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Compacts for Connoisseurs - Audio Physic Step 25

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Nothing conveys the art and alchemy of high-end audio better, in my view, than the execution of a fine, two-way compact loudspeaker. More than any pull-out-the-stops floorstander, the stand-mounted two-way embodies one of audio's most challenging balancing acts—engineering the artful sonic choices—deciding the criteria to emphasize or heighten, to limit, even ignore.

Audio Physic Step 25: Built for Speed

On the surface the particulars of the \$3290 Audio Physic Step 25 hew to tradition. It's a two-way, bass-reflex design just under 13** tall with a rear-firing port. The front baffle and the rear panel have a modest backward slope for driver alignment. The cabinet flares curvaceously out on the sides. It's a very rigid construction, and the cabinet is beautifully appointed from the finish of the driver frames to the back-panel terminal plate. The Step 25 also deploys some of the same Hyper-Holographic Cone (HHC) drivers Audio Physic developed for the flagship Caldera and Reference line speakers. The HHCT II is a small (1.75** diameter) cone tweeter with an exceptionally light, stiff, ceramic-coated-aluminum diaphragm. Likewise the 5.9** mid/bass driver implements its version of this cone technology and is designated Hyper-Holographic Cone Midrange or HHCM.

All this adds up to make the Step 25 something special. Easily one of the most transparent small speakers I've hosted recently, its image and soundstage

reproduction are so specific, timbres and tonal colors and micro-dynamics so alive and focused, that when I compare the sonic picture that the Step 25 casts against most other speakers it's as if I'd just had a pair of cataracts removed.

The Step 25 conveys an of-a-piece, point-source-like coherency, and a purity so startling that I felt I'd physically stepped into the recording studio, the very recording booth itself, and ended up standing within a few feet of soprano Audra MacDonald as she delivered her renditions of "Somewhere" and "Bill" from *How Glory Goes* [Nonesuch]. It was if I was no longer at the receiving end of a speaker but rather within the pressure zone and confines of the live event. Actually, this has been a basic trait of Audio Physic speakers for some time—building box speakers that more often than not seem not only cabinet-free but also have a level of transparency akin to something more along the lines of small electrostat or planar-magnetic.

There are a couple of key features that might explain the disappearing act that so defines the Step 25. It employs Active Cone Damping (ACD). This was developed to avoid resonances associated with metal cones via a silicone/rubber ring mounted on the outer ring of the cone, where it applies pressure to suppress resonances. This same technology was also adapted for cables in order to eliminate mechanical vibrations that are transferred into the cabinet. Vibration Control Terminal, as it's termed, employs heavy aluminum construction that is additionally damped and fitted with a neoprene gasket for elastic suspension, ensuring that the binding posts are effectively decoupled from the cabinet.

Tonally the Step 25 strikes a fairly even balance but with a lighter-spirited accent—one that may remind car enthusiasts of a little sport scar with a high-revving, high-output engine. It represents a more forward and present style of sound, which makes for a superb "voice" speaker that can capture every inflection and nuance of a vocalist's performance. Few tracks exemplify the Step 25 strengths like Nils Lofgren's "Keith Don't Go" [*Acoustic Live*]. His brilliant guitar showmanship is a clinic for aspiring guitarists everywhere. The Step touches all the right bases—whether it's cataloging Lofgren's slashing flat pick, percussive bridge taps, articulate lead lines, or a bevy of satisfyingly deep resonances and ringing harmonics from the guitar soundboard. The Step 25 conveyed this performance with fully realized intensity and vibrancy

All speakers uniquely fuse with and transform the space they reside in. And every recording played through that system is shaped accordingly by that transformation, conjuring up a virtual venue if you will. The Step 25 caused me to visualize my room along the lines of a smaller hall. It's acoustic suggesting a little more reflectivity and dynamic energy, but just a shade of leanness and dryness.

Like many AP speakers I've heard over the years the Step 25 reconfirms the company's unflagging allegiance to a highly controlled sound. The Step 25 all but seems to rejoice in its precision. There's just a hint of silvering in the treble, a characteristic that accents the brilliance of the Step's transient speed and clarity. This was a trait I noted during Copland's *Appalachian Spring* [Reference Recordings], where the string section seemed slightly elevated in intensity as if propelled forward by some invisibly added thrust. Yet to the tweeter's credit the effect steered clear of overt stridency. Had it revealed that sort of aggressive side

then the sweeter, ambient textures from the backing singers during Cat Stevens' "Fathers and Sons" would have departed.

A narrow flare of sibilance, more than I like, is also a small part of this accenting. For example, during Elton John's "Mona Lisas and Mad Hatters" the guitar flat-picking was laudably clean but the clatter of the leading edge of the transient was a little pushier than I hear on my reference system. All things considered, however, this was not so intrusive that it diminished my overall enjoyment of the speaker.

There's substantial and useable midbass output into the 50Hz range. And by useable I mean that bass can be felt down to the heart of the fundamental tone and not just in a theoretical or measurement-based sense. It's there beneath big-bore percussion and heavy brass and winds. Dynamics have a lively toe-tapping character that extends throughout the midrange and into the treble.

Mind you, at little more than a foot tall, the Step 25 does have limits. Fully recreating the weight and scale of an orchestra rushing into battle is a distinctly big box, multi-driver affair and for that assessment I refer you to Jonathan Valin's illuminating review of the Audio Physic Avantero (Issue 220). In the lower realms of the tonal spectrum I could hear the Step 25 throttle down on its willingness to summon forth every micro-dynamic gradation. It cannot take the full measure of Ray Brown's acoustic bass. The cavernous impact of a baritone sax was a bit more tenor-like than strictly baritone. And reproducing the willowy sweetness of a coloratura soprano like Anna Netrebko is one thing, but the performance of a large barrel-chested male vocalist like Bryn Terfel suddenly takes on a lighter complexion. On a larger orchestral work the speaker gently compresses, surrendering the larger dynamic thrusts and impacts from bass and drums and softening the launch of winds and brass. The Step 25 is certainly game in the face of this onslaught, and amazingly maintains its composure, never growing harsh or brittle.

Images are Felix Unger-clean; rim shots are crisp, finely grained, and detailed. There's a tactile feeling to the relationship of drumsticks playing off the skins. Few speakers approach the soundstaging capability of the Step 25, which is virtually invisible as a source. Picturesque is the word that first came to mind when I sought to describe its ability to reconstruct front-to-back layering of images or the way it grants each musician his own ambient space to perform.

The Step 25 is the consummate "touch" speaker in the way it draws forth the tiniest musical delicacies and details of audio reproduction. Yet it was a constant source of surprise and satisfaction in the versatility it displayed with a wide range of challenging music. Audio Physic calls it the Step. I think it's more like a leap.

Specs & Pricing of Audio Physic Step 25

Drivers: 1.75** tweeter, 5.9** midbass

Frequency response: 55Hz–33kHz

Impedance: 8 ohms

Sensitivity: 87dB

Dimensions: 12.6** x 6.9** x 9.8**

Weight: 12 lbs.

Price: \$3290 (Sherpa stands, \$300)

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