

Compact Impact

DETAILS



ART Stiletto



£995 (pair)



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Easy to place



Limited bass extension

From the family business that brought us Systemdek turntables comes the ART Stiletto, a stab at the compact, lounge-friendly loudspeaker. **David Allcock** wonders if it shows the competition a clean pair of heels...



ABOVE: the 960mm-high Stiletto, with and without grille

ABOVE: Stiletto stands on a 30mm plinth

Following on from its extraordinary Skibo system (May 2004) ART Loudspeakers sought to develop a more conventional looking loudspeaker, one that would be at home in smaller living rooms and unobtrusive while still offering many of the sonic qualities of the larger Skibo. The result is the Stiletto.

In terms of unobtrusive design, the Stiletto is leagues ahead of the competition, making the slim Onyx Rocket RS 550 and even the Elac 270.2 seem bulky by comparison. In fact, none of the stand-mounted speakers I've encountered over the past five years can match the Stiletto's ultra compact footprint. The Stiletto measures only 140 x 960 x 160mm (whd)

and weighs a friendly 12kg, yet is very solid, and well braced internally, eliciting only a minimal response from the knuckle rap test. It uses a 25mm Peerless soft-dome tweeter with a precision horn-loaded faceplate and 96mm SEAS mid/bass driver in a 5½ litre enclosure.

The Stiletto is a compact two-way system using a first-order crossover, and this combination of compact dimensions and simple crossover made placement easy. The cabinets worked within 60cm of the side wall and 75cm of the rear wall. They would even go as close as 30cm to the rear wall without destroying the soundstage depth and causing the midrange to become opaque

over-emphasised in the lower midrange, a sure sign a speaker is too close to the rear wall. This versatility is to be applauded: with today's smaller houses, all too often the audio system has to share space in the living room, and this flexibility in

placing and ability to work close to a rear wall is critical in such circumstances. The Stiletto can be bi-wired, too, and like every speaker so far encountered, it sounded superior with shorting strips removed and run with two cables a side.

The speakers required 75 hours running to get them performing truly at their optimal level, and once run they opened up and started to show their true colours. However, until then the bass was somewhat tight and constricted with the high frequencies showing little real air.

BASS SURPRISE

Once run in, after about 75 hours use to get them performing optimally, the first surprise was the bass – not just the quantity, but its quality and extension. No speaker employing a 96mm bass driver in a relatively diminutive cabinet (and part filled with sand) is going to be a party animal capable of structural damage, but the bass this speaker produced was much better than anticipated, with far greater solidity and extension than one would expect.

Given a densely-mixed album such as Jewel's *0304*, not only was the main bass line from 'Intuition' highly tuneful with very good timing, but it suffered very little overhang. Just a touch of curtailment on the decay and the lack of energy transmitted into the room were the only clues the sound was emanating from such small boxes – especially impressive as I'd switched to the Stiletto straight after using the Hyperion

SYSTEM USED

Shanling SCD-T200 SACD player; Musical Fidelity X-Ray V3 CD player (used as a standalone player and transport for MF Tri-Vista 21 DAC); Basis Gold Debut turntable/Graham 2.0 arm and Benz Glider L2 Reference cartridge

Musical Fidelity X-80 integrated amp; Shanling STP-80 integrated amp; Bryston 3B-SST stereo amp with Krell KRC-3 pre amp

Onyx Rocket RS550 Mk II; PMC GB-1; Hyperion Sound Design HPS-938

Atlas Elektra and Chord Company Signature Interconnects; Chord Company Signature and Townshend Audio Isolda DCT bi-wire speaker cables

All source equipment was powered through Isotek Orion mains filters with amplification powered by Isotek Titan; all mains cables were Isotek Elite

Sound Design HPS-938, where each speaker sports a pair of 200mm bass drivers in a cabinet with over three times the volume of the Stiletto.

When asked to produce a large quantity of bass, as is called for on the remixed version of 'Oxygene 4' from Jean Michel Jarre, the Stiletto didn't become unruly or uncontrolled – it simply reached its natural lower limit and then rolled off quite rapidly in room, allowing the music to be enjoyed without calling attention to the lack of absolute extension and slam.

While it may give away a little bass performance to its peers, from the lower midrange and up, this speaker can happily take on the very best up to £2000. The combination of the simple crossover network, the excellent tweeter and the lightweight mid/bass driver made for a midrange that was utterly sublime, with Rosie Vela's rich vocals having a smooth, effortless presentation

'Subtle horn loading of the tweeter assisted overall efficiency of the design and also helped dispersion, allowing listening off-axis'

you could listen to for hours without fatigue.

HIGHER FREQUENCIES

The Stiletto was capable of bringing out the most subtle intonation and shifts in phrasing – bettering the lightning fast Elac 207.2 in this area and giving the likes of the Acoustic Energy AE1 Mk III a run for its money – without ever giving the listener the feeling they are

WHAT WE LISTENED TO

- Jewel, 0304, (CD) [Atlantic 83638-2]
- Rosie Vela, Zazu (LP) [A&M Records AMA 5016]
- Jean Michel-Jarre, Aero (CD) [Warner Music 825646 185122]



being assaulted by a speaker desperately trying to prove its high-resolution credentials. The Stiletto had a wonderfully natural presentation in the midrange that allowed the music and performance to speak for themselves, with the Stiletto simply getting out of the way – a feat far more difficult than it may first appear.

The upper registers were as accomplished as the midrange. The subtle horn loading of the

tweeter were kept under control without curtailing their contribution to the overall mix. While the Stiletto was just a touch slower sounding than the Elac 207.2, you could still hear the distinctive contribution to the note of the initial impact, followed by the metallic sheen of the cymbal, which then was permitted the time to dissipate before the next note was played, allowing each note to exist in its own space, precisely placed on the soundstage without splashiness, aggression or hardening. This suggests the tweeter was working well within its abilities in this implementation.

In fact, I always ran out of travel on the bass driver long before any kind of sonic aberration could be heard from the tweeter.

SOUNDSTAGE

Much like the very best stand-mount two-way speakers, the Stiletto has mastered the art of vanishing into the soundstage, leaving only the music behind. But what makes the Stiletto stand out is its ability, like the Totem Hawk (March 2003), of being able to do so without needing precise placement to the millimetre.

While its size and limits on bass extension preclude

ALSO CONSIDER

- PMC GB1, £1145 [Oct '04] – slightly deeper and taller, its use of a transmission-line gives the GB1 extra bass extension, increased power handling and a larger scale presentation, the trade-off being a speaker that requires more precise room positioning to give of its best, and more power as it needs solid-state power to control it.
- Elac 207.2, £999 [April '05] – needs not only meticulous placement, but also a powerful amplifier due to lower efficiency.
- Onix Rocket RS550 Mk II, £700 [Aug '05] – a stunning speaker at only £700 but substantially larger and heavier than the others mentioned. Very powerful bass performance, but needs to be kept well clear of side walls and doesn't quite have the midrange and HF delicacy of the Stiletto.

a vast soundstage being presented, the stage was still laterally extended far beyond the edges of the speakers and fully encompassed the full width of the room, with only a slightly shallower stage depth betraying the speakers' smaller size. Placement of images on the stage, again much like a stand-mounted two-way, was excellent, with clear delineation of each musician and only a subtle loss of absolute solidity at the stage extremes.

With its ease of placement you don't have to pull the Stiletto out every time you want to hear it working at even close to its best. The ability to deliver a large, precise soundstage with excellent balance from top to bottom while conveniently located near a wall is one that will be appreciated by many, and will allow far more music to be enjoyed more of the time without having to wait for the children and partner to be out, and that's a benefit which is not lost on me. □

TECHNOLOGY

The Stiletto cabinet is manufactured from 18mm MDF and has an effective volume of just 5½ litres, with three litres being loaded with sand to give some extra mass and improve stability. The tweeter is the same Peerless soft-dome 25mm design used in the Stiletto's big brother, the Skibo, that has been modified to ART Loudspeakers' precise requirements. It is loaded with a mounting plate, which in the Skibo was mounted on an unusual stand above the main cabinet, but in this case has been set into the cabinet, time aligning the magnet assemblies of the midrange and tweeter. The bass/midrange unit is a '120mm' SEAS CA12RCY, a driver with only 6.1g moving mass and a frequency response extending to around 4.5kHz. It is only slightly less efficient than the Peerless tweeter, and the combination was selected to permit the use of a very simple first-order crossover. Overall sensitivity is given as 88dB/W.

THE REPORT

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

ART Loudspeakers has tackled the £1000 speaker market with its own individuality, and the Stiletto is a surefire winner in my eyes. ART is to be congratulated on this excellent, realistically priced, real-world design, and I'm happy to recommend this well-conceived and very well-executed loudspeaker.