

AUDIO PHYSIC STEP PLUS LOUDSPEAKER REVIEW

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The Audio Physic Step plus is designed to apply high-end speaker technology to a desktop speaker that might be used in a smaller room.

The Audio Physic Step plus combines this well-respected companies' knowledge of building larger speakers, to offer a transducer designed for a smaller room with not just high-end aspirations, but a true high-end speaker that will satisfy discriminating users. To make it even more compelling, the Step plus has high end sound from a desktop sized loudspeaker.

As suggested by the manufacturer, I placed a pair of Audio Physic Step plus speakers in two of my smaller rooms for testing; a bedroom and my small home theater which resides in a converted guest bedroom. The results were superb, with rock solid imaging, sparkling high frequencies, and solid mid bass. They don't produce the deepest bass notes, but they are very clean down to 40-50 hz as determined by test tones and a sound level meter.

Highlights

Audio Physic Step Plus Loudspeaker

- A new HHCT III Tweeter
- Modified crossover from the previous version of the Step speaker
- Newly designed inner cabinet with open cell ceramic bracing
- The Audio Physic Step plus is easy to drive with amps from 10 to 120 watts
- Won't please fans of the deepest bass but easily augmented with a subwoofer

Introduction

Imported and distributed by Vana Ltd. of Lake Grove, NY, Audio Physic is a well-regarded German manufacturer of high quality speakers. The Cardeas 30 [LJE] tower speaker is the pinnacle of the company's current line-up and it receives consistently glowing reviews. Audio Physic uses the technology from its best speakers trickled down to the Audio Physic Step plus, with the same high frequency driver designed for the Cardeas 30 [LJE].

I've often read about Audio Physic speakers, so I was happy to try these diminutive speakers in my listening environment.



Audio Physic wants to fill a niche so that an astute and demanding listener doesn't have to give up high-end sound in rooms where their main music system would be impractical. I've experienced this first hand, where I could not find a high-quality speaker for my bedroom, where I do a lot of listening. I have a bay window with a lovely view of the Arizona mountains in my bedroom, but for years I had an old pair of mediocre speakers being driven by an old receiver. The Audio Physic Step plus speakers are perfect for such a situation, and I was anxious to compare these speakers to what I eventually bought for the bedroom, KEF LS 50 speakers driven by a Denon receiver. The KEFs are almost half the price of the Audio Physic speakers, yet the KEFs are also highly regarded and I've been quite pleased with them in that space.

AUDIO PHYSIC LOUDSPEAKER SPECIFICATIONS

HEIGHT:

320 mm/12.6"

WIDTH:

175 mm/6.9"

WEIGHT:

5.5 kg/ 12.13 lbs

SUGGESTED AMPLIFIER POWER:

10-120 watts

IMPEDANCE:

8 Ohms

FREQUENCY RANGE

50 HZ: 40 kHz

WOOFER - MIDRANGE DRIVER :

5.9" diameter

US MSRP:

\$2,599 – \$2,799 (depending on finish)

COMPANY:

Audio Physic

Design

The speakers arrived in a well-designed and protected box, in fact it was one of the best shipping containers I have seen.

Inside is a comprehensive user manual in a protective plastic folder. The manual is especially good in dealing with setup options, and warning users away from bookshelf placement which would adversely change the sound. Audio Physic also includes a level to make sure the speakers are vertical in your home setup.

The review samples I've received have a glossy black finish. They are also available in white, cherry, ebony and walnut.

The speakers are small by high-end standards at just over a foot high, and slightly under 7 inches wide. They are hefty speakers, due to the weight of the speaker magnets and the robust internal bracing. Knock on the side of the speaker and there are no resonances to be heard.



The Step plus speakers are a two-way design. The speaker also features what Audio Physic calls Active Cone Damping. Active Cone Damping (ACD) was first developed and implemented by Audio Physic to avoid resonances associated with metal cones. A silicone/rubber ring is mounted on the outer ring of the cone where it directly applies pressure on the cone. This is claimed to be a highly effective means to eliminating the otherwise unavoidable ringing and therefore removes the metallic sound.



The Audio Physic Step plus speakers are designed for stand mounting, the speakers tip slightly back, a design decision to balance out phase differences between the low/mid and high range drivers in this two-way design. Mounted flush to the front panel, the drivers were exposed in the review sample I was sent. The retail version of the speakers does come with a grille cloth. Some people prefer to have no grilles on the speakers to provide a slightly more coherent sound field. Other innovations are provided by the re-engineered crossover with its painstakingly selected components.

The interior wiring, as well as the high-quality WBT™ control terminal, mechanically decoupled from the cabinet, are also part of the tonal coordination. While these are all small incremental design steps, the creators of these speakers believe that little decisions add up to better sound output.



On the rear of each speaker is a bass port, as well as speaker terminals that support banana connectors or spade lugs. The connectors are high quality and when using spade lug connections, a torque indicator responds with a click to let you know things are tightened correctly. It's a nice design touch, and something I wish all speakers included. For my tests I used the pre-installed banana plugs. With Audio Physic encouraging me to place the speakers on stands for the best sound, I auditioned them on stands I had available. In my bedroom however, I placed the speakers on a long low cabinet.

Audio Physic recommends the speakers be at least 20 inches from a rear wall, and I complied with those suggestions in both rooms. On stands though, I moved the speakers even further from the rear wall, almost 2 feet. I also toed-in each speaker slightly as advised in the manual, and listened to the speakers at ear height. I used a Denon receiver in the bedroom, and drove them with an Emotiva amp in my small home theater. The Denon offers 75 watts with two channels driven while the Emotiva offers more than 80 watts per channel, so plenty of power for these speakers.

In Use

So, did all the small details and build quality make a difference in actually listening to music? In a word, yes. These speakers sounded almost magical in both my listening rooms.

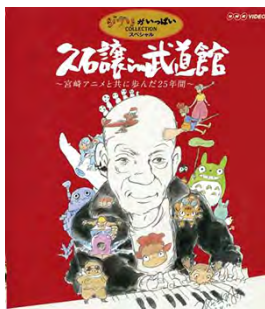
The first thing I noticed was the imaging. The speakers were never a point source, and simply created a realistic horizontal image of an orchestra, rock group, or jazz ensemble. It was quite uncanny. I explored bringing the speakers out to different distances from the wall in both rooms. As I moved the speakers from 20 inches to 2 feet the soundstage added depth, but even at the lesser distance, the speakers created a very lifelike stereo presentation.

I experimented with moving my listening chair around a bit, and when I moved closer to the speakers, less than 3 feet, I was surprised how well the image held up. Many speakers just fail at creating a coherent audio image when you get too close. I also noted that I could drift off the center line quite a bit, and still hear a balanced presentation. In fact, sitting almost directly in front of the right speaker, I could still hear a solid stereo image with no beaming of highs from the right channel. These are marks of an excellent speaker and how it interacts with my rooms.

Think of sitting far to the left or right at a live concert and the instruments still sound well balanced. That's what is happening here with the Audio Physic Step plus speakers.

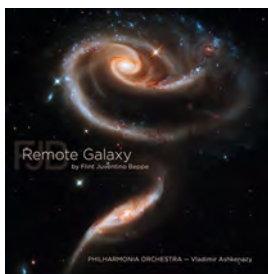
As I previously noted, the Step plus speakers are not the speakers for bass heads. In both rooms, I added a small subwoofer, a Klipsch wireless sub, an R10SWi) that I use with my KEF LS50s, and it gave me a deeper bass than the speakers can create on their own. The Klipsch is not a high-end sub, but it's a good match for my bedroom-based KEF's. Audio Physic also makes a very high-quality subwoofer, but it wasn't part of the offered review package. Having said all that, I thought the Step plus speakers sounded fine on most music without augmenting the bass. In fact, they sounded a great deal more than fine. This is particularly noteworthy with such a small woofer-midrange of 5.9 inches in diameter. There was solid output to 50 hz, and audible output to about 40 hz.

My listening menu consisted of these discs worth mentioning:



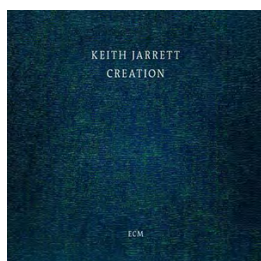
Joe Hisaishi "Budokan:"

Joe Hisaishi in Budokan: This is a Blu-ray disc of a 2008 concert celebrating the composer's film music in Tokyo. While the disc can provide a 5.1 mix, I listened to the 2.0 stereo mix on the Step plus speakers. This is just a great live concert. I think you must import the disk, but it is region free. There's more than a thousand people in the orchestra and chorus, and the sound is breathtaking. The Audio Physic speakers capably negotiated the native drums and high strings, always providing a stable image. Massed choruses are a real test for a speaker too, and individual voices never got lost or distorted.



Flint Juventino Beppe "Remote Galaxy:"

Remote Galaxy: A lovely Blu-ray audio disc by composer Flint Juventino Beppe. He makes a successful run at creating a musical journey through time and space. The music on the disc works the ends of the frequency spectrum, and the Step plus speakers render this unique music beautifully.



Keith Jarrett "Creation"

Keith Jarrett: Creation. More lovely music from the Audio Physic Step plus speakers. I often use piano music because it is notoriously hard to get right. We all know what piano sounds like, but many speakers make a hash of the piano, sounding "electronic" and not acoustic (assuming the recording is of an acoustic piano!). I cranked up the Audio Physic Step plus speakers to a room filling volume, and the piano sounded like it was in the room with me. A very convincing presentation.



Daft Punk "Tron: Legacy"

Tron Legacy: Another great disc for testing speakers with mostly electronic music. The track 'Disk Wars' is a particularly good test of the low end. Here the speakers did their best with my subwoofer adding to the deepest octaves of bass.

Conclusions

THE AUDIO PHYSIC STEP PLUS is high-cost, I'd consider it high value – the speaker offers accurate sound and exact imaging. For many, the money is well spent.

LIKES

- Very revealing speaker
- Extremely high construction quality
- Extended highs and clean midrange
- Visually attractive
- Comprehensive setup documentation

WOULD LIKE TO SEE

- Subwoofer package offered

The Audio Physic Step plus speakers can't be confused with bookshelf speakers for a bedroom or small listening room. They are high-end speakers in a very compact size that outperform many speakers in their size class. I love my KEF LS50 speakers, but these Step plus speakers are incrementally better at creating a real soundstage, if they get the proper placement in terms of height and distance from a wall. I didn't go with speaker stands in my bedroom, but the speakers sounded great at ear level on a credenza that also supports a TV.

I think many listeners will be fine with the speakers as they sound out of the box. Some will prefer some bass augmentation. I believe the speakers were more to my taste with a subwoofer, but you likely won't have to break the bank to find a subwoofer that integrates well with the Audio Physic Step plus speakers. I thought my 10" powered Klipsch did just fine.

Audio Physic does offer a larger version of this speaker with a bass driver called the Tempo plus. It should have similar sound but reach more deeply into the low end.

These are not inexpensive speakers by any means, selling for \$ 2799.00, but the quality of construction and components are high end, not just high-end pretense. Their pedigree from Audio Physic means a great deal of hard work and artistry went into their design, and it was reflected every time I listened to them.

I was sad to pack them up and see them go. If you have the kind of smaller room for which these speakers were designed, they are certainly worthy of serious consideration.