

Desk Buddies

* Just because these four speaker systems are pint size doesn't mean they can't sound good

By Ken C. Pohlmann

Audioengine
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Axiom
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Sierra
Sound
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Scandyna
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Speaker photos by Tony Cordoza



Audioengine A5 | \$349 a pair | 3/4-inch tweeter, 5-in woofer/midrange | 2 x 45-watt amplifier | Inputs: Two 1/8-in stereo minijacks | Outputs: USB (power charging only), RCA stereo | Finishes: Black, white, or caramel | 7 x 10 x 7 3/4 in, 23 lb
audioengineusa.com

In this crazy, mixed-up world we live in, at least we can count on a few basic truths: The sun rises in the east. Americans are still the best basketball players in the world. And all small speakers sound crummy. I firmly believe all of those things. At least I *used* to. Then I listened to a quartet of very interesting small speakers.

A speaker's essential job is to emit sound by moving air in a way that mimics the way voices and musical instruments change air pressure. When the changes are reasonably similar, we're fooled into thinking we're listening to things like singers and guitars, instead of paper or plastic cones. It's a tough job, indeed, and it usually requires a range of cone sizes (smaller for high frequencies and larger for low frequencies) and a large cabinet (to hold all those drivers, and to contain air to help reinforce the low frequencies). So, very generally, bigger speakers tend to be better at moving air.

But like most convenient truths, this one has exceptions. With clever engineering and quality components, you *can* squeeze very decent sound from small speakers. How small? Let's consider bookshelf models or smaller — small enough to fit on a desktop flanking a computer screen, for example. The four I rounded up for review are the Audioengine A5 (\$349 a pair), the Axiom Audiobyte with EPZero subwoofer (\$528), the Sierra Sound In Studio 5.0 (\$299 a pair), and the Scandyna Micropod SE and Amp (\$897). All of the systems use stereo speakers, although the Axiom was also tested with a subwoofer. And with the exception of the Micropods, all four are self-powered — no external amplifier required. So much for the engineering details. My real question was, can small speakers sound good?

To evaluate the systems, I placed the speakers on stands and sat relatively close — about 5 feet away — to duplicate the near-field conditions most listeners would experience. I used an MP3 player as one of my sources, figuring this would also be typical.

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But because I didn't want the source signal to be a compromising factor (whether from data compression or a lackluster digital-to-analog converter), I also used a good DVD player as a source. Of course, I listened to a wide variety of music, ranging from hip-hop to opera, over a wide range of listening levels. In the end, I was well satisfied that my question had been answered.

Audioengine A5

The Audioengine A5 system looks like a pair of ordinary stereo speakers, with the cabinets' rounded edges and the bezel that surrounds the tweeter lending the only styling cues. Each cabinet is solidly constructed of medium-density fiberboard (MDF) and sports a 5-inch Kevlar woofer/midrange driver and a 3/4-inch silk soft-dome tweeter with a neodymium magnet. Both cabinets have ports in back, as well as binding-post connectors. Another small nicety is a soft foam pad on the bottom. Then you notice that the left speaker weighs 5 pounds more than the right.

Of course, the left one contains the input and amplifier circuitry for the pair. Its back panel has a stereo minijack input (not the most reliable type, in my opinion) and stereo RCA line outs. (The latter are meant to drive a subwoofer, but be aware that the outputs are full-range, so your sub will need to have a low-pass filter.) A pair of binding posts connects a speaker cable to the right speaker, and there's a power switch and auxiliary AC outlet. The amplifier is powered by its own AC cord, with the power supply built into the cabinet.

The left speaker's front has a soft rubber volume control and a blue LED power light. (All of the speakers in this test used blue LEDs, so I guess blue is "in" for the fall season.) There's another audio-input minijack on top, along with a USB port. The port is for charging only (no data transfer), supplying 5 volts at 1.2 amps, and can be used to charge most iPods and other bus-powered players and devices. Since there's an analog audio input right next to the USB port, it's easy to jack in a player, and to charge it during use. A few extras are included, such as speaker wires, a 1/8-inch-to-RCA Y connector, a USB power extender, and minijack cables. The speakers are neatly housed in cloth bags with drawstrings. Interestingly, no grille covers are provided.

From the first downbeat, I really liked the sound of the Audioengine A5 speakers. I started with "Sultans of Swing" from *The Very Best of Dire Straits* (Warner Bros.). This is my all-time go-to track for instantly sussing out a system's sound quality. The bass here was a bit muddy, but never boomy. The mid-range was very natural and gave vocals a great sense of "being there." The treble was a bit rolled off. Long-suffering **S&V** readers will know that I greatly prefer dark-sounding speakers, and the Audioengines provided exactly my kind of velvet-smooth sound. But some listeners might find the A5s' high end a bit too soft, lacking some edge and presence.

Next, I listened to Chad Kroeger and Carlos Santana's "Into the Night," from *Ultimate Santana* (Arista/Legacy). The constant kick drum in the song's introduction provided a nice, low foundation through the A5s. Sure, a sub would have helped, but these satellites were more than adequate for this bass line. As the instrumentation heated up in the verse, the upper bass line

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Axiom Audiobyte | \$349 a pair (satellites and amplifier) | 1-inch titanium dome tweeter, 3-in aluminum cone woofer/midrange | 2 x 55-watt amplifier | Input: 1/8-in stereo minijack | Outputs: USB (power charging only), RCA subwoofer | Finishes: Charcoal, black, white, gray, cherry, high-gloss walnut, real-wood walnut and cherry, blue, or orange | 5 1/2 x 6 1/2 x 4 in, 5 1/2 lb (pair)
EPZero subwoofer | \$179 | 6 1/2-in woofer | 7 7/8 x 12 1/2 x 14 1/2 in, 14 3/4 lb
| axiomaudio.com

sounded a bit obscured, but not immensely so, and Kroeger's vocals sounded completely natural, with an accurate growl. However, the percussion didn't sizzle as it should have, dulling the mix and making lower frequencies more prominent.

There are two things I just never do: cross a street without looking three ways (left, right, left again) and play orchestral music on small speakers. Small speakers might be okay for overdubbed and sampled pop music, but they just can't reproduce the sound of a stage full of musicians in a concert hall. Nevertheless, tempting fate, I cued up Philip Glass's soundtrack for *The Illusionist* (Rykodisc) and found that it sounded startlingly good. Given the A5s' inherently warm sound, the massed orchestral strings on this CD came across as the epitome of lushness. The double basses and cellos sounded muscular and sweaty, and the violins moody and dark. (Maybe *too* dark, but the sound was an exact fit for this score.) The harp on one track, "The Locket," had plenty of detail, and its hall ambience was open and full. Not many small speakers can successfully reproduce orchestral music, but these speakers get it done.

I was also impressed by the accurate imaging of the relatively small A5s. The stereo panorama was wide and consistent between the cabinets, and the soundstage had good depth. With some toeing in and fiddling, I was able to get a great sense of stereo spread. The amp was positively heroic in its acoustic output. It played loud, albeit with some clipping at its highest levels, showing that both the amp and the speakers were at their limit.

Axiom Audiobyte with EPZero subwoofer

The basic Audiobyte system consists of two speakers and an amplifier/power-supply unit. Axiom requested that we review the system with a subwoofer, so we added its EPZero passive sub.

The two Axiom satellites are exceedingly handsome. My review samples were cloaked in a burl walnut finish that rivals the best-looking walnut you'll see in some luxury automobiles. The Audiobytes are pure and simple speakers with sealed, angular cabinets housing a tweeter and a midrange/woofer driver. You connect them using a minijack input — not, as I noted with the Audioengine A5s, the most reliable type. The cabinets have removable grille cloths. Befitting their lush appearance, the satellites arrive in cloth bags with drawstrings (again, like the Audioengines).

Whereas considerable cost went into the satellites' looks, very little went into the design of the EPZero subwoofer's cabinet, which is a plain, vinyl-covered box. Unlike good children, it's meant to be heard and not seen. A 6 1/2-inch driver and port fire forward through a removable grille cloth. On its leading edge, there's a switch for selecting flat, half-boost, and full-boost bass levels. Once again, hookup is made via a minijack connection.

The system's amplifier — the brains (and brawn) behind the speakers — is housed in a black plastic box that matches neither the satellites nor the subwoofer. But its volume control *does* match the EQ wheel on the sub. The amp's back is fairly sparse, with one minijack input, three minijack outputs to connect the speakers, and an RCA jack for an additional subwoofer output. There's also a power switch and a USB port that you can use for charging an iPod or other device. As with the Audioengine speakers, the amp is powered by its own AC cord, with the power supply built into the cabinet.

On "Sultans of Swing," the first thing I noticed was the speakers' lower-midrange performance. Lead vocals in that range had a good, neutral quality, although the sound was a touch chesty. The bass was reasonably tight and accurate, but the upper midrange and treble were too crunchy and bright for my taste. Listened to without the optional EPZero subwoofer, the satellites sounded thin and their peaky treble response was almost too much to bear. You pretty much need to opt for the sub.

The tangy "Into the Night" sounded great on the Axiom system, with the speakers' aggressive sound proving a good match for this mix. The hard-driving snare had lots of snap, and the kick drum sounded solid. Santana's electric guitar came off tight, detailed, and sweet, just as it was recorded. As with "Sultans," everything fell apart when I unplugged the subwoofer; without that foundation, the satellites sounded small and tinny.

The title track from *The Illusionist* provided a sonic challenge for the Audiobyte system. The sub couldn't accommodate the full range of the double basses, with some of their warmth lost in between the sub's upper stretch and the satellites' lower reach. The rule that small speakers have a hard time with big orchestras remained in effect here: The violins, while cleanly articulated in the satellites, didn't sound big enough. Instead of a true ensemble sound, it was just a bunch of musicians playing violins — not nearly the same thing.

The Audiobytes' imaging was reasonable for their size, with ample acoustic space surrounding each speaker. Their soundstage was relatively small, although there was some depth to it, most likely due to the physical separation of the subwoofer. The

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Sierra Sound In Studio 5.0 | \$299 a pair | 1-inch tweeter, 5-in woofer/midrange | 2 x 40-watt amplifier | Inputs: Stereo minijacks, stereo RCA, iPod universal dock (with adapters) | Outputs: S-Video, USB | Finishes: Black, white, or red | 7¼ x 10¾ x 8 in, 23½ lb | sierrasound.com

system's amp packed plenty of punch, producing copious sound levels that would fill a medium-size room. On the other hand, limiting circuits kicked in occasionally at maximum volume, briefly muting the system's output.

Sierra Sound In Studio 5.0

Like the Audioengine A5s, Sierra Sound's In Studio 5.0 speakers look at first glance like typical bookshelf models. Each MDF cabinet sports a 1-inch silk soft-dome tweeter and a 5-inch woofer/midrange driver safely tucked behind round metal grilles. The cabinet edges are rounded, there are rubber pads on the bottom, and both have rear ports.

But look closer and you'll also see that the left speaker contains the system's input and amplifier circuitry. It also has stereo RCA and minijack inputs, as well as an input-source select button. There's an S-video output for routing video from an iPod to your TV, and a USB port for syncing to a computer. The left speaker connects to its mate through a ¼-inch jack. You'll also find an auxiliary AC outlet, a volume control, and a power switch. (The power supply is built into the left speaker.) A universal iPod-dock connector up top is used to both play and charge iPods, and four different well adapters are supplied.

The system comes with a small remote that does all the usual chores, and also has buttons for repeat, shuffle, track skip, and menu for controlling a docked iPod. S-Video, USB, and RCA-to-minijack cables are included, as well as a cable for connecting the two speakers.

On the In Studio 5.0, the youthful Mark Knopfler's vocals on "Sultans of Swing" sounded warm and were reproduced with good detail. But vocals were also pulled back in the mix, and they lacked the true presence that exists on this track. The forthright kick drum and energetic bass guitar came across strongly, but the sound was muddy in the upper bass and also a bit boomy in the lower bass. This combination ultimately detracted from the speakers' detail by blending nuances into mush. The treble

was clean and had a bit of snap, but it might also prove a touch too bright for some listeners. (The sounds of the cymbals and the snare drum cut out a little too quickly for my taste.)

The In Studio 5.0's strong bass reproduction on "Into the Night" provided a muscular foundation for the song's kick drum and bass guitar. Kroeger's husky vocals are placed far in front of the instruments, and they didn't have any problem cutting through the mix. In fact, the speakers' recessed mids helped to restrain these too-hot vocals, and the resulting combination delivered a good sonic balance. The cleanly reproduced percussion also helped to emphasize the song's flamenco beat.

On the lush opening to *The Illusionist*, the Sierra's somewhat tubby reproduction helped beef up the lower strings as they moaned through the track. Some lower-frequency detail was obscured — the bowed double basses, for example — but I liked the mournful sound I was hearing. The violins also sounded pretty good, although they were a bit thin in the upper register.

The imaging of the In Studio 5.0s was also impressive, with a distinct spatial placement of instruments in the mix. Likewise, they had a wide soundstage — a good thing since these speakers will likely end up placed fairly close together. The amplifier really kicks butt, driving the speakers to impressively loud levels. With an iPod set at maximum volume, the amplifier pushed right up to the edge of overdriving the cones but never quite went into clipping — a sign of careful engineering.

Scandyna Micropod SE and Amp

If your home was built during the Arts and Crafts movement, or can be described as "rustic" or "charming," you can skip Scandyna's Micropod SE speakers. But if your home has lots of glass and stainless steel, or can be described as "futuristic" or possibly even "European," they'll fit perfectly. The Micropod SE speakers and matching Amp (my review set featured a friendly blue color) have an unusual style, to say the least. I mean, when's the last time you saw a power amplifier's technical sheet specifying the amp's diameter?

The Micropod SE speakers employ a curvy nautilus shape (a styling cue made famous by another company). Each plastic cabinet neatly houses a ¾-inch soft-dome tweeter and a 2¾-inch Kevlar woofer/midrange driver. Three spindly aluminum spikes support the speakers, although they can also be placed flush on your desktop. (An optional wall-mounting bracket is also available.) The speakers' frequency response is rated at -3 dB at 65 Hz, but if you need more bass, there are matching Bass Station and Minibass subs. No grille covers are provided. Incidentally, I wouldn't recommend these top-heavy speakers for a busy desktop; I guarantee that you'll knock them over more than once.

The Amp shares the same futuristic styling as the speakers. Three spikes attach to the bottom, or it can be wall-mounted using an optional mount. A big knob on top adjusts volume when turned, and it selects one of four inputs when tapped. You press and hold the knob to power the Amp up or down. Conveniently, the amplifier senses an input and automatically switches to it, and also turns the volume down automatically when the unit is powered down. (My review unit sometimes wouldn't change

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Imaging was good but not great. Again, small cabinets have a tough time creating a properly diffuse soundstage, and these were no exceptions. The soundstage was decent though a bit narrow, and it lacked some depth. The Amp's modest power allowed the pods to fill a medium-size room with sound, but the system's overall level was certainly the lowest of the quartet.

FINAL REPORT

The truth isn't always what it seems. For example, the sun doesn't rise in the east. Rather, it's the horizon that lowers. Likewise, it's entirely possible for small speakers to sound good. This is especially true when the designer has the advantage of bundling in the power amplifier and is able to carefully craft its output to match the speakers' abilities.

Each of these four systems is eminently listenable — within certain limitations. In the professional recording world, these speakers would be called near-field monitors. In the consumer market, you'll hear them called computer or desktop speakers. In any case, they're meant to be listened to at close quarters. With relatively low amplifier power output and small speaker drivers, they simply can't be expected to play at levels loud enough to shake a room. Moreover, their small size limits bass response. (Even the Axiom's subwoofer will neither shake nor stir your martini properly.) Instead, these speakers are meant to provide good-quality sound at medium-loud and softer levels — something that they all do, but not equally well.

The Axiom Audiobyte with EPZero subwoofer is a nice system, but not my cup of tea. Its sound quality, while accurate, was too bright. And you need to factor in the cost of the sub — a mandatory addition to the otherwise tinny satellites. I was bothered by the minijack connectors to all the speakers, and also by the system's single input.

If your house is sometimes mistaken for a flying saucer, then you need to buy the Scandyna Micropods and Amp. The system's funky style is fun, and I appreciated having four inputs. Despite a sweet sound, in the end the Scandynas lack the heft and bass response that most listeners will require. On the other hand, if you're willing to add an optional subwoofer, this unique system might step up its performance.

Sierra Sound's In Studio 5.0 is a solid choice, especially if you plan to use it with an iPod. Its bass response can be tubby, and the high-end was a touch crunchy, but overall fidelity was still quite good. The amplifier really kicks, and it will ensure that everyone in your house can also enjoy the music. But I wish the volume control wasn't hidden inconveniently on the speaker's back — a design choice that forced me to use the remote control.

The Audioengine A5 was my fave of the four. It has the features I need (two inputs and USB charging) and omits things I don't need (yet another remote). These speakers' smooth sound instantly won me over, and their natural midrange cemented the deal. Low-end performance was quite good, although just a little thick on instruments like string bass. The treble was relatively soft, but that's the way I like it. All I need to do now is clear some space on my desk . . .

S&V



Scandyna Micropod SE | \$198 a pair | 3/4-inch soft-dome tweeter, 2 3/4-in Kevlar woofer/midrange | 5 x 6 1/3 x 4 1/2 in, 2 lb

Amp | \$699 | 2 x 50 watts (4 ohms) | Inputs: 2 stereo minijack, 2 stereo RCA jack

| Outputs: 2 stereo speakers and 1 stereo line, minijack subwoofer | 8 1/4 diameter, 2 1/2 lb

| System finishes: White, black, silver, blue, yellow, or red | podspeakers.com

inputs — I had to switch the amp off and then on again.) Power is supplied by an external brick, and there's a small remote that controls on/off, mute, volume, and source select.

On "Sultans of Swing," the Micropods' midrange had a nice, sweet tone, and vocals sounded natural. Treble was also accurate, with just a touch of hardness to the snare and cymbals. This was all pretty surprising given the speakers' size. But their lack of bass was apparent: Despite valiant efforts, the small cabinets just couldn't dig deep, with the lack of low-end support placing sharp limits on the Micropods' otherwise good performance.

The acoustic guitar introduction from "Into the Night" sounded nice and edgy on the Scandyna system, cutting through the mix to aggressively establish its presence. The song's oddly recorded handclaps sounded appropriately odd, but they also had a bit of an unwelcome ragged edge. This is a get-up-and-dance song, and I dearly wished the Amp's maximum loudness level had about 20 dB more juice.

The Illusionist was a tough nut for these speakers to crack, with the title track's lower bass missing both heft and warmth. Simply stated, the double basses and cellos lacked cojones. Violins fared better, displaying good inner detail. But the Micropod/Amp combo couldn't produce the lush concert-hall sound that makes this score special. On another *Illusionist* track, "The Locket," the pods sounded quite nice, with plucked harp strings displaying a good sense of concert-hall air. But when this track heated up with pounding percussion and strenuous strings, the system's sound tightened. This suggests that the Micropods have good basic sound quality, but only when you don't push them too hard.