

SOUND IMAGE

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Estelon Extreme Mk II

How high can you go? These magnificent floorstanders, at \$350k the pair, show how hi-fi at its best can look spectacular — and yet disappear entirely when the music starts playing.

Let's just get some perspective here. There are some speakers (often cited as the world's most expensive) that can potentially set you back US\$5m if you request them to be, say, cast in solid 18-karat gold. But there are also plenty of speakers in non-crazy finishes which push towards the million — from Wilson Audio, Final Audio, Kharma, Moon Audio and more.

So if these extraordinary Estelon Extremes from Estonia fulfill the promise of their many awards, not to mention comments from the likes of *The Absolute Sound* calling them “among the best”, well then, they might be considered to offer considerable value at their Australian price of \$349,999. Certainly Estelon is not shy about positioning them as “the ultimate loudspeaker experience”, the ultimate expression of Estelon's founder and chief designer, Alfred Vassilkov, who grew up dismantling Soviet-era radios and tweaking their components to make music sound richer and more alive. Quite the journey!

Materials & build

Given the latest Estelon Extreme Mk II weighs in at 250kg per speaker, we declined to lug them up our own stairs and instead opted to spend a day listening to them in the main reference listening room (appropriately named ‘The Gallery’) of Audio Connection's store in Leichhardt, Sydney. Even in that home of wonders, your first encounter with the Estelon truly takes your breath away: they stand over two metres tall at full height — which is variable (see specs) because the upper of the two self-contained modules is adjustable by over 30cm in either direction to optimise the stereo imaging to the size of the listening space. The adjustment is motor-driven — with a remote control — following a shallow arc that thereby also varies the depth of the tweeter in the top unit, which it shares with the midrange driver and mid-woofer. The separate compartments also isolate the upper drivers from any vibration created by the pair of woofers in the bottom section, which are set at 90 degrees to one another in a bass-reflex design.

The kinda-triangular shape of the enclosures means that there are no parallel surfaces and, consequently, no nasty internal resonances, while the marble-based composite material ensures that the enclosures are exceptionally stiff anyway, so vibrations are

negligible to start with. And this Mk II model has been updated a great deal, from new drivers to a much-revised crossover network with improved inductors, capacitors and resistors. Both the tweeter and midrange driver have been upgraded, though both are still manufactured for Estelon by Accuton under the German company Thiel & Partner GmbH (that's Bernhard Thiel, former production engineer at Backes & Müller, no connection to Australia's Neville Thiele). The tweeter is now a 25mm diamond-membrane unit, while the midrange is a 168mm ceramic membrane driver. The low-range drivers are custom designs sourced from Accuton, using aluminium-sandwich cone construction. They are all described as ‘CELL’ designs, a group of Accuton drivers which, among other things, keep the acoustic centre of every driver in the series in the exact same relative position to the baffle, further simplifying time alignment.

You can have any finish you like if you don't mind waiting — every unit is hand-finished over several weeks by Estelon's expert artisans. But standard finishes for the Mk II model include two-tone high-gloss finishes called Midnight Opera (black/red, as reviewed, left), Bronze Royale (black/bronze), Lunar Eclipse (white/black) and Nordic Emerald (white/green).

Listening sessions

For our audition, each Extreme Mk II was driven by a Karan Acoustics Master Collection ‘POWERa’ monoblock amplifier (3600W into four ohms) with a Gryphon Pandora preamplifier and the dCS Vivaldi One CD/SACD transport, DAC and network streamer. Transparent XL cabling linked it all up, and Audio Connection's David Rizzolo was kindly on hand to conduct the audition.

We kicked off with a Deutsche Grammophon DDD recording of renowned mandolinist Avi Avital playing J. S. Bach, which we had selected due to the clarity of the instrument across its register. We immediately became a bit misty-eyed due to the absolute purity and tightness of the delivery: it was the music, and nothing but the music. We were also immediately struck by both the width and depth of the soundstage from our position in the ‘sweet spot’ — although we later realised we could move well off to one

side and still enjoy very convincing stereo imaging. With orchestral music, the clear definition and separation of the instruments and their frequencies made for that truly immersive ‘being there’ experience that is as much down to the engineers' skills as it is the players' abilities.

If there is a downside to such exacting management of driver control and the crossovers, it's that there is nowhere to hide when it comes to poor technique in either the performance or the recording.

Rizzolo describes the Extreme Mk II as “brutal” in how they expose everything, both the good and the bad. Indeed, we both jumped at a slight slip on a guitar string in one of the tracks on Steve Hackett's ‘Tribute’ album, which is also all Bach pieces. It is telling that we had never noticed the missed note on all prior occasions listening to this German DDD recording, even through other extremely high-end systems.

Hackett's arrangement of *Jesu, Joy Of Man's Desiring* for solo guitar is sublime, and the Extremes beautifully relayed all the richness and depth of his playing. It's important to note that for all their uncompromising precision and tightness, the speakers never sounded clinical or soulless: if there is warmth and character in a performance that has also been preserved in its recording, you'll hear it.





This was the case when we moved on to Madeleine Peyroux's 2006 album 'Half The Perfect World'. The American singer and songwriter has a wondrous voice — both languid and lyrical, expressive and emotional. It can be a challenge to capture all these elements in a recording and then reproduce them truthfully, but the Mk II Extreme impressively relayed all the colours and nuances. Not once did we feel as though anything was missing.

These Extreme Mk II are revelatory on many levels, but perhaps the most remarkable is their bass performance, and all the more so given the unusual positioning of the dual 11-inch woofers both near the floor — to enhance low-frequency response and reduce standing waves, says Estelon — and the way they are both angled symmetrically outward, rather than firing straight down the room.

You might think either of these approaches would reduce the crispness of bass, but instead that was a defining characteristic. The Extreme Mk IIs handled low frequencies with precisely the same aplomb as they did higher ones, so there was definition, separation and clarity, not to mention a powerful dynamism and depth that can punch straight through you.

A true test is Elgar's Cello Concerto in E minor, the seminal recording of which is a young Jacqueline du Pré's passionate performance with the London Symphony Orchestra by EMI in August 1965. The energy and enjoyment of her playing, not to mention her distinctive technique and unique interpretation, make this one of the greatest

classical music recordings ever — it has now been digitally remastered, of course — and the wonder of it is rarely conveyed so faithfully and compellingly as it was by these Estelons.

A fine tune to show off the speakers' deft handling of layered frequencies is the main theme from Hans Zimmer's dramatic 'Interstellar' movie soundtrack. Its fabulous layers build on the four-keyboard pipe organ in London's Temple Church, joined by 34 strings, 24 woodwind, four pianos and a mixed choir of 60 voices, all recorded in the church. It's very easy for systems to muddy all this, especially at the very lowest frequencies — but the exceptionally responsive and tightly controlled drivers in the Extreme Mk II delivered both the composition's power and its glory. The bass was powerfully solid but never overwhelming; the character of the pipe organ's tonality was wonderfully preserved while everything else layered over the top to create the intense aural impact that Zimmer intended. He actually delayed the soundtrack album's launch until the movie's theatrical release because he "wanted people to really hear it for the first time with the movie on really big speakers in a theatre". Little doubt he'd be impressed by how the Estelons can deliver "the visceral experience" he wished for!

Verdict

Listening to these loudspeakers is indeed an experience, even though their sublime accuracy renders them 'invisible' in terms of the performance and its production. Of course, they are very much right there

physically — it's hard to take your eyes off them. But force your peepers closed and you realise that the Extreme Mk IIs are all about the music and the emotion it inevitably stirs.

At this lofty price, Estelon's Extremes are going to be enjoyed only by a small and exclusive group of audiophiles. But it's always worth hearing such speakers — at a Show, or at a friendly dealer. Spending time immersed in their magnificence can recalibrate your ideas of what hi-fi can do, the qualities that you can seek — even if you have to live at a lesser level until the day the lottery sets you up for the hi-fi of your dreams. +

SPECS

Estelon Extreme Mk II \$349,999 (pair)

Type: Four-way bass-reflex

Drivers: Accuton 25mm CELL diamond membrane inverted dome tweeter, Accuton 168mm CELL ceramic membrane inverted dome mid, Accuton 25cm CELL aluminium sandwich dome (custom) mid/woofer, Accuton 25cm CELL aluminium sandwich dome (custom) woofer x 2

Frequency response: 25Hz-60kHz (no envelope stated but linear up to 33kHz)

Sensitivity: 91dB/2.83V

Nominal impedance: 3 ohms (minimum 2 ohms at 95Hz)

Dimensions (HWD): 177-207 (adjustable) x 69 x 82cm

Weight: 250kg

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