

EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Estelon YB Loudspeaker

by Chris Thomas



We want our systems to speak in many voices. We want to understand what the music is about and to hear how it is being played and recorded, regardless of its genre or specific character. The enormously complex relationships between the instruments, the expression, phrasing,

and interpretation of all the musicians and the way that the producer has understood those things and brought them to our ears is absolutely vital to me. So, yes, we tend to want it all from the powerful transient of a bass drum or the slap of an electric bass guitar to the merest harmonic whisper of a delicately stroked piano. But, as well as that, surely we need to feel some sort of emotional connection to the whole experience and this is always a harder area to quantify. It remains one of audio's great imponderables as it covers so many areas. I have always loved the art, technique, and spirit of great musicians and if by chance their works find themselves translated into a great ▶

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- ▶ recording then you can find yourself in the company of greatness. What better ground for a wonderful audio system to exploit?

Listening is half the pleasure, hearing is another. Are you interested, like me, in the emotional impact of music? Surely it is a language we are talking about here and that is a weighty subject without end. Ultimately it comes down to the simplest of things really. You either love a system and feel a connection to it or you don't, and this obviously depends on how much you enjoy listening to it. But, there is no sliding scale or points scoring table to refer to when contemplating this, one way or another. Sure, taste and life experience come into it of course, but there is also intrigue, fascination, mood, location, and the pure desire to listen as well. Music is both simple, nourishing, and endlessly complex at the same time. But it has a mood, a message, and an atmosphere too. Assuming some kind of steady-state level of reception from any of us is implausible. We are a part of the whole experience every time we listen.

When the Estelon YBs arrived and we were unpacking them, I was thinking about my all-too-brief time with the Extreme, Estelon's appropriately named and priced flagship model, in a very sympathetically damped listening room in London's West-End. Various people were milling around and different music was being played while *Hi-Fi+ Editor* Alan Sircom and I chatted quietly in a huddle at the back of the room. Suddenly some choral music soared above the muted crowd noise. Its ethereal, hugely ambient scale captured and owned the room. The sense of a natural acoustic and the way the system recreated the recording space stopped everyone in their tracks. It was like being in a church with hard, towering walls and long, long reverberation times. The whole spirituality of the choir and their performance was so beautiful and so incredibly powerful that it shocked me into an almost reverential silence. There was something happening that day, in that room, with that system that everybody shared. It was like being in the presence of a significant event and it has stayed with me ever since as a reminder of how powerful and important a great system can be. I still don't know what piece was being played or who brought it along and that's fine. It doesn't diminish the experience though, but emotionally it was incredibly heartening and extraordinarily potent.

The YB is a fascinating design, made like all Estelon speakers in Tallinn, Estonia and designed by Alfred Vasillkov. The asymmetrical cabinets have little in the way of a straight line as they twist upwards like a giant barley sugar. They change proportion and shape as you view them from different angles. From the side they appear to be leaning forward as they rise. The light catches them and the soft edges appear sculptural as you begin to appreciate their elegant stance and amalgamation of angles. The swollen base accommodates the large inward facing bass units although these drivers are firing at an angle, across the room rather than directly at each other. They are 203mm aluminium-coned designs that can be used with or without a clip on cover. The cabinet

snakes its way northwards where, at the summit, you will find a 133mm midrange unit with a sliced paper cone. The sliced sections are filled with glue to damp the cone and dramatically reduce breakup modes within its diaphragm. Just below this sits a 25mm beryllium tweeter. This high mounting negates early reflections from the floor and must go some way toward the YB's trademark clean, uncluttered sound. All the drivers are made linked to the internal crossover by Kubala-Sosna cabling. There are no ports.

All of the three previous Estelon models I have heard utilised the superb Accuton ceramic drivers. The YB is a lower priced model and the drivers are sourced from Scanspeak but, after a day's listening I could hear that this speaker, though having a different character, shared the same values and had that Estelon to-the-point clarity and musical flow that I like so much. They certainly have a more restrained presentation than the speakers in the more expensive X-range. Both the XC and the XB are perhaps more immediate and even a touch sharper. They are tonally more imposing, have a leading-edge impact, and a somewhat more dramatic sense of drive and presence. The Estelon YB speaks with the articulation of a small speaker, but has considerable scale and a wonderful sense of presentation. It is a very different design in so many ways but, when properly installed it is fatigue-free and endlessly musical in the way it deals with anything you might ask of it.

I used the dCS Vivaldi in two-box configuration and a collection of amplifiers during my time with them. From David Berning's Quadrature Z mono amps through to a mighty new power amplifier from Vitus, as well as that company's electronically and musically integrated 25 watt Class A model, ▶



▶ the Vitus 025. These are all very great amplifiers in their own way and each of them extracted a subtly different performance from the YB's.

The set-up procedure is reasonably straightforward though final positioning might take a several days of minor adjustments but, though the speakers are quite tall, they are easy to move around on their own coupled resonance-controlled feet. They can be successfully used surprisingly close to rear walls, too. As I worked through the process of physically integrating them into the listening room, I grew more and more interested in the whole shape of the presentation and soundstage they produced. Moving each of them through a swinging arc while pivoted on a rear foot changes the angle of the bass units in relation to the listener and to each other, and this is vital when it comes to focussing the bass. I would also suggest that you experiment with moving them farther apart than might seem normal. A few centimetres at a time until the sound begins to dissolve a little in the middle because then you will likely have gone too far. You will also need to consider the toe-in at every step. The point of this detailed approach is to take full advantage of the wonderfully broad soundstage and extraordinary driver integration that

Alfred has built into them. With the bass units positioned so far from the other drivers I was interested in how the whole musical picture was going to come together and whether the low end might be left detached. Not a bit of it though. The speed and articulation is great, as is their agility. They behave just like a great small speaker in so many ways, but they also have this notable sense of musical scale, bandwidth, and linearity. The bass is brilliantly integrated and feels totally up to speed, too. In short, there is zero disconnect between the drivers. Close your eyes and you would think you were listening to the best aspects of a small speaker but with extra bandwidth and a sense of tonal ease and remarkable depth and powerful musical ambience. ▶

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► This wonderful scale that flows from the speaker is multi-layered. If you like music that is recorded with endlessly flowing soundscapes and depth, the YB is captivating and its ‘natural’ feel when it comes to musical textures just delights every time. Carry this natural feel over to more formal performances in the classical field and the perspectives remain just as compelling.

Estelon’s Beryllium tweeter is very articulate, but its part in the YB’s performance is even more impressive. It is much like the Beryllium tweeters in the Focal range of speakers but with a very different implementation. I love its clean, sparkingly textural impact and if you wondered how it compares to the ceramic drivers in the X-range, I say that point is irrelevant really as it’s the implementation in the YB that is the most important thing. It just never, ever jumps out as being anything other than part of the whole. Its relationship to both the bass and the midrange drivers is just so successful.

Obviously this is a cabinet design that shows exactly what a vital cog (no distributor pun intended) in the machine this can be. They are made from a composite material and I cannot imagine that the external shape is in any way mirrored internally, but I can certainly believe that the bass section must have required quite some detailed work to produce this sort of musical top-to-bottom integrity. If you look at the YB and imagine taking a slice through it, just below the two top drivers, you would have a very small pair of stand mounted cabinets. The cabinet is very, very slim around this area, yet the bass is mounted, almost sub-woofer fashion, quite a way below and at a different angle as the cabinet girth grows to accommodate it. This also gives the YB great physical stability, needed because they are quite tall. Yet, through considered design and a great pair of ears, Alfred has made a wonderful speaker with a very natural tonal balance, that comes together like few others.

I would add at this point though that, if you judge your speakers by their shock value and routinely use terms like bass-slam, or if you lean toward the very taut and overtly impressive type of hyper-realistic sound, then pause for thought here because that is not what the YB is all about. They can certainly move air but, compared to the ceramic driver Estelons, they don’t quite manage that percussive leading edge nor that ruthless pistonic, chest rattling bass that I know so many love. I love it too, but these speakers are simply not like that. I wouldn’t call them gentle, but they certainly seem a little more polite than I remember the stand-mounted XC. In fact it took me about a while before I finally grew to understand their voice. Whether it was the speaker or me, who knows, but I got hooked on the timbre and texture of Tony McManus’ guitar during an afternoon listening session (where I investigated the world of the Celtic acoustic guitar) and began to understand what a great musician he is through the YB. I always admired his fantastic technique, but it was the Estelons that reinforced to me how tonally and phrase-expressive he could be, too.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Three-way, floor standing speaker system

Driver complement: One 220mm Aluminium driver. One 150mm midrange driver and one 26mm domed Beryllium tweeter.

Frequency response: 30Hz–40kHz

Impedance: 6 Ohms (nominal)

Sensitivity: 86dB/W/m

Dimensions: 1285 × 365 × 430 mm

Weight: 40 kg each

Finishes: Many finishes available including Black Matte, Black Gloss and White Matte.

Price: £14,500–£15,500 per pair (depending on finish)

Manufactured by: Estelon

URL: estelon.com

Distributor: Kog Audio

Tel: +44 (0) 24 7722 0650

URL: kogaudio.com

The YB shows a different side to the voice of Estelon. It certainly demands that the accompanying equipment be up to scratch and that the installation be thoroughly sorted. It strikes me that the YB should find a wide, appreciative audience from those who demand serious bandwidth and who have mid to largish rooms right down to those, like me, who have smaller listening rooms and generally find themselves drawn to smaller, high-end stand mounted designs. Yes, I place articulation and balance highly on my list of requirements, but the YB fulfils those demands and yet it has this sense of scale plus an acoustically controllable, brooding bass performance that works really nicely in smaller rooms. Its tall, slender, twisting cabinet has a relatively low-impact, too. So, after five years of making speakers, Estelon has produced a speaker that, while certainly different to their existing models, is still very musically interesting. You should seek it out. +