

Audioengine A5 Powered Bookshelf Speakers Review



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When I first began reviewing audio equipment I took the approach that performance came first, price came second. It didn't matter if a piece of gear cost \$50 or \$5,000, if its performance and build justified the MSRP and could enhance my audio experience then its value and worth was real. After all, how much pleasure do you get forking out for auto insurance – a necessity, sure – but over the course of my 27 years of driving, I estimate paying more than \$12K to keep my Toyotas insured and myself liability-free. I could have used that money for serious investigation into high-end gear or spread out among the many bargain-priced but high-performing pieces that seem to find me. A few months ago, I had the opportunity to review Audioengine's P4s – passive bookshelf speakers that impressed me with their detailed midrange and bigger-than-expected soundstage. Soon after I received an e-mail from Audioengine's Brady Bargaquast asking if I'd like to hear the company's newest powered bookshelf speakers, the A5s. I was, particularly since it would be my first opportunity to audition a separate pair of powered speakers geared primarily for music listening.



Features & Setup

An all-in-one speaker/amplifier combo, the A5s are divided into an active left speaker and a passive right speaker. The left (powered) speaker is necessarily beefier than the passive and weighs 14 pounds compared to 9 on the right and houses a dual class AB monolithic amplifier rated at 50 watts RMS/75 watts peak per channel. Each speaker sports 20mm silk-dome tweeters with neodymium magnets and 5-inch kevlar woofers and comes cased in 1-inch thick MDF cabinets. There are no speaker grills, but that's fine with me as I prefer the look and sound of speakers sans covers. Each speaker foot is padded with a high-density foam isolation pad, which not only isolates and reduces unwanted resonances, it also protects the speaker bottoms from scratches and other damage. The left speaker's minimalist front panel contains a rotary volume control knob and blue LED light, indicating power.



The A5s come in three finishes – Satin Black, Hi-Gloss White and Caramel (Carbonized Solid Bamboo). The black and whites sell for \$349 a pair, while the bamboo duo costs \$449. The bamboo A5s represent the company's most eco-friendly option, featuring no stains or paints and a finish sealed with hand-rubbed water-based satin polyurethane. All Audioengine products, however, are 100 percent lead-free and the company is using environmentally friendly binders, resins and formaldehyde-free adhesives in its speaker cabinets and assembly.

Like other Audioengine products, the A5s are easy to setup and reflect the company's goal of "to get you to your music as simply as possible without all the 'gadget tinkering' that other products generally require. A supplied 14-page Setup Guide walks you through the basics. The first step is connecting speaker wires from the left to the right and then the power cord. At that point, the A5s are ready to play music – they just need a source, and the guide displays four different audio configurations:

1. For use with iPod Universal Dock
2. For use with Airport Express and iTunes
3. For use with iPod
4. All products with 1/8-inch or RCA outputs (CD player, DVD, TV, video game)

One of my biggest frustrations is receiving a product that requires additional wires, cables, batteries, etc., before you can start using it. Audioengine doesn't play that game and includes everything necessary to utilize the A5s out of the box. The speakers come bundled with a 2-meter min-jack audio cable, a pair of 8-inch mini-jack audio cables, a mini-jack to RCA "Y" cable, a 1-meter USB power extender cable and 2 meters of 16AWG speaker cable. You get everything needed (save an iPod dock) to facilitate the aforementioned configurations.





The A5s are definitely designed for iPod users. The powered left speaker sports a USB jack on its top that charges iPods while playing. Behind the USB jack is an audio-in to run a mini-jack cable directly from an iPod or Universal Dock. And there's plenty of room adjacent to place a dock and house the whole works. The back of the speaker includes a built-in AC power AUX outlet and additional audio-in jack, which makes it easy to go wireless. If you have an Apple Airport Express, it can plug into the outlet and be out-of-sight but always ready to go. Hard to believe that a simple outlet could result in such functionality. If the speakers have a design drawback, it's that they offer no tone control. If you choose to connect an auxiliary component such as a CD player, you're stuck with the default sound settings.



Versatile

The A5s scored high marks with me for their versatility and portability. Because there's no separate amplifier or receiver required, you can take the speakers from one room to the next and have music playing in a minute. I spent most of my time listening to the A5s alternately in my living room and home office. I don't own an Airport Express; instead, I connected a Logitech Squeezebox Duet and used it to stream music into my living room. I'm a recent convert to Internet radio and hooked on the many excellent stations serving up Celtic and reggae music. The A5s performed very well whether on an Irish reel or a bass-thumping rock steady number, and as they sat on a pair of floor-standing speakers I often caught myself looking to verify which speakers were playing. The A5s present an open, rich and smooth soundstage capable of fooling my ears (and eyes). Don't expect cavernous bass (frequency response plumbs to 50Hz) but do expect engaging audio from a lovely marriage of amp and speaker.

I enjoyed the A5s most of all as part of a computer audio system. With all my devotion to audio gear, I have yet to sink significant money into computer speakers, mainly because I haven't found any that ring my bell. Recent time spent with Neuhaus Laboratories' T-2 Integrated Tube Amplifier gave me newfound appreciation for the potentials of computer audio and had me digging up long-forgotten files from my external hard drive. The A5s don't bring the warmth of tubes or a separate DAC into the equation, but they do make sweet music on their own.

Unlike the plethora of thin-sounding computer speakers that pervade the market, the A5s are real speakers that happen to be computer-compatible. I loved being able to connect directly to my Mac mini and play iTunes through speakers that make computer audio come alive. Granted, I can easily stream music from my computer to my prime stereo system, but when I'm writing or working at my desk this means the music is playing at my back – not the recipe for ultimate audio enjoyment. The A5s make it easy to setup a second speaker system, positioning them to your liking, and bring the digital audio files on a hard drive to life. Did I mention the sound?

Audioengine has another winner on its hands with the A5s. Features and performance bely the speakers' humble price tag. For iPod, Airport, streaming audio players and more, the A5s are a powered and powerful solution for a bedroom, home office or small listening room. Highly recommended.

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