



Rhythm Divine

Noel Keywood listens Usher's statuesque Dancer CP-8571 II loudspeaker...

Based in Taiwan, Usher have recently established a name for themselves on the UK hi-fi scene, particularly for high value, high quality 'affordable audiophile' fare. However, at £5,600 the new big Dancer is most certainly not in the range of most people's pocket books - and finds itself up against some serious exotica like Quad's new ESL2905 electrostatic, for example...

The Dancer CP-8571 II is a large floorstanding three-way loudspeaker. The highest point, at the rear, stands no less 1.24m off the ground, once base and spikes are attached. Luckily, the front is a little lower, so it looms a little less large visually. Weighing 80kg apiece, each loudspeaker tends to stay where it's put! This isn't an easy speaker to shift around without a small sack truck, and getting it up a flight of stairs takes some effort. As you'd hope though, the 8571 is very pleasingly styled and finished, its light veneer and slim front making it less visually intrusive than the dimensions suggest.

There are two features of the 8571 that Usher want you to know about: they have a beryllium tweeter and they are designed by Joseph D'Appolito, known worldwide as an authority on loudspeaker design. Put together this suggests the loudspeaker has a modern specification and is intelligently designed. And to quite an extent this is what I found; the 8571 has a tidy and well ordered sound that comes across as on-the-nail technically, and free from obvious colourations of most, if not all sorts - something I will come back to.

The lower bass unit is loaded by a chamber fitted with a rear port. Above it sits a mid-low driver also loaded by a rear port that crosses over to a beryllium oxide tweeter at top. The rear carries a chunky pair of bi-wire connectors able to accept 4mm plugs, bare wire or spade terminals.

The importers told us our review samples had 350 hours on them, having been run hard at a dealers before reaching us. All the same we ran them for many weeks and even at the end of it our Dancers sounded tight and restrained at low volumes, but they opened up and sounded impressive at high volumes, but I'm talking well above 95-105dB at the listening position, which is high. Early on I suspected also that my preferred Quad II-forty valve amplifiers were not an ideal match. A chunky and well run in NAD M3 amplifier was better in getting

the well damped bass units moving, so this is a beast that needs solid-state power and a firm yank on the volume control.

Looking at our impedance and frequency response plots suggests why. The amplifier will exercise more electrical damping control than usual because impedance in the 60Hz region is low compared to other loudspeakers. The Dancers will demand bass current and power though, and once they do they really thunder low down, with a strong sense of control. So bass is there, but it isn't especially forthcoming at low volumes. The upside is the Dancers will give tight and controlled bass in rooms that are, in themselves,

unit crosses over to the beryllium dome tweeter which, like the Focal beryllium domes, comes across as precise, if a little 'hard' in its nature.

Where the cleanliness of this loudspeaker's sound, together with its balance and finesse, really shone was when I moved to classical performances and - especially - violin. The English Chamber Orchestra's violins danced vivaciously in Vivaldi's 'Spring', Nigel Kennedy's violin standing out clearly, rich in timbre. This suggested to me that the Ushers were strong in revealing the character and richness of classical instruments, doing a better job here than most - and as listening went on my initial feeling was confirmed. With



"these speakers were strong in revealing the character and richness of classical instruments..."

VERDICT

A clean, dry and accurate loudspeaker best at higher volume levels. Great for classical, but pricey.

USHER DANCER

CP-8571 II £5,600

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FOR

well controlled bass
low colouration
tonal accuracy

AGAINST

power hungry
restrained at low volume
hard to match

prone to being resonant. Against the many loudspeakers I listen to on an ongoing basis however, the 8571s have a dry balance at low frequencies.

That is not to say they don't go low, as 'Lovely 2 CU' from Goldfrapp's 'Supernature' forcefully demonstrated. Lower notes from the synth had our listening room thundering alright, but this is a CD where the lows are not in short supply in the first place. Of course the other side of the coin is that the 8571s come over as tight and well ordered in their timing, more so than most. 'So Fly Me Away' broke out into a fast pulsating and metronomic beat from the off, short stabs from the synth bursting from this loudspeaker like bullets from a gun. Alison Goldfrapp's vocals were convincingly clean, if not as starkly clear as Monitor Audio's metal coned GS60 I reviewed last month. Against a loudspeaker like the GS60, to which the 8571 can be compared even though its price is higher, the Usher is more even in high frequency balance. Its beryllium dome tweeter has been tightly knitted in to give a result that is obviously 'right'. Heavens - measurement showed this loudspeaker is ruler flat in its forward response, and you can hear it. The big Usher sounds tidy in balance and general presentation as a direct result, free of the little honks and squeaks that add character to so many designs. I could detect a change in character as the fibrous midrange

Holst's 'Jupiter', horns, strings and timpani were wonderfully separated and each had its own particular character, meaning the character of the musical instrument rather than that of the drive unit reproducing it. Here Usher have done a strong job, obvious when horns and strings enter with this piece's well known main theme; it was beautifully rendered - lush, large and vibrant - a thrilling performance. I found in general I had volume up a bit, even with classical, but the 8571s so got into their stride with classical works, both large and small, that my absorption in listening took over. Not neighbour friendly then, but not all of us have 'em (mine went deaf long ago).

Think 'squeaky clean' and you'll be getting close to the sound of these big Ushers. They need to be pushed a little to give of their best, but it's a good performance, tight and well ordered. The price is high, there's no doubt, but for classical listeners in particular the 8571s are a strong contender if you like high volumes.

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

That this is a tightly engineered loudspeaker is obvious from its extraordinarily flat frequency response. Whilst this translates through into a certain type of dry, even presentation, I have found from experience, it does not guarantee much more than this. Add a bass response that slowly falls away and you have an in-room sound that is seemingly restrained, in spite of room gain. The beryllium tweeter has been integrated in perfectly and is, in itself, peak free, extending high frequency output smoothly up to 16kHz or so.

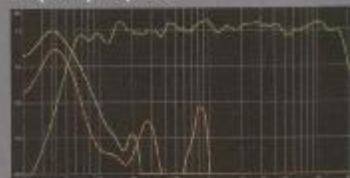
The impedance curve is unusual at low frequencies for a ported loudspeaker. Port damping at 37Hz looks to be set high relative to the bass unit's own resonance, giving the peculiar asymmetric result seen in our impedance trace where one peak - the lower one - is much larger than the other. It's normal to acoustically tune a port so both electrical peaks are roughly equal. Offset tuning may work, only listening can decide, but in this case there are other ramifications. Acoustical damping is sub-optimal, but electrical damping is increased, because of low impedance in the high energy 40-80Hz region. All that can be said is this will likely influence the loudspeaker's bass behaviour, relative to the norm.

At 88dB from one nominal

watt (2.8V) of input sensitivity was good, although loudspeakers this size commonly reach 90dB nowadays and that's what I hope for. Impedance measured 5ohms using pink noise, largely due to a dip to 3ohms from 100Hz-200Hz. Usher use a 7ohm DCR bass unit, one reason voltage sensitivity was held back; it is common to use a 4ohm unit nowadays.

The CP-8571 is well engineered, but in certain critical areas it could usefully be tuned to make it more subjectively accessible. NK

Frequency response



Impedance



conclusion

What can you say about an electric car? It's so slow it barely reaches the 30mph urban speed limit.

Nor will it keep up with the traffic outside this limit: as the battery runs down even a horse and cart are faster. And so it goes on. Yet people are buying them - or my eyes deceive me and it's time to get a pair of specs.

So it is with exotic loudspeakers. They're not very sensible and have many drawbacks, one being that they cost at least as much as an electric car. That makes any firm conclusion a little difficult to make. Is an electric car, for example, the best car in the world? "Yes" according to Ken Livingstone (don't laugh; this idea is coming your way). Most people would vote a Ferrari ahead of a G-Wizz but they pollute and when impaled on a speed bump are not very effective as a means of transport. So quite what is best is always very subjective. So it is with exotic loudspeakers: it is difficult to identify one as the best, most having unique strengths that will ensure they appeal to some listeners, but not all.

In our group I would say there are both strong and weak propositions. Least convincing in their idiosyncratic appeal are Quad's new 2805 and Usher's CP-8571 II. As an expensive piece of dedicated conventional engineering I could admire the Usher and its tight, well ordered sound. This loudspeaker is a model of balance, one that incorporates solid hi-fi principles like supreme cabinet construction, together with innovative engineering like the beryllium tweeter. But then it also has weaknesses, such as questionable integration between fabric midrange and beryllium tweeter. Here, a potential strength becomes a weakness, one our more esoteric designs don't suffer. And whilst the Usher had deep bass I wasn't convinced by its quality. So for all of today's materials and design methodologies, which have removed guesswork from loudspeaker design,

it was little things that let it down. This is still a serious effort, yet one flawed and floored by ordinariness.

Quad's new 2805 is far less compromised than the Usher and as a top electrostatic it has great appeal. The problem here is that you have to work hard to get it to perform at its best - and even then whilst it is better than all that has gone before, loudspeakers in general move on and some top boxes claiming electrostatic levels of performance are getting close. Listen to any good ribbon tweeter and you will know what I mean. Having stripped down Quads in the past I can't help feeling a better loudspeaker hides under the covers of the 2805. In other words, it needs less obstructive covers. All the same,

"quite what is best is always very subjective..."

as they stand the 2805s deliver the goods in a way few others can and, if you have the space for them, plus an interest in hearing vast swathes of the most complex and detailed music ever, this could be your loudspeaker.

If you have £4,500 for the Quads then you almost certainly don't live in a garret and may prefer to lose less floor space. Here, the lavishly finished Tannoy Kensingtons appeal. They are expensive, but they are well engineered and exciting to listen to, the unusual horn loaded Dual Concentric drive units giving a superbly focused sound that's nothing other than engagingly dynamic. At this point I feel that the idiosyncratic has been engineered into acceptable modern form - and there is a lot of modern engineering in this speaker - such that weaknesses are acceptably minimised whilst strengths have been maximised. Whatever way I look at it, the Kensington is a great proposition if you like its Edwardian finish. At the end of the day a loudspeaker should be exciting to listen to and the Kensington is that, largely because of its revealing concentric horn design.

Where the Kensington is brightly



lit and vivid. JBL's S4800 is as smooth as silk. JBL go to work on an idea as old as the hills and, like Tannoy, get it to work just fine. JBL's big loudspeaker isn't a point-source like Tannoy's Kensington and doesn't

have the extreme focus and superbly strong imaging, but by separating the horn out, JBL have the freedom to engineer it into slick modern form that sounds smoother than the Tannoy unit. Ironic then that they combine this with a giant, paper coned 15in bass unit in a relatively shallow cabinet - not the subtlest engineering I've encountered. All the same, the final result is still a great listen, if a little pricey.

At the top of the tree, if not price wise, lies Quad's new 2905. This is quite a different animal subjectively to the 2805. It has a large, open and expansive sound with real bottom end weight. The way this loudspeaker presents music, as is from a taut skin, with a sense of speed that's definitive, is quite awesome. At any price this would be a great loudspeaker, but at £6,000 it is something special. Here, a wonderful idea has been honed into something suitable for today's world and as such it is the very antithesis of formulaic in sound or as an experience. Like the electric car it's a product with built in appeal, but unlike today's electric cars the new 2905 is bang up to speed.