

COVER REVIEW/LOUDSPEAKERS

Mighty Greek Analysis Audio Epsilon

VITAL STATISTICS

Type	Two-way planar, floorstanding
Drive units	Planar magnetic mid-bass driver with 2 630,32 square cm effective area Direct-couple ribbon tweeter with 227,74 square cm effective area
Bi-wiring	Yes
Sensitivity	86 dB/w/m
Impedance	4 ohms nominal
Frequency response	26 Hz to 20 kHz
Recommended amplification	Up to 300 watts
Dimensions	1 320 x 610 x 60 mm (HxWxD)
Weight	36 kg each

VERDICT

No, they're not copies of those famous Apogeos, but Greek-designed and built planar speakers that offer a heady mix of transparency and presence. Beautifully built, too.

PRICE R 96 950,00

SUPPLIED BY Audio Tweak 021-797-7907/ 083 676 1250

Website www.audiotweak.co.za

Epsilon isn't only the fifth letter of the Greek alphabet, but also a beautifully presented planar loudspeaker that has its origins in Greece.

Made by Analysis Audio, a company focused solely on the design and manufacture of planar loudspeakers, the Epsilons look strangely familiar -- until you realise just how much they remind you of Apogee's planar designs.

Indeed, there are some distinctive visual overlaps, including the thick, wooden frame, the tapered aperture for the mid/bass planar driver, and the thin, strip-like ribbon tweeter. Also, like the Apogee, the Epsilon likes to be tilted slightly back. But that, says Tassos Hartzis of Analysis Audio, is where the similarities end.

The Epsilon and its three siblings -- the larger Amphitryon and Omega, and the smaller Omicron -- may be planar/ribbon hybrids like the Apogeos, but their design is original. And Tassos also claims, they address many of the idiosyncrasies that can compromise planar designs.

Given that the South African importer of Analysis Audio is in Cape Town, and that the Epsilons are both large and heavy, I combined a business trip to the Mother City with a morning spent at Audio Tweak owner Ramsey Raad's apartment, where the Epsilons had spent several hundred hours being run in, in anticipation of my listening session.

Driving the Epsilons for this review was a Spectron Musician III Signature -- a muscular digital power amp with a claimed power potential of 800 watts per channel into 4 ohms, and peak current output of 40 Amps. Ramsey had elected to use a home-built, tube-based pre-amplifier for this review.

Source duties were fulfilled by a North Star CD transport/DAC combination. The North Star 192 Transport uses a Philips CD-PRO2M mechanism, and interestingly feeds the extracted digital signal to the matching North Star Extremo digital-to-analogue converter via a proprietary, RJ45 digital link said to provide superior signal integrity to the more conventional SPDIF and AES/EBU interfaces.

Ramsey's room is a typical lounge measuring around 5 x 7 m, with a wooden parquet floor and fairly lively acoustics. With a veritable library of discs displayed on the low coffee table (and some more in my bag) the day promised to be one filled with interesting music, from an interesting system.

Analysis Audio isn't a new endeavour. Tassos Hartzis started experimenting with planar designs way back in the 1980s, and the first production speaker debuted in 1990. As mentioned, the company's focus is purely on planar speakers, due to its belief in the inherent potential of the technology to deliver a realistic musical performance.

Admirable is the fact that the entire speaker is manufactured in-house, since it allows the close attention to consistent quality so vital with products of this nature, while also ensuring production flexibility.

The raw components are sourced from all corners of the globe, including magnets from South America, speaker membranes from Britain and France, and crossover capacitors from Germany. But the design is uniquely Analysis Audio.

Innovations in the context of planar designs such as this include the use of a rubber suspension to couple the mylar membrane of the mid/bass panel to the frame, which helps with excursion and keeps the membrane flatter, in turn benefiting efficiency and the ability to move air.

Interestingly, the Epsilons address one of the perceived shortcomings of planar designs: a tendency to confront the accompanying amplifier with unusually low impedances, which can upset less robust hardware.

But Tassos says the typical impedance of the Analysis Audio designs is around 4 ohms, which is well within the norm, even for dynamic speakers.

The Epsilons prefer a free-standing position, slightly titled back, and with the treble ribbons on the inside of mid/bass drivers in the interests of finer focus and more cohesive imaging -- even if common sense suggests that having the ribbons on the outside would create a more expansive soundstage.

In that sense, the Epsilons behave just like the Apogee Stages, which were my reference loudspeakers for some time during their heyday. And I have to admit to feeling just that little bit nostalgic when sitting down to listen to the Epsilons!

We started out with some acoustic guitar by Brazilian virtuoso Toquinho on '*A luz do Solo*', and **I was immediately impressed by the visceral tangibility of the music. The speakers were able to translate the very fast transients with skilful ease, while imaging was rock-solid, detailed and almost eerily believable.**

Greatly contributing to the listening experience was the ultimate transparency of the Epsilons: despite their considerable physical presence, they disappeared completely from the soundstage, and were never identifiable as point sources, leaving just the music to occupy all that space and air.

Otmar Liebert's '*Luna negra*' was our next musical stop, and again, it was the accessibility of the music that impressed. **The soundstage showed excellent dimension, especially in terms of depth and width, so that the full impact and ambience of the performance could be believably translated.**

I must admit I had expected the Epsilons to shine in the midrange and the treble -- and they did -- but to be a little soft in the bass department. **That the Greeks were much more heroic in bottom-end terms than I had given them credit for, therefore came as a pleasant surprise.**

One could argue that the low-frequency response lacked the outright foundation and depth of a pair of big dynamic speakers, but the Epsilons sounded full and rich enough to please most.

In panel terms, they weren't short of pace or speed, either. Their agility allowed them to communicate their musical message with believability and eloquence.

However, what I enjoyed most was their ability to translate the texture and the emotion of the music. On '*Luna negra*', the piano sounded real enough to touch, while vocals had texture and presence.

It became easy to visualise individual instruments and voices, not just as sounds, but as a physical presence on the open, airy soundstage. That there was an effortlessness to their delivery greatly aided the flow and pace of the music, too.

Ace bassist Ray Brown's '*Summer Wind*' is a stern test of any loudspeaker's speed, dynamic cohesion and bass response, but the Epsilons were well up to the challenge, making the most of Brown's typical string-slap bass riffs and easily keeping up with his often frenetic pace.

On this recording, I sensed some brightness creeping into the sound -- but then, we were listening to the music at **fairly high listening volumes**, which may have been just enough to excite the concrete slab ceiling.

The shimmer in the upper treble didn't detract from the listening experience though, and it may well have preserved some of the finer detail, further adding to the credibility of the listening experience. It is something prospective buyers will have to keep in mind when considering room acoustics and system matching, though.

Panel speakers adore female vocals, and Patricia Barber's smoky, haunting voice on 'Café Blue' was no exception. But tonality apart, the staging here was superb, with Barber floating above the filigreed acoustic guitar. The imaging was almost holographic in its intensity and realism.

The Siri Svale Band's 'Blackbird' used to be one of my reference discs, and revisiting it here reminded me why. The recording is rich in detail, while the texture of the vocals is utterly compelling. This is a voice that grabs you by the throat!

The system picked up and projected fine elements -- the sliding of fingers over strings, an intake of breath -- but never lost its vital commitment to cohesion. The sax was wonderfully airy, rising high above its accompaniment, while the system seemed to dig down into the very core of the performance, extracting not just the notes, but the emotion, too.

That the Epsilons are not scared to rock 'n roll was clear from a listen to Led Zeppelin's 'The BBC Sessions Live', which shows off the band at its raucous, hard-edged, undiluted best. It's not the most refined of recordings, but the speakers relished in the raw acidity of Jimmy Page's electric guitar, and Robert Plant's wailing, whooping voice.

Again, I liked the speed and attack of the system, and the ability of the panels to produce a swift, solid bass -- although here, some more downright bottom-end oomph would have been welcome.

In sharp contrast was Minoru Nojima's delectable solo piano on Reference Recordings' 'Nojima plays Liszt'. The texture and the presence of the piano was almost chillingly believable: the touch of fingers on the keys was audible, as was the soloist's use of the pedals. The result was, well, majestic, and one of the highlights of the listening session.

I could go on and on -- the musical references also included discs by artists as varied as The Chemical Brothers, Killing Joke, Prodigy, Al di Meola and Dick Hyman -- but the inherent message would be the same: the Analysis Audio Epsilon is an exceptional loudspeaker.

As a planar design, its expansive staging, utter transparency, superior imaging and delicate treatment of fine detail don't come as a surprise, although its balance and cohesion play a major role in pulling all these elements together into an utterly satisfying and compelling whole.

Much more surprising, however, is the Epsilon's low-frequency response, which reaches down far enough to establish real substance and foundation. In addition, it musters a pace and attack unusual for this technology, and more typical of conventional piston drive units.

I suspect that, as this system so ably demonstrates, the Epsilons enjoy a decent amount of power and current, and that some of the attack and control experienced here was due to the presence of the Spectron power amplifier, which seems to be a fine piece of kit in its own right.

Also, there is no doubt that the Epsilon is enough of a class act to deserve a high-resolution source such as the North Star DAC/transport employed here.

But in the end, even the accompanying electronics could not have turned a bad speaker into a good one. The Analysis Audio Epsilon is a great planar design that exceeds expectations on almost all levels, and delivers a thrilling musical experience.

Deon Schoeman: Principal reviewer and founder of **Audio Video South Africa Magazine**