The ART Emotion and Emotion Signature Loudspeakers

by Paul Messenger

Another day, another pair of speakers to review. It can sometimes seem that way, but in their infinite variety loudspeakers are always interesting and involving, and can sometimes prove educational too. And that was certainly true of the two pairs examined here.

The Dunlop family has a long history in British (or more precisely, Scottish) hi-fi. Father Peter was the man behind the respected Systemdek turntables, while his sons Derek and Ramsay have opted to go a different route, founding ART Loudspeakers (an acronym for Acoustic Reproduction Technology) in 1995.

Over the last twelve years they have accumulated a range of seven models, from the baby Stiletto Monitor up to the flagship three-box Impression. The Emotion models – three of them – come in below the Impression, but are still large and costly.

All three models share the same drive units and enclosures. They differ only in crossover components, terminals and wiring – and the price. The 'standard' Emotion costs $5,000/pair; the Signature version is $9,000/pair; and the Silver Signature (which I don't dare try!) is a whopping $20,000/pair. Given that cabinet and drivers are identical in each case, can such substantial price differentials be justified? With that question in mind (and given my natural reticence when it comes to things "audiophile") RG arranged for me to compare the standard Emotion to the Signature version.

Conceptually and stylistically the Emotion is a strangely unfashionable beast. Although it's technically a stand-mount, albeit with a fixed and fully integrated base, this big reflex-ported two-way is based around an unusually large 10-inch (250mm) diameter bass/mid driver. It's a long way from today's slim-line stereotype. There's nothing discreet or self-effacing with this speaker: it's more than a foot wide, similar in depth, and stands three and a half feet tall. Internal volume is probably around 100 litres, which is bulky by anyone's standards.

Happily it's all – including plinth and stand verticals – rather attractively dressed in high quality veneer, with hardwood post-formed front panel and plinth edges. Our samples came in dark walnut and light maple, but light oak, cherry and rosenut are also on the options list. An optional grille covers just the drive units, and neatly attaches to the heads of the main driver mounting bolts. The plinth accommodates 8mm spikes, which come with nylon lock-nuts so the sockets aren't stressed, and the port fires downwards between the stand verticals.

The enclosure might have a large surface area, but it's built from birch ply throughout, and very solidly too, with a 38mm thick front panel, and two internal vertical braces. Both drivers are sourced from Norwegian specialist SEAS: the bass/mid unit has a 250mm cast frame, a 190mm diameter doped paper cone, and a 50mm voice coil; the top-of-the-line Crescendo tweeter has a 29mm fabric dome behind a short horn flare, and a neodymium magnet motor structure. The large main driver likes to be crossed over at a lower frequency than usual, around 1.8kHz, while the network uses a third-order feed to the tweeter, and a second-order roll-off to the bass/mid driver.

The difference between the standard and Signature variants is limited to crossover components and wiring. Whereas the standard version has hand-wound copper air-cored inductors, Clarity cap SA series capacitors, and OFC copper wiring, the Signature uses Jensen copper-foil inductors, Jensen copper-foil paper-in-oil capacitors, Caddock non-inductive resistors and Kondo KSL SPC copper wiring. Signal is applied through a single pair of high quality WBT socket/binders. Upgrading from standard to Signature (or Silver Signature) is possible – at a price – though this is rather more than a simple DIY exercise.

My very basic measurement regime threw up some interesting results, especially since the listening experience hadn't prepared me for a quite dramatic response suckout in the crossover zone (1.5 – 2.5kHz. The reason is that the dispersion of a large diameter driver gradually narrows as it approaches the crossover region; this then changes abruptly to wide dispersion as the tweeter takes over. At 1m on-axis, the suckout is much less obvious, because less room-reflected (ie off-axis) sound is part

of the mix, so toe-in is critical.

While the balance elsewhere is not particularly smooth, it is pretty well ordered, especially through the broad mid-band, and the treble looks nicely judged. Best used well clear of walls under my room conditions, the low bass is notably strong, helped by a low port tuning frequency of 26Hz, while the mid-bass is a little lean. Sensitivity is a relatively modest 89dB, but reasonable enough in view of the fine bass extension and easy load. Interestingly, both models show a resonance at around 450Hz, while the Signature has a slightly lower impedance than the standard version, presumably because its superior crossover components have lower resistance.

The Signature immediately impressed. Even with unpromising sources, such as live sport from the TV, I soon came to the conclusion that this speaker was something quite special, the background noise from crowds seemed more convincing than usual, and the crowds themselves bigger.

The standard Emotions are very respectable performers, offering impressive authority, grip and drama, but I was surprised at how much subtlety, transparency, texture and delicacy was missing compared to the Signature. I could enjoy the standard Emotion right enough, but it has greater timesmear, more coloration and weaker low-level resolution, with the net result that it simply doesn't get my juices flowing like their more expensive brother.

£4K is a substantial hike in price, but much to my astonishment (given what the money is going on) I have to declare it well worthwhile.

The Signature was the version that was really getting me excited; that I was becoming slightly awestruck by, and in danger of falling in love with. The market for £9,000 speakers might be much smaller than that for £5,000 speakers, but then I don't often find myself on the receiving end of a little bit of shock and awe. The more time I spent with the Signatures, the better I got to like them, across all sorts of sources and types of programme.

It's all very well to enjoy one's favourite music through a given pair of loudspeakers, but the acid test is actually how much you enjoy them when they're playing unfamiliar material, or music that you normally dislike – in my case, nearly everything operatic. The Emotion Signatures emerged triumphantly, helping even the most difficult unfamiliar and challenging material make sense and communicate. I found myself listening to Radio 3 much more than usual, and even enjoying the singing bits that normally leave me unmoved. Because of the extraordinarily subtle way these speakers handle very low-level detail and the precise decay of sounds, human voices sound uncannily real, solo or en masse: even modern atonal choral material proved highly effective, and it became surprisingly easy to hear what The Be Good Tanya's Frazey Ford was actually singing about.

I review several dozen speaker models a year, and many turn out to be highly competent these days. But only a handful – perhaps one a year on average – ever get on the 'I want to keep these for reference' list. ART's Emotion Signature joins a very select band that includes (in strict alphabetic order) the B&W 800D, JBL K2 S9800, Quad ESL 2805 and Tannoy Kensington. Each has its particular strengths, and while the JBL remains my personal all round favourite, the Emotion Signature combines much of the mid-band delicacy and transparency of the Tannoy and Quad, with a good measure of the weight and authority of the B&W and JBL. Assuming the exceptional bass extension and alignment suits the listening room, this superb loudspeaker will delight listeners with its subtle delicacy and superior communication.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Two-way reflex with integral stand
Drivers:	260mm treated paper bass mid 29mm soft dome tweeter
Bandwidth:	24Hz - 25 kHz ±2dB
Sensitivity:	89dB
Impedance:	8 Ohms nominal 6.5 ohms minimum
Cabinet:	Braced birch plywood with hardwood trim. Book leaf matched veneers
Finishes:	Dark walnut, light maple, light oak, cherry and rosenut
Dimensions (WxHxD):	340x1060x340mm
Weight:	50 kg pr.
Prices:	From £5000/pair

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