

Size Matters

It's the classic speaker buyer's conundrum, big or small? Channa Vithana pits Monitor Audio's new RS8 floorstander against Usher's X718 standmounter...

The eighties brought us strong ideas on system set-up, wiring and speaker placement. A new breed of high quality standmounters appeared, such as the original Wharfedale Diamonds, designed with bespoke stands in mind that gave fantastic performance. Then, in the early nineties, came a new genre of quality floorstanders, such as Mission's classic 752, which caught on like wildfire. Given the choice of spending £1,000 on a pair of small boxes and a pair of big ones, people seemed to plump for the latter, even though floorstanders can have unruly bass; they are more variable than standmounters. How do the (£800) Monitor Audio RS8 floorstanders and the Usher Audio X-718 standmounter (£740, plus stands, obviously) stack up against each other in view of this? Both manufacturers have impressed us in the past, Monitor Audio with their fine floorstanding GS60s and Usher with their excellent stand mounting S-520s.

The Silver RS8 is MA's latest mid-priced contender and their top Silver model. Compared to its predecessor, the S8, it is more eye-catching, as the front baffle features attractive semi-curved drive unit chassis plates instead of the previous black, squared-off ones. The RS8 comes in smart real wood veneer finishes and there is a choice of Black Oak, Rosenut, Walnut, Natural Oak and Cherry. It features three six-inch (approximately 152.5mm) 'C-Cam' drive units; one midrange and two bass.

For the treble, a 'Gold Dome, C-Cam' 25mm tweeter, similar in performance to the Gold Reference version, is employed. 'C-Cam' is an acronym for Ceramic-Coated Aluminium/ Magnesium. MA says it was originally developed by the aerospace industry for use as blades in jet engines, but exhibits ideal qualities for use as a tweeter dome. Monitor Audio isn't the only manufacturer using magnesium/ aluminium alloy; Focal JMLab also uses it for tweeters on their Chorus V series.

There are two ports, one on the rear panel at tweeter height and another below the lowest bass driver on the front panel. The binding posts allow for bi-amp/bi-wiring options. There are excellent spike attachments at the base for levelling and stability; you have the option of padded discs for hard wood floors or spikes for carpets, and both are easily adjustable thanks to well designed thumb-operated locking-nuts. Vital statistics are 900x270x185mm and 21kg.

The Usher Audio X-718 incorporates solid-birch side panels and piano gloss centres, making it materially even more desirable than the MAs. The Usher range is designed by Dr. Joseph D'Appolito, a prolific worldwide loudspeaker designer and Usher's consultant since 2000. Dr. D'Appolito holds many degrees from RPI,



"whilst the MAs turned in a typically crisp, expansive sound, the Ushers were far more music dependent..."

have the Usher logo uniformly centred. The X-718s (and matching Usher stands) are uncannily similar aesthetically to the Sonus Faber Concert series of loudspeakers from around the mid-nineties which also had a slanted front baffle and subtly designed wood side panels with four fixing covers. Usher says the slanted front baffle improves the time/phase alignment and further reduces cabinet resonance.

The X-718s feature an '8945P' 7-inch (approximately 178mm) mid/bass drive unit which has an aluminium silver phase-plug in the middle. The mid/bass driver features a heavily damped carbon fibre impregnated paper cone, which Usher says has been, "proven to be free of (resonances) normally associated with stiff paper cones". The '9950-20' tweeter measures 1 inch (approximately 25.5mm) diameter and there is a port at the slanted rear panel which is situated at tweeter height. High quality binding posts allow bi-amp/bi-wiring.

The X-718s are available in Piano Black, Silver, Yellow, Claret and Ivory finishes, measure 255x407x390mm and weigh 12.5kg. Optional Usher stands, some which can be bolted into the X-718s include; £325 RWS-708, £400 RWS-729 and a new £450 Partington X Stand which is the sonically preferred choice of UK distributor HiAudio.

SOUND QUALITY

The Monitor Audio RS8s have particularly distinctive high frequency abilities, something I've found common to their earlier models, as far back as the R852/MD standmounts from the late eighties, for instance (see HFW January 2005,

p19). This is surely down to their use of metal dome tweeters and impressively, unlike the usual typecasting of such devices, I did not find the sound harsh or brittle. Rather, the RS8s are expansive and low in coloration. They are also excellent at midrange detail retrieval, able to reveal the subtleties of intricately played percussive and stringed instruments superbly. They also handled dynamic orchestral crescendos and powerful low frequencies with ease. The opening 'Fanfare' on the Janáček 'Sinfonietta, Taras Bulba, etc.' contains a sublime horn section that should pan across the listening room with finesse, precision phrasing and an expansive spatiality, and the RS8s were excellent in the rendering of this demanding horn-led piece.

The masterful cover of the Nine Inch Nails song 'Hurt' by Johnny Cash revealed a crisp, clear and highly communicative piece of music. The RS8s impressively reproduced vocals without a chesty, muffled quality. Instead the phrasing of the vocals and instruments arrived outstandingly while remaining convincingly musical.

The RS8s reproduced 'Down By The Seaside' from 'Physical Graffiti' by Led Zeppelin with fine instrumental separation, but not clinically so, as they sounded entirely at ease with the demands of the song as it went from gentle lament to the more traditional Zeppelin bombast. Consequently, power and depth emanated deep out of the mix with convincing reproduction of low frequencies for the drum and bass guitar.

The RS8s reproduced the music from 'Rosanna' from the Toto SACD with a deft touch, revealing a lush yet open recording quality, with a wonderful combination of musical cohesiveness with excellent instrumental and vocal separation.

Janáček's 'Fanfare' demonstrated the Usher Audio X-718s to be rhythmically more free flowing, but less well separated in the higher frequencies compared to the Monitor Audio RS8s. Here the horns on the 'Fanfare' sounded fuller-bodied and more effortless, meaning that on this piece at least the Ushers embodied

MIT and the University of Massachusetts, and is also said to be the progenitor of MTM (a tweeter in between two mid/ mid-bass drive-units), otherwise known as the D'Appolito configuration.

The X-718s exploit a slanted front baffle with what looks like four gold coloured fixing covers to each solid-birch side-panel and impressively, these all

better timbral acuity, specifically with the horns, while the phrasing of the instruments was slightly superior too. However, the lesser sized enclosure also limited the scale, power and reach of the music when compared to the bigger boxed Monitor Audios. This was their downside – they sounded dynamically compressed and smaller in scale. I preferred the Ushers between 600-800mm from the rear concrete wall. They were tonally smoother than the MAs when called upon to reveal the crescendos within the Janáček music, but seemed more diffuse too and less controlled.

'Hurt' by Johnny Cash propelled itself from the Ushers nicely, with a richer tonality compared to the Monitor Audios, exemplified in the vocal region. In terms of dynamics and scale, where I expected the smaller Ushers to be commensurately less able than the larger MAs, both loudspeakers proved highly accomplished with this recording, which surprised me. Therefore with its slightly faster sequential tempos, more three-dimensional vocals and atmospheric qualities, the Usher proved superior specifically with 'Hurt'.

However, this wasn't the way with everything I tried. Whilst the Monitor Audios turned in a typically big, punchy, crisp and expansive sound on everything they played, the Ushers were far more music dependent. The vast scale of 'Down By The Seaside' by Led Zeppelin had the Ushers shirking slightly, unable to convey sufficient weight for this grandiloquent rock music. Lead guitar melodies and vocals also revealed ringing distortions as the Ushers rendered high frequency peaks. The Ushers reproduced a clearer version of 'Rosanna' by Toto in comparison to the Monitor Audios by procuring a more expressive and animated musical quality. However, they were not as effortless as the Monitor Audios considering the Toto recording and consequently came across a little strained during the high-frequency guitar solo. That's their problem – within their 'envelope' they are excellent, but they are pushed outside of it too easily when powerful, large scale music is played.

CONCLUSION

The Usher X-718s are beautifully designed and built.

They remained more successful with the Janáček and Johnny Cash recordings, especially with 'Hurt' by Cash where they matched the bigger boxed Monitor Audios for scale and weight while bettering them for tempo with faster instrumental/vocal phrasing and rhythms. However, the Led Zeppelin and Toto recordings didn't do so well because the Ushers sounded discernibly strained on guitar solos and vocals. So while very good, they are somewhat fussy with the type of music used. The Monitor Audio RS8s have outstanding instrumental

separation, excellent phrasing and also a powerful dynamic ability. As such, they remained unflustered throughout with any of the music used and while not quite as good in tempo as the Ushers, they accommodate a wider variety of music. So for this reason, my choice would be for the Monitor Audio RS8s.

MUSIC:

Janáček/Serebrier/Czech State Philharmonic, Brno, 'Sinfonietta, Taras Bulba, etc.' (1995/1996/2001)
 Johnny Cash, 'American IV: The Man Comes Around' (2003)
 Led Zeppelin, 'Physical Graffiti' (1975)
 Toto, 'IV' SACD (1982/2003)

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

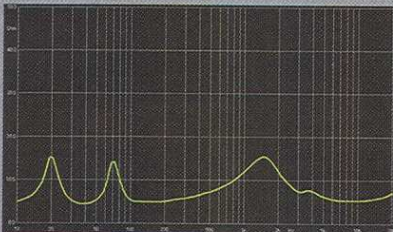
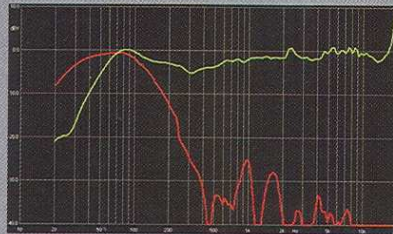
MONITOR AUDIO RS8

The twin bass units of the Monitor Audio RS8 peak strongly, by around 3dB at 70-80Hz so the RS8 is not going to lack bass. What its quality will be like can only be judged by listening. In contrast the lower midband is recessed, but above 1kHz output rises to make the upper midband and treble regions more obvious.

Above 14kHz the tweeter peaks sharply by no less than +12dB at 20kHz - an extraordinary amount but one that will increase treble detail, provided the tweeter is well controlled enough not to break up and become harsh. Sensitivity was high at 89dB, so they do not need a lot of power.

The RS8 is going to sound bright and quite bass heavy, not an especially subtle combination. Since such behaviour is easily enough

controlled nowadays, its existence in the RS8 is not likely to be accidental. The speaker is tuned to sound detailed and fast, with a heavy low end punch. NK



MEASURED PERFORMANCE

USHER X-718

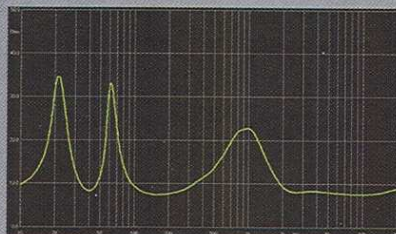
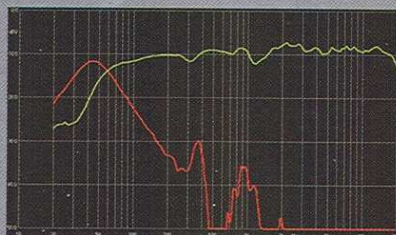
The Usher X-718s exhibit a generally flat frequency response across their full bandwidth. The tweeter in particular has a very even output with no unpleasant dips or peaks, which should give good smooth treble.

Measured bass response starts to drift gently downwards below 150Hz, before finally falling off around 60Hz but is reinforced below this by the port, which is tuned to 40Hz. The X-718s are not ultimate bass machines and will most likely benefit from placement reasonably close to a wall.

There are a couple of undulations in the midband, namely a dip at just over 1kHz and a rise at 2-3kHz, which interestingly correlates with Usher's quoted crossover frequency of 2.05kHz. This is likely to give an element of forwardness to the midrange.

Unusually these days, the X-718s really are an 8 ohm

loudspeaker, with a measured DCR of 6.8 ohms, and the benign impedance curve, along with the measured sensitivity of 85.5dB means that they will work well with a good range of amplifiers, but need 60W or more. AS



VERDICT

Crisp, clean, expansive and atmospheric sound that's detailed and dynamic.

MONITOR AUDIO RS8 £800

MONITOR AUDIO LTD.

+44 (0) 1268 740 580

www.monitoraudio.co.uk

FOR

- powerful, articulate bass
- superb high frequencies
- build quality

AGAINST

- long running-in period

VERDICT

Generally very clean and detailed with fine rhythmic abilities, but lack scale and dynamic articulation.

USHER AUDIO

COMPASS X-718 £740

Usher Audio

+44 (0)8450 525 259

www.hiaudio.co.uk

FOR

- styling
- build
- rhythmically excellent

AGAINST

- limited dynamics
- music dependent