

## Estelon YB Loudspeakers



I do love an elegant-looking speaker. There's something to be said for architectural grace. After all, accepting into your life and home a pair of full-size speakers is a serious commitment. The damn things have to sit there, damn near in the middle of your room. You have to stare at them as you're listening. I could live with a pair of boxes made of MDF wrapped in vinyl, but I sure as hell would rather not.

You want elegance? You want architectural grace? Check out Estelon. This Estonian company manufactures some of the most otherworldly speakers I've ever seen. I first saw one of Estelon's larger speakers -- I forget the model -- about four years back, at the now-defunct TAVES show, here in Toronto. I can't tell you what they

sounded like, although I would wager they sounded great. What I remember is the impact their appearance made on me. Those big speakers had the look of alien humanoids. They were positively frightening sculptures of menace and power. I thought they looked wonderful. But to do them justice, my living room would have needed a complete do-over -- I'd have had to transform the room into something out of an H.R. Giger painting.

### **Nuke it from orbit**

Estelon also makes speakers of a less threatening appearance -- such as the first and, so far, only model in their Y series, the least expensive speaker they make: the YB (\$22,500/pair, all prices USD).

Retaining the general proportions and all of the grace of Estelon's bigger speakers, the YB's cabinet is molded from one of the company's proprietary composite materials, which yields an inert one-piece cabinet. At 88.2 pounds and with tall, narrow proportions of 49.6"H x 13.1"W x 15.5"D, each YB is quite dense. Mounted in its sealed enclosure are three drivers: a 1" beryllium-dome tweeter and a 5.25" midrange-woofer, both from Scan-Speak; and an 8" woofer from SEAS with an aluminum cone. Each driver occupies its own chamber: the midrange-woofer at the narrow top of the tall cabinet, and just below it the tweeter, both firing directly forward -- and far below them, at the bottom of the cabinet, the woofer, firing inward at an angle. In short, these speakers are sold in mirrored or "handed" pairs. This puts the tweeter 37" above the floor. The slender cabinet, which seems to gracefully twist in place, has no parallel surfaces -- even its little top panel slants upward toward the rear.



Estelon claims two benefits of mounting the woofer low and to the side. First, having the woofer fire toward the center of the room means that the first reflections of the higher bass frequencies won't bounce off the sidewalls, which helps improve imaging in the smaller rooms for which the YB was designed. Second, the woofers' nearness to the floor provides more boundary reinforcement, which increases their apparent efficiency.

The woofer is crossed over to the midrange-woofer via third-order slopes, and the midrange to the tweeter via second-order slopes. The crossover components consist of both transformer-core and air-core coils and oil-filled capacitors, with all components directly connected and soldered.

The close attention paid to detail continues inside, where all wiring is by Kubala-Sosna, with Cardas connectors. Those connectors are mounted very low on the rear panel, below the speaker's bottom apron, and were a touch fiddly to use with spades, which need to be inserted and held in position as you turn the thumbscrew. But once they're tightened down, the terminals grip the spades nicely. Banana plugs were a little easier to use, though after they're inserted you still need to tighten that screw.

Estelon specifies that the YB has an efficiency of 86dB/2.83V, a nominal impedance of 6 ohms, a power rating of 150W, a frequency range of 30Hz-40kHz, and requires minimum amplification of 30W.



My review samples were finished in a high-quality Black Gloss lacquer. White Gloss and Black Matte lacquers are also available for the base price; add \$2500/pair for Red Racing, or \$5000/pair for Champagne Gold Limited Edition. All of these lacquers are from the German company Standox and, due to the YB's complex shape, are applied by hand using proprietary techniques. Estelon is also happy to discuss custom finishes.

It's hard to imagine a more graceful, elegant, classical shape for a speaker cabinet than the YB. The cabinet's gentle inward slope, up from its wider, rounded base through its high, narrow waistline, is graceful, yes, but also slightly ominous and menacing. In all, it's a wonderful design, beautifully executed.

The grilles, however, leave much to be desired. They work just fine, and attach by nifty magnets -- but the magnets cling to the drivers' otherwise exposed screw heads, which negates some of the value of having invisible magnets in the first place.

Of more concern to me was how the grilles sit proud over the drivers. Having those flat, matte pancakes glommed on to the front of a YB is like pasting a big, hairy mole on the cheek of the Mona Lisa. The woofer's grille has the same characteristics, but being lower, larger, and on the side, it blends in better with the Estelon aesthetic. But the midrange and tweeter grilles went straight back into the shipping boxes.

In my discussions with the folks at Estelon, I came to understand that a lot of engineering went into the design of the YB. All of their design choices are made for logical, rational reasons, and in my time of listening to the YBs, nothing dissuaded me from that impression.



### **It's the only way to be sure**

The YBs projected a palpable soundstage full of depth and, well, vigor. It was an involving soundworld that shot the music outward in a well-integrated manner. Sitting in front of these beautiful, vaguely humanoid columns as they slammed out "Stuff," from Miles Davis's *Miles in the Sky* (LP, Columbia/Music On Vinyl MOVLP2385), I was the recipient of a musical event. Leaving aside the actual details of the composition of the sound -- bass, midrange, treble, and all that -- it was an exciting experience to be in the middle of Miles's band, feeling the musical foundation of his rhythm section of double bassist Ron Carter and drummer Tony Williams as they intertwined like musical lovers, playing off Herbie Hancock's fruity electric piano.

As I listened more, I learned that the YBs were chameleons. Change cables or interconnects or electronics and their sound changed dramatically. The same went, most notably, for the positions of the speakers themselves. With speakers, I'm generally a set-and-forget guy. There are two spots in my room that have worked well for pairs of speakers in the past, and rarely have I had to fuss with moving speakers around to get really good sound. In recent memory there have been only a couple of speakers with which I experienced enough discontent with their sound from these spots that I had to find new places for them. A couple of years ago, when Totem Acoustic's

Signature Ones visited my listening room, I had to push them back to get some low-end boundary reinforcement. And 15 years before that, the omnidirectional radiating pattern of Mirage's Omni 260s had me spinning those guys around till I was dizzy.



The Estelon YBs, however, took a long while to fully break in. The factory claims around 300 hours for break-in time, which seems reasonable. Early in that process I moved them out toward the sidewalls, to extend the highs through the help of some room bounce. As time went on and electronic components changed, I pulled the speakers closer together until, for the most part, they ended up in close to the same speaker positions with which I've almost always gotten the best sound.

Still, differences in toe-in angle were easy to hear. I didn't feel a need to fuss with positioning, but deep down, I knew I could squeeze a bit more performance out of the YBs. And I wanted to get the most out of them. Here's why.

Just look at these speakers. It's hard to get a solid bead on YB's appearance -- the organic curves and angles, the flawless lacquer that bends light around the cabinet. They seemed to pull light into themselves and disappear. And they're perhaps the most beautiful speakers I've had in my room.

But these seductive transducers "disappeared" acoustically as well. Even with such hard-left/center/hard-right jazz recordings as the Gil Evans Orchestra's *Out of the Cool*, recorded in 1960 (LP, Impulse! AS-4), the YBs could float massive, invisible soundstages with genuine depth and realism. According to the stage map in the liner note, Evans's piano was way the heck up front for these sessions. In "La Nevada," that piano sounds as if it's a million miles away -- but not in the recessed way normally associated with good imaging. The YBs projected that piano backward and floated it up in one of the most convincing reproductions of depth of soundstage I've ever heard.

As I've just implied, some speakers can simulate soundstage depth by recessing the midrange. The YBs were above such trickery. If I had to venture a guess as to how these speakers mastered space so well, I'd say it's everything about them -- their rounded, organically shaped, exceptionally dead cabinets, high-quality drive units, and good engineering. None of these characteristics are unique to Estelon, but the combination of them in so elegant a package verges on the stunning.

The owner's manual hints that it's best not to overdrive these speakers and thus risk driver failure. Well, far be it from me to second-guess the manufacturer, but I pushed these babies pretty damn hard at times, and never once heard from them the slightest whimper of distress: no compression, no hardening, no distortion of any kind -- instead, for the most part, only a direct relationship between the position of the volume knob and the volume of sound coming from the speakers. Turn it up, it got louder. Not sure what the fuss is about here.

You know how, for every record, each listener finds a specific volume at which that record sounds best, most realistic? The YBs seemed to know in their hearts where that level was for each album I played, encouraging me to seek that sweet spot. Still hanging with Gil and his Orchestra as they blasted out the catchy melody of "Stratusphunk," I found myself cranking up the 3dB-stepped attenuator of my crusty old Sonic Frontiers SFL-2 preamplifier by two notches. That increase of 6dB resulted in nothing but more volume. This dynamic track gives the sense of a huge space, the trombones complaining from the left as the trumpets tell them to shut the hell up from the right. It's a dysfunctional family in the midst of a passive-aggressive spat, and it sounds glorious, with tons of blat from those trombones. At the right volume the YBs stepped aside and re-created, in the front of my listening room, Rudy Van Gelder's enormous recording studio in Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey. Again, no recessed-midrange tricks here. Instruments receded from the plane of the speakers in folded layers.

So yeah, there's a correct volume for most music. For me, that level is often higher than others might find comfortable, but the heck with them. The YBs were able to accommodate my need for speed, and encouraged me to turn it the hell up. The Estelons were a tiny bit reticent at low volumes, and so might not be the best choice for those who listen late at night and need to keep the noise down. But they sure did come alive when I goosed them just a bit. There was a clear demarcation point at which the YBs snapped awake. I live in a townhouse, with neighbors to either side, and I wasn't ever concerned that I was playing the music too loud while in the YB's zone. That said, I did get huge smiles from cranking these guys up to seriously loud levels.

I've been all over the place so far in this review, giving you my thoughts as they randomly occur to me. That sometimes happens when I get really enthusiastic about a product. Sorry 'bout that. Let's try and nail down some of the YB's characteristics in a more linear manner.

Not long after I'd set up the YBs, I spoke with Alissa Vassilkova, cofounder and CEO of Estelon. When she tactfully asked which orientation I was using -- woofers firing inward or outward, I told her it was the latter. (I'm notorious for ignoring owner's manuals.) Vassilkova suggested that I swap the speakers so that the woofers fired toward each other. Okay.

The change in sound was startling, but not so much in the bass. Rather, the imaging improved dramatically. Each instrument was better placed in space, and the music cohered so much better that I went from quite impressed to enchanted.

My well-damped room can accommodate serious bass, but the single 8" cone low in each YB's cabinet filled my space with satisfying, musical bass. The YB's bottom end evoked a Venn diagram of the three bass components with which we're all familiar -- extension, tightness, volume -- arrayed in mostly even proportions. The extension was there, with the sound of almost every instrument realistically reproduced. I've been listening to Henryk Górecki's third symphony, his Symphony of Sorrowful Songs, as performed by the Polish National Radio Symphony Orchestra conducted by Krzysztof Penderecki, and Portishead's Beth Gibbons tackling the solo

soprano part (LP, Domino WIGLP395X). This nasty, ponderous piece is full of, well, sorrow. It's not an easy listen, but it has a towering grace and is full of raw, tightly restrained emotion, and in certain passages no small amount of bass. The first movement builds on a swelling foundation of double basses -- a whole bunch of them, going by the photo in the liner notes. The YBs didn't exactly slam out those bass notes -- in keeping with Górecki's intentions, those two 8" woofers throbbled out the low end, exhibiting just the right blend of control and ominous growl. Music needs to bloom. The Estelons let that happen.

But that it was the music that drove the Estelons, rather than the speakers dictating how that music should sound, was illustrated by another lovely thing: I sold my copy of the Tragically Hip's *Day for Night*, the original single-LP edition, for serious coin a couple years back, and paid a fraction of my takings for a new, far superior-sounding vinyl edition reissued on two 180gm LPs and half-speed-mastered from a tape mixed at Abbey effing Road Studios. This is, to my understanding, the first Canadian album that's received such treatment. It's one of the few shrewd transactions of my financially miserable life.



*Day for Night* is a sonic extravaganza, especially in the bass. It's full, juicy, and crisply defined down in the basement, and the thin, elegant, refined YBs just slammed it out. Expanding the album from one to two LPs gives the music room to breathe. Just listen to the definition in the bass line in "So Hard Done By" and the crispness of Gord Sinclair's bass, and how it interacts with Johnny Fay's bass drum. The drums begin in the intro, which gave me plenty of opportunity to hear the YBs whack out a snappy, realistic image of pedal slamming into skin. It was a fine balancing act -- the Estelons keeping the initial attack of the stroke, along with the sense of outward motion of the low note propagating along the skin like ripples on a pond. In another moment, partway through the song, Sinclair's bass carries on alone, accompanied by only a cowbell, and there, too, I was smitten by the richness of the YB's low end, with just a touch of warmth to thicken the stew. Near the end of my listening I received Vertere's Mystic moving-coil cartridge, which, at \$2699, retails within spitting distance of European Audio Team's Jo N°8 MC cartridge (\$2495), which I raved about recently. I swapped out my Roksan Shiraz for the Mystic, and the Estelons instantly told me how very different the two cartridges sound.

The YB had more of a silky, unforced top end -- a characteristic I don't often associate with so revealing a speaker. A revealing speaker usually has a forward, precise, elevated treble. But this was high-rent treble. The YB's beryllium tweeter and its supporting infrastructure were obviously of superb quality. But the tiny little waves of this easy-to-listen-to treble contained a shit-ton of information. The brilliant mash-up of "El Paso"/"Out on the Weekend" from Giant Sand's *Cover Magazine* (LP, Thrill Jockey THRILL 104LP) is almost embarrassingly intimate, with little HF content in the "El Paso" portion, but there is reverberation from the wires on the underside of John Covertino's snare drum. I hadn't really noticed this detail before, but the combination of the brand-new Mystic's crispness and the YB's dexterous high-frequency sinuousness brought it to the fore. That said, when the drums and guitars come crunching in for "Out on the Weekend," the YB's highs gently receded just enough to let me listen at the elevated volume level without ear strain. At times I wondered whether the absolute top of the YB's HF extension lacked some energy in the sparkle region, but as my listening continued I stopped wondering. I think this was due to an inordinately long break-in period, though choices of cable and gear do seem somewhat more important with the YBs than with many other speakers of my experience. Remember what I said about these speakers being chameleons? Another way to look at them: Should you buy a pair, you'll be able to tailor their sound precisely to your taste in sound.



I heard zero grit or any other distortion anywhere in the crossover region. The upper midrange right through the lower treble was astoundingly clean, which put the YB right in to my sweet spot. I could listen loud -- not only to clean, sparse audiophile music, but also to stuff with a bit of thrash in its guts.

The next track on *Cover Magazine*, "Johnny Hit and Run Pauline," is just that -- an abrasive attack recorded with a rawness not usually heard on an album as well recorded as this. Here I could easily tell that it's a nasty piece of work, but I could still enjoy it. The clarity of the YB's tweeter and its well-managed handoff to the midrange layered PJ Harvey's shrieking vocal clearly beside Howe Gelb's guttural growl, and -- this is key -- the disparate instruments in this track remained clearly focused, unaffected by the generalized mayhem exuded by this unhappy song.



## **But it's dry heat**

I began this review by musing about the Estelon YBs' soundstaging -- about how they projected an image. Now I'm drawn back to tell you more about how this speaker combined its varied talents -- that deep, tight, slightly rich bass; that expressive midrange; that unfatiguing, well-controlled treble -- into an extremely satisfying musical whole.

It ended up almost as hard to get a bead on the YBs' overall sound as it was to lock in on their silhouettes -- two dark, ghostly columns sitting there, somewhat aloof, always elegant. And always musical chameleons, reproducing each recording as it required: deep, rich, and slammin' when it was time to rock; cool, calm, and precise when there were details to unearth.

Can one speaker do it all? For the most part, yes. The Estelon YB has many talents, and it's rare for a speaker to pass through my room and provide me with so many facets to explore. Highly recommended.

Jason Thorpe  
*Soundstage! Ultra*