

Pioneer S-2EX Loudspeaker



Bridging the divide

Neil Gader

By offering qualities we typically associate with audiophile speakers as well as those from the pro-monitor world, Pioneer's EX Series bridges the divide between two distinct listening cultures. It combines a recording-studio ethic, rigorous construction quality, and most significantly, technology plucked directly from the playbook at Pioneer's pro-audio "skunkworks," the highly regarded TAD (Technical Audio Device) division.

Though TAD's first home-audio effort, 2003's M-1 speaker, was critically acclaimed, its \$40,000 tag priced most of us out. The more down-to-earth EX Series was designed and built at Pioneer's Speaker Design Center in Paris by a team comprised of TAD and Pioneer engineers. Andrew Jones, the chief designer of the M-1, served as sound advisor, and the EX Series also received feedback from sound engineers at London's legendary AIR Studios.

The \$6000 S-2EX is a three-way, stand-mount compact in a bass-reflex enclosure. The baffle has a gentle curve in it, as well as a backward slope, that serves to time-align the transducers at the listening position. Weighing in at over sixty pounds, the cabinet is bolstered by multiple layers of laminated MDF, ranging in thickness from 30mm to 100mm; the side panels are curvilinear to reduce internal standing waves. With its massive internal bracing, the enclosure's resemblance to a ship's hull is striking.

As with the TAD M-1, a concentric driver unifies the tweeter and midrange transducers. Although it's a dead ringer for the M-

l's driver, the EX midrange cone is magnesium rather than the M-I's far more expensive beryllium. In either case, break-up modes don't appear until well into the ultra-sonic range. The beryllium tweeter, however, is pure TAD, and TAD technology informs the bass cone, as well. Here the diaphragm is of one-piece construction (as opposed to the more commonly found separate center-cap), which Pioneer feels adds greater rigidity while pushing resonances outside of the cone's audible frequency range. Finally, the huge 65mm voice coil has been engineered for extreme power handling and dynamic headroom.

Sonically, the S-2EX isn't hobbled by the usual constraints of a compact speaker. It may sit on a stand, but it speaks with the voice of a three-way through and through. As its high-powered studio-monitor bloodline implies, the S-2EX is designed to play at prodigiously loud levels that would harelip any number of sophisticates



Specs & Pricing

PIONEER ELECTRONICS

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Type: Stand-mounted, bass-reflex loudspeaker

Driver complement: 1.4" concentric tweeter,

5.5" concentric midrange, 7.12" woofer

Frequency response: 34Hz–100kHz

Sensitivity: 86.5dB

Impedance: 6 ohms

Dimensions: 11.5" x 22.25" x 16.75"

Weight: 62 lbs.

Price: \$6000

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Sota Cosmos Series III turntable; SME V pick-up arm; Shure V15VxMR cartridge; MBL 1531, Simaudio Moon Supernova, and Sony DVP-9000ES digital players; Plinius 9200 and MBL 7008 integrated amps; Tara Labs Omega, Nordost Baldr, Kimber Kable BiFocal XL; Wireworld Silver Electra & Kimber Palladian power cords; Richard Gray line conditioners; Sound Fusion Turntable stand

from the high end. Orchestral scale is remarkable for a speaker of this dimension; symphonies spring to life, with the walls of the venue seeming to breathe like a bellows.

The S-2EX doesn't subdue dynamics, either. Concert grand pianos are not submissive instruments—at close range the energy and transient attack from any nine-footer will churn your insides. In this regard, the only other speaker of this size that compares is another compact three-way, the MBL 121.

In terms of tonal balance, this is one of the more neutral speakers I've heard in some time. Its midrange seems spot on; its treble is highly extended if a little dry at its limits; and bass response extends deep into the midbass with perceivable reserves below 40Hz. Its upper bass and lower mids (the bugaboos of compact speakers) never seem to run short. Cabinet resonances and port anomalies are so low that you quickly forget this is a bass-reflex design. There is also a sensation of weight in

the mids that deepens the presence of male and female singers. Both jazz singer Claire Martin, from Linn's *Too Damn Hot*, and a *cappella* specialist Laurel Massé, on *Feather and Bone* [Premonition], exhibited good body and chest resonance.

The S-2EX communicates a precision sound geared to resolving details at all levels, micro and macro. Even familiar recordings take on a greater complexity and a physicality bordering on the tactile. Like any great speaker, its character is mostly determined by the recording. The downside is that bad recordings are not enhanced by syrupy colorations—the S-2EX exposes every blemish, as if illuminating them in high definition. The *upside* of such resolution is that the best recordings have never sounded better. Even familiar chestnuts seemed completely refreshed, as if I'd unknowingly acquired a newly remastered version. From the opening bars of Järvi and the Cincinnati Orchestra's reading of Bartók's *Concerto for Orchestra* [Telarc], each

orchestral section is clearly defined in space. From the immediacy of low-level drums and winds, to the ripeness of plucked strings, and later, the elegance of massed strings decaying into the acoustic of Music Hall, the sound was effortless and expansive. During Vaughan Williams' *Antarctica* [Naxos], the speaker resolved the bronze waves radiating from the cymbals and the tenderness of the celeste with low-level detail I'd never heard before. Even difficult-to-sort-out cello lines or the rumblings of the organ were multifaceted, not just undefined throbs. The trombone and brass sections assaulted me with energy, and the crescendo was so horrifyingly powerful that I needed to trim the volume.

However, if I had to single out a performance characteristic of the Pioneer that trumped all others it would be image focus. It possesses a driver coherence comparable to the best two-way mini-monitors, but with the bone-crushing power of a three-way. The kudos goes to the concentric driver—a design that I'm often not a big fan of, though this one has won

me over. Its remarkably uniform off-axis response offers a wider than normal sweetspot. Andrew Jones of TAD explained that, because of the transducer's relatively shallow throat and the fact that the midrange cone behaves as a waveguide for the tweeter, the transducers match each other's directivity at their respective crossover points. The benefits are improved power response and the absence of hollowness (the cupped-hands effect). And because there is no beaming, this point-source-like performance nails the exact position and angle of something like a concert grand on stage. It's also tailor-made for reproducing the soloists and the deep layers of voices in a large chorale—in fact, the more voices the merrier.

The only area where there might be a "cultural" disagreement about the S-2EX is the character of its treble. Tonally, I think its response is near dead-bang neutral. But with Rutter's *Requiem* [Reference Recordings], cello transients, the rattles of a tambourine, or the top strings of a violin can seem exposed, lacking a cushion of air for harmonics to ride

upon. Also, Sinatra's smoky voice on "Angel Eyes" from *Only the Lonely* [Capitol] exhibited a slight hardness and a less yielding character. This was the one area where I could foresee the fur flying—enlivening the debate of studio monitor versus audiophile speakers. Some will find the tweeter a revelation in terms of resolving detail; others will regard it as a bit too business-like, controlled, and clinical. I found amplification and cabling were crucial as well. My only regret is that I didn't have the new Plinius SB-301 on hand. It's an amplifier that has already made me reassess the performance of other components in the audio chain, including speakers. (See my Sneak Preview on p. 74.)

I've nothing but profound admiration and respect for the Pioneer S-2EX. I've never experienced a larger envelope of performance from a stand-mounted speaker. It's not a flowery romantic, but its brand of musical truth is seductive, nonetheless. While there will never be one speaker that suits everyone's taste, the Pioneer S-2EX should be required listening for any self-respecting audiophile. **TAS**