

# audition

equipment review

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## Subsonic XM3 Mk.II Floorstanding Loudspeakers

**J**ust last week I had one of those 'I can't believe what my ears are hearing' moments, which followers of the home audio hobby are prone to have from time to time. I got to listen to a pair of Kharma Grand Exquisite loudspeakers which retail for a Sydney home-unit buying \$380,000. How did they sound? Like nothing I've ever heard before. The cabinets are massive; extending almost from floor to ceiling, and yet when I listened to them, they magically melted out of the room as though they were a simple pair of bookshelf speakers. What was left in their place

was a sound so glorious; it was as though I'd shoved von Karajan off his rostrum to conduct the Berlin Philharmonic myself in *Ode To Joy*. That's pretty good; but it must be said, the sort of result I think I'd expect of speakers sporting diamond tweeters with solid gold wiring. At that kind of money, you really are approaching 'cost no object' engineering and can pretty much do whatever you want in a quest to build a pair of speakers.

But what of the other end of the scale? What can be done when building a pair of floorstanding speakers for less than say \$1,000? The truth is that in terms of competition, the market is a lot hotter at this end than up in the outer stratosphere of the Grand Exquisites. Buyers have far wider choice and can afford to be far pickier. Cost constraints aside, speakers have to perform or get lost in a veritable forest of jarrah-clad MDF competition. For me it's the litmus test for a loudspeaker maker; 'sure, that's what you can do for \$10,000, but what can you do for \$999?' Obviously, at that price there is only so much anyone is going to be able to do, so the name of the game is to get the fundamentals right. Concentrate on the cabinet, drivers and crossover and squeeze out as much sound as you can for the money.

When first released, the XM3 loudspeaker from Australian manufacturer Subsonic typified the sub-\$1,000 floorstanding speaker. No things of beauty in their vinyl-clad enclosures,

There's a lot more than just a new look to these improved Subsonic X Series

By Michael O'Connor

### Vital Statistics

**Dimensions:**

865 x 190 x 295mm

**Weight:**

18kg

**Price:**

\$999

**Distributor:**

Subsonic Audio

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they nonetheless had an open and grain-free sound with decent enough bass that justified a paltry ask of \$899. They consequently went onto sell strongly and feature in living rooms and home theatres all over the country. Since their first release however, the market has moved on and consequently this September we see the launch of the new XM3 MkII.

So what's different about these XM3s? Lift them out of the box and the first change is obvious to see; the vinyl's been replaced by timber veneer. This was an obvious change to make, as it's fast becoming the norm even at this end of the market. You have a choice of Jarrah, Oak or black or, for an extra \$200, Subsonic will stain the timber any colour you wish to order. The cabinet has a quality finish with nice touches like bevelled edges either side of the drivers. In the rear are chunky gold plated biwireable posts and beneath that a large reflex port. The speakers come with removable grills and carpet spikes.

So cosmetically, we now get an improved XMS, but what about the internals? Where as previously the XMS made use of well-regarded European drivers, these have now been replaced in favour of a design of Subsonic's own. I must admit that this change did fill me

with some trepidation - why do it if not to simply save money - until I learnt than non other than Dr Rod Crawford himself had acted as consultant to the new design. Dr Rod's treatment of the drivers in his own Legend Acoustics loudspeakers have always traded on their famed 'fast and open' sound, and this was the first time so far as I was aware, he had collaborated

on a speaker not his own since his time at Linn. These all-new woofers then were certainly something I was to keen to get a taste of. At about 3.5kHz up the listening range the tweeter takes over which itself has been reworked; now taking in slight horn loading. It is powered by a neodymium magnet and kept cool during operation courtesy of internal ferrofluid and a rear heat sink. Each speaker has one tweeter that sits atop two woofers. All of the drivers are mounted flush against the baffle and securely counter sunk in place.

The cabinet is solidly constructed and meets the knuckle test with a reassuring dull 'thunk'. Bracing is used throughout with all internal walls covered in acoustic damping. The name of the game here of course is to reduce as much as possible the resonance of the box so all that is left is the sound of the drivers. Bracing and damping all help to reduce standing waves and



project the sound out into the listening room. The crossover also comes in for some treatment with use of audiophile parts such as air cored inductors and polypropylene capacitors. Magnetic field stray between the crossover parts are kept in check by mounting the components perpendicular to each other. As it is out of sight, the crossover is an obvious place to cut corners when designing a budget speaker, but a shoddy one is always going to be audible. A properly designed crossover is a must at any budget.

So cabinet, drivers and crossover have all come in for revision. Time then to feed the new XMS a signal and see what they can do. In setting the speakers up, I was sure to give the rear firing ports some room to breathe by placing the speakers about 250mm off the rear wall. I toed them in slightly towards the listening position and sat in between them, about 300cm back.

## Technotalk

### Product Type:

Floorstanding loudspeaker

### Driver Complement:

2 x 130mm shielded bass driver

1 x 25mm silk dome tweeter

### Cabinet Configuration:

3-way, bass reflex

### Cabinet Construction:

18mm MDF, timber veneer

### Frequency Response:

45-22kHz ( $\pm 3$ dB)

### Connections:

4mm biwireable binding posts

### Power Handling:

125 watts

### Nominal Impedance:

6 ohms

### Crossover:

12dB @ 3.5kHz

### Finishes:

Black, Jarrah, Oak (others to special order)

Technotalk specifications and recommended retail prices are supplied by the manufacturer

**“The woofers sounded clear and assured with good bass definition. It had to have been something of a risk to go with their own design instead of using imported drivers, but I think Subsonic has managed to pull it off. *Busy Child* by the Crystal Method was pulsing and driving and made me want to get out of my chair and dance - as it rightly should.”**

Subsonic told me that the pair I had for review had already been used for demonstration in dealers, so I assumed that they had already been run-in to some extent. Nonetheless, initially I thought the sound somewhat constrained and struggling to get out of the box. Not overly so, but on *Joker And The Thief* by Wolfmother, I felt that the drum kit and base were lost somewhat compared to the rest of the band. It sounded distinctly as though further running-in was required, so I had the speakers playing fairly constantly for the next week. After that, I sat down and listened for any change in the sound.

Now the speakers had opened up further and were in much better voice. Lucianna Serra in the role of Rosina in *The Barber Of Seville* was clear and bright. Her voice stood solidly between the speakers and projected well into the room. I found the tweeters to have a certain crispness to them that suited operatic music well. Beethoven's *Symphony No.3* spread a full soundstage across the room with good definition between the strings, wind and percussion. These aren't large speakers in the Kharma Grand Exquisite sense of the word, so full symphonic music is going to be compressed to a certain extent, but the virtues of the Subsonics shone through all the same. The woofers sounded clear and assured with good bass definition. It had to have been something of a risk to go with their own design instead of using imported drivers, but I think Subsonic has managed to pull it off. *Busy Child* by the Crystal Method was pulsing and driving and made me want to get out of my chair and dance - as it rightly should. The drivers, I must say, didn't overly remind me of a pair of Legend speakers, not withstanding Dr Rod Crawford's involvement, but they were suitably articulate and grain-free. All up, a success. Credit should be given then for trying for something new and pulling it off.

Next, I repositioned the speakers on either side of my Sony Bravia TV and gave them a run as the front speakers in a surround set-up. On my new edition of *300* the XMS made an instant impact. Replacing my usual monitor speakers, the soundstage was now fuller and more engaging if down somewhat on outright clarity. The opening battle scene where the Spartans first engage the invaders was full of drama and outright slam. More delicate touches

such as the sound of voices off screen and the clash of swords were handled well. The tweeters in particular proved their worth here. Speaking of battle scenes, there were no backward steps from the Subsonics when playing *Rocky Balboa*. The speakers showed good integration between the drivers with a smooth roll off between the woofers and tweeters.

So there it is really; a pair of loudspeakers with which the manufacturer, in this case Subsonic Audio has obviously taken care in the design of the cabinet, drivers and crossover. Whether building super high-end or affordable equipment, there is no excuse for a manufacturer not taking care of the basics. You can buy these Subsonics knowing you are getting a great deal for your (not so many) dollars. **AVL**

**Ancillary Equipment:** Naim n-Vi, McIntosh MC50 monobloc power amplifiers, Cambridge Audio Studio Reference interconnects, Nordost Flatline Gold loudspeaker cable, Gutwire Basic Clef AC cable

## O p i n i o n

The 'Opinion' expressed here is that of the reviewer, summarised in the form of a 5-star rating system, and should be considered as an integral part of the full contents of this Audition Equipment Review. As such, each category should be judged on its own merits and not necessarily used as a comparison with other equipment reviews in this, or other editions of Audio & Video Lifestyle magazine.

- ★ Shocker
- ★★ Average
- ★★★ Good
- ★★★★ Excellent
- ★★★★★ Perfection

**“Cost constraints aside, speakers have to perform or get lost in a veritable forest of jarrah-clad MDF competition. For me it's the litmus test for a loudspeaker maker. . .”**

### Performance

★★★★★

### Build Quality

★★★★★

### Compatibility

★★★★★

### Value For Money

★★★★★