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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Epos Encore 50

by Paul Messenger





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‘Form follows function’ is a fine maxim for designing virtually any product, but it does leave out one crucially important ingredient – manufacturing costs.

The enclosure is responsible for much of the performance of a loudspeaker – probably more than 50 per cent, truth be told – and there’s more than one good reason for creating irregular and/or curved shapes. But curved and/or unusual shape enclosures cost money, so there’s a strong financial case for keeping things simple, with flat panels joined at right angles.

I can’t say whether or not that was a factor in the creation of the Epos Encore 50, as a key part of its construction is a double-thickness enclosure that deliberately combines

plywood and MDF for optimum performance, which would be very difficult to achieve without adopting a rectilinear shape. Whatever the motivation, the net result is one of the larger and heavier floorstanders around, standing well over a metre tall and weighing 45kg. Which goes some way towards justifying a pricetag just short of £5,000/pair.

No-one would call this speaker neat, pretty or discreet. Rather it’s a bit of a monster, making an unambiguous statement about its intention to deliver serious hi-fi sound quality with considerable bass and loudness capabilities. ▶

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► Dressed all over in good quality cherry or black real wood veneer, with slightly rounded vertical edges, it is a very nicely finished monster, and a purposeful looking one too, thanks in no small part to the similarly monumental plinth which is part of the package. This substantial and well shaped slab of black MDF not only considerably enhances the stability footprint well beyond that required by EC legislation, but is also supported on a magnificent set of spikes – very heftily built, top adjustable and with every flexibility one could need. Epos even supplies something called a ‘skateboard’ to help move the speaker around – useful for those who don’t already possess a Black & Decker Tough Truck! A bonus is that the plinth and tall enclosure lifts the midrange and treble drivers well up to and even a little above seated ear height.

There’s also considerable flexibility in the crossover arrangements too, with wire jumper links accessed through the base for both the midrange (+1/0/-1dB) and treble (+1.5/0/-1.5dB) drivers, and three pairs of socket/binder terminals with removable brass links. The whole crossover unit is mounted in its own sub-enclosure, and isolated from acoustic and mechanical vibrations. High class passive components are used throughout, including an auto-transformer feeding the midrange unit, and care has been taken to avoid magnetic field coupling between inductors.

It’s mounted on a substantial removable panel, so that the speaker may subsequently be converted to active operation (Creek/Epos has plans to introduce a “custom DAC, with programmable digital crossover” sometime soon). The crossover/terminal back panel even has louvres to help keep components from overheating.

The driver line-up is clearly high quality and looks conventional enough, though it breaks with Epos’ plastic cone tradition in using paper-based cones (with added Kevlar and carbon fibres) for both bass and midrange drivers. The tweeter is the more familiar mesh-protected 25mm metal dome tweeter, albeit with a number of modifications to reduce the resonant frequency and improve power handling for this application. The twin 220mm bass drivers each have 140mm diameter cones, and are loaded by a 43 litre enclosure and a large rear port tuned to 30Hz; the 158mm midrange driver has a 100mm cone, and operates within a separate sealed 8 litre enclosure.

The enclosure is perhaps the most interesting element of all, since it was found that birch plywood and MDF had specific advantages over each other – plywood sounding smoother while MDF had the lower noise floor. Putting the two together, along with extensive bracing, could provide the best of both characteristics.

Measurements confirmed the effect of adjusting the crossover jumper leads was much as promised, but the specified 89dB sensitivity seemed like a considerable underestimation. With the preferred ‘+1’ setting on both sets



of jumpers, and measured under realistic far-field in-room averaged conditions, a generous 92-93dB seems a much better estimate, though it should also be noted that the amplifier load is very demanding through the mid-bass, falling below 3ohms around 100-120Hz.

This is obviously a speaker that should be kept well clear of walls, and it has plenty of bass to fill much larger rooms than our 4.3x2.6x5.5m space. Indeed the sub-60Hz bass is theoretically about 5dB too strong in my room, but because it’s clean and well formed this didn’t seem to be any problem subjectively – in fact it was rather nice! ►

Initially measured with the crossover set 'flat', the overall frequency response (far-field, in-room) showed a steadily falling characteristic amounting to around 9dB from 200Hz up to 4kHz, followed by a recovery of about 3dB in the treble proper. In truth this looked (and sounded) a bit too laid back, so the midrange and treble levels were both set to '+1', which proved much more satisfactory, objectively and subjectively, and was therefore adopted for most of the auditioning.

This was carried out using Naim NAC552/NAP500 amplification and Vertex AQ Moncayo speaker cables. Sources were Rega Valve Isis and Naim CDS3/555PS CD players, Magnum Dynalab MD106T tuner and Rega/Linn and Funk/Linn hybrid turntables with SoundSmith Strain Gauge cartridge to play vinyl.

And once the midrange and treble outputs were maximised, the true – and indeed impressive – qualities of this speaker quickly became apparent. Its two most obvious strengths are an exceptionally wide dynamic range, thanks to very effective cabinet coloration control, and an unusually smooth sonic delivery across the midband and treble in particular.

It does retain something of its laid back character, and while that does mean that voices can sound a little 'shut in', speech remains clear and articulate even at very low levels. And because the presence band is quite restrained, the volume can be turned up as high as you like without any real tendency to sound aggressive.

This is a speaker that likes to be played at a high level, not only because it has the right sort of tonal balance, but also because of that marvellously effective enclosure. The more time I spent with these speakers, the more their undoubted charms won me over. They're exceptionally free from any fatigue inducing character, and therefore very easy to listen to over the long haul. One might perhaps wish for a little more dynamic brio and tighter transients, where it does fall a little short of the best, but it's certainly no slouch here either, and its all round musical communication skills are very effective.

Imaging is precise and well focused, providing good depth where this is available from the source – a live BBC Prom featuring Elgar's Symphony No1 gave fine Albert Hall orchestral perspectives, in part because the wide dynamic range is maintained right across the band.

The Encore 50 deals with all kinds of music without fear or favour. Radio 3's Choral Evensong sounded excellent, with impressive rendition of the gothic cathedral's marvellous acoustic, but the Grateful Dead's *Anthem of the Sun* was equally enjoyable, and the speakers clearly laid bare the substantial differences between the two turntables used.

While the high sensitivity provides ample practical recompense, the low impedance in the bass region does rather suggest a preference for solid state amplifiers with low source impedances and ample current delivery. While I daresay push-pull thermionic amplifiers with appropriate output transformer taps will work fine, the single-ended variety are probably better avoided.

I think it's rather too easy to underestimate this speaker. The whole unpacking and installation procedures are enough of a chore to undermine its appeal somewhat, and while aesthetics are a personal matter, I don't think many would consider it a design classic. And the sound quality is also arguably a little too laid back in the 'flat' setting.



However, select '+1' on both the crossover network jumpers, wind up the volume, and the Encore 50 really starts to get into its stride and show its mettle. Understatement is still very much part of the package, but many may find this welcome, and few if any alternatives will match its combination of smoothness, wide dynamic range, ample bass and good sensitivity at anything like the price. This is a genuine high-end speaker at well below current high-end prices. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity: 89dB claimed; 93dB measured

Impedance: 4ohm nom claimed; 3ohm min measured

In-room frequency response (best settings): 60Hz - 15kHz (+/-4dB)

Bass extension (in-room): -6dB@20Hz

Crossover frequencies: 250Hz, 3.5 kHz

Drive units: 2x 220mm bass with 140mm cones

1x 158mm midrange, 100mm cone

1x 25mm aluminium dome tweeter

Size (wxhxd cms): 26.5x123x38.5

Weight: 45kg

Finish: cherry or black real-wood veneer

Price: £4,995/pair

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