

# EQUIPMENT REPORT

## YG Acoustics Kipod Studio Loudspeaker

The Best Loudspeaker on Earth?

Robert Harley

**Y**G Acoustics is a relatively young company (founded in 2002) that has made quite a splash in the upper end of the loudspeaker market. The firm has attracted some fervent supporters along with much controversy surrounding its key marketing slogan, "The Best Loudspeaker on Earth. Period." This statement, along with the products' pricing and unusual build, tends to polarize audiophiles.

The Kipod Studio reviewed here is YG's least expensive full-range loudspeaker, priced at \$38,000 per pair. The Kipod Studio's design brief was to bring the same level of performance found in YG's \$107,000 Anat Professional to a more compact design, with the only trade-offs being bass extension and maximum playback volume.

The Kipod Studio is a two-piece system: The Kipod Main Module is coupled to a woofer enclosure that also serves as a stand for the Main Module. The Main Module is a small two-way speaker in a sealed enclosure that is available on its own for \$17,000 per pair. The Kipod Main Module is transformed into the Kipod Studio with the addition of the \$21,000-per-pair woofer, which can be ordered with or without integral power amplifiers (the price is the same). In my mind, the Kipod Studio is a single loudspeaker system that happens to be housed in two enclosures. Indeed, the Kipod Main Module bolts to the woofer enclosure to form a single structure. Nonetheless, one can buy the Kipod Main Module and later add the woofer for the same price as purchasing both together.

The sealed woofer module has a truncated pyramid shape that houses a 9" ScanSpeak woofer in the front and an amplifier panel in the rear. This panel has a variety of controls for tuning the system to a room. These include woofer level, crossover frequency, equalization frequency, and equalization level. Single-ended and balanced line-level inputs are provided. The line-level input is fed from a second output from your preamplifier. Note that



your preamp needs two main stereo outputs, one to drive the woofer modules and one to drive your main power amplifiers. The integral power amplifiers, designed specifically for this particular woofer, are rated at 400W.

The enclosures are made entirely of aluminum panels, machined and finished in YG's Colorado factory (see sidebar). The Main Module's ScanSpeak-sourced 6" midrange driver is crossed over to the tweeter at 1.75kHz with a fourth-order slope. The crossover components are as good as they get—the ultra-expensive Raimund Mundorf capacitors and inductors. Each driver is measured and the crossover hand-tuned to a specific set of drivers. YG keeps these measurements on file so that if you need a replacement driver it can supply one of identical characteristics.

The crossovers are designed using a program YG founder Yoav Geva wrote that is based on an algorithm he developed for another field that reportedly allows simultaneous optimization of the frequency and time domains. That is, the loudspeaker's amplitude response is flat and its phase response is uniform. YG claims that the Kipod Studio has a phase uniformity of  $\pm 5^\circ$ . This means that the disparate drivers move in unison in response to a musical signal.

A machined-aluminum waveguide around the Vifa ring-radiator tweeter controls the tweeter's dispersion. The Main Module can be ordered with single-wire or bi-wire connection. The review samples were supplied with bi-wire connections. Incidentally, I replaced the stock jumpers with a pair from Kimber (Kimber Select KF9033 jumpers) and heard a reduction in grain and a small increase in transparency.

Although the woofer module is available in passive or active configurations, virtually every customer opts for the active version—and for good reason, in my view. An active woofer has many advantages, the main one being the removal of passive crossover parts from the high-level signal path between an amplifier and the woofer's voice coil. A crossover's low-pass section that feeds the woofer typically uses a large series inductor; its removal allows the amplifier to better drive and control the woofer. Second, an active woofer relieves your main power amplifier of the burden of driving the woofer. Third, a powered woofer can be equalized to deliver deeper extension than would be possible from a passively driven woofer. That's the case with the Kipod Studio; the system is flat to 20Hz despite the small footprint and compact dimensions. Fourth, a powered woofer offers the ability to control the woofer level to best match your room. Finally, the integral amplifier can be designed specifically for the impedance curve it will be asked to drive.

Interestingly, the Main Module is run

full-range. That is, there's no high-pass filter to keep bass out of the Main Module's 6" driver. The idea is to achieve the purity of a two-way mini-monitor with the bass extension of a floorstanding three-way. Nonetheless, the 6" driver's excursion will be the limiting factor in the system's macro-dynamic capabilities. It is, however, loaded in a rather small sealed enclosure which helps limit its excursion. For those who want higher sound-pressure levels, YG makes a Main Module Subsonic Filter that keeps low bass out of the Main Module, but presumably at the expense of ultimate transparency.

The Kipod Studio doesn't carry a specified frequency response—the literature states that it delivers "useable output from 20Hz to above 40kHz" and that frequency-response deviations are limited to  $\pm 0.7\text{dB}$  "in the audible band." Note that the upper-midrange and treble balance is somewhat dependent on the speaker's rake angle—it can be tilted back to varying degrees by how far the front or rear spikes are inserted. Sensitivity is a moderate 87dB and the impedance is 8 ohms nominal, 5 ohms minimum, suggesting that the system should not present a difficult load to a power amplifier. The 100-watt Pass Labs XA100.5 monoblocks were plenty of power for the Kipod Studio.

**Listening**

Dick Diamond of YG Acoustics set up the Kipod Studio in my listening room, as he does for many YG customers. Setup, placement, and tuning were surprisingly quick and easy, partly

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### Inside the YG Acoustics Factory

I visited YG Acoustics' factory in the Denver suburb of Arvada, Colorado, last year for a firsthand look at how these loudspeakers are made. I learned that Yoav Geva, YG Acoustics' founder, based the loudspeakers' design on an analog application of a digital-signal-processing algorithm he developed that allowed simultaneous optimization of signals in the amplitude and time domains. When used in loudspeakers, this technique reportedly results in flat frequency response and nearly perfect phase response. The "Best Loudspeaker on Earth" claim stems from what YG claims is the flattest frequency response and best phase response of any loudspeaker.

YG builds the loudspeakers from scratch inside its 6000-square-foot, seven-employee factory. The enclosures are all made from solid sheets of aircraft-grade aluminum. (The baffles of the Anat Main Module and the tweeter ring of the Kipod are ballistic-grade aluminum, which has some titanium in it.) YG owns the very expensive (and reportedly top-of-the-line) milling and grinding machines for working the metal. Raw aluminum sheets, some of them weighing three-quarters of a ton, are moved via an overhead crane system. The panels that make up the enclosure are cut and drilled, and then ground to create the finish you see on the final product. The panels are then anodized by an outside facility.

One model loudspeaker is built at a time with drivers

that have been individually tested and measured. The data on each driver are archived so that if a customer needs a replacement driver, one of nearly identical characteristics can be substituted. Each speaker's crossover is tuned to match the set of drivers going into the enclosure. The crossovers use the huge (and extraordinarily expensive) Mundorf capacitors and inductors. The Kipod's two cone drivers are sourced from ScanSpeak and are either custom-made for YG or re-built by YG to its specifications. The tweeter in the Anat, for example, uses a diaphragm from Germany and ScanSpeak's motor structure, with final assembly performed in YG's factory.

The facility felt more like a craft shop than an industrial factory. There was a perfectionist attitude toward every aspect of production, and the pace was slow and deliberate. The metalwork was exquisite.

In addition to the Kipod reviewed here, YG makes the Anat Reference II line that begins with the \$33k Anat Main Module. As with the Kipod, the Anat Main Module can be used on its own or mounted on a woofer. This configuration is the \$70k Anat Reference II Studio, and can be ordered with a passive or actively powered woofer (the price is the same). The top-of-the-line is the Anat Reference II Professional, which adds a second woofer enclosure and is priced at \$107k.

because of the ability to adjust the bass from the rear-panel controls. There wasn't the usual struggle between the loudspeaker and the room; the Kipod Studio's low bass and midbass integrated easily and perfectly. The loudspeakers ended up very close to where I've positioned the last few speakers I've auditioned, the Revel Salon2, Magico V3, and Wilson X-2.

I had heard the Kipod Studio at the 2008 Rocky Mountain Audio Fest and thought it was one of the show's highlights. In fact, the Kipod Studio in a small hotel room showed better than YG's Anat Professional in the cavernous acoustic nightmares that are the ballrooms at The Venetian hotel. The Kipod Studio struck me as having tremendous clarity and dynamics, with an almost horn-like presence and "jump-factor" dynamics, but without typical horn colorations.

That initial impression was consistent with my observations after living with this loudspeaker for the past two months. The Kipod Studio's sound was extraordinarily quick, clean, detailed, and "alive." It was also an extremely transparent and revealing loudspeaker that laid bare changes in electronics, cabling, setup, AC quality, and source deficiencies. The Kipod Studio walked a fine line between resolution of musical detail and sounding analytical. Consequently, it should be matched with high-quality associated components, preferably those that favor warmth and ease.

With the right electronics, the Kipod was capable of an enormously appealing and captivating sound. It disappeared in the sense that it was a transparent window on the music, with extremely low coloration. I heard an immediacy and presence, yet the overall presentation wasn't forward, spotlighted in the midrange, or colored in other ways that foster a sense of life but quickly become fatiguing. Rather, the Kipod Studio achieved its lifelike vitality by imposing so little of itself on the music.

This quality was, I concluded, not just the result of the Kipod's lack of tonal colorations in the midband, but of its transient quickness and coherence. Leading edges of notes seemed to jump out of the presentation with startling speed, much the way horn loudspeakers reproduce music's dynamic structure. Transient information had a coherence that was world-class; although highly resolving of dynamic shadings, transients never degenerated into mere noise. Instead, I heard percussion instruments, acoustic guitar, and other transient-rich instruments rendered with a completely natural and organic quality that was the antithesis of "hi-fi." This quality is the Kipod Studio's greatest strength—the ability to sound highly resolving and alive without a trace of fatigue-inducing etch. Many loudspeakers sound "detailed" during a brief listen and then become fatiguing. The tell-tale sign of such a speaker is a sense of relief when the music is turned down or off. Not the Kipod; its resolution was musically authentic, not an artifact, which allowed very long listening sessions.

I was greatly taken by the Kipod Studio's reproduction of brass and woodwinds, particularly trumpet and saxophone. The speaker was able to convey the "blat" and bite of these instruments' timbres (they are rich in upper harmonics) but without glare or shrillness. Check out the superb (and superbly recorded) DVD-Audio title *XXL* from Gordon Goodwin's Big Phat Band for a great example of this quality. Much of what we find unpleasant in a trumpet reproduced at realistic levels is not

the instrument itself, but rather the distortion components that make it seem louder than it actually is. The Kipod Studio rendered these instruments with a full measure of upper-midrange energy that gave them a lifelike immediacy with no trace of hardness.

This performance was realized, however, only with very clean-sounding sources, electronics, and cables. The Pass Labs XA100.5 amplifiers were an ideal match, with their gorgeous rendering of timbre and lack of solid-state artifacts. Similarly, the Kipod much preferred the Air Tight PC-1 Supreme phono cartridge over the "hotter" Dynavector XV-1s. Note that I'm not suggesting that the Kipod needed "soft" electronics and sources to compensate for an overly bright presentation (it wasn't bright), but rather that this loudspeaker was so revealing that it uncovered any flaws in source or electronics. (This is probably why show demonstrations of YG products have been so variable.) Indeed, the Kipod Studio thrived on a very clean and resolved source, such as high-resolution files played back on my fan-less, drive-less PC-based music server feeding a Berkeley Alpha DAC. This loudspeaker reached down to the lowest signal levels and to the farthest reaches of the soundstage to bring that information to the listener's attention. My caveat earlier about the Kipod Studio walking a fine line between resolution and sounding analytical

## SPECS & PRICING

**Type:** Three-way dynamic loudspeaker  
**Driver complement:** 6" midrange, ring-radiator tweeter (main module); 9" woofer (woofer module)  
**Woofer module amplifier power:** 400W RMS  
**Impedance:** 8 ohms nominal, 5 ohms minimum  
**Sensitivity:** 87dB  
**Cabinet:** Aircraft-grade aluminum; tweeter ring is ballistic-grade aluminum  
**Dimension:** 7" x 16" x 13" (main module); 12" x 41" x 17" (woofer)  
**Weight:** 40 lbs. each (main module); 64 lbs. each (woofer)  
**Price:** \$38,000 per pair

**YG ACOUSTICS LLC**  
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 Arvada, CO 80002  
 yg-acoustics.com

**ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT**  
 Basis 2800 Signature turntable with Basis Vector 4 tonearm, Dynavector XV-1S and Air Tight PC-1 Supreme cartridges, Aesthetix Rhea and Rhea Signature phonostages; PC-based music server (built by Goodwin's High-End), Classé Audio CDP-502 CD/DVD-A player, Berkeley Audio Design Alpha DAC, Pass Labs X20 preamplifier; Pass Labs XA100.5 power amplifiers; MIT Oracle MA interconnects; MIT Oracle MA loudspeaker cables; Running Springs Audio Dmitri, Shunyata Hydra-8, Hydra-2, and V-Ray AC conditioners, Shunyata Anaconda, Python, and King Cobra CX AC cables; Shunyata Dark Field cable elevators; room custom designed and built, acoustic design and computer modeling by Norm Varney of AV RoomService, acoustic treatment and installation by Acoustic Room Systems (now part of CinemaTech)

applies not to highly detailed sources, but rather to etch or brightness in the associated electronics. In short, if you feed the Kipod Studio a clean and detailed signal, you'll be rewarded by a presentation that is richly filigreed and immensely involving.

The Kipod Studio's bass was notable for its tuneful quality in the midbass along with extremely deep extension, the latter thanks to the integral amplifier and equalization circuit that pushes the woofer harder below its natural roll-off frequency. Even organ pedal tones were well served by the Kipod Studio, provided that the playback level was kept moderate. The bass had a consistent character throughout the entire range, and mated seamlessly to the midrange. The texture of acoustic bass was beautifully rendered, with a satisfying combination of warmth and agility. On bass-heavy recordings the Main Module's midrange driver limited the playback level because of excessive excursion; the upper-bass became loose and uncontrolled. Keep the playback level moderate, however, and all is well.

Just as the midrange had tremendous clarity without sounding forward, the Kipod Studio's treble was alive, open, and present yet never overbearing. The top end was musically vivid without being sonically vivid. In addition, the treble was exquisitely detailed, with fine resolution of nuances and inner detail. Delicate brush work on a drum kit, for example, had real detail that conveyed the mechanism by which the sound was made rather than merely sounding like a high-frequency noise. Cymbals were notable for the sense of delicacy, and of being surrounded by air.

The Kipod Studio's soundstaging was commensurate with the rest of its performance—tight, precisely defined, and tangible. Images floated independently of the loudspeakers just as one would expect from a mini-monitor. The loudspeaker's tremendous midrange and treble transparency helped in creating the impression of a "see-through" quality that allowed very low-level sounds at the back of the hall (including spatial cues) to be rendered with great resolution. The overall presentation was highly revealing of the hall's size and characteristics, but not hugely expansive. The soundstage was wide, deep, and transparent, but had less height and sense of envelopment than I'm used to hearing. I had, however, been listening to the Wilson X-2 for the previous 18 months. No doubt this impression is the result of the Kipod Studio's much smaller physical size that puts the drivers at ear level rather than considerably above ear level.

As much as I enjoyed the Kipod Studio, I have one serious reservation about its performance, particularly relative to its considerable price—it is limited in playback level and macro-dynamics. Timpani and other high-level, low-frequency transients caused the 6" midrange to produce a "popping" sound (the back of the voice-coil former hitting the magnet) when its

excursion limits were exceeded. A related phenomenon was a tendency for the upper-bass to lose definition and sound flabby with a combination of high-ish playback levels and the presence of low-bass in the music. The low-bass caused high midrange-driver excursion that colored the midbass. All loudspeakers have such limitations, and typically the higher the price, the louder the system will play without strain. Judged from one perspective, the Kipod Studio is quite expensive considering its inability to reproduce orchestral climaxes with ease at realistic levels.

**Conclusion**

The YG Acoustics Kipod Studio is an extraordinary loudspeaker, but one that won't satisfy all listeners. In a moderately sized room, fed by high-quality electronics, and played at reasonable levels, it is world-class. Its ability to vividly bring music to life through dynamic expression without becoming analytical is extraordinarily compelling. This is a vital aspect of music reproduction, and one at which the Kipod Studio excels.

If, however, you want to play orchestral music at full-tilt, or have a large room, or cannot invest in high-quality electronics and sources, the Kipod Studio probably isn't your best choice. YG's solution for larger rooms and for higher playback levels is the Anat Reference II series. The Kipod Studio is a specialized loudspeaker that maximizes transparency, transient accuracy, soundstaging, resolution, and tonal purity within certain limitations of room size and playback level. But when playing within those parameters, the Kipod Studio is utterly magical. **tm**

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## YG Acoustics Founder Yoav Geva Talks with Robert Harley

### How did you get into loudspeaker design?

I was 15 or 16, and bought my first stereo system—a Sony CD player, Sony integrated amp, and a pair of Bose speakers. I wasn't too happy with the speakers, so I asked my father what I should do. He told me I had two options: One was to work more, save more money, and buy better speakers; the other one was to build my own speakers. He knew that I liked to tinker with stuff and said that if I were to build my own speakers, he would be happy to supply me with the books and materials necessary to do it. So, of course, I chose that option and started to build speakers as a hobby.

### Did you make speakers continuously from that time until you started YG Acoustics?

Yes, it was always a hobby.

### When you started YG, why did you decide to make the enclosures from aluminum panels?

The first-generation speaker actually had an MDF cabinet. I ended up using aluminum for the insert around the tweeter because there was just no way to machine that complex shape out of wood. I really liked what it did in terms of preventing the front baffle from vibrating. The second-generation speaker already had the entire front baffle made of aluminum, and the body was still a combination of MDF and plywood. That sounded much better—the images started to float better in space.

I decided to go full-bore and do everything out of aluminum, and haven't looked back since. It allows you to machine things more accurately than you would with a soft material, such as wood. So you have a speaker that has a better production tolerance and also allows you to achieve more complex geometries inside the speaker.

### Can you talk about the crossover and your technique that result in optimized performance in the frequency and time domains?

This is really what sets us apart from other manufacturers. Most manufacturers use a piece of software called "LEAP," Loudspeaker Enclosure Analysis Program; it's a very, very good piece of software. It controls about 80% of the market. That's what nearly all manufacturers use to optimize their cabinets and crossovers. The problem with LEAP is that it allows you to optimize either frequency response or phase, but not both. What we have that's unique is software I developed that allows you to optimize both at the same time. That's why our speakers are currently the only ones on the market that offer zero relative phase (actually, plus or minus five degrees relative phase) and flat frequency response. You'll find a lot of speakers that offer one or the other. Those that offer a flat frequency response tend to sound very neutral, but sometimes a bit lifeless. Those that offer good phase have great dynamics and soundstaging, but are usually a bit colored. We're proud to be able to offer both.

### So, you actually developed this algorithm and wrote the software?

Exactly.

### And how does that manifest itself in the loudspeaker's sound?

The speaker is, first of all, very neutral because of the flat frequency response. Instruments have the same timbre that they would have in real life. And, because of the phase, the soundstage is very accurate. It's not overly big, not overly small—it is exactly as recorded. And maybe the most important thing is the dynamic pop of instruments, the absence of which to me is the number one thing that tells you immediately that you're listening to hi-fi rather than to live music. With my speakers, I have to say the dynamic pop is there as it would be in live music, since all drivers move exactly at the same time.

### What's the thinking behind the Kipod Studio, a compact \$38,000 loudspeaker?

Most speaker manufacturers create a huge, big, sophisticated flagship. But as you go lower in their price line, even if it's very expensive, you'll find products that are very big, but they might not have the same technology as the flagship. What I did was compromise on maximum volume, or size in this case, which obviously affects maximum volume. The Kipod is a speaker that is scaled down in size, but it has the same level of technology that I offer with my Anat, my flagship line. The result is a speaker that is compact and intended only for medium-sized rooms, but one that offers technology that you would otherwise have to spend \$107,000 to get.

## **So, the Kipod Studio features the same degree of execution as the \$107,000 Anat Professional, just scaled-down in size?**

It's scaled-down in size, but not compromised in technology.

## **You use powered woofers in all your designs, which is unusual in high-end audio. What do you see as the advantages of driving the woofer with an integral amplifier?**

It offers two advantages. First of all, it's room adjustable. That would be, by far, the biggest advantage. We can achieve uniform sound in pretty much any room. It's important to note, by the way, that we don't expect the customer to know how to adjust the woofer. Using a diagram of a customer's room, we can optimize the settings. The second advantage is that the main amplifier doesn't have to work as hard. The load gets shared between the woofer amplifier and your main amplifier.

The Kipod is a speaker that is scaled down in size, but it has the same level of technology that I offer with my Anat, my flagship line.

## **There's traditionally been resistance by audiophiles to powered loudspeakers.**

Some audiophiles prefer not to have it. That's why I also offer a fully-passive version of the Kipod Studio and the Anat Studio. But I think once they see the quality of the amplifier that we put in it and how the amplifier was designed specifically for our bass driver's impedance curve, that reluctance tends to go away.

## **Your literature and Web site stress the measured performance of your loudspeakers. How much can measurements tell us about speaker performance?**

Measurements can tell us everything, as long as we measure everything. It's important to note that measurements that we do at the factory, or that any designer does, are not just the six or seven graphs that you see in some magazines. We have a book containing hundreds of tests we've performed. These can describe the performance of the speaker start-to-finish—without anything missing.

## **But what role does listening play in loudspeaker development?**

Listening tells you whether you have measured everything or not. Your ears will not tell you specifically what's wrong and how to fix it. That's what measurements are used for. They are the development tool, but the ears are the best verification, because if you didn't measure something, you will still be able to hear it, and this will tell you that something is wrong. Whereas with measurements, if you didn't measure something, how would you even see that it's wrong?

## **Or how to fix it?**

We need to listen to see if something is problematic and then

find the measurement that shows you how to fix it. I doubt that from just listening, you'd know how to fix it. At least I don't. But, it tells me that I need to measure more until I find something that explains the phenomenon that I could hear.

## **Over the years I've heard your loudspeakers many times at shows, sometimes sounding wonderful and other times not so good. Is there something about your designs that make them more sensitive to the room, or associated equipment, or setup?**

Our speakers are very critical. When you have a speaker that exposes all of the nuances in a performance, you will hear very clearly any change that you do upstream. Think of it this way: If a speaker has a response deviation of plus/minus 4dB and you put in front of the speaker a cable that rolls off highs by 1dB you probably won't be able to hear it. Do the same with a speaker that's plus/minus 1dB and it will be much more apparent. Our speakers are very, very critical. With a speaker of this quality the whole system would be of very high quality and assembled quite carefully.

## **You chose not to high-pass filter the Kipod Main Module's 6" driver to keep low bass out of it. Is that because the Kipod Main Module is available separately as a stand-alone system or because you felt that the additional crossover parts would compromise the sound quality?**

It's actually both. I really like the transparency of a two-way design. It's a simple design and a lot less can go wrong when you do a simple design. That's why both the Anat and the Kipod lines are essentially two-way monitors, and then you add to them bass modules. The driver relies on mechanical filtration, meaning a sealed enclosure to protect the mid/woofer from very high excursions.

## **Doesn't that limit the system's dynamics?**

It limits the system's overall maximum sound. When you say dynamics, you could refer to two things. One is just maximum volume level, which definitely it will limit. That's why the Kipod is designed for medium-sized rooms or smaller. The Anat can handle far, far greater volumes because it has two mid/woofers. And, I would have to say with the Anat, I've never encountered the volume limits of this design approach. But when you refer to dynamics in terms of the sense of immediacy in the music, I would claim that it's very helpful to have a mid/woofer that is not blocked by a big capacitor with its own problems.

## **Tell us about your advertising slogan, "The Best Loudspeakers on Earth. Period."**

Of course, I believe it, otherwise, I wouldn't write it. But, I don't expect anyone else to believe it just because I said so. In fact, I would claim that a customer who chooses to purchase my speakers just because I claim that they are very good is not a careful enough customer. But I would expect these customers to be curious enough to decide to test my slogan for themselves to see if they agree with me. My hope would be that the customers read the slogan and say, "Yoav believes it. He tries to give scientific evidence for it in his ads. I would like to try to schedule a demo and see if I agree with him or not." tas