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Epos ELS8 Loudspeaker

Steven Stone

I've known Roy Hall, Epos' U.S. distributor, for over twenty years, but I've never reviewed any of the components he imports. While this may have been good for our friendship, it has denied me the pleasures of his products. With the new Epos ELS8 speakers now in my clutches I'm probably destined to join the ranks of journalists who've been the objects of Roy's prickly manufacturer's comments. But before the barbs fly I'd like to go on record as stating that the **Epos ELS8 ranks as the best under-\$500-a-pair monitor speaker I've ever heard.**

Tech Talk

The ELS8 is a ported two-way monitor with a one-inch-diameter aluminum dome tweeter and a five-inch-diameter polypropylene midrange/woofer. Using a second-order crossover with a 2.3kHz crossover point and a port tuned to 58Hz, the ELS8 is designed to work either with a subwoofer or as a stand-alone transducer. The ELS8's drivers are made to Epos' exacting specifications in China.

Although it was designed as an evolutionary product based on the ELS3 speaker, the ELS8 shares no parts with its predecessor; both of its drivers were designed from scratch. The new midrange/woofer uses a steel basket for added strength and rigidity. Even its pointed dust cap isn't merely cosmetic, but specifically created to maximize its ability to withstand physical stress and minimize in-band resonances. The driver's polypropylene cone material has a neck that is thicker than its edges to control linearity at the frequency extremes. Even the driver's suspension is specially terminated to avoid frequency peaks and troughs caused by internal resonances.

The ELS8's new aluminum dome tweeter is only 50 microns thick. Because of this physically fragile dome structure Epos uses a black metal mesh screen to protect it from foreign objects like fingers and pencil points. Unlike earlier generation tweeters, the ELS8 tweeter doesn't need a phase cap to augment its intrinsic dispersion characteristics.

Both the tweeter and woofer have curved-plastic trim-plates that not only give the front baffle a cleaner appearance but also improve the drivers' dispersion. The speaker's front baffle is also curved. According to Epos' Mike Creek this curved shape was introduced more for cosmetics than sonics, but it does slightly reduce front-surface diffraction. The ELS8's grille covers use traditional insert pegs to hold them in place, but they required particularly painstaking tooling to precisely fit into the speaker's curved front baffle.

The ELS8's cabinet is constructed of 18mm-thick MDF with glued-in vertical and horizontal crossbraces. During initial design stages Epos ran extensive accelerometer tests on the ELS8 cabinet to determine optimal dimensions so it wouldn't need to employ complicated damping schemes to minimize cabinet resonances. If you tap on the sides, top, or front baffle you'll notice that each has its own unique resonant frequency. Except for a small amount of fiber inside, the ELS8 doesn't have or need large amounts of internal damping materials.

Instead of point-to-point wiring the ELS8's crossover employs a carefully laid-out printed circuit board. Epos feels that the circuit board insures more consistent performance from the crossover than production-line point-to-point assembly could. Unlike Epos' more expensive speakers, which are wired internally with solid copper wire, the ELS8 uses braided copper wire. Another difference between the ELS8 and Epos' more expensive speakers is the ELS8's use of crimped push-on connections rather than soldered ones.

Stateside fashionistas will be disappointed to learn that the ELS8 is only available in the U.S. in black ash finish. Brits, Europeans, and other citizens of the world may choose the ELS8s in a light maple veneer. But since the maple veneer is actually vinyl rather than real wood, the black ash option may well be your best choice regardless of where you live. Even though the black finish is also *faux* wood, it looks quite convincing—more so than the maple option. Despite, or possibly because of, its “just the facts ma’am” black exterior the ELS8 is a very stylish looking speaker. Its black-mesh tweeter cover and black polypropylene midrange woofer cone give it certain Darth Vader-like vibe.

What Does \$500 Get You?

Sonically the ELS8 punches well above its weight class. On my desktop I actually preferred the ELS8 to the \$1200-per-pair Acoustic Energy Radiance 1 speakers. Why? Because the ELS8 has less bass augmentation from its rear port so it integrates with a subwoofer far better. Also the ELS8 creates a sizable sweet spot that doesn’t waver when you move your head too far to the right or left of center. The ELS8’s sweet spot was equal in size to that of the Spendor SA1, which generated the most voluminous listening zone I’ve experienced on my desktop.

What else does the ELS8 do well? It images and disappears like a good mini-monitor should. Even when they were only 1½ feet away on my desktop, I was unable to pinpoint the speaker driver’s exact location after my “spin and point” test. For this test I put on a blindfold (courtesy of British Airways from back in the days when they actually gave you something more than a stiff upper lip), played music on my desktop, and spun around in my computer chair a half dozen times. Then I tried to point where I thought the speaker drivers were. On good speakers I get it wrong, and yes, with the ELS8 speakers I consistently missed the mark.

Some speakers put the front edge of the soundstage at the speaker’s front baffles while others move it behind them. The ELS8s are among the latter. I like this, especially on computer desktop in a nearfield environment. They also do a commendable job of preserving depth on recordings that actually have some natural depth. While the ELS8s don’t have quite as much separation in the back third of the soundstage as the Paradigm S1 speakers, the Epos matched the Paradigms on the front two-thirds. The Epos also produced an equally wide and properly proportioned soundfield with only the slightest bit of curvature at the extreme outer edges.

Unlike many budget-priced speakers, which achieve only a middling level of resolution, the ELS8’s resolving powers are exceptionally good. Because they don’t add any artificial grain or texture, which would obscure subtle musical details, they make it easy to discern extremely subtle musical cues. On the latest Sara Watkins solo album [Nonesuch] her lead vocals have a delicate airiness that can all too easily blend into the trailing edges of Sebastian Steinberg’s percussion tracks. The ELS8s preserve the individuality of each of the two similarly timbred parts. Also the ELS8s do a superb job of differentiating between the different sonic characteristics of recordings. You can immediately tell if a recording is analog or digital, minimally miked or multi-tracked through the ELS8s.

Most small speakers suffer in comparison to big burly floor-standing brutes when it comes to dynamics. But on my desktop in a nearfield environment the ELS8s do a surprisingly good job of keeping dynamic contrasts largely intact. Although the ELS8’s micro-dynamics aren’t quite as good as the Paradigm S1s’ or ATC SCM7s’, the ELS8 nearly matches both in terms of overall macro-dynamics. When it comes to crashing orchestral fortissimos the Paradigm S1 does have a bit more headroom, but on commercial pop recordings you’ll have to push the ELS8s mighty hard before they show signs of distress. If you want or need to eke out a couple more dBs of low-distortion SPLs

from the ESL8s, try using a THX-standard 80Hz crossover to relieve the ELS8 of low-bass duties and employ a subwoofer (or two).

Speaking of subwoofers, integrating the ELS8 with subwoofers was far easier than with the Acoustic Energy Radiance 1 speakers. In fact the ELS8 mated with a wide variety of subwoofers from the diminutive Aperion Bravus 8D to the burly JL Audio F112 with the same ease as many sealed-enclosure mini-monitors I've used. In all cases the THX standard 80Hz crossover point worked nicely.

Like any small speaker, the trick to wringing the maximum performance from the ELS8s is putting them into the right-sized room. I found the ideal listening distance in my own room was approximately six feet from ear to speaker grille, with at least two feet between the speaker and any boundary walls. You can get some room reinforcement for the speakers' bass if you move the ELS8s closer to the wall, but you'll lose imaging specificity as well as skewing the harmonic balance away from neutral toward the netherworlds of midbass bloat.

At a \$500 price point you don't expect a pair of speakers to be perfectly neutral. The ELS8 speakers aren't, but they don't miss by much. They err on the darker side of that invisible line. Although they are slightly dark, they don't sound overly warm or thick in the lower midrange or upper bass. Instead they merely lack a bit of presence in the lower treble and upper midrange. With many less expensive electronics, which are often a tad bright, the ELS8's harmonic balance will be a fine match.

Many audiophiles, especially as their ages creep up toward the three score mark, tend to favor speakers with a slightly tipped-up treble response to compensate for their own lost or failing upper octaves. The ELS8 won't help you regain any of your lost youth high-frequency-wise. Both the ATC SCM7s and Paradigm S1s deliver more in the way of upper-treble extension and air.

Serious music lovers know full well that complaining about upper-frequency air and extension is for audiophile weenies. The midrange is where 99% of the music is at and that's where the ELS8s definitely deliver the goods. **My listening notes for the ELS8s are peppered with words such as "natural" and "relaxed." Their midrange rightness reminds me of storied speakers of the past such as the Celestion SL600s and, gasp, the Quad ESL 57s.** Like these great speakers of yore the ELS8s don't have any sonic quirks that distract a listener from the music's core. Solo guitar recordings, such as the Tony Furtado/Dirk Powell duet "Banes Grave" from the compilation *Come to the Mountain: Old Time Music for Modern Times* [Rounder], sound richly well balanced whether heard from my desktop or from two rooms away.

Expecting a small box speaker to have low bass is roughly akin to waiting for the tooth fairy to deliver a Patek Philippe in exchange for your first-born's front tooth. It ain't gonna happen in this particular universe. What upper and midbass the ELS8s do possess is clean, fast, and well integrated. As I've mentioned earlier, if you want more boom in your room the ELS8s will readily accommodate the subwoofer of your choice. I especially liked using them with a pair of JL Audio F112 subwoofers. After only an hour of fiddling, I found the results were virtually seamless between the Epos and JL speakers.

A New Benchmark

For some audiophiles the idea of spending only \$500 on a pair of mini-monitors is akin to asking them to surrender their premium speaker cables in exchange for an eight-foot run of zip cord. It's too bad that snobbery and elitism may prevent many well-heeled audiophiles from auditioning the ELS8 speakers. I suspect that quite a few of them will be shocked by how good the ELS8 speakers sound and how close their overall performance comes to similarly sized cost-is-no-object designs. Don't

believe me? Try a pair. **I guarantee they can make the act of adjusting to new economic realities exceptionally palatable.**

Associated Equipment

Desktop System

EAD 8000 Pro CD/DVD player and transport, MacPro Dual core computer with i-Tunes 7.61, Amarra software, Locus Design Polestar USB cable, Devilsound USB DAC, High Resolution Technologies MusicStreamer+, Bel Canto Dac 3, Bel Canto 96/24 adapter box, Reference Line Preeminence One B passive controller, Bel Canto S-300 stereo amplifier, Accuphase P-300 power amplifier, Modified Dyna St-70 amplifier, Earthquake Supernova mk IV 10 subwoofer, PS Audio Quintet, AudioQuest CV 4.2 speaker cable, AudioQuest Colorado interconnect.

Room System

CEC TL-2 CD transport, Oppo BDP-83 Blu-ray/Universal transport, Sony BPS-300 Blu Ray Player, Apple TV, Sonos Z-90, Lexicon MC-12B HD pre/pro, Bel Canto M-1000 power amplifiers, two JL Labs Fathom F112 subwoofers, two Genesis 2/12 subwoofers, Sound Anchor single column 24" speaker stands, PS Audio Quartet and Duet AC devices, Synergistic Research Designer's Reference interconnects and speaker cables.

Specs & Pricing

Type: Two-way bass-reflex mini-monitor

Drivers: 25mm magnesium alloy dome tweet, 150mm polypropylene woofer

Power Handling: 100W

Frequency range: 60Hz–20kHz

Impedance: 6 ohms nominal

Sensitivity: 85dB 2.83V/1 M

Amplifier compatibility: 25–100W

Crossover: Second-order filters using film capacitors on tweeter

Size 12.2** x 7.1** x 8.46**

Weight: 5.67Kg per speaker

Price: \$499 (matching ST35 stands, \$249)

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