

Miraculous balance

Situated below the Reference Ultime models, the Stenheim Alumine range has been enriched by the arrival of a new Two.Five speaker which takes its place quite naturally between the bookshelf Two and the floorstanding Three. It promises to be the perfect combination of manageable dimensions, high efficiency and exceptional musical abilities.

The Alumine range was waiting for this model between the famous Two, the first in the lineup in bookshelf format, and the more ambitious Three floorstander, priced at €40,200 per pair, compared with €25,800 for the Two.Five. This two-way speaker incorporates 3 drivers whose crossover is both simple and sophisticated, having been fine-tuned over many hours of listening, and designed to be as discreet as possible. In audio, simplicity is the Holy Grail, but it is extremely difficult to achieve. And yet this new Stenheim model succeeds marvellously, with a rare overall cohesion.

THE EXCEPTIONAL IN A COMPACT FORMAT

The footprint is just 23 cm wide, 27.5 cm deep and 97 cm high, which is astonishing when you consider the Stenheim Two.Five's bass performance. The surface finish of the luminous silver-grey aluminium walls is attractive and slightly structured, with contrasting black front and rear panels. In addition to perfect assembly, with no visible screws, the speaker bezels have a curvilinear profile to avoid any parasitic reflection near the baffle. The tweeter benefits from a slight horn lip to regularise the directional lobes and increase efficiency. The transducers are slightly offset from the centre towards the inside, meaning that there are specific lefthand and righthand speakers. The totally rigid enclosure is made from 10mm thick solid aluminium plates with curved top corners, from which the bass-reflex port emerges at the front, with flared edges to avoid any airflow noise. The black aluminium rear panel is securely screwed in place with 20 BTR screws. Underneath, threads allow the solid cones and counter-screws supplied to be inserted, for perfect decoupling and precise level adjustment by means of the included C-spanners. Aluminium cups are also provided to prevent any damage to the floor, given the speaker's considerable weight (45 kg). The Stenheim Two.Fives give off an impression of seriousness, without resorting to costly exotic technology or unnecessary visual ostentation. The uncompromising design, right down to the smallest details, is worthy of the finest manufacturers, like the simple Nextgen WBT terminal block. They are available in two finishes: light grey or dark grey, with black front and rear panels in both cases, plus ivory, full black and mocca as options.

PHL AUDIO AND SEAS

Making the most of the excellent French PHL Audio loudspeakers, the Two.Five uses two 6.5 inch (165 mm) bass/midrange drivers, which offer a high sensitivity of 93 dB SPL. The bass extension of these two transducers, each with an emissive surface area of just 14 cm, is astounding, but they are well loaded and moderately filtered so that they can express themselves freely, with extension and speed. This bass driver is similar to the one used on the Two model, but has been modified to take into account the larger load volume of the Two.Five. Its paper diaphragm is treated to make it insensitive to ambient humidity, and to smooth out small resonances, lowering the level of distortion, which is already very low. The cone is attached to a flexible convex suspension, providing wide linear excursion. The tweeter is a 25.4 mm (1 inch) textile dome from the Norwegian firm SEAS, as seen on the Two model, loaded with a horn leader machined into the aluminium baffle to even out the directional lobes. On this two-way system, the lower woofer is filtered at 150 Hz, while the upper one is low-pass filtered at the tweeter's cut-off frequency, i.e. around 2.5 kHz, to smooth out the frequency and impedance curves. This filtering has been fine-tuned at length during extensive listening sessions to ensure maximum overall coherence, using the best current components such as Mundorf and Jantzen. The internal wiring comes from a Swiss manufacturer specialising in instrumentation, medical and aerospace applications.

LISTENING

Timbre: The Two.Fives surprise you through their ability to hold up to the light each tonal compound without a hint of inaccuracy, over a very wide bandwidth, including an extension in the bass and extreme bass that is out of all proportion to their size. Serious work on the loading and filtering enables a remarkable fusion with the midrange/treble registers, with no gaps or bumps to disturb the overall sense of unity. What's more, the definition and precision of the mid/high registers are phenomenal: everything can be heard distinctly, in the right sequence, so that the qualities of the best recordings can be appreciated without missing anything. You never cease to be amazed by the harmony and accuracy of these speakers in their musical expression, sticking faithfully to what has been recorded. But despite this unparalleled clarity, they know how to blend into the background to help you immerse yourself more intimately into the music. The live track 'In a Sentimental Mood' from Abdullah Ibrahim's new album is flagrant proof of this: the flute, piano and bass reveal a highly engaging realism, in every little detail, which is simply splendid.

Dynamics: the Stenheims come close to being highly powerful in terms of their dynamic freedom, which is almost limitless, but without the colouration sometimes present in certain horn speakers that betrays their limitations. The Two.Fives unleash rhythmic flights of fancy with ease and without restraint, with note attack expressing itself instantly as if experienced live. We can thank drivers derived from professional applications, which have a lot more to deal with compared to a domestic living room. The dynamic range of the Minnesota Orchestra, conducted by Eiji Oue on Stravinsky's The Firebird Suite (Reference Recordings), is just incredible for such a compact loudspeaker, helping you to suspend disbelief right down to the extreme bass, unlike a small-format model. You get the same impression listening to Harry Connick Junior's big band in "Chanson du Vieux Carré", which is a pleasure to hear in its fullness and generosity. The brass attacks are lively and realistic, and the joy this orchestra has in playing together is expressed in life-size, or very nearly so: what the Stenheims are doing is impressive.

Soundstage: When listening to a complex choir like Voces8's "Nothing Else Matters" (Decca), each voice is in its exact place, with no intermodulation, and each specific tessitura can be read in a harmonious whole, modulating the nuances with fluidity and accuracy. The presence and stature of the singers grab your attention majestically in the reverberation of the recording space, creating a perfect fusion of all the sound parameters. The sensation of communion with the music is more keenly felt than is often the case, as every minute detail is brought into perspective thanks to a phenomenal transparency, delivered by a faithful respect for the phase at all frequencies. This three-dimensional image is not a happy accident, but proof of the perfect mastery of all the loudspeaker's components, which cohere harmoniously to achieve this musical unity. From Sol Gabetta playing Mendelssohn to Talk Talk in 'The Colour of Spring', the Two.Fives demonstrate their obvious talent for extracting the best from every musical genre.

Value for money: Despite their high price, it is no exaggeration to say that the Stenheim Two.Fives offer good value for money, because in a compact format they can match the musical performance of larger, often much more expensive speakers. The degree of perfection in all areas of musical performance reaches dizzying heights, and you'll need sources and amplification to match, but they can content themselves with around thirty excellent watts to give their best. They are handcrafted in Switzerland, in the Valais, in Vétroz, near Sion, ignoring time and passing trends, by bringing together the very best in their manufacture.

VERDICT

The Stenheim Alumine Two.Fives belong to the select club of today's very best loudspeakers, rivalling the most prestigious brands despite their compact size. In this discreet format, they pull out all the stops in terms of a musical reproduction that is perfectly plausible in space, right down to the most distant music stands in the orchestra, combined with superior tonal accuracy, including a truly astounding bass, while retaining the brand's appeal: a dynamic ardour that is rarely encountered, unless it is with certain high-efficiency monitoring models. Stenheim has squared a difficult circle.

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