, mellow and musical, and unapologetic about it. The sound might not hit all the marks for a pasty-faced audiophile sitting there anxiously with his clipboard and beads of sweat on his forehead, but it's going to make most people smile.

A word about the bass. The typical trick of very small speakers is the so-called "mid-bass hump," whereby the mid-bass region is boosted to mask the absence of bass lower in the frequency range. I won't swear that these don't do that, but if they do they don't do it much.

Most people who use subwoofers use way too much bass, I guess under the theory that if they're going to pay for all that extra bass, they're dang sure gonna get their money's worth. To those people, the extension of the A5+'s might not seem adequate. I've always liked small 2-ways, though, and I've always thought 50Hz extension is fine even for music—especially considering the tight spec; these speakers might not be 6 dB down until the mid or even low 40s. Part of the reason for that is that I'm particularly sensitive to bass—I can hear and identify standing waves in room setups, and most audiophiles can't—and I'd rather have a little less bass done well than a little more done badly. If you watch a lot of movies and/or if you're inured to excessive bass, you might want to go with the matching subwoofers. Otherwise I really don't think you'll need them. In any event, my recommendation would be, use the A5+'s for a month without the subwoofer, and then decide.



Conclusion

So what do we have here? Basically, the ideal second speaker. I doubt these are going to be any dedicated music listener's best speaker system, unless you're severely cash constrained (in which case they'll do—remember, for that laughably low \$399 you get a power amp too). But they are very well suited for a whole range of other uses. I'm extremely happy with them with my TV—they seem ideal, given that I like good-quality but modestly scaled setups—and they'd be great as computer speakers—and perfect in every way as dorm room speakers (including cost, and down to the robust shipping box), at least for kids who don't mind less than eardrum-damaging volumes. They'd work well as bedroom, office, or workshop speakers, and they're small enough to throw in the car if you have a summer cottage or hunting cabin.

Seldom is any product such a safe recommendation. Sure is nice when that happens.

Mike

'Open Mike' is a series of off-topic posts by Yr. Hmbl. Ed. that appears only, but not always, on Sundays.

ADDENDUM: *This post is already too long, but if you want to use these as your computer speakers, you should budget for a digital-to-analog converter (DAC) as well. You can spend up to many thousands on a DAC, but [Audioengine makes one to match their speakers](#) that doesn't cost much. See also Chris Lucianu's comments below. —MJ.*

[Send this post to a friend](#)

Mike replies: Don't forget [the A2's](#), which are great as nearfield computer desktop speakers. They cost half as much. I wrote about them at the first link in this article.

Featured Comment by Michael Elenko: "We've had the A2's as the output for my son's Yamaha digital piano for a couple of years now. They are simply excellent. What's also sweet is the iPod/iPhone jack at the back. We just plug in the iDevice of the moment and enjoy."

Featured Comment by fred: "For an extra 70 clams these speakers come wrapped in bamboo which looks better than the black or white MDF. Not sure if the bamboo is acoustically as good as MDF but it looks terrific."



A5+ in bamboo finish

Mike replies: It does look terrific. I really like bamboo. It's very hard wearing, quite pretty (IMO) and very sustainable.

Featured Comment by Chris Lucianu: "Endorsed. The Audioengines are, for the price, outstanding. I'm lucky to work with studio audio hardware, but the A5+ are my first recommendation for compact stereo or nearfield computer-based music systems. Small caveat, and I'm sure Mike will weigh in on this: A DAC will greatly enhance the sound quality of a system based around a computer plus the A5+ speakers. Fortunately, Audioengine has just introduced two budget DACs which fit the bill perfectly: [the D1](#), and [the wireless D2](#) (great for remote or distributed listening)."

"Michael Lavorgna at [Audiostream.com](#) [has just reviewed them](#). Again, for the price, recommended.

"And now the usual disclaimer: I don't know anybody at Audioengine from Adam*. I'm not even a customer (as I said, I get my fix via studio monitors), just a satisfied endorser. After many lengthy comparative listening sessions, these are the speakers I recommend to friends and colleagues—and I still get invited for drinks and dinner. (*Pun intended, even if it takes gearslutz and audioholics to get it.)"

Featured Comment by Lawrence Plummer: "Mike, I will back you up on the choice of the A5+. I picked up a white pair from B&H a month ago for use on my computer. These are a pair of the best sounding (and looking) speakers I have run across in a long time."