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ADAM Audio A5X Active Monitors

A beloved design plus an improved tweeter equals a must-hear small monitor

by Mike Metlay

ADAM Audio is a German firm that makes active monitors for everything from very small desktop systems to main rooms in studios, combining various combinations of low-frequency drivers with the Accelerating Ribbon Technology (ART) folded-ribbon tweeters that are its trademark. Other companies offer monitors with folded-ribbon tweeters, which somewhat mimic the function of human vocal cords in the way that they move air, but it was ADAM Audio that firmly established the folded-ribbon tweeter as a technological contender in the world of studio monitoring.

Back in August 2009, I reviewed the ADAM Audio A5, a small monitor pitched for studio and multimedia use, and I was very impressed by its lovely and strongly believable presentation throughout the audio spectrum, with the only caveat being that a 5" speaker doesn't provide the low end you'll get from a larger woofer. At the time I wasn't very familiar with how folded-ribbon tweeters sounded, so the clarity and extension of the A5's ribbon was a real revelation to me and I quickly fell in love with them as reliable and predictable monitors for use in the very near field. To this day, the A5 speakers live and work in my office studio at Music Maker Publications as my small check monitors.

Some time after the release of the A5, the line was upgraded to the new X-ART folded-ribbon tweeter, which offers higher efficiency and greater maximum SPL as well as a frequency response extending out into the realm of the high-def. Lorenz Rychner took the opportunity in November 2010 to review the tiny but mighty A3X, a new monitor with a 4.5" woofer that showcased the X-ART tweeter in the smallest feasible footprint. Lorenz, whose experience with ADAM monitors includes a number of reviews (most recently the dual-woofer A77X in our October 2013 issue) and many hours of listening, was blown away by the sheer size of the great sound the little A3X provided.

We've recently reviewed the very affordable F5 and F7 monitors from ADAM (January 2013), but in the months after the A77X review I got an itch to hear for myself the differences between the original A5 and the new A5X, which was still a vital element of ADAM's AX Range. Were the differences significant? What could readers look forward to in the upgraded monitor?

Specs and features

One glance at the spec chart tells us that the A5X is more than "an A5 with a new tweeter." At just under 15 lbs. each and measuring 11 x 6.5 x 8.5 inches, the A5X is noticeably beefier than the A5, and offers heavier performance to go with its larger size.

The A5X has a slightly larger woofer—the chart says 5.5", my measurements put it closer to 5" but still larger than the A5's. As with the tweeter, A5X's woofer is a new design, a carbon/Rohacell/glass fiber cone that's no longer covered by a grille as on the A5. These redesigns lead to a frequency response that's slightly extended at the low end and massively extended at the high end: 50 Hz–50 kHz vs. the A5's 55 Hz–35 kHz. Also significant is the A5X's greatly increased amplification power—



75 Watts for the woofer and 50 Watts for the tweeter vs. the 25W/driver of the A5.

The A5X retains the A5's sensible and functional array of controls. On the front panel, under the woofer and between the front-firing ports, are a volume knob and power switch, along with LED indicators for power on and Stereo Link active. Major points for having these controls in the front!

The rear panel also has recessed and click-detented trimpots for frequency tweaks: ± 4 dB of tweeter gain and ± 6 dB of high and low shelving EQ to adjust for awkward rooms and placements. These room EQ bands are much more aggressive than the A5's, with corner frequencies of 300 Hz and 5 kHz vs. the original's 150 Hz and 6 kHz. The provided chart shows the low EQ as being more of a broad peaking EQ than a conventional shelf.

The A5X can take balanced signals on XLR or unbalanced on RCA; power is provided via conventional IEC cabling. The Stereo Link function, which allows one speaker's volume control to alter both speaker levels at once, uses RCA connections and won't work with balanced inputs; I did little with it other than to verify that it works.

In session

After a day or two of loud music to break in the woofers, I worked with the A5X for a few weeks of listening and tracking/mixing, both in my "worst case" listening setup and in a more traditional small-studio nearfield placement. I did a fair bit of twiddling with the low and high EQ shelves, and ended up following ADAM's advice to not use them unless there was a clear benefit.

These new band settings are much more “grabby” than the A5’s, and it was easy to overdo boosts or cuts. I did back off the tweeter gain by two clicks (about 1 dB) for listening sessions at very close range, to offset the dauntingly efficient X-ART tweeter, but in more conventional arms-length positioning I left it flat as well.

Compared to the A5, the A5X is just more speaker, there’s really no other word for it. The X-ART tweeter speaks so clearly it’s almost startling, and the new angled-face cabinet and tweeter enclosure provide a very wide and comfortable sweet spot; you can move around quite a bit but maintain clear stereo imaging and consistent frequency response. If anything, behavior in the crossover region (2500 Hz) is even smoother than on the A5, which could sometimes be a little scooped.

The slightly larger woofer does in fact give slightly more bass, and it’s still tight and well-defined with upper harmonics helping fill in what fundamentals will be lacking at the very low end. The A5X would be a very good candidate for pairing with a sub-woofer like ADAM’s Sub8, but it did perfectly well on its own, with mixes translating well to larger monitors.

I found the A5X somewhat less forgiving of clutter in the mids than its predecessor; while relatively sparse acoustic Americana, jazz, and classical music sounded brilliantly detailed with each source standing out in sharp relief, sloppily mixed rock tracks tended to sound congested and thick, even to the point of unpleasantness. If you worry that you have a tendency to add “just a bit more” of this, then that, then the other thing, until your mixes get away from you, the A5X won’t let you do that unscathed.

And last but not least, the A5X’s increased amplifier power is significant. It gets good and loud (up to 110 dB SPL at one meter) with less strain on the amplifiers, leaving plenty of headroom for sharp, clear transients when needed.

More is more

I’ve said it before and it bears saying once more in conclusion; the A5X simply takes the great sonic performance of the original A5 and gives you more of everything—more treble extension, more bass power, more headroom without distortion, more clarity. The AX Range has not been rendered irrelevant at the lower price points by the introduction of ADAM’s very affordable F Range; like the A3X, the A5X is an uncompromising small monitor that discerning small-studio owners will find a true and loyal ally in their tracking and mixing work. As much as I love the A5, it’s going to be difficult to go back now that I’ve heard what the A5X can do. ➤

Price: \$549 each

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