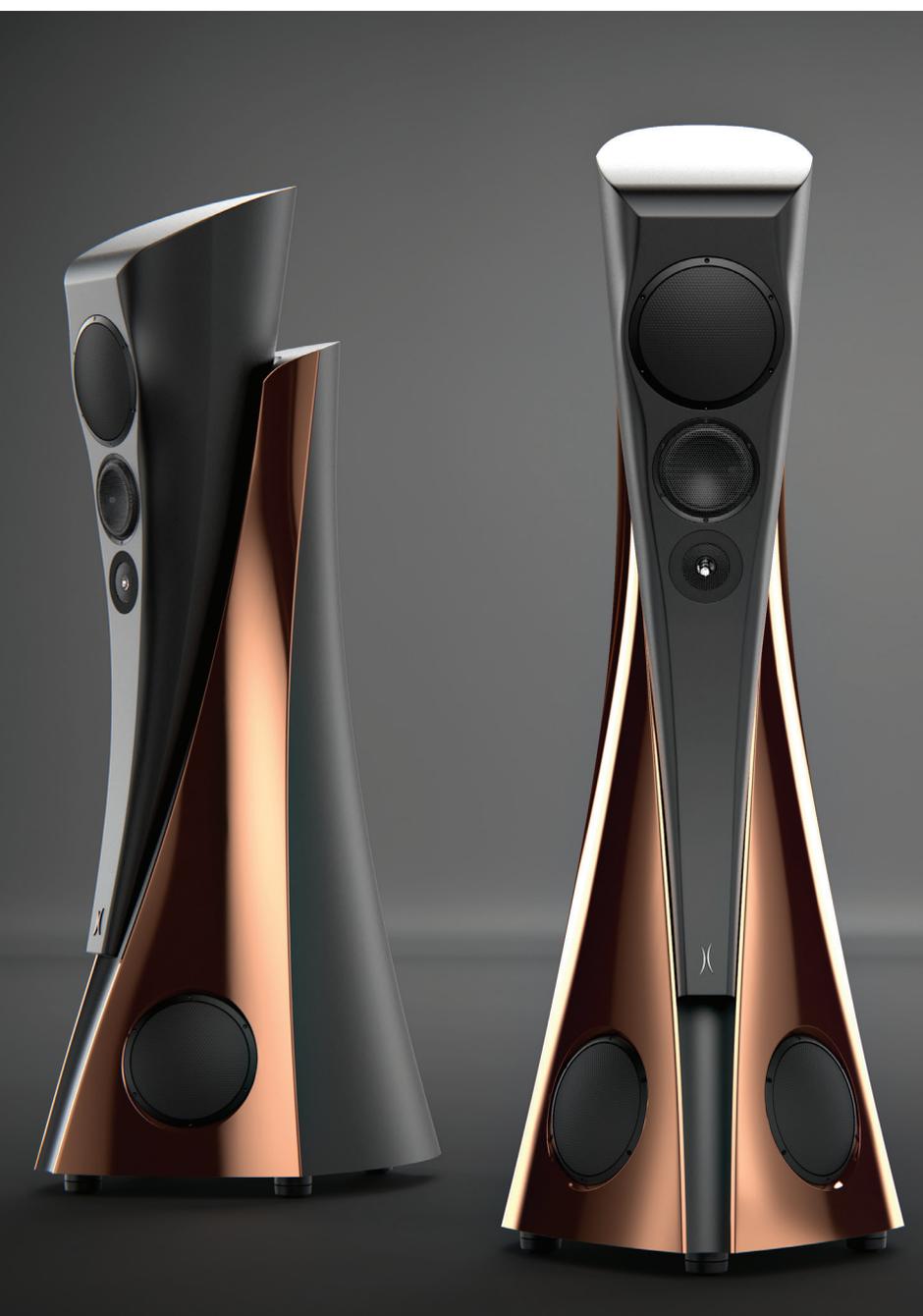


Estelon Extreme floorstanding loudspeaker

by Chris Thomas



I would say at the outset that, generally, I am not a fan of big speakers. Over the years, I have heard too many installations in homes and recording studios where big bandwidth systems have exercised a room's dimensions and acoustic foibles to the detriment of any subtle musical pleasure. On the very few occasions that I have heard big speakers work, it has been in natural large living rooms where the live and reverberant characteristics have been lightly treated and the quality of the music, general warm friendliness of the location, and moderation with the volume control has made the music both understandable and enjoyable. For me an audio system has never been a substitute for 'live', and for manufacturers, subjecting your giant flagship models to demonstration room vagaries is always fraught with potential peril. Having said that, I should also point out that I have never lived in a room where such speakers would be remotely comfortable, with room to breathe.

That all being said, I was recently invited to The Ideaworks in Central London to take a listen to the new Estelon flagship speaker, the Extreme. Having very much enjoyed Estelon's smallest stand mount design in the comfort of my own home I was interested, but naturally wary that this was going to be another power session marred by lingering one-note stomach-churning bass and searing high frequencies, all laid on with a megawatt trowel. I needn't have worried really as Kog, the UK distributors, just don't go in for that kind of thing at all.

I loved Alfred Vassilkov's baby, the XC. It had just about everything a stand mount should, being concise, full of out-of-the-box

energy, and musically expressive, which, for me, is the most important thing by far. I had seen pics of the Extreme and it looked intricate and complex, but not particularly huge. So, when I first saw the Estelon Extremes, I was surprised at the way the elegance of their lines masked their actual size. Yes, this is a tall speaker, but it is quite slim and its sculptural form is emphasised by the twin elements of the design interwoven within the central V structure. This is held visually separate through colour and finish.

Again, for full-range flagship models, the Extremes' shape is elegant and the complete opposite of the mammoth dimensions and mega cabinetry of so many 'top of the range' models from other manufacturers. Even the quick phone snaps I took of it that day made them seem so much smaller and compact than their actual height, which can vary, depending on where the upper section has been set.

The room was quite pleasant in atmosphere and a world away from the hard, booming, inarticulate, and muddy sounding spaces I have heard so many times before. It didn't have that cloying deadness of absorptive oppression that can be so unpleasant and unnatural. The partnering equipment, supplied by Ideaworks, was unfamiliar to me also. Driving were a pair of hefty Mark Levinson mono amplifiers and some extremely modest £10 per metre cabling carrying the signal over long lengths. I imagine that, given a free-hand, Kog would have loved to have installed their own amplification, perhaps from the upper echelons of the Vitus range, and would no doubt have been rather more fussy when it came to the details of the installation itself – possibly with Stillpoints racks and no doubt some Entreq grounding boxes and cabling.

A guided tour of the speakers with the charming Alfred was impressive. Estelon are very much about cabinet design. Obviously the fit and finish is exemplary and where the unusual shape of the design might seem on paper to be somewhat 'extreme', once

you understand the relationship of the two enclosures to each other, it all makes perfect sense. The top enclosure can be moved vertically within its confines via a remote control (very much in the manner of a Gerry Anderson sequence from something like *Thunderbirds*), but the curvature means that it also arcs towards the listener as it does so. Imagine a less exaggerated Scorpion's tail and you won't be far off. The physical relationship and distance between the twin bass drivers and the mid and treble units can therefore be altered to your taste and this is going to depend on where you will be sitting. In this way, the Extreme can grow from 1770mm to 2070mm tall. The listening room dimensions dictated that we would be seated fairly near field in enormously comfortable reclining chairs and therefore the speakers were quite close together. Alfred ran the options past me as the central column slid up and down, and the differences were very interesting. Pretty quickly you will make your decision on a favoured setting as the musical integration snaps into tighter focus. I am told that, once the motors have done their work, the moving column comes to rest on a very small internal pin/spike design that detaches them physically from the bass enclosure, eliminating resonance and vibration that might interfere with the delicate high and mid frequencies. As Alfred was explaining the mechanism, trying to envisage exactly how this might be achieved was difficult, but it was impractical to disassemble the Extreme at that moment to make it clear exactly how the design functioned. The cabinet material is described as a "Proprietary marble-based composite" and is, according to Alfred, the speaker he has been designing in his head for the past 30 years. It just took a while for driver design and cabinet materials to catch-up. But, for anyone who has seen Estelon speakers before, the curves and stance are unmistakable.

The lower part of each Extreme handles the low frequencies through two 250mm aluminium domed units arranged so they are firing toward each front quadrant to the listener's left and right and not sideways. This is a large enclosure where it needs to be, but tapers in the centre, giving the speaker a ►

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► wonderfully elegant line and contour. Estelon really knows how to finish a product and the superb metallic copper of the bass cabinet continues across the front, but transforms to a beautiful slight matt black as the cabinet falls from sight. This 'trick' on the eye makes the whole unit actually appear much less bulky than it is. In the centre of this is the tapering slot that the upper part slides into. Here you will find what Estelon call a Mid-Woofer at the top. This is another 250mm aluminium domed unit while just beneath it is a 180mm inverted dome ceramic driver. The tweeter is a quite magnificent 32mm diamond design, again with an inverted dome. This tweeter section can be moved forward from its standard location through three positions via a discrete side-mounted key providing even more scope for further adjusting the speaker's balance of presentation. All the drivers are custom made by Accuton and each speaker sits on four black Stillpoints Ultra 5s.

As soon as the listening began it was clear that this was not just a flagship statement of the company's abilities,

introduced to establish a presence in the lofty and expensive ultra high-end market. There were no twenty-foot wide guitars or bizarre instrumental dimensions. Instead, the whole musical picture had understandable scale and, even when huge, was focused. The lower bass section was doing a fantastic job at realising pitch and shape but still had that physical impact that is so much a part of experiencing music through speakers of this type and yet the area most likely to get itself or the room into difficulties. My first trip to The Ideaworks was really concerned with examining the speaker and speaking to Alfred about the concepts and design. Listening to him explain how and why he came to any number of decisions was fascinating and his demonstration of the way that moving the twin enclosures, relative to each other actually worked in a musically dynamic situation was almost spell-binding.

There were a few interested people milling around, but we did get a chance to hear some music and I was certainly impressed. Here was a large speaker that bucked so many trends. Standing in a far less than ideal position at the back of the room, near a corner, I was chatting to Alan Sircom as different discs were played on the Vitus SCD-025 that Kog had managed to squeeze in. It was a pretty informal gathering at that stage but Alan and I were fascinated enough with what we were hearing that we made an arrangement to return a week or so later for a private session where we would be able to listen to our own musical selections for as long as we wanted. There was the opportunity to have them delivered to my home for a full review, but their size and 500kg total weight made that an impossible venture.

Sometimes though, even in less than ideal circumstances like this, the power of music can still reach out and grab you and it is surprising what a mark it can leave. Some choral music, which I had never heard before, ►

► completely captured my ear and entranced me. It was a conversation stopper. The sound of a choir, recorded in a church with a high stone interior brings its own reverberation characteristics. The microphones ‘hear’ the character as the combined voices swirl in incredibly convoluted and complex patterns, overlapping the original voice with the delay as they bounce from mouths to hard wall, gently decaying with each journey and modulating in a simply glorious way. The way that these swelling overlaps ring against the hard surfaces, slowing the decay and generating new harmonic possibilities, can be deeply moving. I thought at that moment that, in many ways, this has become the recorded sound of spirituality. I have never heard it illustrated as beautifully as this. The pure atmosphere of that recording was amazing and close to hearing the real thing at Evensong in Salisbury Cathedral several years ago. That experience of sound and emotion had stayed with me and the Extremes rekindled it with an almost ethereal and illuminating beauty. It was a marvellous and captivating experience that I will never forget.

The second visit found us alone in the room and we could run the Extreme, using our own music, as hard or as gently as we liked. *Panthalassa* [Sony], described as a “Reconstruction and mix translation” of the music of Miles Davis from between 1969 and 1974 and made by Bill Laswell is a disc that I had been listening to at home for some time. Intense and moody, it is an hour long and features four tracks. Laswell has created textured soundscapes punctuated with percussion against which Miles writes his horn in large letters with his own timing and phrasing. Through the Estelons it was compelling. The backdrops, alive with colour, stretched far back, filling the area behind and outside the speakers with intense colour against an almost touchable blackness. The drums appeared from nowhere, hung in free-space punctuating the mood with percussive stabs, paving the way for Miles himself. That sweet and sour tone of his horn was fantastic. The counterpoint he created, through Laswell’s creative vision, was spellbinding; though the sounds were very much of their time, the Extreme recreated the performance and the atmosphere magnificently. The Extremes are incredibly concise and musically expansive perhaps because their low-end is so elastic and agile. There is no feeling of saturation down here or that the amplifier is asking too much of the drivers or cabinet. Everything is remarkably clean, yet it retains the tonality and sheer presence that is so essential to recreating anything like lifelike scale and level.

Moving on to Nickel Creek’s superb eponymous album from 2000 [Sugar Hill], which is blessed with Alison Krauss’ wonderful driving production, found the Extremes completely in their element. Looking at the CD cover, I have to say that it is positively indecent that people this young could play this well, but Nickel Creek have it all. This album can be quite challenging as the mandolin and guitar are very closely recorded, leaving plenum noise completely to the fore and the vocals, too, are close and oh so tight. Most systems seize on these elements, and rather neglect the supporting tracks of violin and great guitar chord work, but the Estelons are disarmingly capable on this music, and their tonal balance is just about perfect. The production, so articulate and almost microscopic in its attention to fine detail, isn’t shredded by the Extreme’s scale and depth. Instead they deliver the story in the style of a fine raconteur while retaining that incredible cohesion that marks the band as ►

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▶ one of the best acoustic combos I have ever heard. Fast, too. The opening track 'Ode To A Butterfly' is brimming with blistering picking and some really, really sweet melody work from Chris Thile's banjo and then mandolin as he duels with the bluegrass guitar of Sean Watkins. The precision of these guys is incredible as is Sarah Watkins' authentically Country fiddle work. The string bass lays a rolling foundation and sets a pace that shows the Estelons never lose control of any musical thread, and the Extremes are utterly responsive to the smallest push or rest. It's about as close as I have heard to having the band in the room with you.

So much of what big speakers are about is the bass, the way it is made, and the way it interacts with the listening room. Bass is where I feel most full-range systems crash

and burn, and no amount of bass traps or sound dampening products seem to help. Lose this battle and you have lost the war. With this in mind I have to say that I have only heard the Extreme in one room, but it was nicely damped and the speaker responded really well. It is very precise, concise, and beautifully controlled, but seldom clinical. Dynamic and focussed, it was superb on most bass instruments with no vagueness or incoherence that I could detect. They have that feeling that comes from ultra-lightweight driver cones and tightly controlled enclosures. These Estelons are endlessly expansive. They shift the music out of the not-inconsiderable cabinets and into the room before you. In many ways, they behave like the small XCs; both have a voice that is free and dynamic from the gentlest whisper to the most shuddering dynamics.

But, for me, the Extremes are not really about bandwidth or the sheer imposing power of their sound. They are actually all about subtlety, musicianship and the art of recording. They are about communication, involvement, emotion, and about you, the listener and the music you love. Yes, they are crazy money and a complete system capable of showing what they can do is even crazier. They are a statement product, unfortunately to be afforded by very few. I could call them the 'lucky' few. But that shouldn't detract from what a stunning experience listening to them can be. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: five driver, floorstanding speaker in two enclosures.

Driver complement: Two 250mm aluminium bass driver; one 250mm aluminium dome mid-woofer, one 180mm inverted dome midrange, one 32mm inverted dome diamond tweeter.

Frequency response: 20Hz-45kHz.

Sensitivity: 91dB/2.83v

Dimensions: (HxWxD) 1770-2070m x 790mm x 820mm.

Weight: 250kg/ each

Finishes: All liquid gloss – Copper, Gold, Dark Silver, Black Lava.

Price: £140,000 per pair

Manufacturer: Estelon

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