

Audioengine's A5 Bamboo and the greening of home electronics

by Michael Fallarino

I've been an audio buff for a few decades now, and subscribe to a half-dozen AV mags to stay up on trends and developments. I even spent part of the 90s writing about consumer electronics for an international jazz magazine. I've developed my favorite companies over the years, and both my friends and the majority of my customers in the building business know that I'm an electronics geek and they do not hesitate to seek and implement my advice.

Over the course of the past two or three years, one small company, Audioengine, has been manufacturing innovative powered speakers and wireless transmission devices for today's sophisticated, compact-loving electronic environment, and I have recommended their products to my customers.

Audioengine's eco initiatives include the following: all electronics are lead free and all components meet the EU's RoHS (Restriction of Hazardous Substances Directive); cabinet assemblies use environmentally friendly binders, resins, and adhesives; plastics are deployed sparingly; and the amplifiers of the powered products meet Energy Star requirements in standby mode. That's a pretty good start if you ask me. But Audioengine has recently taken their green options a step further.



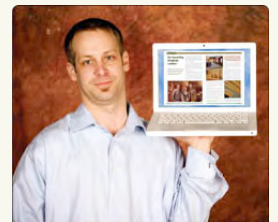
1) Audioengine's A5N's solid bamboo enclosures – who'd a thunk? 2) The well-thought-through rear panel of the A5s left speaker; 3) The A5s come packed in a fabric pouch with all the accessories you need to connect and enjoy them.

Photos by Mike Fallarino

Audioengine's flagship product, the A5 powered speaker, goes bamboo

As a woodworker who has built finely crafted musical instruments as well as my own loudspeaker assemblies, I'm well acquainted with how material selection and overall design play a role in sound reproduction. The material of choice for mass-produced, consumer grade loudspeaker cabinets over the course of the past few decades has been MDF (medium density fiberboard). There are a number of reasons for this, including low material cost and ease of finish applications, but probably most important is MDF's neutral acoustic properties. A speaker should reproduce sound as accurately as possible without adding its own accent, and MDF accomplishes this neutrality quite well.

National
Green Builders
Products Expo
May 28-29, 2009
Your Business
To Business
Green Building
Products Expo!
Las Vegas
Convention Center
www.ngbpe.com



Click [HERE](#) to access the digital version of GBPD!



Links du jour:

[Terry Campbell's blog](#)

[Fallarino – Amazon](#)

[Sippican Cottage](#)

[Atlas Lumber blog](#)

[Mwanzi](#)

When the Audioengine company began, their debut product was the A5 powered loudspeaker – a compact, self-powered bookshelf-sized loudspeaker with cabinets made of MDF and available in white or black. Those speakers are still available. But recently – and this is the departure point for this article – Audioengine did something I had never seen done before and it compelled me to investigate and report. They debuted a version of the A5 (the A5N) with solid bamboo cabinets. “Revolutionary!” I thought. Making a cabinet assembly from solid wood? You might expect an eco-marketing ploy such as a cabinet made from MDF with a bamboo veneer, but these shells are approximately 7/8 inch thick solid bamboo. In addition to using sustainably harvested bamboo, Audioengine takes the shell fabrication and finish to an authentic level of fine craftsmanship.

For starters, they bypassed the use of stain to alter the natural color of the bamboo to its finished honey-amber tone by heating it. This process carbonizes the sugars in the bamboo, darkening and mellowing the color. They then used a waterborne satin poly to protect the wood and hand-rubbed it to a fine finish. The glue lines on the enclosure assembly are perfectly precise, plainly revealed by the fact that all edges receive a 3/8ths quarter-round treatment, and the machining appears to be nicely feathered by hand. I often use this type of detailing in my own work. It's an extra step of true caring to get the intersection of three quarter-round planes (two sides and a top, for example) into a uniform, polished three-dimensional radius, but Audioengine has done exactly that on the A5 and it adds an uncommon level of visual and kinesthetic appeal.

The A5N: around the block

The A5 is a very compact bookshelf speaker measuring 10 x 7 x 7.75 (HxWxD”) with the focus on reproducing material from digital sources. The left speaker contains the power supply (50 watts a channel RMS) and connectivity, and the right is its passive slave. All four speaker wire binding posts are high quality screw-type. The speakers are shielded and can be used as near-field monitors. The inputs are via a pair of stereo mini jacks. One is located on the rear panel and one is on top of the left speaker, along with a USB port to make it iPod friendly. The power panel on the left's back also contains a handy pair of RCA-out jacks, and an auxiliary AC outlet for something like an Apple Airport Express for transmitting music wirelessly. Both cubes have a rear port to enhance bass response for what are essentially undersized enclosures for speakers with a 5” (Kevlar) woofer. The left speaker has a subdued (jeez...what a revolutionary idea!) power indicator, volume control knob, and a replaceable power supply fuse. The fit and finish of the A5Ns is exemplary, and as a finish-oriented fabricator, they speak my language (no pun intended).

So how do they sound?

The A5s are a pretty unique product. In an interview with Dave Evans, one of Audioengine's cofounders, he made it clear that the A5s are truly designed and built through and through as original OEM products (guess where). To be clear – Audioengine is designing and manufacturing all component groups, even the drivers themselves, with relationships in mind, and from iterations of listening tests. I'm a firm believer in the much less is much more approach when it comes to critical listening trials. So among the sound sources I ran through the A5s was Susheela Raman's Music For Crocodiles, a lush, exotic tapestry of Indian/world fusion, exquisitely recorded. Although the A5s could not match the bottom end or sound stage of the substantially larger equipment I compared them to, they did blow away similarly sized enclosures. And make no mistake about it, although the soundstage and timbre of the A5Ns may be a tad woody and contracted at close range, these puppies have a 50 Hz bass response and can amply fill a large room (say 500 SF) with very well-defined and balanced sound. I drove them until the back of the left speaker got so hot it was untouchable – without the thermal protection circuit shutting them down.

Bottom line: in my environment the Audioengine's A5Ns (MSRP \$449) have

displaced a competing powered multimedia system, and caused me to shoo another pair of very respected bookshelf speakers out the door. In the end, the bamboo enclosure is simply my kind of icing on my kind of cake. To learn more about Audioengine's A5 speakers as well as their other innovative products, visit them online at www.audioengineusa.com.

For an exclusive interview with Dave Evans, cofounder of Audioengine, connect to www.Fallarino.com.

Mike Fallarino is a contractor in the Albany, New York, area. He can be contacted at herbalist@berk.com.

© 2009 Michael Fallarino | www.Fallarino.com. All rights reserved.

Archived Content:

[Air Washers](#)

Archived Content:

[Moisture Meters 2](#)

Archived Content:

[Panasonic's IAQ initiatives](#)