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Monitor Audio Silver RX8 Floorstanding Loudspeaker

Chris Martens

The British loudspeaker-maker Monitor Audio enjoys a reputation as a pioneer in the development of metal diaphragm-equipped drivers and is also known for building value-oriented products that look and sound better than they have any right to for the money. A perfect case in point would be the firm's newly released Silver RX8 floorstanders (\$1750/pair), which are sophisticated enough to offer many of Monitor's more advanced technologies, yet affordable enough to be accessible to a broad range of customers. For those of you familiar with promising yet flawed sound of Monitor's earlier-generation Silver RS models, let me assert that the Silver RX8s have taken giant steps forward so that they dramatically outperform their predecessors.



It is tempting to veer off into a detailed discussion of the rich and diverse technical features of the RX8, but instead let me simply summarize by saying that the Silver RX8s incorporates a number of design concepts and technologies drawn directly from Monitor's more costly Gold Series speakers. In a figurative sense, this means RX8s are alchemists capable of turning sonic silver into gold, while in practical terms it means the RX8 sounds like a much higher-priced speaker than, in fact, it really is—a characteristic the RX8 shares with another great overachiever in this price class; namely, Magnepan's classic MG 1.6 loudspeaker.

Part of the RX8's goodness revolves around its inherently neutral tonal balance. As is often the case with genuinely neutral transducers, some listeners might interpret the Silver RX8 as sounding slightly bright or lean, but this is an illusion. It's just that the RX8s take an accuracy-first approach to music reproduction, while staunchly refusing to inject artificial warmth or euphonic colorations.

But accurate tonal balance is only part of the story, because the Silver RX8 also offers excellent transient speed and definition, plus astonishingly high levels of resolution and detail. Put these qualities together and you've got a speaker that can dig way down deep into good recordings to retrieve layer upon layer of musically relevant details. Most of the time the speaker's revealing qualities are thoroughly enjoyable, but at times they can represent a double-edged sword. When fed great material and driven by high-quality source components and electronics, the Silver RX8s can sound almost shockingly good.

But when fed so-so program material or driven by mediocre components, the speakers are not shy about reporting whatever sonic quirks and foibles they may encounter—sometimes to their own detriment. This is not a speakers that softens its delivery in order to make flawed material sound better; rather, it is a speaker that can, and sometimes does, convey almost “too much information” (or at least information you might prefer to do without).

The Silver RX8 handles both large and small-scale dynamic contrasts in a very lively and expressive way, and while the RX8 cannot play at ridiculously loud levels the way certain expensive blockbuster speakers can, it more than holds its own versus like-priced competitors. In contrast to systems that have a subdued, comfortable, “polite” sound, the Silver RX8 system serves up high levels of refinement and detail with a real spirit of energy and gusto—a complementary combination of virtues indeed.

One very important point to note is that while the RX8 benefits (as do all high-quality speakers) from good, clean amplification, it does not need a lot of power in an absolute sense (unlike, say, the Magnepan MG 1.6, which is extremely power-hungry). During my listening tests I drove the RX8s with many different amplifiers, but one of the most pleasing and synergistic combinations involved a match between the RX8s and Peachtree Audio’s delightful and very affordable iDecco 40Wpc hybrid integrated amp/DAC. My point is that you don’t necessarily have to spend an arm and a leg on electronics in order to tap much of the RX8’s performance potential.

I identified only three small sonic caveats with the RX8. First, because the RX8 floorstanders are comparatively short in stature, they tend to cast sonic images and soundstages that fall slightly below ear-level. You can ameliorate this by using Monitor’s adjustable floor spikes to tilt the speaker backwards a bit. Second, the accuracy and transient speed of Monitor’s metal dome tweeter comes at a price—namely, a tendency for the tweeter to sound just slightly piercing or bright, at least when fed by mediocre source components or electronics. The good news, however, is that these traces of edginess will melt away if you make a point of pairing the RX8s with smooth-sounding, higher-quality system components (the better your gear, the smoother and more three-dimensional the RX8s sound). Finally, the bass output of the Silver RX system can, at times, sound slightly overblown or underdamped—especially in smaller rooms (bear in mind that the RX8s were voiced so that they could serve double-duty in home-theater systems intended for use in large family rooms). To address possible problems with excess bass, Monitor thoughtfully provides sets of foam rubber port plugs to enable users to fine-tune the speakers’ bass characteristics to fit their tastes and/or room requirements. During my home listening tests, I installed the plugs in the RX8s’ front ports, which tightened up their bass response considerably.

When you get right down to it, musical realism (the kind where you temporarily suspend disbelief and allow yourself to imagine that you are in the presence of real instruments) is what we all want from good speaker systems, though it is perhaps a “holy grail” we can rarely if ever grasp. But on one recording in particular, the Silver RX8 system came about as close as any mid-priced speaker I have ever heard to achieving true, you-are-there-grade realism. The recording is Christopher Roberts’ stunningly well-recorded *Last Cicada Singing* [Cold Blue], which features Roberts performing his own compositions for a fretless Chinese string instrument called the Qin.

I’ve only heard a real Qin in live performances a handful of times, but after each performance I found that the instrument’s harmonically complex, evocative sound—which can entail both soaring treble lines and plunging bass lines of almost ethereal delicacy—really stuck with me. Imagine my surprise, then, when I put on the Roberts’ recording and heard through the Silver RX what sounded very much like a real live, no jive Qin performing directly across the room from me. The Qin is the sort of instrument where, at least in its upper registers, string noises, plucking sounds, and almost subliminal noises of fingers gliding across strings become integrally enmeshed with the voice of the instrument itself. I was floored by both the delicacy and precision with which RX8s captured inner details of Roberts’ playing style and the resulting high-frequency harmonics and textures I heard (qualities that would not seem at all out of place in a speaker several times the RX8 price).

But the Qin is also capable of producing surprisingly deep and richly textured bass notes, and the RX8s did not disappoint, revealing the depth, power and sheer size of the Qin (an instrument that is bigger than some photos make it appear), while showing how Roberts deftly slides and bends notes to achieve the desired pitches. What made the experience feel very nearly real, however, was not just the system’s ability to get the voice of the Qin right (which is saying a mouthful), but also its ability to capture the sound and “feel” of the recording space. When you play this recording through the RX8s, you’re not only struck by the palpable presence of Roberts and his Qin, but also enchanted by the sense of being enfolded by the reverberant and intimate acoustic of the recording venue. Significantly, the RX8 did a great job of recreating the often elusive feel of the “air” surrounding the instrument and instrumentalist, so that you can almost sense Roberts’ hands maneuvering over the strings. While the RX8’s sonic presentation on *Last Cicada Singing* might have had a subtly larger-than-life quality, I nevertheless found the overall level of realism it achieved to be breathtaking. Let’s put it this way: I’ve heard many far more costly speakers that could not handle this recording as well as the RX8s did.

Though I've supplied just one musical example, here, I hope my comments convey the fact that the Silver RX8 is an exceptional performer at its price—a system that, above all, gives an unexpectedly honest and believable rendition of the timbres and dynamic qualities of real instruments. While the Silver RX8 is certainly not a perfect speaker, and while it cannot do all of the things that some higher-end speakers can, it is nevertheless the one I would choose without hesitation as a platform upon which to base a moderately priced high-end music system. The Silver RX8 speaker is good enough to show you many of the sonic benefits of very high-priced source components, amps, cables, etc., yet it is—thank goodness—easy enough to drive that you won't have to spend a small fortune on ancillary gear, which is great news for music lovers on tight budgets.

SPECS & PRICING

Driver complement: One 1-inch C-CAM gold dome tweeter, one 6-inch RST mid/bass driver, two 6-inch RST bass drivers

Frequency response: 32Hz–35kHz

Sensitivity: 90dB

Impedance: 4 ohms

Dimensions: 10.8** x 37.8** x 15.25** (with plinth and feet); 7.3 X 35.4 X 7.9 (without plinth and feet)

Weight: 47.88 lbs. each

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ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Analog: Nottingham Space 294 turntable/Ace-Space 294 tone arm, Grado Reference Platinum phono cartridge, PS Audio GCPH phonostage.

Digital: Musical Fidelity kw SACD player, Rega Isis CD player, Oppo BDP-93SE “Special Edition” universal/Blu-ray player, PS Audio Digital Link III DAC.

Electronics: Musical Fidelity kW 500 hybrid integrated amplifier, Rega Osiris integrated amplifier, Peachtree Audio iDecco hybrid integrated amplifier/DAC/iPod dock, NuForce P-9 preamplifier and Reference 9 v.3 SE monoblock amplifiers.

Speakers: Magnepan Mg 1.6, Mirage OMD-28

Cables: Furutech Alpha Reference interconnects, digital cables, and speaker cables, NuForce Focused-Field interconnects, digital cables, and speaker cables; PS Audio power cables; Teo Audio interconnects and speaker cables.

Accessories: PS Audio Soloist and Power Plant Premier power conditioners, Solid Tech Reference rack and vibration control accessories, Auralex and RPG room acoustic treatments