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Accuracy, truth, high fidelity. These terms are often applied, in one way or another, to components that do not alter the signal fed them to any noticeable degree. The attainment of this level of performance is the ultimate goal of the audiophile quest — theoretically, it will help the audiophile enjoy the most satisfaction when listening to music. How such a high level of accuracy is arrived at is another subject altogether, and one debated by audio manufacturers, consumers, and reviewers alike.

When I decided to review a loudspeaker from YG Acoustics, I was almost intimidated by the coming task. Well, not really, but I was reminded of Jack Nicholson's character, Col. Nathan Jessep, in *A Few Good Men*: “You can't *handle* the truth,” he proclaimed. It has also been said that *the truth hurts*, and that *the truth will set you free*. Many different thoughts about truth are floating around out there. But how the concept of *truth* applies to a loudspeaker is an interesting proposition.

In “Searching for the Extreme: YG Acoustics,” I interviewed Mr. YG himself, Yoav Geva, in hopes of learning about the process he uses in designing YG Acoustics loudspeakers. The experience was enlightening; it would be a good idea to re-read that article before digesting this review. But if you've seen any of YGA's ads, you'll know that there's never been any question about the company's design *goal* of truthfulness to the source. I wondered if YGA's claims of accuracy — in effect, they say they make the most accurate loudspeaker available — were true. And if they were, I wondered if that accuracy would translate to musical satisfaction in my listening room. After spending some time with the YGA Kipod Studio (\$38,000 USD/pair), I have some answers, and a few thoughts, on the subject.

Kipod Studio

The Kipod Studio is a two-piece, floorstanding loudspeaker that is fairly compact (41”H x 12”W x 17”D) and weighs 104 pounds. Technically, it's a two-way monitor that sits atop an optional subwoofer; together they comprise the Kipod Studio. The Main Module incorporates a 1” Vifa ring-radiator tweeter and a 5.25” Scan-Speak midrange-woofer. The subwoofer section consists of an 8” Scan-Speak woofer powered by an internal Hypex amplifier that YGA rates at 200W. The cabinet is built of aluminum panels fastened together with machine screws. Tapping on the cabinet produced no audible ringing, which suggested that YGA uses some form of internal damping. I would later find out that they don't. The cabinet's apparent inertness is due to “accurate optimization and dimensioning of the enclosure parts.” The Kipod's metal “grille” is more accurately described as a six-legged metal spider, to be affixed to the drivers' attaching machine screws; the spider does nothing to keep dust or sunlight away from the drivers, but it will help stop an inadvertent foot or hand from banging into a cone.

Yoav Geva claims some incredibly impressive specs for the Kipod Studio: a frequency-response deviation of less than 0.7dB from 20Hz to 20kHz; less than 0.2dB difference from the left channel to the right; near-zero phase difference between the mid-woofer and the tweeter. These numbers illustrate the importance that Geva places on the measurement process, which, he says, is a prime differentiator between him and other designers. YG Acoustics' loudspeakers are reportedly designed with proprietary measurement software developed by Geva himself, instead of the off-the-shelf software that, he says, virtually every other manufacturer uses. The Kipod Studio, along with every other YGA speaker, has a customized crossover built especially for it by Geva, to ensure that each unit matches the theoretical ideal as closely as possible.

Another difference between YG Acoustics and many other manufacturers: As you move up the YGA line, the company claims that you don't get *better* sound, but you do get *more* sound. The specs and intended sound quality of the Kipod Studio, according to Geva, are exactly the same as those of the much larger, more expensive Anat Reference

YG Acoustics Kipod Studio Loudspeakers

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Professional (\$92,000/pair). What the Anat will do better than the Kipod is play louder, which makes it more suitable for larger rooms and higher playback levels.

Setting up the Kipod Studios required a bit more than just hooking up the speaker cables. The preferred configuration is to run the Main Modules full-range and powered directly from your amplifier, like any other speaker. The subwoofers require a line-level connection from your preamp, and of course each sub must be plugged into a wall outlet. On the sub are several controls, for adjusting crossover frequency, phase, and bass boost, and the manual comes with a drawing of the sub's control panel with the default settings clearly illustrated. Small deviations from these default settings may be necessary for various rooms, but I had no problem getting excellent performance right from the start with the default settings and moderate toe-in of the speakers. Later on, I found that a slight bass boost at around 50Hz helped cure a shallow recess in this area.

Sound

Listening to Sonny Rollins play "I'm an Ol' Cowhand," on *The Contemporary Records Story* [CD, Contemporary 4441], gave me the first clues of what I was in store for. The Kipod Studios presented a very high level of instrumental separation, almost like what I've heard from the best multichannel music systems, in which each speaker produces a discrete instrument. As reproduced by the Kipod Studios, each instrument inhabited its own unique space in my room. This, coupled with the speakers' spot-on tonal accuracy, made the music sound very close to live in my room. In fact, the sound somewhat shocked me on first hearing, and whetted my appetite for more.

Continuing to explore the Kipods' amazing ability to sort through music, I pulled out a toughie: Chris Jones' "No Sanctuary Here," from *Roadhouses & Automobiles* [CD, Stockfisch SFR 357 6027 2], has several concurrent bass lines — instrumental and vocal — that can meld into one when played back through a lesser system. The Kipods allowed me to follow every note of each bass line without any blurring of low-frequency separation and leading edges. Nor was there any discontinuity in the transition from the midrange to the upper bass. The Kipod's powered subwoofer section sounded quite agile and quick, and seamlessly integrated with the Main Module.

Conductor Eiji Que's rendition of Copland's *Fanfare for the Common Man* [CD, Reference RR-93CD] is a dramatic performance, to say the least. As reproduced in my room, the power and drama of this classic piece came through with flying colors. Yoav Geva makes a point of telling potential customers that the Kipod will deliver all of the accuracy and sound quality of his larger models, just not at the same amplitude. With the impact in *Fanfare*, you need a full-range speaker to experience the music as it was intended to be experienced. The Kipod Studios had no problem playing back this recording at fairly boisterous levels. The Kipod Studios got all the parts right — including the drums — which made the whole sound just as it should.

I did test YGA's claim of limited loudness by pushing the little Kipod Studios quite hard, just to see how far they would go. Though surprised at how loud it could ultimately play, I did finally find its limit when I asked it to play simultaneously loud and low. On Bruno Coulais' "Norbu," from *Himalaya* [CD, Virgin 8 48478 2], I was amazed at the Kipod's ability to reproduce the bass drum with incredible dexterity. The soundwave from the drum didn't just envelop me, but rolled from the front of the room, through my listening seat, and then on behind me. That sense of rolling bass was so real that I felt as if I could point out in the room exactly where the sound was at each precise moment. It was only when I adjusted the volume just a *touch* too high that the woofers put out sounds of distress in the form of some ugly distortion. I didn't encounter this problem with any other music, but I suppose you do pay a price in terms of loudness to get this system to play down to 20Hz.

YG Acoustics Kipod Studio Loudspeakers

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Speakers:

Wilson Audio Specialties WATT/Puppy 8

Amplifier:

Vitus Audio SS-101, Anthem AVM 30
(to drive the YGAs' powered subwoofers)

Source:

Esoteric UX-3SE

Cables and power conditioning:

Shunyata Research Antares interconnects,
Orion speaker cables,
Hydra V-Ray power conditioner

The Kipod Studios' depth of soundstage was extraordinary. Images of performers were life-sized and palpable, and they could throw a *scary*-real image of a vocalist. Sara K.'s "If I Could Sing Your Blues," from her live *No Cover* album [CD, Chesky 185], might as well have been performed right in my room. K. sounded reach-out-and-touch-you real. Examining *why* the Kipods were so good in this area was a fascinating exercise. I concluded that three things had to be in place for this type of vocal-imaging magic to happen: the voice had to be precisely positioned, exactly the correct size, and with flawless midrange purity. The Kipods did all three perfectly.

Britten's *Festival Te Deum*, as performed by the Westminster Choir directed by Joseph Flummerfelt, on *The Ultimate Demonstration Disc* [CD, Chesky 95], was also something special. The Kipod Studios were remarkable for their imaging of this track, possessing the most pinpoint-accurate imaging of any pair of speakers I've ever had in my room — in fact, they imaged as accurately as any speaker I've ever heard anywhere. I've heard soundstages that were wider and grander, but never ones in which images *within* the confines of the soundstage were more accurately placed. The Kipods were truly holographic in their presentation of choral music. I could hear *precisely* where each singer was located in space.

The only weakness I noted — and only when I compared the Kipod Studio to some other speakers that have particular strengths in this area — was the YGA's inability to move enough air in the midbass to sock me in the stomach while reproducing a drum kit. For instance, an old standby, the Dave Matthews Band's "Say Goodbye," from *Crash* [CD, RCA 66904-2], opens with a deftly performed drum solo that's tight, fast, and impactful. The Kipod got 90% of the way there, but just failed to hit hard enough to make the drums sound completely tangible at realistic volume levels. But very few speakers that don't have very large woofers can reproduce this track with all of its impact intact.

Comparison

A natural competitor of the Kipod Studio is the Wilson Audio Specialties WATT/Puppy 8 (\$27,900/pair). The similarities are striking: both are three-way, two-piece, stackable designs. Both are intended to be run full-range, but small enough to fit into most rooms with some ease. But while both manufacturers have attempted to surpass industry standards in addressing cabinet resonances, one of the main physical differences between these speakers is the materials used for their cabinets: The WATT/Puppy 8 is built of Wilson's M and X materials, which they claim have superior resonance-suppressing characteristics, and is finished in a high-gloss automotive paint of the buyer's choice, while the YGA is made of natural brushed-aluminum panels, precision-cut with a CNC machine. The Kipod Studio, for its \$10,000 upcharge, does include a powered bass section, as opposed to the 8's fully passive design. I find both speakers visually attractive while being unlikely to dominate any environment in which they're placed. They're both head-turners, in a positive sense.

The differences in the speakers' sound were more striking. The Kipod Studio played lower in the bass. I got a response that was mighty close to 20Hz, whereas the WATT/Puppy 8 seemed to fall off around or just below 30Hz — not a huge difference, but enough to matter with some music. The Kipods were also the sharper imagers, with the ability to etch the most clearly defined images I've ever heard in my room. The Kipod's highs were also a touch more extended and detailed, which gave cymbals a shimmer that I've rarely heard with any other speaker. The Wilsons countered with more midbass punch, which gave weight and dynamic underpinning to music such as well-recorded rock. This physicality is something I've grown accustomed to, and is quite important to me. The 8s could also play louder without strain — unlike with the YGAs, I've never reached the Wilsons' output-capability

YG Acoustics Kipod Studio Loudspeakers

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limits in my room. Whether these differences sway you to one side or another will depend not only on your sonic priorities, but on the music you listen to, and at what volume.

The Kipod Studios and the WATT/Puppy 8s both offered fantastic performance in my room. I never felt I was missing anything while listening to either. In fact, I remember remarking to myself, while listening to each pair, that *This is some of the best sound I've ever heard*. So although there were sonic differences, both speakers were, at the end of the day, very enjoyable. Each is a thoroughbred with much to admire and very little to fault.

Conclusion

There is no question in my mind that the YG Acoustics Kipod Studio is one of the most-thoroughly well-designed loudspeakers available, regardless of price. It sounds better than most of what I've heard, and ranks among the top three speakers I've had in my home. My advice would be that if your room is the size of mine or smaller, and you have the cash, you simply *must* hear this speaker. If you have a bigger room and more money, YGA has larger models for you to explore. There are some mighty fine competitors in the überspeaker market, and now there is another. I loved listening to my music collection through the Kipod Studio. If this is the sound of accuracy, I want more of it. And that's the *truth*.

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