

Review: Audioengine N22 Amp, P4 speakers, and S8 Subwoofer – Big sound, small footprint, No Dock required : Macenstein

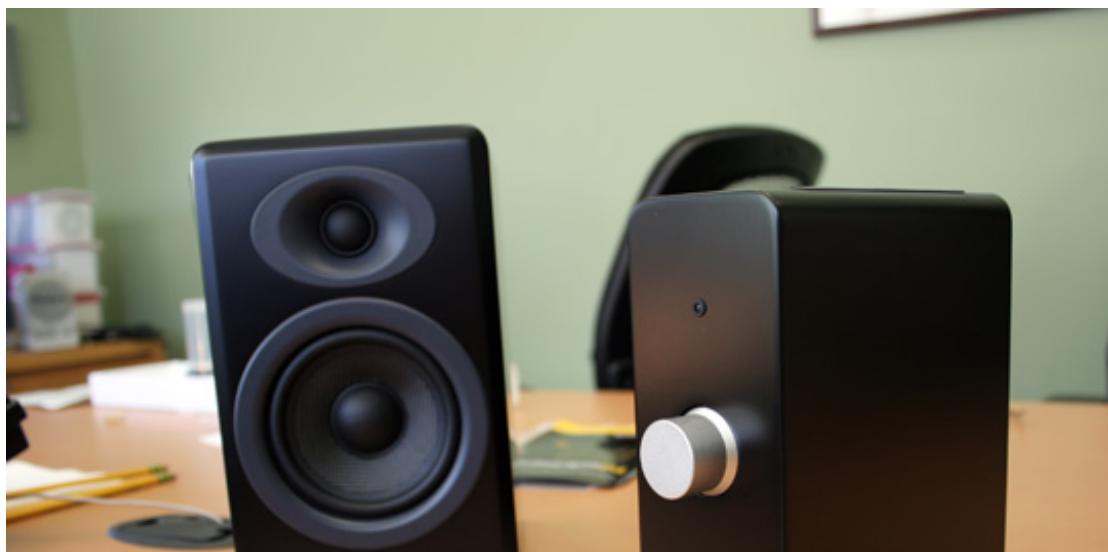
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Easily one of the more annoying aspects of being a loyal Apple customer is dealing with the Dock connector. Oh sure, it works great when you buy your brand new iPod touch or iPhone, and then buy your similarly brand new iPod speaker system with dock connector. But just wait a year. Apple has a tendency to make incrementally small, almost unnoticeable changes to the way their gear interacts with 3rd party peripherals, and suddenly mixing your new iPhone 5 with your favorite iPhone 4 speakers or GPS cradle results in the “This device is not compatible with iPhone” message popping up. I’ve learned a few years back that as nice as some of these high-end iPod speakers are getting, even \$600 speakers such as the Zeppelin will ultimately leave you stranded as Apple continues to update its devices. So, what’s the solution? Well, do what I do, and if you’re going to drop REAL money on iPhone-compatible audio, go Dockless. And, if you’re going Dockless, (and you have the cash) you could do MUCH worse than the combo **[Audioengine’s Audioengine N22 Amp, P4 passive speakers, and S8 subwoofer.](#)**

I’m reviewing the N22 Amp, P4 speakers, and S8 Sub as a package, but all three components could work independently of each other and fit into a wide range of existing set ups, as the N22 can power pretty much ANY set of passive speakers (ie, not powered speakers) or unamplified headphones, for that matter, the P4 should work well with any receiver or power amp with 4, 6 or 8 ohm speaker output impedance, and the S8 (my favorite of the 3) is an all purpose subwoofer for music, movies and games.



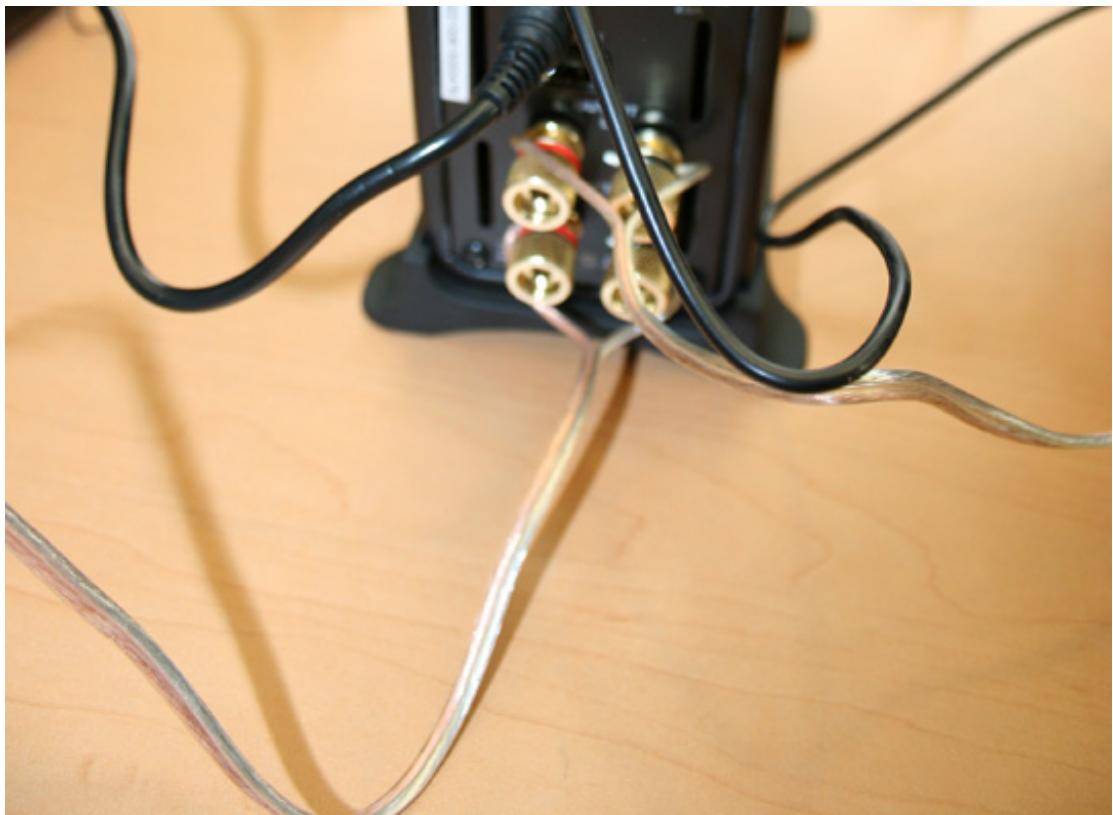


The N22 (\$199)

First, let's check out the N22 Amplifier, as that has the most moving parts – meaning one. The N22 is a compact integrated stereo power amplifier and high-quality headphone amp designed to serve up audio in a mid-sized room. Think “bookshelf speaker” type situations, like large bedrooms, dorm rooms, or offices. Physically it doesn't take up much more space than an external desktop USB drive, and in fact it sort of looks like a little fatter version of the Western Digital MyBook. The minimally-designed front of the unit is dominated by a single multi-purpose Power/Volume knob which has a very nice feel in the hand as it turns. Above the knob is a subtle blue power light which is (thankfully) not some sort of blinding LED like some manufacturers inexplicably seem to love putting into everything, and below the knob is the headphone port for using with non-amplified headphones of your choosing.

The rear of the N22 consists of 2 inputs (mini stereo and RCA), a variable Preamp/Line out (for connecting to a sub woofer, like the S8), a USB Port (for powering USB devices only, not for audio input, unfortunately) and 2 sets of gold-plated speaker connectors. The USB port is something Audioengine often adds to their speakers, as they sell a set of USB wireless adapters called the W1 and W2 that you can use to stream music from your PC or iDevice to the N22 (although the adapter comes with a stereo mini port, the audio is still not delivered via USB). With the advent of Airplay, these adapters seem a bit like a throw back, and are bit pricey, but we tested them a few years back and found they worked well. I realize that after starting this article railing against Apple's proprietary dock connector, it's a bit odd I would call for AirPlay integration, however, AirPlay seems like more of a standard, less prone to change. I would also have taken an external power outlet for an AirPort Express (as the the S8 sub and Audioengine's popular A5 speakers have) but you can use the USB port to power your iPod/iPhone/iPad, so it's inclusion is still welcome.





Wires: The price of going dockless

The two sets of inputs are interesting in that they are not mutually exclusive, meaning if you had two iPods hooked the N22, you would hear both songs at once. This in and of itself is not really useful, but what's cool is if you use the N22 in an office setting, like I do, then you can leave your computer hooked to it as well as your iPod, meaning you can still hear your computer's notification sounds (even from another room) while your music is playing. It also means you don't have to keep reaching back and plugging/unplugging things when you change sources. So if you planned to hook your computer to one input, and your television to the other, you don't need to mess with the connections if you suddenly decided to turn off your music and watch a movie.

For the audiophiles out there, the N22 amp is a solid performer for its size, delivering 22 watts RMS per channel, and it's rated 20Hz-22kHz +/-1dB. As expected, I did not notice any hiss, even at full volume.

The N22 ships with a 6.5ft stereo mini cable and a 3ft RCA cable, as well as a set of thick speaker wire, so you're good to go out of the box.



The P4 in your choice of colors

P4 speakers (\$249)

Audioengine's P4 passive speakers are a great set of bookshelf-caliber speakers which can be used in conjunction with the N22 or most other amplifiers or surround sound systems. Visually, they look nearly identical to all the powered speakers Audioengine sells. Given that they are unamplified,

I found the weight of the P4's to be surprisingly (and pleasingly) heavy at about 6lbs each. For all I know they stuck a couple pounds of lead in the base to make them feel sturdier, but psychologically I like that they had some heft to them. For some reason I hate spending money on light speakers.

The P4s have the same gold-plated bindings as the N22, and the overall build quality and feel is wonderful. The P4's have a mounting screw hole on the bottom and can be mounted to stands/brackets if that's your thing. I will say that as with most speakers, proper placement DOES make a difference in sound quality, so it's nice to have that option.

Sound quality

It's always a treat to listen to your favorite music on a set of speakers as well balanced as the P4s as they tend to bring forward instruments that have a tendency to get buried. It really can breathe new life into songs you've heard a hundred times. In our tests, the N22 and P4 combo produces very clear, very accurate sound across a very broad and eclectic range of music. Even our pipe organ enthusiast was pleased with the sound, which is saying something. At full volume (which is uncomfortably loud in a small to mid-sized room) the sound DID feel just a bit thin, although in general we were impressed with the bass the system was able to deliver. If anything is lacking in the N22/P4 combo (and not much is), it's that with certain songs I felt the sound could use just a bit more "presence", for lack of a better term. However, that might be me asking more than a bookshelf system is meant to deliver on its own, which is where the S8 comes in.



The N22 and all its accessories

S8 Subwoofer (\$349)

Weighing close to 1000 lbs (OK, 30 lbs), yet coming in at under a foot cubed, the S8 is easily the most impressive piece of audio equipment we've had the pleasure to review. The design of the S8 is fairly low key, and looks pretty much like any other subwoofer you've seen, albeit a bit more compact. The unit itself is physically rock solid, and actually feels like a piece of quality furniture. Aside from the front facing port, design-wise there's nothing to catch/distract the eye (desirable in a sub). In the rear, the S8 has two sets of dual line-level inputs (RCA and mini-jack) so you can have two different sources hooked up to minimize having to plug and unplug depending on what you're listening to (similar to the N22). There's also another power outlet for the ability to hook up an AirPort Express if you are so inclined. However, given that the placement of the sub is often not directly near the amp (where you want to feed an audio source 9 times out of 10), connecting an AirPort express would mean running the audio cable back to the N22, a potentially not-aesthetically pleasing thought. Moving an outlet to the N22 would have been a better move, although that would likely have required a larger form factor than Audioengine wanted.

Inside is an 8-inch downward-firing driver, controlled by a series of 3 knobs on the back of the unit which control phase, crossover, and volume. By playing with these knobs you can create subtle, almost imperceptible bass, or the kind of deep, booming, “feel it in your balls” kind of bass I usually associate with the neighbor kid’s Jeep Cherokee approaching from three blocks away. The S8 has a wonderful, tight sound, with great response. As anyone who has ever owned a sub knows, having a dedicated sub makes all the difference in the world, although many people (my father and the neighbor kid in particular) have a tendency to over-use their bass, much the way many people tend to over-crank the contrast and saturation on their HDTVs. For those who enjoy annoying their neighbors and damaging their internal organs, the S8 will definitely meet their needs, but luckily, a nice balance is also easily achieved.



Adding the S8 to the mix

As good as the P4’s sound, and as happy as I was with their low end reproduction, their lack of “real” bass becomes apparent when you add the S8 into the mix. In fact, if the S8 has any drawbacks, it’s that they make speakers you formerly thought sounded great on their own sound like crap when you turn it off. That missing “presence” I mentioned before comes back in spades with the addition of the S8. Of course, subwoofer fans know that music isn’t the only thing that benefits from some extra-low end, and movies (especially ones with explosions like Transformers and Iron Man) were a pleasure to watch with S8 hooked up.



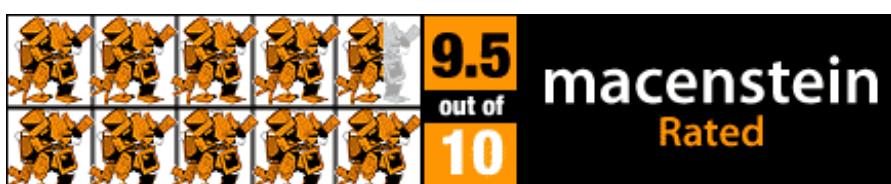


Issues

For once I have no real problem with how an audio system sounds or looks. Obviously listening to music can be subjective, as not all music types will sound equally well balanced with the same settings. If you have eclectic musical tastes you may find you need to make minor “per song” adjustments if you have your music source set to shuffle a mix of acoustic Aimee Mann-esque songs and then some bass-heavy Lady GaGa pops up, but the important thing is with a system like this, no matter WHAT your musical tastes, you’ll be able to hear the music the way it was intended to be heard.

Conclusion

The triple-threat combination of Audioengine’s N22 Amplifier (\$199), their P4 passive speakers (\$249) and their S8Subwoofer (\$349) clocks in around \$800, and may be a bit pricier than many people looking for a way to play music from their iPods are looking to spend, but its a solid combo that will serve you well for years to come, and thankfully, is not tied to the iPod alone. The decision to eschew the dock connector in favor of the more universal mini jack means the system is more versatile than other iPod-centric offerings, and can not only enhance your music listening experience, but also your TV and movie watching experience. The compact design of each element, while very sleek and clean, is small enough to fade into the background of most rooms, allowing the music to do the talking. If you don’t have the cash for the full system, the N22 and P4 combo is still a great buy, and leaves you open to an S8 upgrade down the road. The system comes highly recommended.



Pros: Some of the best sound you can get for under \$1000, nice design, USB port (N22) for charging your iDevice, outlet for an AirPort Express (S8)

Cons: Not cheap (but worth it), N22 could use a power outlet for an AirPort Express, or AirPlay support would have been killer

Comments