



Small - but perfectly formed... The Monitor Audio PL100

by Jason Kennedy

For relatively old lags like myself the Monitor Audio name will forever be associated with its charismatic founder Mo Iqbal, a larger than life character whose favourite catchphrase was 'gold domes matey', a reference to the gold anodised finish that distinguished the firm's top-line models in his day. One look at the new Platinum Line that now occupies the high ground in MA's portfolio will reveal that that phrase is no longer appropriate; there are no domes in evidence, gold or otherwise. Instead the three models in the Platinum range carry a ribbon tweeter in their luxuriously finished cabinets, marking a distinct change of direction for the company.

The Platinum series consists of the £2,300 PL100 stand-mount under consideration, the £5,000 PL300 floorstander which adds a pair of eight inch bass drivers to the PL100's bass/mid and treble units and the £2,300 PL350C three-way, four-driver centre channel. Custom designed stands are also made for the two smaller models and a pair was bolted onto the PL100s for this review; at £350 a pair-they're not cheap but they are very nicely conceived and executed. A large, sculpted ARC plinth (anti-resonance composite,

which is a polymer based material that is apparently similar to Bakelite) sits on large but shallow bullet shaped spikes that can be adjusted from above. Alternatively they can be removed leaving chunky rubber O-rings to interface



with a hard floor surface. The main column is in powder coated aluminium and has a cable routing slot in the rear that will take reasonably thick cables but probably not the sort of

thing you'd expect to use with a speaker of this price. The column is bitumen damped to kill any ringing. On top there are two steel top plates separated by chrome spacers with bolts running through them into the cabinet itself, with damping washers between cabinet and metalwork to further prevent ringing in the stand. Without spikes this stand raises the speaker 630mm off the ground, the spikes add another 25mm but will usually sink into the carpet.

The cabinet has a deep and luxurious finish on its veneered parts, equal to any other speaker this size, regardless of price, an impression underpinned by the beautifully machined and platinum plated WBT terminals on the rear and the leather upholstery on the front baffle. The veneer on this pair is Santos rosewood, but ebony is also an option. Each is coated with 11 layers of polyester lacquer to produce that deep sheen for hours of buffing pleasure. The front baffle is covered in Strathspey leather that is so uniform that the uninitiated might mistake it for the increasingly convincing leatherettes available nowadays. Look closely however and you can see variations in the grain, sniff closely and you can tell it once adorned a cow, albeit in a slightly more furry state.

The actual cabinet is made from 15 thin wooden laminates that end up ▶

▶ being 25mm thick, shaped to produce the curved sides and back panel and then internally braced. The whole cabinet is tensioned with a large bolt whose head sits between the reflex port and the terminals, the idea being that any remaining resonances can be tuned out. The front baffle is also made out of ARC, which looks like cast aluminium but doesn't have the same tendency to ring – which is quite useful.

What differentiates the Platinums from the rest of the MA range and quite a few other speakers is that ribbon tweeter. This was developed by Dean Hartley and MA's design team, and while it's based on existing technology it does differ in subtle but important ways. I asked Dean why he chose to go down this relatively difficult route, rather than picking a proven unit from an OEM supplier. By making it in-house MA can ensure consistency of production and long-term stability, as well as being able to engineer the response to fit in with the 165mm mid-bass drive unit, a pairing that means that the ribbon has to extend down to 2.5kHz, something which he found few OEM units were capable of doing. He decided to make the change to a ribbon because of a desire to achieve very high frequency extension, something that ribbons are inherently better at, the purpose being to provide a wide-band speaker that could make the most of high-resolution formats.

The mid-bass driver has to be pretty nimble to match the characteristics of the ribbon so MA developed a new

cone. This is made of a sandwich of ceramic coated aluminium/magnesium (C-CAM) either side of a Nomex honeycomb centre which provides rigidity. MA has

managed to produce a very lightweight drive unit that uses the same C-CAM material as the ribbon tweeter in its construction and is said to be significantly more rigid than a traditional metal cone.

Each drive-unit is housed in a die-cast alloy chassis. The bass mid basket curved to match the baffle. Its motor system was developed using FEA software to minimise distortion and maximise linearity and its reflex port fashioned to allow rapid, turbulence free

movement of air; standard stuff but still reassuring.

Most of the listening was conducted with a Resolution Audio Opus 21 disc spinner, a Classé CP-700 pre-amp and CA-2200 power amp, an amplifier combination whose smooth resolution and reserves of power were ideal for this open and revealing loudspeaker. While being an exceptional all-round design, where it scores over often larger and more expensive speakers is at higher frequencies, where that ribbon gives it an unfair advantage. This unit combined with the small and inert nature of the cabinet makes for superb imaging, producing instruments and voices that are in the

room and totally disconnected from the loudspeakers themselves, which is a nice trick if it can be done in an even-handed fashion. And the PL100 can; it has enough bass extension and power to create palpability and weight which underpins the mid and treble and gives great recordings the gravitas they deserve. It is not going to compete in the bass with larger speakers but you are not left wanting. Everything from a piano to a kick drum has the body that it warrants.

Rodrigo y Gabriela's *Live in Manchester and Dublin* is an album which keeps on surprising with its subtlety and realism, especially in the quieter moments deliver a vivacity and presence that is uncanny. The quality of the treble is definitely a factor here; it has a naturalness that some might find too smooth but which is in fact simply devoid of the usual problems found in dome tweeters. The rewards it brings are 'worth the candle' so to speak. This is because it has genuine speed without edginess so the leading and trailing edges of each note are properly defined without embellishment or distortion. In practice this means that no matter how dense the material, if the amplifier can deliver it in one piece this speaker can reproduce it.

Robert Glasper's piano playing along with drum and bass revealed generous helpings of fine detail in the PL100's hands, the lines from all three musician's being easy to follow and separate without the result seeming overly analytical, the subtlest notes, delivering the musical message in as successful a fashion as the power chords, if not more so because there is more room for expression when the player is not trying to hit hard.

This Monitor Audio is also pretty handy with dynamics and dynamic range, being sensitive to both small and large changes in level and tracking them with ease thanks to ▶



EQUIPMENT REVIEW

▶ its fleetness of foot. Just listen to the way Gillian Welch's 'Time (The Revelator)' builds. The mid-band on this particular track can often seem a shade hard but via the PL100s this is not an issue. Instead this well-worn test track regained much of its beguiling charm. You can hear that the recording has been pushed close to the limit at some stage in its travels but the speaker stops this technicality from intruding on musical integrity.

Results inevitably hinge on the quality of the signal, more so than most because of the resolution on offer. So Burnt Friedman's dub excursions don't really hack it while Keith Jarrett's solo piano does the opposite, convincing you that it's worth putting up with his musical mannerisms to hear those fleeting glimpses of God that appear when he's in the zone. This is when this speaker's ability to show you what's happening in the quietest passages is really valuable. Loudspeakers aren't supposed to have a noise floor but the fact that one like this can deliver so much detail at such low levels would suggest otherwise.

It's qualities continued to shine with female voices including those of Rickie Lee Jones and Diana Krall, the former sounding no less nasal than usual but devoid of the strain that can appear with less capable speakers. The PL100 manages to combine remarkable openness with an effortlessness that really benefits a good recording. There is a body at high frequencies that you rarely hear and this allows female vocals to deliver captivating performances with ease.

During the course of this review I listened to a number of components from Leema including its new Stream CD player and Pulse amplifier, which seemed a good opportunity to try alternative source and amplification with the PL100. What this revealed is that the Monitor Audio is fussy

about what it's used with, the upbeat and excellently timed qualities of these c£1,000 components was not clean enough to warrant the degree of exposure offered by the speaker. Pioneer's smoother sounding DV-LX50 universal player proved a better fit, proving that character rather than cost is the key factor with system synergy.

I also tried different room orientations to give the speaker the opportunity to give of its best, most of the listening was done with them relatively close to one another (c2m) and with the reviewer about 3-4m away. Swinging things around so I sat closer to more widely spaced speakers increased the sense of energy they could deliver. Led Zeppelin's live rendition of 'Immigrant Song' coming across in

such effective fashion that one got a good impression of the awesome experience that being at the live event might have offered, without playing back at silly levels. John Paul Jones proving as ever to be the lynchpin, fleshing out the sound behind the

explosive antics of Bonham and Page. Mind you Bonzo's onslaught on 'Over The Hills' is something to behold.

I also got to briefly compare the MA with a passing pair of Focal 816WSE floorstanders. At £900 less expensive this wasn't a sensible comparison, but it was interesting to hear that the extra bass extension of the Focal could not compensate for its relative shortcomings in terms of

speed and dynamics. I have to admit that prior to hearing this speaker my hopes were not that high; as a rule I prefer larger loudspeakers with more potential in the girth department. The PL100 beat off this barrier with ease and delivered a result that is both charming and revealing. Forget cheaper alternatives, when it comes to punching above its weight, MA's PL100 is in a class of its own. ▶+



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Two-way reflex loaded
Driver Complement:	60mm ribbon HF 165mm bass/midrange
Frequency response:	42 Hz - 100 KHz
Sensitivity:	88 dB
Nominal Impedance:	4 Ohms
Dimensions (WxHxD):	225 x 370 x 285mm
Stand (WxHxD):	340 x 615 x 365mm
Weight:	13 Kg
Finishes:	Santos rosewood, ebony
Price:	£2,300

Manufacturer:
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