

# Estelon XB Mk II Loudspeakers



In my mind, home-stereo loudspeakers can be grouped into three classes. Class One fulfills the primary goal of speaker design: this class of speaker just has to make music. All other goals are secondary. So they have to sit there, generally in front of the listener, and play sound through their drivers. These speakers should be, and generally are, dressed up somewhat, either in a nice wood veneer or a lacquer finish. But beyond that, they're two MDF pillars, upon which you wouldn't be remiss in resting a doily and a lamp or a potted plant. Or if you're like me, the record sleeve from whatever's playing on the 'table at that moment.

This is a noble thing, the box-shaped MDF loudspeaker. When building to a price point, it's hard to beat an MDF box, and the art of the veneer is fully mature, so if you want great sound, a six-sided box can give it to you in spades for a reasonable price.

Class Two is the exotic cabinet. Made from exotic materials, it still looks like a box. This class of speaker is an offshoot of the first MDF speaker class. Heroic cabinet materials beyond MDF can glean important improvements in rigidity, and now that you can round the corners a bit, you can reduce diffraction. This class of speaker is more expensive, and looking at it, you'll notice some sense of panache to those two pillars at the front of your listening room. The top may or may not be sufficiently level for doily placement, and the cost is now somewhat higher.



Class Three is where we're going today, readers. This is the world of the speaker as an art form that transcends its basic purpose. It's where the cabinet, its construction, its appearance, and its personality are as important as its sound. Make no mistake, the cabinet-as-art-form wasn't created for its own aesthetic sake. The ability to form a cabinet in a unique shape bestows benefits to sound quality as well as appearance. The two worlds—sound and physical form—are intertwined. It's highly unlikely you'll be able to put a doily on this class of speaker, and the cost is now rising toward that of a mid-level sedan.

I've covered a few speakers in Class Three, but in recent years, the one that most struck my heart, charmed my ears, and pleased my eyes was from Estelon—the YB, which I reviewed several years ago. As I've said several times in the past, Estelon, based in Tallinn, Estonia, makes perhaps the most beautiful speakers in the world, and every time I've heard them, I've been mightily impressed.

And here I sit now, with a pair of Estelon XB Mk II speakers. The XB is the big brother to the YB. The \$49,000-per-pair XB sits one model above the YB in Estelon's lineup, a series that reaches its zenith with the terrifying Extreme Mk II, which retails for \$269,000 per pair (all prices in USD). It's interesting to note that up until the recent introduction of the new \$19,000-per-pair Aura model, the YB, with its current retail price of \$29,000 per pair, was the lowest-priced Estelon speaker. Estelon does not make Class One or Class Two speakers.

Should things be going especially well for you this month, you might want to consider the \$63,000-per-pair XB Diamond Mk II, which retains the same format as the XB Mk II but ups the ante by way of a diamond tweeter, upgraded wiring, and a higher-end crossover.

As you can see from the photos, the XB is a dramatic speaker. It's an attention grabber, even in black lacquer. The XB's cabinet is available in an automotive-grade lacquer in a number of colors, which would certainly make this speaker a definitive conversation piece.

### Statuary

About that cabinet: It's cast in one piece with an injection mold using crushed marble mixed with a proprietary resin composite. The cabinet is further stiffened with internal walls made of the same marble composite as the cabinet and MDF braces that are glued in with a proprietary adhesive. The crossover is in its own sealed enclosure at the bottom of the cabinet.



While the general construction concept of the YB (now in its Mk II version) is the same as the XB Mk II, the XB is a much more substantial speaker. Both are three-way designs, with the woofer positioned



close to the floor to take advantage of boundary reinforcement and the additional gain provided by that location. The tweeter is located below the midrange, which allows it to remain at a seated ear level, while the speaker can extend higher for increased cabinet volume.

Around back, the XB is ported, with the port situated down low, just above the two extremely high-quality binding posts. The driver complement is serious audio royalty. All three drivers—a 1" ceramic inverted-dome tweeter, a 6.25" ceramic-membrane midrange-woofer, and an 8.7" ceramic-sandwich woofer—are sourced from Accuton. Internal wiring is by Kubala-Sosna. On a more mundane note, Estelon specifies a frequency response of 22–30,000Hz (deviation not provided), and a nominal impedance of 6 ohms, with a recommended minimum amplifier power of 30W. Crossover slopes are all 12dB per octave, with the woofer handing off to the midrange at 76Hz and the midrange handing off to the tweeter at 2kHz. Crossover components include double-layer, silver-gold foil, oil-impregnated supercapacitors, large wirewound resistors, and aircore inductors.



The XB Mk II is a large, heavy speaker. Estelon quotes its dimensions as 49.5"H × 16.5"W × 23"D, but the visual impression of the speaker changes dramatically depending on whether you're viewing it from the front or side.

The XBs landed in front of my house, each in its own sturdy, pro-audio-grade flight case. The cases were laid flat on a wooden skid and wrapped in clear plastic. With the help of two neighbors, I got them off the skid, down the 30° drive, and into my garage.

Decanting these 150-pound speakers from their wheeled cases was quite straightforward. The XBs themselves come fitted with widely spaced casters, so rolling them out onto the floor was a non-issue.

That said, I really, really wouldn't want to do this on my own, as a) the speakers are tall and it would be a real shame to tip them over, and b) the piano gloss lacquer is flawless and it would be a real shame to bang them into something.



I left the casters on for a while, as I wanted to be sure about the positioning. Once the spikes—which come packaged in a cool Mission: Impossible carry case—were installed, it would be a pain to move these guys around on my tiled floor.

The spikes are extremely strong and well machined, and they thread into different holes than those used by the casters, so installation was easy. Again, though, you need two people for this job.





Connection is via one pair of extremely high-quality binding posts. I used my Nordost Tyr 2 cables during the first part of the review period, switching over to my Audience Au24 SX cables when I received a Hegel Music Systems H30A power amplifier.

### **Dat ass**

The XB Mk II is a stunning, elegant, graceful speaker. Back in early 2020, I reviewed and then purchased a pair of Estelon's first-generation YB speakers. Prior to their arrival, I had no intention of laying out my own cash-money for another pair of speakers. But after hearing them, and having them grace my main floor living room with their presence, I couldn't let them leave. Here they remain, and right now I'm in the living room listening to the YBs playing William Basinski's *Disintegration Loops* (16-bit/44.1kHz FLAC, Musex International / Tidal). The sun is pouring in, and as I look over my shoulder, I can see the YBs silhouetted against the window, leaning gracefully forward like the Rolls-Royce fairy. They still charm me, both visually and aurally.

But those are the YBs. The XBs downstairs in my listening room have that same Lladró-esque quality to them, that same Art Nouveau sway-backed lankiness—but there's a bit of menace to these guys. They're larger, first off. A touch taller, more filled out through the middle. Muscular even.

That said, the XBs radiate sophistication. From the front, they're narrow, being only as wide as required to accommodate their drivers. From the side, though, the lower part of each speaker structure extends further back than is evident at first glance, which makes each speaker look like it's continuously advancing, almost threatening in its intent. It also means that each speaker must be positioned a fair

distance from the wall, and I had to pull the XBs a touch further into my room than usual to give the rear ports space to breathe.



The easy-rolling casters were a great help in positioning these speakers. It took me longer than usual to find the perfect locations for the XBs. Usually, I just plonk down whichever speakers are in for review in the usual spots, fuss with distances to the walls a bit, and call it a day. I suspect my room is at the bottom end of the appropriate volume for these formidable speakers. My room is, for the most part, quite accommodating. There's a big wall of LPs behind my sofa that adds significant absorption in the bass, as well as some diffusion of the highs. The open staircase to the floor above seems to act as a bass-evacuation circuit, so rarely do I have too much low end.

Still, I had some trouble finding the perfect spots for the XBs. If I pushed them back far enough to get the highs toned down the way I like them, the rear-ported XBs started getting too thick down low. When I pulled them forward to a spot where the bass was in line, they were too bright up top. The big aha moment came when I started playing with toe-in. As soon as I removed most of the toe-in and pointed the XBs almost completely straight ahead, the whole package just snapped together. The highs still sparkled, the imaging tightened up, and the Estelons began to sing in ways that immediately brought back to me the sense of awe that I experienced last year at Warsaw's Audio Video Show.

### **Dark they were, and golden-eyed**

The exact moment I got the positioning right—it was revelatory. I was listening to Talk Talk's "Inheritance" from Spirit of Eden (LP, Parlophone PCSDX-105), an album I play at minimum once during

my reviews. Screw it—I play it all the time because it's just righteous. Tight and tense, then loose and flowing, it's a speedball of existential angst mixed with freebased religious ecstasy.



As soon as the positioning was sorted, "Inheritance" bloomed, shot out, and enveloped me. From the moment that ride cymbal trickled in, and that deep, deep piano washed over me, I knew these were the speakers in which I'd like to be buried. Mark Hollis's plaintive voice was set back just a touch further in the soundstage than I'm used to, but the sense of layered depth was astonishing. Not only did each instrument have its place, the sonic images were rock solid. For the first time listening to this album, I noticed that the cymbals on "I Believe in You" were located in space in a realistic manner, right above the snare drum. Prior to the XBs taking up residence, I reacted to Martin Ditcham's percussion as something sort of disembodied, a thing in the general vicinity of the left channel. With the Estelons presenting this track, I was thrust into the acoustic, with abundant spatial cues jumping out left and right.

Before I go any further, I think it's vital to say that there's much more to these speakers than just their imaging, but for now I think I'm going to have to harp on some more about how they portray space. When I flipped over Spirit of Eden to listen to "The Rainbow," the XBs devastated me with the solid



corporeal presentation of Mark Hollis's voice. Rounded and fully formed, it wasn't just a head floating there, no, I could readily sense Hollis's chest. I could smell, feel, and touch the size of him, slightly larger than life. Same with the ancillary instruments. Nigel Kennedy is floating around this album on violin, along with Andrew Marriner, son of Sir Neville, on clarinet. Via the XBs I was, for the first time, clearly able to isolate each of these instruments and visualize the disparate threads that they contribute to this intense album.



There's a midrange clarity to the XBs, a sort of laid-bare, stripped-down cleanliness. It's like there's no overhang, no reverberations or artifacts muddying things up. The XBs don't pollute the musical signal. So when that biting harmonica rips off the record a couple of minutes into "The Rainbow," it's an event, an attack, just as it should be with this music. Likewise with that repetitive post-rock guitar as it builds tension, slashing through the room like flying metal. I found myself flashing back and forth between imagining individual strings, seeing them vibrate, and visualizing a guitar amp about to catch fire.

I initially had trouble reconciling the XBs' midrange crispness, their resolution of detail, with the slightly recessed image presentation, and it took me a short while to get a handle on the way the XBs layer images. It's a deep, front-to-back, top-to-bottom soundfield, one that's extremely well delineated, well organized.

I guess there are people out there who don't like Talk Talk, so let's move on from Spirit of Eden. My buddy Mike recently came over for a listen. Mike's a bass player, so we spent much of our time listening to music where the focus is on the bottom end. At one point, Mike scoped out my Japanese pressing of Pink Floyd's Meddle (LP, EMI EMS-80322), so it seemed expedient to throw on "One of These Days."

“How loud do these things go?” Mike asked me. This is a question I don’t usually ask myself, but when you think about it, a \$49k pair of speakers should be able to rock out, right?



I was using my Sonic Frontiers SFL-2 preamp at the time, and its blunt 3dB steps mean significant jumps between volume positions. I turned up the system as loud as I was comfortable with, and then, gritting my teeth, clacked it up three more steps. This. Was. Loud. There are two parts to “One of These Days,” before and after the grinding horror-movie voice. I knew it jumped dynamically in the second part, and I mentally readied myself to write Estelon a check for some new drivers.

My stars! This was fun. The XBs refused to dynamically compress. They refused to show the slightest sign of strain. What did happen was those two woofers loaded my room up in an astonishing manner. Huge waves of chunky bass throbbed over us, making us both giggle. There’s a sense of linearity to the XB’s low end, but while elevated levels bring the bass up in relative volume, its tonal character remains utterly consistent. I noted that my heart was racing and I was beginning to sweat. Did I mention earlier that the XBs project a lifelike soundstage? Well, now you can add lifelike, frightening dynamics to their assets.

Listening at a more reasonable level, I found that the XBs' bass presented as lithe and tight, and just a touch full in my room. That tightness, combined with a slightly elevated level (due, I'm sure, to the proximity of the ports to the wall), made the XBs flat-out boogie. This was effortless, world-class bass. As demonstrated by my "One of These Days" experiment, a pair of XBs can easily crank out more bass than anyone could ever require at anything approaching sane volumes. When I threw "The Beat Goes On" from Giant Sand's Cover Magazine (LP, Thrill Jockey, Thrill104) on the VPI, I was floored by the juicy, textured sound of Howe Gelb's electric bass. There's the foundation tone, of course, which the XBs shot out like mortar fire. But the XBs also conveyed the sense of roundness at the top of the note, the pull and release, the quick start-stop action that gives this song its overt swing.

Like I said, the XBs' bass was a touch warm in my room, but never so much that it sounded thick or slow. No, I just loved how they energized my room. There's no better example I can give you than Massive Attack's Protection (LP, Wild Bunch, 5700962). Pick a song, any song. Take "Three," for example—this track is so smooth and so creamy that it melts in your mouth. I am fairly sure the bass itself on this album is programmed, but it's deep, tuneful, and quick, and it underpins the mood. The XBs launched out that bass without overhang, in a manner that totally integrated with the region just above. On this album, that whole smile-shaped EQ thing leaves nowhere for poor bass quality to hide, and the XBs just locked it in. Nicolette's voice sways along on top of this foundation, and the XBs made it feel like I was sinking into honey swirled with ribbons of muted color.

Protection has some lovely top end to it also, sort of that boom-tizz R&B thing, and here the XBs showed how crisp and precise they are in the highs. That Accuton tweeter is, like the midrange, composed and clear, with the ability to produce copious SPLs without even hinting at breakup. Again—like that midrange—I found that the XBs reproduce the high frequencies with accuracy and detail, but they never, never cross the line into sounding sterile. There's texture when it's required and transparency and accuracy to the source when it's called for. Good recordings shine through the XBs, in such a way that a casual listen might lead you to believe that poor records might be rendered unpleasant. That's not the case, though.

For example, take my wretched 12" single of All of My Heart (LP, Neutron Records, SOVX 2317). It's pressed on the thinnest wafer of vinyl I've yet encountered, and it's a sonic mess. But I still really like this Lexicon of Love album and listen to it on occasion, much to my family's consternation. Through the XBs, I could clearly hear just how bad this pressing is. But the ordered, composed, sophisticated tweeter allowed me to note just how crispy this track sounds while still allowing me to listen to it at high volumes without wincing or feeling aggravated.

In retrospect, I don't think it hurt that the Estelon speakers' backing cast of characters was at the absolute top of its game. My system has been building itself up over the past year, and right now, with the Hegel H30A amplifier fed by the EMM Labs DS-EQ1 phono stage and DS Audio's DS 003 cartridge, I feel like I've entered another dimension. My own Aurelia Cerica XL speakers, as crazy-good as they are, really don't do justice to this world-class front end.

No, it took the injection of the Estelon XB Mk IIs to show me what the rest of this kit can truly do. Now, the XBs are expensive speakers, by any stretch, but while I'd be an idiot to brand them a bargain, I truly



believe there's huge value here, given their world-class sound and outrageous, provocative, seductive looks.

I think it's fair to contrast the XBs to the YBs I've lived with for the past three years. The YB is already a Class Three speaker, with its heroic build quality, high-end driver complement, and exceptional sound, and it stands out as a worthwhile purchase on its own merits. The XB, at an additional twenty thousand dollars per pair above the price of the current YB Mk II, is a big-ass jump, and you'd think it would need to be significantly better to justify that Honda-Civic-sized upcharge.

Far be it for me to spend your money, but I'm gonna take a stand here. Yes, the XBs are certainly, definitely, for-sure worth the extra money. Just on sound alone, a pair of XBs deliver an incredible improvement in realism, dynamic snap, top-end extension, and bass performance. Imaging, too, is notably more precise. And this is all over and above the superb performance of the YBs. Back in 2020, I pretty much raved about the sound quality of the YB and found it to be certainly worth the purchase price—but the XB is simply another class of speaker.

So yeah, you're getting good value for your twenty large, I'd say.

### **Do it**

I've spent the last week trying to find some negative aspect of life with the XB Mk IIs. It doesn't help, I guess, that the XBs slid into pretty much every one of my preferences as if they were custom-made for me. Starting with the obvious, these guys are quite expensive. Shelling out \$49,000 for a pair of speakers isn't something many of us can do on a whim. But if you did have that much spare cash lying around, I really can't see how you could possibly be dissatisfied by their sound.

And then! Then you could take a look at the custom palettes offered by Estelon and pick a pair in one of their nutty colors. If I were placing an order today, I think I'd choose their Red Rocket Liquid Gloss—which is an extra \$7750 for the pair, but who's counting?—and park a Ducati Superleggera V4 right between them. Since I'd be inviting two chunks of sculptured art into my house, why not drag in a third?

Can you sense how these speakers are making me dream big?

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