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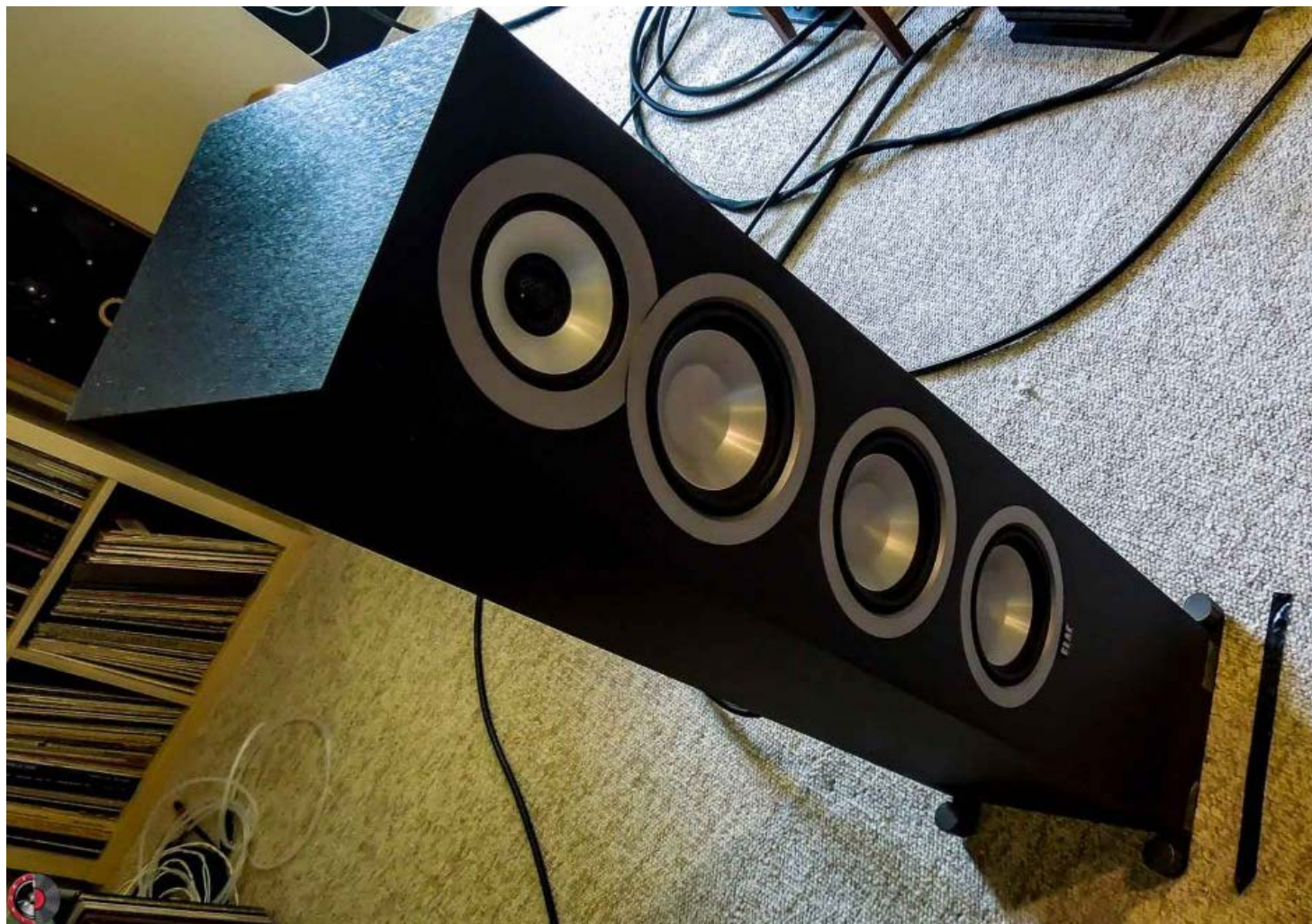
Announcements

February 13, 2017 in Announcements // CH Precision and Dynaudio in house for review

Home » Audio Gear Reviews » Loudspeakers » Review: ELAC Uni-Fi UF5 floor standing speakers

Review: ELAC Uni-Fi UF5 floor standing speakers

Posted on February 19, 2017 by Part-Time Audiophile in Loudspeakers



by John Richardson

ELAC is an audio technology company that has been around quite a long time, having recently celebrated their 90th birthday. The company began in Germany back in the 1920s developing early sonar technology and introduced its first home audio product, a turntable, back in 1948. By 1984, they had gotten into the loudspeaker game, and the rest, as they say, is history.

Follow

Today, ELAC manufactures numerous types of audio equipment ranging from several lines of speakers, a turntable, amplifiers, and a music server. Especially noteworthy in the audiophile and home theater press has been **their latest series of speaker designs**. On offer are several ranges, including the mid-level Uni-Fi line, whose floor standing model, the UF5, is in the spotlight here. The line also has on offer bookshelf models, as well as a center unit such that a full-blown home theater system can be constructed if desired.

On the surface, these ELAC speakers look like many well-executed mass-produced home theater transducer setup would be expected to look ... Nothing much special here. Well, aside from ELAC's not-so-secret weapon, Andrew Jones. Yes, *that* Andrew Jones, the man who has gained accolades of late for being one of the more innovative high-end speaker designers at work today. Mr. Jones has come up through the design ranks working for such companies as KEF, and later Pioneer, as well as that company's highest end division, TAD. In his capacity as a design engineer for these firms, he has designed speakers both large and small, and running the gamut from **absolute budget models** to the **highest of the high-end**. What this designer is best known for, according to audiophile myth and legend, is his ability to design an insane level of technology and musicality into a speaker at a reasonably sane price point. And by sane, I mean a product that pretty much any music lover could afford.

A superb case in point is the set of floor standing speakers I have here, designed by Mr. Jones for his newest employer, ELAC. These are the Uni-Fi UF5s, which I mentioned just a bit earlier. Observing them from my listening chair at a distance of roughly eight feet, I see a pair of attractive, modern tower speakers. Yeah, they're nice, reasonably unobtrusive, and would do justice to pretty much any hipster's pad, but there's nothing about their overall aesthetic that jumps out at me. Well, OK, those aluminum drivers do look pretty cool now that I think of it. There's none of that cool vintage vibe that my ancient Spondor BC1s give off, nor is there that crazy level of fit, finish, and polish that my more modern ATC SCM 19 monitors sport. But what I haven't told you yet is the price. You can **score a pair** of these ELACs for a hair under \$1,000 US, and let me tell you, this is a hell of a deal. Look past the somewhat pedestrian appearance of these guys (the drivers do look cool, though), you will be in for a sonic feast of the highest order. We're talking horn-o'-plenty here, so listen up.



Specs and Other Niceties

Ok, now that I'm all hot and bothered, let me step back a bit and highlight some of the technical bits of these remarkable speakers.

What we have from the outside is, as I mentioned, a pair of fairly conventional-looking narrow-baffle towers. Each speaker stands 39 inches in height (not including its spiked outriggers) and measures just under eight inches in width. The overall footprint is quite reasonable, with a depth of 10.75 inches, so these shouldn't be too hard to place in a room of normal dimensions. The cabinets themselves are made of black vinyl-clad thick MDF fiberboard with ample internal bracing, and are triply ported in the rear. Each tower sits on a pair of outriggers which are screwed tightly to the base of the speaker; these have spikes inserted into them so that the speaker can be effectively coupled to the floor, even through thick carpet. Attractive threaded caps come down from above to nicely hide the tops of the spikes.

Going from top to bottom, we have an integrated tweeter/midrange unit consisting of a one-inch soft dome tweeter housed concentrically within a four-inch aluminum midrange driver. As I'll discuss later, I think some of the best sonic attributes of the UF5s come from this concentric-driver system. Down below is a linear array of three 5.25 inch aluminum woofers. Choice of aluminum was said to be made based on that material's low weight and stiffness, which together lead to vanishingly low levels of distortion over the working frequency ranges of the drivers. As frequently happens for me, I assume that metallic drivers will sound metallic, but rest assured, they don't!

Besides the three ports on the rear panel of each speaker, there are also very high quality metal five-way binding posts. The fit, finish and construction of these was quite surprising at such a low price point, and they handled my locking banana terminations with ease.

Finally, I'd be remiss if I didn't mention a few other vital statistics. The UF5s provide an effective frequency range of 42-25,000 Hz with a nominal impedance of 4 ohms and a measured sensitivity of 85 dB at 2.83 V/m. The maximum recommended power rating is 140 watts per channel, but using clean power from a high quality audiophile amplifier, I don't put any real emphasis on such ratings. The low nominal impedance coupled with a relatively low sensitivity will be more of a concern for most users.



First Impressions

I should re-iterate here that all of the speakers I have been using regularly over the past few years are stand-mounted units of relatively small cabinet volume. We all know what sorts of things such speakers do well and what they don't do so well. So when I initially hooked up these ELACs, the first thing that really struck me was how well they pressurized my large listening environment. Yeah, my room is big, so I normally don't worry too much about filling it with sound, preferring to listen in the near field without being unduly concerned about how the sound from my speakers will fill the void. That approach is fine and dandy; that is, until you hear what you've been missing! I'm talking about getting the speakers to really couple to the listening environment. To this end, I've had some pretty large speakers in here, including other floor-standing models from Zu Audio and Tekton, but I don't recall either of these speakers grabbing hold of the room quite like these ELACs somehow manage to do.

I hear this room-filling loveliness most readily in the lower end of the audio spectrum. It's not necessarily bass extension I'm talking about here, as the UF5s really don't go crazy low. It's really more of a quality issue that's somewhat subjective in that the sound is truly big without becoming excessively boomy or undefined. Yes, my ATC speakers have wonderfully taut and controlled bass, but they don't own the room like these UF5s somehow manage to do. I have to think it's some combination of the cabinet size, the porting, and the efficiency of the woofer array that lead to this magic conjured up by the relatively inexpensive ELAC transducers.

Incidentally, my initial reflections were obtained using a **Benchmark** AHB2 amplifier to drive the speakers; this amp puts out 100 watts per channel into eight ohms, and doubles down from there as impedance decreases. I found this Benchmark/ELAC combination to be quite rewarding, so much of my evaluation was made using this setup. I did try other amplifiers, and my findings are reported later.

As for the rest of the frequency spectrum, all sounded quite satisfactory right out of the box, with minor improvements noted as break-in of drivers and crossover components continued over several weeks of listening.

Another attribute that I noticed right out of the box was how nicely coherent the UF5s sounded off-axis. I often work at my computer off to the side of the room while the music plays, and I was pleasantly surprised by how natural the speakers sounded from a position probably at least 25 degrees from the center axis. I'm fairly certain that the concentric midrange/tweeter assembly gets the lion's share of the credit for such a nice fringe benefit to my listening lifestyle.



More specific, longer term observations

Alright, then, how did the ELAC UF5s hold out over the long haul?

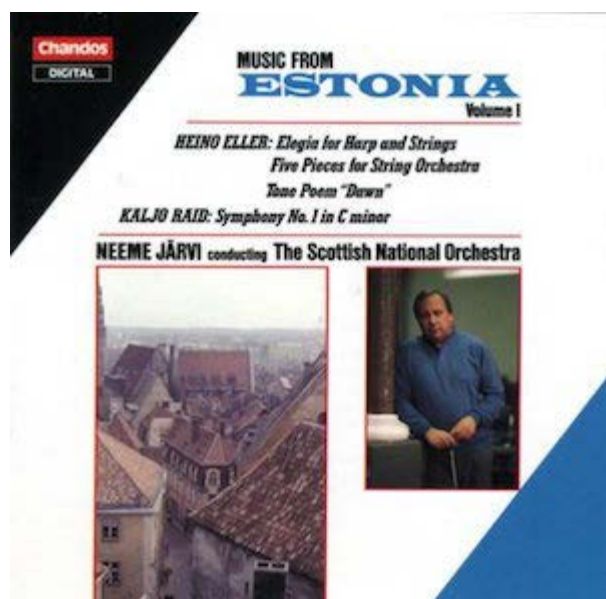
Sometimes, it's not a good idea for a reviewer to know up front what a particular component costs. If it's relatively inexpensive, we often tend to harbor preconceived notions, such as "speaker x won't hold up over the long-term to my exacting scrutiny, so let's just get this review over with so I can get back to the ear-candy of my reference speakers." It's like someone giving you access to their gear for an extended free trial but being disappointed before even listening to it... What privileged snowflakes we reviewers can be!

I'll be blunt. I'm amazed at how happy these ELAC speakers make me feel, even after weeks of listening to them exclusively. I won't say I'm gobsmacked, or that I have to pick up my jaw from the floor; I'm just *very* pleasantly surprised. These things are just plain *good*!

Via the Benchmark amplifier, the speakers are authoritative and ballsy, but without ever being too "in your face." They remind me of Teddy Roosevelt, who supposedly "spoke softly but carried a big stick." The ability to impress is there big-time, but the ELACs let you know it in a pleasantly self-effacing sort of way. This is one of those rare designs that will impress in a dealer showroom, at an audio show, and again when you get them home. Again and again. Too much showboating at the front end (typically when a buyer has to make a snap decision) generally leads to disappointment in the rear end, but I can't see that happening too often in the case of an ELAC customer.

Tonal balance is just so spot-on. There's wonderful integration from the treble right down to the deepest bass. The image depth and width are stunning for the price point, and image specificity and precision rival the best that my much more expensive monitor speakers offer up. Well, then again, that Benchmark AHB2 amp seems to bring out the best possible spatial characteristics of any speakers I've matched it to. And let's not forget about that lovely bass presence I spoke of earlier.

These speakers have to some degree re-introduced me to many of my favorite orchestral recordings. I've found that when using my stand-mounted monitors, I tend to play the music that sounds best through them, and that's not the large-scale orchestral stuff. The powerful presence and scale of the concert hall just aren't quite all there, and I can easily sense the loss. Small scale jazz, concertos, and string quartets, fine. Female vocals and solo guitar, great. I just need that last little bit of power coming from the boxes when I do orchestral, and I've found the UF5s satisfy my needs quite nicely indeed. It's not just a "volume" thing; it's really about "presence," or the ability to make my room sound more like a real concert hall.

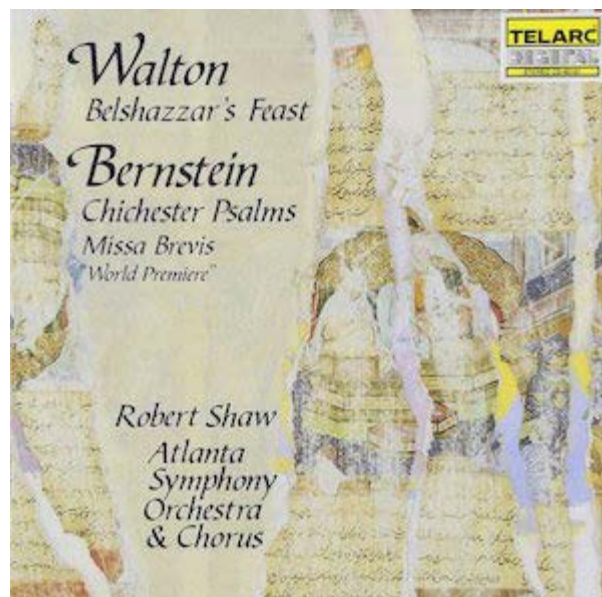


A great example of what I'm talking about can be summed up when listening to an older Chandos recording of the orchestral works of two relatively unknown 20th century Estonian composers: Heino Eller and Kaljo Raid (LP, Chandos, digitally archived). I can't for the life of me remember how, why, or when I obtained this record, or how much I paid for it (knowing me, probably not much...), but I have always found it quite enjoyable due to the quality of the recording and the uniqueness of the music. The recorded performance is vintage early Chandos, basking in warmth, dynamic power, and lots of reverberant hall information. In short, just the kind of stuff these ELACs yearn to reproduce for my own enjoyment. Raid's Symphony #1 is a perfect example in that it is martial, yet somber; somewhat chilly and distant, but still highly accessible in sort of a post romantic way. Think, for example, of the

symphonic works of Shostakovich and Prokofiev, or Raid's better known Estonian contemporary, Eduard Tubin. At any rate, the symphony is quite lovely, especially for a composer who is next to unknown and who spent much of his professional life as a Baptist minister! And that dynamic, resonant sound that so befits the work is wonderfully captured by the Couzens boys in a relatively early (1986) digital recording.

From the opening strains from the resonant low strings, the ELAC UF5s capture the power of the work, as well as the finer nuances. The speakers are also exceptionally revealing of the shortcomings of the recording: to some degree, so much effort was made to capture the reverberant nature of the “live” recording venue that some of the inner detail of the instrumental sections becomes lost in the noise. Even so, the strings just glow while percussion is distinctly reproduced: the softly struck bass drum has loads of texture, adding its own reverb to the mix. The UF5s are also exceptionally even-handed in their reproduction of the entire frequency range: treble is extended yet natural, midrange is accurate with a slight sense of bloom (not a bad thing), and the bass, as I’ve said before, is taut and powerful in a room-filling sort of way. The recorded dynamic swings that make or break this type of performance are there as well, though probably not as well reproduced as by much larger, cost-no-object speakers. I found the tympani thwacks at the end of the first movement to be quite spine tingling, I must say. The more playful second movement emphasizes the strings and woodwinds more-so than the first, leading me to fully appreciate the deftness and accuracy with which the all-important midrange was reproduced. Such instrumental timbres shone with the natural glow and slight hint of warmth I would have expected from this recording, leading to a natural, colorful, and fully realistic rendering that never grew old.

While on the subject of large orchestral recordings, I decided to cue up another favorite, Sir William Walton’s choral extravaganza *Belshazzar’s Feast*. I have several recordings of this venerable work, but my favorite, thanks to both the performance and the recording quality, is an early stereo EMI version with Walton himself conducting from the box set “Walton conducts Walton” (LP, EMI, digitally archived). I use this recording for evaluation of gear not only for its natural recorded tone, but more for its uncanny sense of recorded image and soundstage depth. I don’t know how the effect was achieved, but when reproduced via a really good system, the orchestra is arrayed well behind the plane of the speakers, while the massed voices seem to emanate from even further back, sometimes seemingly lurking behind the walls. It’s cool, and a sometimes even eerie sleight of ear, especially late at night with the lights out.



With this cut, the ELACs and Benchmark amp made a formidable pair. While the soundstage depth isn’t the deepest I’ve experienced, layering was clearly evident, with individual instruments occupying specific locations. I was also struck by the tonal realism of the instrumental and vocal parts, as well as the general sense of room-filling reality of the recording. It wasn’t too great a stretch to close my eyes and transport myself to the concert hall, given the volume of air these speakers seem capable of moving.

So much for the big orchestral guns ... How well do the UF5s reproduce smaller scale, more intimate compositions, such as small jazz ensembles or string quartets? I next decided to check out a favorite album by one of the many jazz greats we lost during 2016, vibraphonist Bobby Hutcherson. My album of choice was *Solo / Quartet*, (LP, Contemporary, digitally archived), and interesting jazz set consisting of three tunes in which Hutcherson overdubbed



himself playing several percussion instruments over top of his signature vibraphone, as well as several more cuts in which he is accompanied by his quartet. This is a great recording and a heck of a lot of fun to hear; it never fails to lift my spirits after a tough day, as it's filled with tune after tune of happy music.

Thanks to the ELAC speakers, all of the cuts on the album were imbued with energy and excitement. I could really feel the electricity of the performances and get something of a taste of how much fun Hutcherson and his sidemen were having during this session. The vibes just glowed, throwing off complex tonal colors that dazzled my ears and mind. I could listen like this all day and probably not tire of the wondrous things to be heard and enjoyed. On the tune "Alhambra," in which the full quartet is going full tilt, I could truly sense the tightness of the group, with everyone totally in sync and firing on all cylinders. It's that sense of immediacy and scale that I keep coming back to that lets me peek into the recording venue, almost to the extent that I feel guilty pulling back the curtain and viewing an almost sacred event. Man, these speakers really do rock.

Experimenting with other amps

As wonderful as the ELACs sounded with the Benchmark AHB2 amp, I just couldn't help experimenting with some of the other great amps I have lying around. While the speakers responded beautifully to the Benchmark's 100 watts per channel, I thought it would be interesting to try amps of lesser and greater output. On the smaller side, I had the lovely First Watt F7 ready to go, putting out 20 watts per channel into both 8 and 4 ohm loads. This amp has never failed me, though the speakers I use it with are always of the higher impedance variety. I figured the UF5s would provide something of a challenge to the First Watt amp due to their combined low sensitivity and low nominal impedance. I was right. All of the warmth and glow in the treble and mids were there in spades, but the bass was lacking. The little F7 just couldn't muster the juice to get that nice extension and fleshed-out bass quality that the Benchmark so easily provided. Lesson learned: the ELAC speakers need substantial power to sound their best.

Want power? No problem; it was time to pull out the **Merrill Audio Thor monoblocks**, which easily put out 200 watts per channel into 8 ohm loads, with plenty more watts on tap for lower impedances. I was more than curious to find out if doubling the power of the Benchmark would make any difference in the overall performance of the ELACs.

All I can say is that more power certainly doesn't hurt. The Class D Merrill Thors gave a gutsy, but slightly less intense experience than the Benchmark amp. These results are totally in keeping with my experiences with the Merrill amps using much more expensive speakers. More specifically, the Thors provided a sweet, dimensional, and ever so slightly rounded off presentation that lulled rather than grabbed at my attention. I'd have to say I thought I heard a bit more extension, presence, and texture in the bass as well, which really made itself known when playing back

Walton's Belshazzar's Feast. However, revisiting Bobby Hutcherson's Solo Quartet, I think I preferred the attack and slightly greater tonal resolution of the Benchmark amp driving the ELACs, especially when it came to placing in sharper focus the complex harmonic character of the vibraphone and marimba.

If I have a take-home message to convey on behalf of the UF5 speakers, it would be that I remain exceptionally impressed by their capability to flesh out the intricate but subtle differences that I know exist between the two expensive amplifier setups I used. One might think it silly to couple \$1000 speakers with amplifiers ranging in price from \$3000 to \$4500, but I'd now argue otherwise. It would be interesting to try these speakers out with a high quality integrated amp in the same price range (the Rogue Audio Sphinx immediately comes to mind...), but I had no such amps on hand during the review process. However, if you happen to have an expensive amp with sufficient power on hand, but are looking to economize somewhat on your speakers, I'd urge you to give these "bully" floorstanders a chance.



Some Final Thoughts

I just finished reading John Atkinson's "[As We See It](#)" column in the February 2017 *Stereophile* magazine, in which he notes (and to some degree bemoans) the exponentially increasing prices of the very best speakers available to today's consumers. I've been in this game long enough to remember when the thought of about any pair of speakers topping \$10,000 seemed utterly ludicrous. Now that manufacturers offer up sophisticated speaker systems in excess of \$250,000, one starts to really appreciate the value provided by the ELAC UF5s. Fortunately for folks like me who live



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within the confines of a real-world budget, audio technology has both advanced and trickled down to the point that the level of quality in sound reproduction available from these ELACs would have been unthinkable just 20 years ago, particularly at \$1000 price point.

Of course, being too inexpensive has its downsides as well, as I mentioned earlier in this review. If a component isn't expensive enough, or if it's wrapped in vinyl instead of a rare (but sustainable, of course) African wood veneer, it tends not to be taken seriously by the audiophile community. I myself am vulnerable to such thinking, as I am sure many of you are. Make no mistake though: the ELAC UF5 should be taken seriously as a contender for anyone looking to spend upwards of \$5000 on a pair of dedicated, high-end tower speakers. I'd even wager to say that if ELAC chose to clothe the speakers in a fancy automotive paint job or an exotic hardwood veneer, they could easily ask \$3000 to \$5000 for a pair and have no trouble at all getting them to sell.

In the end, I fully believe that Andrew Jones/ELAC made the right choice by putting the money where it matters: into the sound.

Editor's Note: When a product strikes a peculiarly dramatic synergy between "value" and "performance", we call that a Julia. You can read all about that, [here](#), but in the meantime, do check out this amazing speaker.



About the Author

John Richardson has been interested in music and audio since his early teen years, or stated another way, as long as he can remember. He has been involved in the audio community in one way or another for around 20 years and for the last five has been a regular contributor to the on-line magazine *Stereomojo*. There, he has been the resident computer audio guy and “value conscious audiophile” (aka “cheap bastard”).

John is a professor of analytical chemistry and a forensic chemistry consultant in his spare time, when he isn’t listening to music or evaluating gear. He tries to fit in plenty of time to hang out with his two teenage kids, his lovely wife, and the family cat, though only the cat also seems to harbor audiophile tendencies. John also enjoys running, cycling, golfing, hiking, or just about any other activity that sucks up time and money.



John is also a contributor to *Stereo Mojo*.

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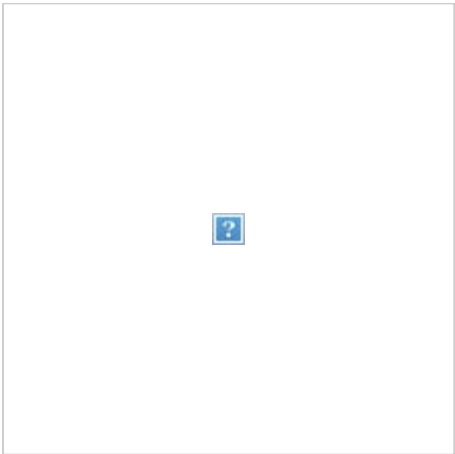
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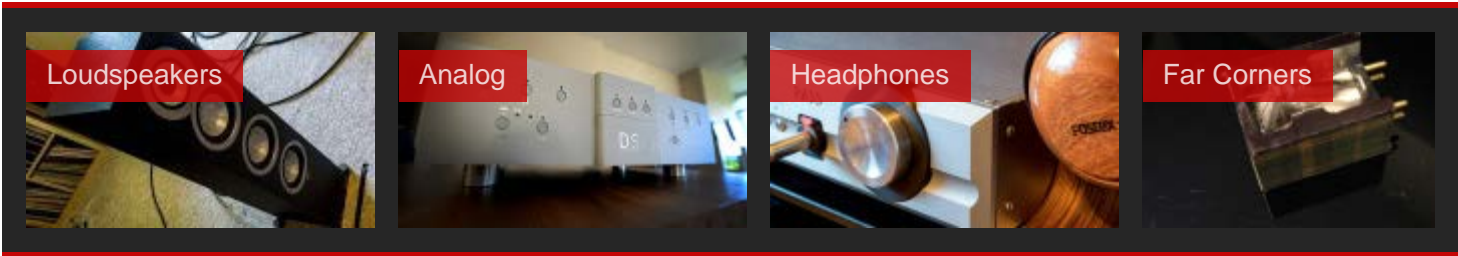
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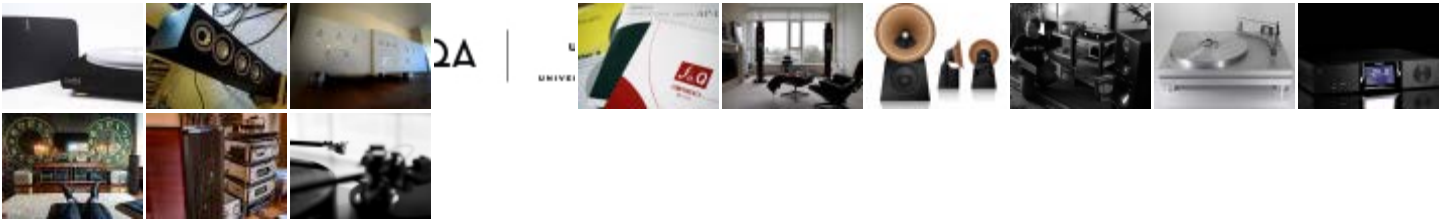
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Great, in-depth review...your writing style and details provided are exceptional. Congrats!.

I did audition the F5 and while I really, really like the midrange, I did notice that bass response was lackluster when rock music was played. How well do these speaker get along with rock music?

Best regards from Argentina!

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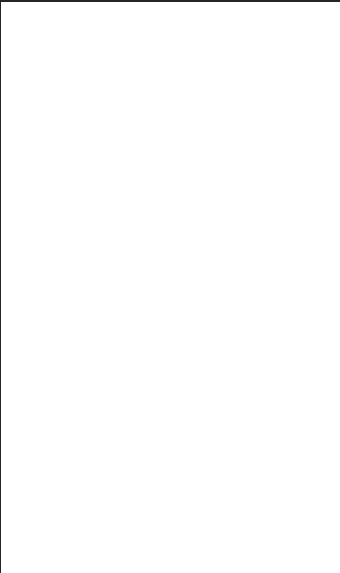
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