



ESTELON XA

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN



ESTONIA



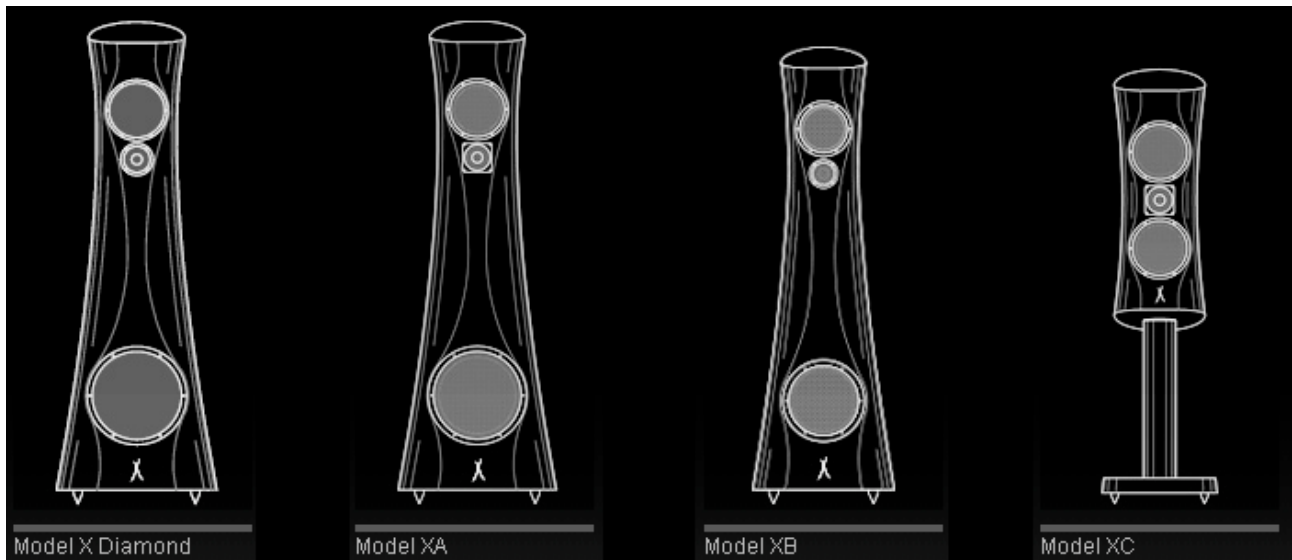
Products from central Europe which Milan Kundera and Andrzej Stasiuk named Middle Europe in the *Moja Europa* anthology rarely penetrate the consciousness of Western customers. Some brands usually from smaller manufacturers strike it lucky and achieve some measure of domestic success there beyond the (former) Iron Curtain but overall they are a relative few. I'd single out Ancient Audio, Lampizator and GigaWatt from Poland; Reed and Turntables.It from Lithuania; Canor (formerly Edgar) and JJ Electronics from Slovakia; Human Audio and Heed Audio from Hungary; and Trafomatic Audio from Serbia as the most obvious ones. One big exception is Pro-Ject Audio Systems which in fact is Austrian but has its manufacturing with the Czech firm SEV Litovel s.r.o.

That's why I was so surprised by the success of Estonian firm Estelon. Enthusiastic reviews from PFO and Tone Audio hit out of the blue. A CES Innovation Award followed. My surprise wasn't the speaker's worthiness but the obvious fact that the origin caused no issue. The only thing of import was the product itself and how it performed. And I too had been impressed by how they sounded.

Visiting a HighEnd 2012 exhibit in Munich with Vitus Audio electronics and Loit's Passeri CD player, I was completely seduced and awarded Best of Show for this particular system which featured the X Diamond as the top model of a four-square lineup which includes the floorstanding XA of the same appearance and dimensions (123 x 45 x 64cm HxWxD), the smaller XB floorstander and the XC monitor.

I've since learnt that it all began with today's XA, speakers of quite extraordinary looks whose shape reminds me of a water clock with smaller upper section housing the midrange and tweeter and a lower bigger one the woofer. This E-Ion shape was developed by Alfred Vassilkov after many years of studying the effects of acoustic

reflections and diffractions. Mr. Alfred speaks of a 'musical instrument' albeit not how Harbeth and Spendor reference this term for their deliberately resonant cabinets. Estelon's enclosure in fact is a proprietary composite of undisclosed composition. One can merely cite an obvious conceptual overlap with Wilson Audio and Hansen Audio for just two.



The transducers Estelon champions without exception are from Germany's Accuton, i.e. ceramic diaphragms or ceramic-coated sandwich versions for the woofer. The XA suggests a small 2-way monitor atop an integral subwoofer which is supported by a rear-firing port. These 3-way speakers use a single pair of top-line WBT binding posts and expensive internal cabling from Kubala-Sosna. The XA won the CES Innovation's Award in the high-performance audio category in 2011 and once again in 2012.





Sound – recordings used during this review: David Sylvian, Sleepwalkers, P-Vine Records, PVCP-8790, CD (2010); Dead Can Dance, Anastasis, [PIAS] Entertainment Group, PIASR311CDX, "Special Edition Hardbound Box Set", CD+USB drive 24/44,1 WAV (2012); Depeche Mode, Enjoy The Music...04, Mute, XLCDBONG34, maxi-SP (2004); Elgar Delius, Cello Concertos, Jacqueline Du Pré, EMI Classic, 9559052, 2 x SACD/CD (1965/2012); Eva & Manu, Eva & Manu, Warner Music Finland, 5389629, CD (2012); Hilary Hahn, Hilary Hahn Plays Bach, Sony Classical, SK 62793, Super Bit Mapping, 2 x CD (1997); Jim Hall, Concierto, CTI/Mobile Fidelity, UDSACD 2012, SACD/CD (1975/2003); Maria Peszek, Jezus Maria Peszek, Mystic Production, MYSTCD 214, CD (2012); Miles Davis, Milestones, Columbia/Mobile Fidelity, UDSACD 2084, SACD/CD (1958/2012); Novika, Tricks of Life, Kayax, 013, CD (2006); Pat Metheny, What's It All About, Nonesuch/Warner Music Japan, WPCR-14176, CD (2011); The Beatles, Yellow Submarine, Parlophone/Apple/Toshiba-EMI, TOCP-51121, CD (1969/1998); This Mortal Coil, HD-CD Box SET: It'll End In Tears, Filigree & Shadow, Blood, Dust & Guitars, 4AD [Japan], TMCBOX1, 4 x HDCD, (2011).



Loudspeakers of this size, with such a large woofer, top-notch drivers and a steep sticker provoke particular expectations. Anyone immediately thinks of powerful punchy bass, intense dynamics, massive acoustic power and so forth. And these expectations are fulfilled. With the Estelons there is drama, power, scale and amazing density of sound. You won't get that from a small speaker no matter what. There's also proper vertical scale which in my experience is delivered only by sufficiently tall speakers. But you'd need a much better understanding of audio to say much more about the XA after just looking at them. The choice of drivers and how they are applied and loaded into their special enclosures add up to something that quite transcends our standard criteria of quick sonic assessments.

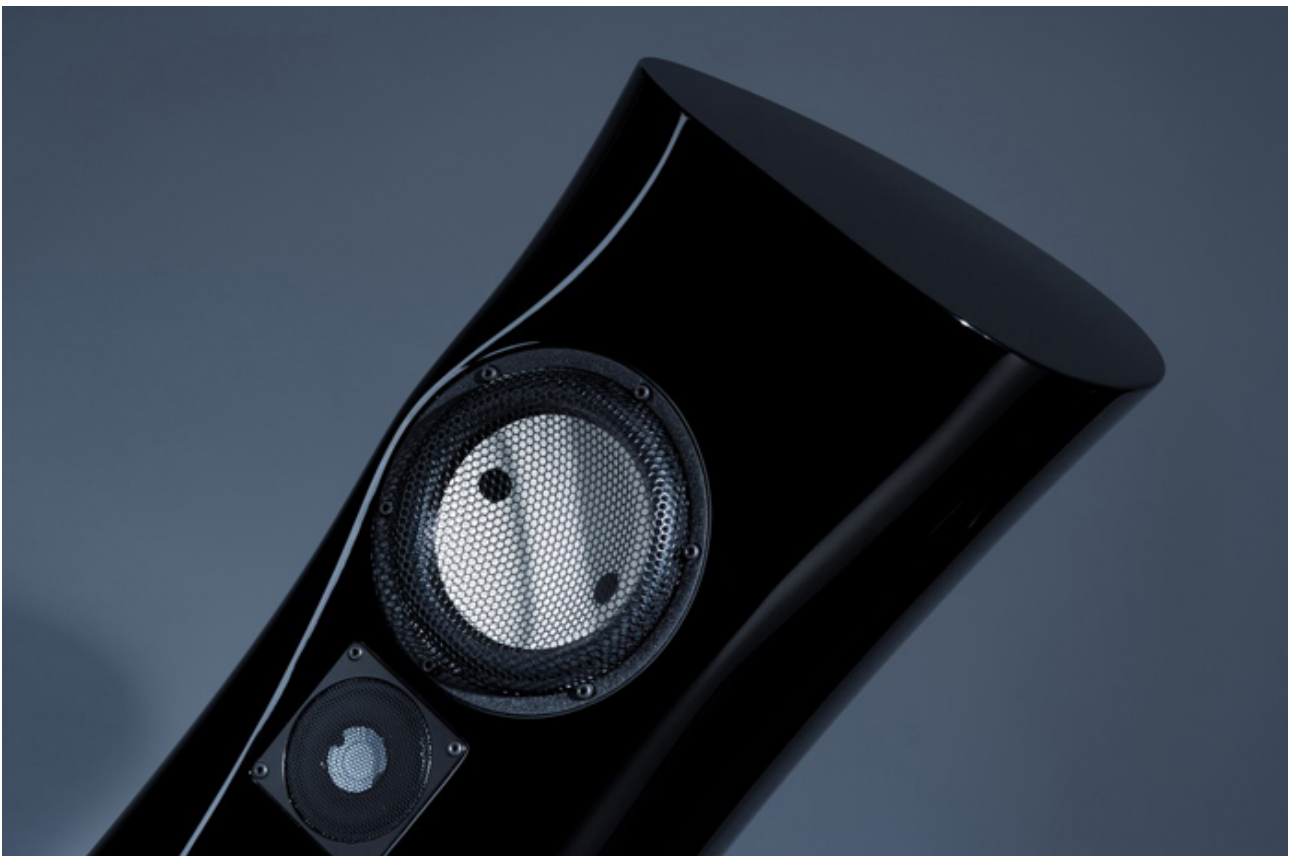


The Estelons deliver a quite sophisticated but emotionally inert sound from something like This Mortal Coil's box set in tonally neutral fashion. When presented with warm musical material that doesn't include too much energy in the upper strata like Jim Hall's *Concierto* or Miles Davis' *Milestones*, they deliver a pleasingly warm performance. When fed with somewhat melancholy material like Path Metheny's solo album *What's It All About* they will sound melancholy; and on something passionate but tinged with sadness like Maria Peszek's latest *Jesus Maria Peszek* (Marysiu, congrats on this fabulous recording) they present passion and sadness at once. It reads simple - a neutral speaker merely passing on what it's fed. At first it does appear so but there's a lot more to it. These Estonians have their own delivery which gets modeled and to some extent modified by 'amplifying' the

distinctive features of whatever music we send their way. It's why Maria Peszek's album was such a profound experience; why I chilled out so nicely with Eva & Manu sent to me by Anssi Hyvönen, Amphion's boss (his speakers were used during the mastering of that recording) only to get tormented again by This Mortal Coil at day's end.



Everything in this presentation was deep and rich. It seems to be a proprietary feature of well-implemented ceramic drivers I'd encountered before in most Avalons and Isophons. The Estelons did the same thing but at a higher level. Their wealth and lushness even turned the sound slightly warm in a perfect rather than exaggerated fashion which often happens with speakers using these drivers.



Then one comes to appreciate their extraordinary resolution. Apart from one narrow band in the lower midrange, the XA offered as much resolution and density as my Harbeth M40.1. In other ranges like the top treble and lowest bass the Estelons' magnifying power was clearly superior. I was stunned and amazed by their bass to an extent I'd previously encountered only with the Hansen Audio Prince v2 quite some time ago but I still remember their sound which has since become a personal reference.

Starting with the treble I have two personal references. The new Harpia Dobermann with its metal tweeter is a nice reference to compare against as is Sonus faber's Electa Amator owned by Janusz—a member of our Cracow Sonic Society—equipped with the original Dynaudio Esotar tweeter. These are two treble references I'm closely familiar with. Estelon's concave ceramic dome reproduces treble in a different more creamy fashion. This had me first suspect that it wasn't as fast and open as these other two when in fact it offered a far richer more precise response than the Dobermanns' Seas unit which lacks depth and weight by comparison. After some consideration I believe that only the Sonus faber would make a worthy opponent though the Amator's treble is still a bit different and even more unlimited, direct and detailed. Yet here one must recall that those speakers are small monitors which can't reproduce full-scale sound to affect our subjective perception of their top end.



Let's return to the bass which might be key for the Estonians. As mentioned already it seems that they play exactly what they're fed to convey simply what's been recorded. Yet simultaneously it seems that their tonal center is set a bit lower than usual as though there were a small but noticeable accent in the lower band. Midrange and tweeter are perfectly integrated to where I couldn't hear the crossover point or changes in tonality or dynamics, just natural directivity effects. Regardless, the bass here is the most important contributor to the overall sound.

How the XA handled it reminded me to some degree of studio monitors – *true* recording monitor devices, not merely two-way speakers called monitors. I'm specifically thinking of Amphion's Krypton³, larger Tannoys and Harbeths. Those deliver very dense extended bass at great resolution and clarity which nonetheless never overpowers. Strong transients are conveyed at full power yet when it's time for the midrange or treble to shine,

the bass turns invisible to make the speaker behave a bit like a stand-mount. Of course the bass never actually disconnects. It simply forms a perfect foundation for the vocal range to enhance its separation and holographic imaging.



And that's exactly what the XA did for Pat Metheny's guitar. Although a solo recording which admittedly sounds a bit dark, it remains an acoustic guitar with no real bass. Even so I could feel the woofers creating some pressure to build an aura and spatial foundation for the midrange and tweeter, helping those units deliver what they were asked to without any fatigue. When required these speakers deliver real slam – say on the Maria Peszek recording, on David Sylvian or Depeche Mode. Then their bass is huge and potent but very well controlled and articulated. It never gets boomy or pretentious. Pace and rhythm are another forté. When reproducing giant studio-crafted acoustics of a particularly evocative mood like the Vangelis *Blade Runner* soundtrack, an entire universe gets built in front of us yet you never ever hear the bass reflex at work.



It won't be until something clicks inside your head that things fall into place. That's because audio is an art of choices. Designers make choices, companies makes choices, finally the client must choose. If you get a chance to audition the Estelon XA, take your time to relax and adapt. I'm convinced that even if they won't be your ultimate choice, you *will* discover certain aspects of their performance which others lack by comparison. You'll find yourself missing their amazing immaculate smoothness and clarity which conjures up an illusion of minor warmth. They do seem to restrain some expressivity in the lower midrange/upper bass were they might be

slightly shelved down. I'm pretty sure it's what caused a somewhat smaller soundstage on This Mortal Coil and some gentle 'grip' on female voices in general which interestingly didn't affect male voices.



This aural modification doesn't really influence the overall assessment but simply gives a particular character which might or might not be what we expect. I'm pretty certain that it's a component of this limitation of expression. I heard something similar with other speakers sporting ceramic drivers. It might be a part of the price one pays to achieve perfect sonic alignment of such ceramic transducers. Listening to the Estelons I can't really pinpoint the exact frequency at which this 'restraint' happens. Maybe there's also a little bump around 2kHz but this could have been an effect of my room acoustics. These are the first loudspeakers I met which whilst having such a measured flat response betrayed no weakness during listening. Usually when measurements are perfect, something doesn't sound quite right one way or the other. I found nothing wrong here, just some very reasonable design choices producing excellent sonic effects. The XA for example generated a *huge* soundstage. They freely 'breathe' and differentiate this aspect of recordings very well. The depth of the soundstage was extraordinary as was its overall size but in particular their ability to fully illuminate each item within a particular place was outstanding. This soundstage also had appropriate height which isn't the case for many smaller speakers.

The sound was beautifully decorrelated from the physical enclosures save perhaps for the treble as a normal function of tweeter directivity. The midrange and woofer never were identifiable as sound sources but only projected in the middle, around and even behind them. Images were fantastically solid – not mere spots in space but material blocks, perhaps not perfectly holographic like small monitors but distinctive enough with their own textural character regardless of actual position. The feeling of presence was the same whether close or far away. The XA never lost focus even in the farthest reaches.

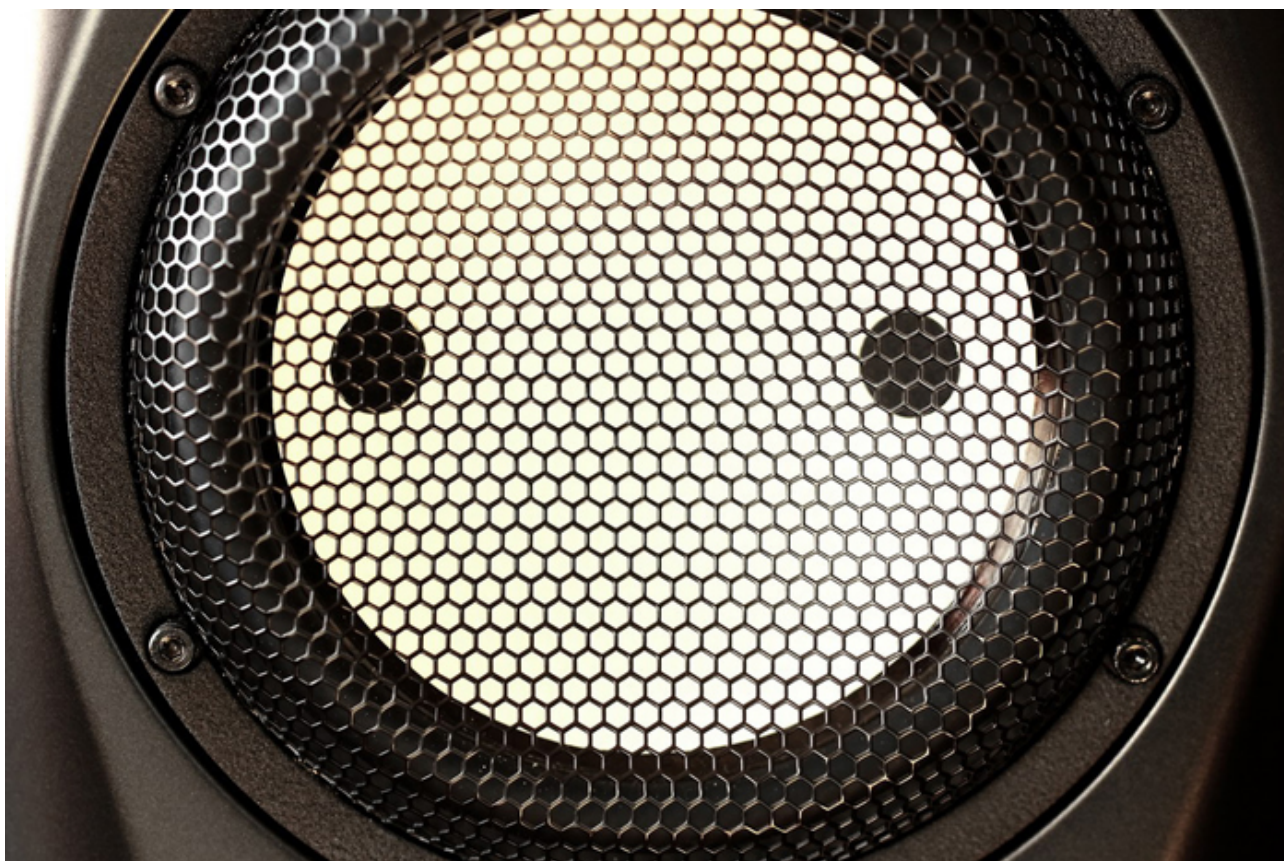


Summary. Expensive speakers usually offer very sophisticated sound. Occasionally less costly ones like the Sonus Faber Amator, the Harbeth M40.1 or the Amphion Krypton³ approach similarly elevated sound which most of us could spend the rest of our lives with, taking huge pleasure from our music regardless of the storage medium. But Estelon's XA has you *think*. Yes they cost a lot more but they also pay back more. They are capable of proper sizing even at the rear, they differentiate complex bass, integrate all the sonic aspects into a cohesive whole... to get *all* of that will set you back.



Your first impression will tell you that their expression is somewhat restrained, perhaps even that they're rolled off a bit but always follow the signature of a given recording regardless. They also seem a bit warm but it's not really a 'warmed up' sound. This quasi warmth comes from very low levels of distortions. I get this from time to time with amplifiers or speakers where it usually means great resolution despite not equally good selectivity. The latter must come from somewhere else.

These speakers are huge and look it. Their elegantly curvy shape might save you from feeling intimidated but when I placed them next to the Harbeth M40.1, they *completely* dominated the British speakers despite the fact that the Harbeth are very oversized monitors. To be honest, I'm not a huge fan of ceramic diaphragms. I'm aware of their virtues which are apparent each time when driven from proper amplification yet I personally do prefer a more expressive sound even if, objectively, it'll be a bit more colored. That's my personal view/choice and many readers will disagree. That's what our hobby is all about. That said, the Estelons were the first speakers that allowed me to fully enjoy the virtues of ceramic drivers. I expect that the even costlier Avalon models would do the same thing but I never had a chance to hear those in my room, just at certain fairs and exhibits. But I did have a chance to experience the Estelon XA in my room to know that they're worth every penny one needs to part with to acquire them.



Test methodology. The XA speakers are truly large and heavy - much larger than my Harbeth M40.1 which I compared them to. They reminded me rather of Amphion's Krypton³ which I tested just before the XA arrived. Despite their size the same placement that had worked for Hansen's Prince v2 and before that Avantgarde Acoustic's Uno Pico and since my Harbeth also proved optimal for the Estonians. There were no issues with either bass or soundstaging. I spent time to select the best amplification. Estelon states a minimum power requirement of 20 watts since their impedance is flat and their sensitivity high. I tend to disagree. The XA loves power, the more the better. Of course it's not just about raw power but also quality. If you most care about ultimate neutrality, Soudal's 710 would make a perfect choice. Still solid-state but a bit more creamy would be Vitus Audio which in Poland is represented by the same importer as Estelon. For something less neutral and with

greater personality, you should try the McIntosh Mc275 whose 'Anniversary' edition I had at my disposal. Other tubes amps would do too but not some low-power SET variant. Another good option would be the best version of the ASR Emitter II. This review was an A/B comparison with both A and B known but not a quick direct comparison as moving such huge speakers was quite challenging. Musical samples were 2 minutes long but after the official sessions I also listened to full albums.

Design. The Estonian Estelon XA is a 3-way bass-reflex floorstanding speaker. Its unique shape was designed to eliminate edge refractions and to isolate mid/woofer and tweeter from the woofer. The enclosures are made from an undisclosed composite containing crushed marble to be available in many colors. At 140mm tall and 640mm deep, the XA is massive and weighs in at around 85kg each or 140kg in the shipping crate. That's why Polish importer RCM opted for hiring professional movers to deliver these speakers to my upstairs flat. They were thrilled that I wasn't testing a 5.1 system.



Technical specs from the maker:

Frequency response: 25-28.000Hz

Power rating: 200W

Nominal impedance: 6Ω (min. 3.5Ω at 60Hz)

Sensitivity: 89dB/2.83 V

Min. amplification power: 20W

Dimensions (HxWxD): 1370 x 450 x 640 mm

Weight (piece): 85kg