

Monitor Audio Platinum PL100 Loudspeakers by Doug Schneider

Over the last half-dozen years, I've noticed an interesting trend happening in stand-mounted, two-way speakers. Previously, premium two-ways with unique cabinets, top-quality parts and fancy finishes were primarily the domain of small boutique-type speaker builders, the one- or few-men shops that paid attention to the tiniest of details that bigger companies often overlooked. In contrast, for the most part the big speaker manufacturers seemed more concerned with cranking out more conventional box-type speakers, usually with vinyl veneers, at low, low prices. Certainly there were some exceptions, but for a time the small guy had a chance to stand out with some unique products.

Then things changed. In the last half-dozen years, more and more big companies have taken aim at this market, and nowadays it's these large outfits with their well-stocked R&D departments and extensive manufacturing facilities that are producing some of the most impressive two-ways out there. They're creating speakers with beautifully built and finished cabinets, exotic parts, and finicky attention to detail that even the boutique guys can't match, both in terms of quality and price. The Empire Strikes Back.

Enter the PL100 loudspeaker from Monitor Audio, a sizeable UK-based company that's been on the hi-fi scene for 35 years. Part of the company's top-dog Platinum series, the PL100 is the most ambitious two-way design Monitor Audio has ever built. It's priced at \$4800 USD per pair without stands, \$5500 with, and features dazzling design details that make it as distinctive as speakers at any price. This is Monitor Audio's attempt at challenging the state of the art in two-way speaker design.



Review Summary

Sound

"Once the speakers were positioned to my satisfaction, I marveled at how extended their treble was (more so than with most dome tweeters), how seamlessly the ribbon tweeter integrated with the midwoofer, how cohesive they sounded from top to bottom, and how well controlled the bass was for speakers of such modest size. In fact, the bass presentation was among the best I've heard from any stand-mounted two-way." However, "the overall balance tended to favor the top." "A speaker that's unflinching in its presentation, one that, in the end, hides nothing."

Features

"The driver choice is very interesting. Monitor Audio designed a ribbon tweeter that they say extends to 100kHz, and it is crossed over to a newly designed 6 1/2" woofer at 2.8kHz. Both drivers use the company's C-CAM (ceramic-coated aluminum magnesium) technology for the diaphragms." "In the case of the woofer, the company touts proprietary RDT, which stands for "rigid diaphragm technology." The cone is made from ultra-thin layers of their C-CAM alloy that's bonded to a Nomex honeycomb core." "The PL100's crossover is said to be made with top-quality parts -- and so it should be at the speaker's price -- and there's pure-silver wiring throughout."

Use

"Initially I listened to the PL100s on axis -- with each speaker firing straight at me. Like that, there was too much higher-frequency energy and, depending on the source material, the PL100s edged toward brightness. After that, I tried them far off-axis; however, when I went too far off-axis, the speakers sounded dull. This drastic shift has mostly to do with the ribbon tweeter."

Value

"A top-drawer performer with luxury appeal, and it hides nothing."

Description

The PL100 is 15"H x 9"W x 11"D and weighs almost 30 pounds -- of average size in terms of minimonitors but certainly heavier than most speakers its stature. The side walls and rear panel are curved, something Monitor Audio achieves by using multi-layered MDF that's bent into shape and bonded with special glue. The PL100 is available in a choice of two real-wood veneers, Santos rosewood and ebony, or piano-black lacquer finish. All are topped off with 11 layers of clear lacquer that make the speakers look spectacular.

The front baffle is made from what Monitor Audio calls Anti-Resonant Composite (ARC), which is a resin chosen for its damping properties. It is then covered with Strathspey leather that comes from the Andrew Muirhead company of Scotland. Solid aluminum bars cap off the top and bottom of the baffle. Some people might think that the leather has been used for its special acoustical properties, but Monitor Audio says that the leather is mostly aesthetic.

All in all, the cabinet is beautifully made, wonderful to look at, and, from what I can tell by picking it up and rapping my knuckles here and there, robust. However, there's also one more feature you can't really see that contributes to this sturdy build: an internal rod that is attached to the back of the front baffle and extends to the rear panel, where it's connected. The only thing visible is a bolt head that takes an Allen wrench. Monitor Audio says they torque each one precisely for optimum cabinet rigidity.

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In the case of the woofer, the company touts proprietary RDT, which stands for "rigid diaphragm technology." The cone is made from ultra-thin layers of their C-CAM alloy that's bonded to a Nomex honeycomb core. The result is said to be a cone that's very stiff but light. Monitor Audio rates the woofer's low-frequency output down to 42Hz.

Grilles are supplied -- meshed metal plates with a slight curve to them. Magnets keep them firmly in place. Just get the grille near enough to the front baffle and you'll feel the magnets grab. The grilles are basically supplied for driver protection. To me, the speakers look better with them off, and they sound better that way too.

The PL100's crossover is said to be made with top-quality parts -- and so it should be at the speaker's price -- and there's pure-silver wiring throughout. On the back are a newly designed port and two sets of WBT binding posts, so you can biwire the PL100s if you wish. If you don't want to biwire, thick solid-metal jumps are provided for single-wiring.

Monitor Audio rates the PL100s sensitivity at 88dB (1W/1m), and the impedance as 4 ohms. They recommend a power amplifier rated between 50 and 120 watts. Based on my experience with the speakers, 50 watts should be sufficient for average listening, but because the PL100s are able to play quite loud if given sufficient power, it might be best to look at the highest-powered amplifier you can afford in order to play them at close-to-lifelike levels. I used amps rated between 150 and 200Wpc and was pleased with the results.

Finally, the optional stand deserves some space -- I actually consider it to be integral to this speaker because it fits so well and makes the whole speaker look so nice. The stand is about 24" high with a big base made from ARC. It has large spikes that can be leveled from their tops, and it is equipped with a dual-layer damping system that's part of the stand's top plate.



What I particularly like is that the stand bolts to the bottom of the speaker, which gives the PL100 real solidity on the floor. Frankly, I can't imagine anyone not buying the stands, unless they're really hot on the idea of finding other stands (for whatever reason) or they want to put the speakers on a shelf. Monitor Audio ships the stands disassembled, and it took me about 20 minutes to get the first one together. After doing it once and figuring out what to do (there's a little bit of "Uhh, I think this part goes here" to get through), I put the second one together in five minutes.

Looking at all the PL100's design details, it's obvious that Monitor Audio assessed every aspect and created a distinctive speaker that's not only an audiophile's tool but also a luxury item that can be displayed proudly in a dedicated listening room or a domestic family room. This is truly a speaker you can live with.

Positioning and sound

It didn't take me long to figure out that the PL100s sound as distinctive as they look, and, as a result, they took me a bit more time to set up than usual. Mostly this had to do with the voicing of the speaker -- in particular, the ribbon tweeter's tonal balance and the way it disperses sound.

Initially, I listened to the PL100s on-axis -- with each speaker firing straight at me. Like that, there was too much higher-frequency energy and, depending on the source material, the PL100s edged toward brightness. After that, I tried them far off-axis; however, when I went too far off-axis, the speakers sounded dull. This drastic shift has mostly to do with the ribbon tweeter. Although Monitor Audio has obviously done things to improve dispersion, its sound is still more directional than that of a tradition dome tweeter.

Associated Equipment

Loudspeakers – PSB Synchrony One.

Amplifiers – Simaudio Moon Evolution W-7 stereo power amp, Simaudio Moon i-1 integrated amp, Stello M200 mono power amps, Classé Audio CA-5200 multichannel amp.

Preamplifier – Simaudio Moon Evolution P-7, Anthem Statement D2.

Digital – Simaudio Moon Evolution SuperNova CD player, Toshiba HD-A30 CD/DVD/HD DVD player, Sony PlayStation 3, Stello DA220 Mk II DAC.

Interconnects – Nordost Valhalla, Nirvana S-L.

Speaker cables – Nordost Valkyrja, Nirvana S-L, Analysis Plus Silver Oval.

So I had to play with the toe-in to get the best balance, taking into account my listening position and the side-wall reflections. This is something I have to do to some degree with every speaker I review, but it was more critical with the PL100. I settled on a listening distance of about eight feet and toe-in 20 degrees off-axis from the tweeter. For my room, this position was ideal. However, I don't doubt that prospective buyers will have to fiddle with the positioning somewhat to get the sound right in their rooms. It'll likely be a little different with each setup.

Once the speakers were positioned to my satisfaction, I marveled at how extended their treble was (more so than with most dome tweeters), how seamlessly the ribbon tweeter integrated with the midwoofer, how cohesive they sounded from top to bottom, and how well controlled the bass was for speakers of such modest size. In fact, the bass presentation was among the best I've heard from any stand-mounted two-way. Monitor Audio rates the PL100s to 42Hz -- low, but not ultra low -- but it wasn't the depth that kicked me over, it was the detail that the speakers showed. The PL100s had honest, well-articulated bass with no funny stuff going on.

For example, I played "Walk on the Wild Side" from the *Between Thought and Expression: The Lou Reed Anthology* compilation (RCA 62356-2) and found it remarkably easy to follow the tight bass lines. This isn't always the case with smallish speakers; oftentimes, there's congestion and wooliness as the speaker struggles to reproduce lower frequencies accurately. The PL100s sounded drum-tight throughout the bass range they displayed with no weird bloating or doubling. In fact, they were so tight that when I played hard-driving percussion like Shakira includes on her *Laundry Service* CD (Sony 63900), there was a real sense of drive and attack, akin to what much larger floorstanding designs are capable of. All told, I found the PL100's low-frequency presentation noteworthy for a stand-mounted design.

I was also quite taken with how transparent the PL100s sounded. In fact, they reminded me of an electrostatic design -- quick on their feet and able to unravel the smallest musical nuances. The PL100s allowed a very clear view into the recording, resulting in a rather awesome display of detail and precision, both in terms of the recorded detail they projected forth and the sense of spaciousness they provided. For instance, I was playing the Cowboy Junkies The Trinity Session (RCA 8568-2-R) one night and was struck by two things: the way the speakers re-created the recording venue's vast space and the way the speakers disappeared into the spacious soundfield they provided. If I closed my eyes, I would have been hard-pressed to pinpoint the PL100s' exact position in the room.

The high frequencies were extraordinarily extended and, like the rest of the speaker's sound, incisive and detailed. Cymbals had a clear and airy sound, and the top end of guitar was notable for the vibrancy and attack. The high-frequency extension, transparency and cleanliness also had a strong effect on the detail around each musician. What I'm talking about is what audiophiles call "air," the high-frequency nuances that circulate around each performer and help to define the acoustic space. The highly resolving PL100 conveyed those subtleties with astonishing precision. When I listened to Rebecca Pidgeon's "Spanish Harlem" on Chesky Records' The World's Greatest Audiophile Vocal Recordings compilation disc (Chesky SACD323), the space around her voice was conveyed so convincingly that the result achieved holographic proportions.

The PL100s have the makings of a great transducer, but the midrange performance polarized my thoughts. On the one hand, through this region, I heard the same great clarity and transparency that I heard in the bass and the treble. On the other, the midband was not particularly rich-sounding -- nobody would call this speaker warm. As well, the overall balance seemed to emphasize the upper-mids. As a result, the PL100 was leaner-sounding through the meatiest part of the midrange, and there was an upper-midrange emphasis that increased sibilance and other nasty sounds that plague some recordings. Even set up the way I had them -- not much toe-in, about 20 degrees off-axis -- the overall balance tended to favor the top.

Projecting a little more energy up top has pros and cons. It can provide a lively, incisive sound with a high level of detail; however, it can also exacerbate flaws in the recording. The PL100 does all that, and Monitor Audio obviously knew this when they designed it. In my opinion, then, the design team elected to create a speaker that's unflinching in its presentation, one that, in the end, hides nothing. Some people are going to love that design choice while others might want something a little more restrained. Obviously, personal preferences will dictate if the PL100 is the right speaker for you.

Comparison

Over the last few months, the speakers in my listening room have alternated between the PL100s and the PSB Synchrony Ones, which I reviewed last month. The Ones retail for \$4500 -- \$300 less than the PL100s, \$1000 less if you include the stands. The One is a five-driver, three-way floorstanding design. Its footprint is a little bit smaller than the PL100 on stands, but for all intents and purposes it takes up the same amount of floor space.

Both speakers are extremely well built and feature leading-edge industrial design and first-rate fit'n'finish. They're perfect examples of modern-day speaker building that results in quality and features you'd rarely find in speakers five years ago, even from boutique builders. What's more, they're reasonably priced for what they offer. That's what's achieved when large companies with their vast resources set their sights on this segment of the market.

That said, although both are well made, I give the more expensive PL100 the nod on luxury appeal. The One's cabinet is nicely constructed and quite elegant, but things like the rich wood finish and the leather-covered front baffle on the PL100 move it a notch ahead. It just has more pizzazz. So while the PL100s are a bit more expensive, you can see where the money's going.

Sound-wise, they have a few similarities, but mostly they're different. The Ones, with their triple-woofer arrangement, go about 10Hz deeper in the bass, which is quite a lot. That extra bass is good in a large room like mine, but it can be enough to overload a smaller room. In my opinion, the Synchrony Ones would be best in medium-sized or large rooms, while the PL100s would be best-suited for small or medium-sized rooms.

I'd never call the Synchrony One voluptuous-sounding, but it does have more meat through the midband than the PL100, so voices tended to sound fuller. The One also doesn't emphasize the upper mids as much, so sibilance wasn't an issue. Overall, the Synchrony One sounds richer, treading an ideal line between detail and musicality, but in the end it is not quite as unflinching in its presentation as the PL100.

However, the PL100 sounds slightly more transparent, particularly in the highs, and it's more spacious-sounding overall. The One makes for a fine re-creation of space, but the PL100 makes for an amazing one, projecting the walls of a concert hall a little bit to the left and right of each speaker, and past my front wall. The Synchrony One, on the other hand, keeps things a little more inside.

I also thought that the ribbon tweeter outclassed the Synchrony One's dome tweeter in terms of cleanliness and refinement. They're both extended, but way up top, the PL100's ribbon sounded ever so slightly cleaner, airier, and more effortless than the PSB's dome -- likely one of the reasons Monitor Audio's engineers went to a ribbon. I also have to point out, though, that as clean and airy as the PL100's treble is, it's more emphasized -- the PL100 has the slight uptilt -- so all that extension does come at a price.

In terms of the way these speakers sound, listeners will be split on which one they think sounds best. The One is a little more extended in the bass and richer overall, and the PL100 is not quite as deep down low but still very full for a two-way. It is also more extended in the highs and displays greater transparency.

That's these speakers in a nutshell; now you must listen and decide.

Conclusion

Insofar as the construction and build quality go, I doubt that you'll find many detractors who won't like what Monitor Audio has done with this speaker. The ribbon tweeter and woofer are proprietary designs that are merged together splendidly. The cabinet features world-class craftsmanship capped off with splendid appointments, like the leather-covered front baffle and the ultra-high-gloss finish on all sides. The dedicated stand is a sophisticated item that bolts to the speaker's bottom and brings the entire design all the way to the floor. The PL100 is a well-thought-out, complete speaker system, not just a nice-looking two-way in search of something to sit on.

Sonically, preferences are likely to intervene greatly in the buying decision. The bass performance is impressive -- it goes as deep as I'd expect from a moderately sized speaker, but it's more detailed than that of any similarly configured speaker that I've heard. Other strengths include a high level of transparency and detail along with super-extended highs that are effortless and clean. The sense of spaciousness these speakers can convey is awesome.

The only caveat comes in the midrange, which can sound somewhat lean in the vocal range, with an overall balance that rises toward the treble. The PL100 will probably sound forward to some, so definitely try before you buy. The PL100 is a top-drawer performer with luxury appeal, and it hides nothing.

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