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Epos Epic stereo loudspeakers



Epos Acoustics just makes loudspeakers; no iPod docks, Wi-Fi or Bluetooth here. And they face the perennial challenge of the speaker designer — how to achieve the best possible sound quality at a given price. It's not hard to make a great loudspeaker if you have a limitless budget. Creating a range that excels at each price-point is rather harder.

Epos has used modern materials and computer-aided design to arrive at its new series of 'Epic' speakers, which are substantially different from

what has gone before, with all new drive units, an ingenious grille-mounting device. Judging from our tests of two of this three-strong series, it has produced something special.

Epic 1

The new Epic range comprises three models, numbered in King Arthur counting style as the 1, 2 and 5 — two standmounters and a floorstander. The smaller Epic 1 standmounter is the one we haven't heard — a four-ohm 88dB/W/m design with six-inch bass/midrange driver and Epos' new 25mm soft-dome tweeter (a first for Epos, as opposed to its usual metal dome), in an enclosure little more than 12 inches high (310 × 185 × 245mm).

Epic 2

Moving up to the Epic 2s, we have larger standmounters, measuring 415 × 210 × 280mm. They're traditional two-way designs, using the new soft-dome tweeter and a 180mm bass/mid driver, also newly developed by Epos to produce an "even frequency response and smooth roll-off". It's a relatively amplifier-friendly loudspeaker design, with a nominal four-ohm impedance and a higher-than-average 90dBspl sensitivity.

Designed and engineered in Great Britain and assembled at Epos' Chinese manufacturing facility under tight control, the quality here is fantastic. As part of its design philosophy, Epos has kept the crossover network as simple as possible but high quality, using the likes of polypropylene capacitors and metal-oxide resistors. The binding posts are gold-plated and the Epic 2s can be biwired.

Internally, the 18mm MDF cabinet panels have been braced both vertically and horizontally — the old knuckle-wrap test sounded reassuringly solid and dead. Build and finish (there's Black Ash or Cherry vinyl veneers) are both excellent.

Out of the box, the Epics come without any grilles attached — but acoustically-transparent grilles are provided, with Epos' aforementioned clever way of mounting them. The smooth front baffle can be popped off with a nifty baffle removal tool — slide it through a small hole just above the rear bass reflex port, and a gentle tap pops the baffle off, so you can replace it with the supplied cloth grilles. There are many advantages to this Epos 'dual grille' design. The primary one is that it means that if you want the cloth grille, it fits perfectly 'into' the cabinet, so it doesn't sit proud, like most grilles. This greatly enhances the appearance. Not that the Epics don't look good without... in fact they look fabulous, and that's how we started listened to them. The cloth grille does, however, afford a higher level of driver protection, if you have pets... or small children...

On a pair of sand-filled 51cm column stands, with the speakers around 70cm from the rear wall and toed-in toward the listening position, we began listening.

The pair we received from Aussie distributor Epocz had only been in the country a few days and never out of the box. So, initial listening was with a cold pair, but that can still be a useful gauge of things to come — first impressions do count. And we liked what we were hearing straight from the first few bars.

A good medium-sized standmounter can deliver the best of both cabinet types. You still have the intimacy and immediacy of a smaller cabinet, but there's genuine, usable bass as well. Of course, the Epic 2s can't extend as deeply as their floorstanding brethren — see our review of the Epic 5 floorstanders overleaf. But after running in you get a tight, tuneful and really well-controlled bottom end. These speakers are full of drive and energy, boasting plenty of character, but never producing any aggressive-sounding hard edges, no matter what the musical style.

The soft-dome tweeter (and crossover) didn't exaggerate already harsh and bright recordings



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— there's nothing worse than a top-end that shrieks. To the contrary, the Epic 2's are far more refined and even-sounding here, but with excellent clarity, and the ability to present music in an emotional rather than technical manner (which, no matter the style, always suits the music better).

All the right speaker hi-fi elements were present and correct — great soundstaging, excellent stereo depth, stable imagery, plus that tight and tuneful bass. What more could you ask for from \$1200 speakers? Not a fat lot. Provided you don't plan on listening at headbanging volume levels, the Epic 2s will dish up whatever's sent down the speaker cables.

Epic 5

The Epic 5 is a three-driver system, but it's actually a 2½-way design. The two bass/midrange drivers are 'specced' by Epos with a diameter of 179mm, the more usual industry measurement of diameter (across the mounting holes) is 167mm, but the pair together, both handling bass, equate to a combined 'piston area' of 262cm², equivalent to a single nine-inch (232mm) cone.

The reasons Epos uses two drivers are many, but one such is that by doing this, it can use both drivers to deliver low bass, then roll off one of the drivers (the lower one, as it happens) to leave the upper one operating on its own at higher frequencies. This is what's meant by a '2½-way' design. It's a tried-and-true method, used by hundreds of the world's best-known speaker manufacturers. The driver itself is a fairly standard design, possessed of a pressed steel chassis, with a conventional spider arrangement.

The tweeter is again that "first soft-dome

tweeter used in the history of the company", with a high-temperature voice coil that is suspended in ferrofluid to both increase the tweeter's efficiency and aid in cooling (to help dynamics), and powered by a neodymium magnet.

We experimented with the floorstanders and settled on 40cm from the rear wall for the best balance and most extended bass, even though moving them a bit further out would increase the depth of the soundstage; the increased bass and improved balance were worth the tiny sacrifice.

Whoever 'voiced' the Epic 5s, they are obviously steeped in the traditions of the greatest 'British' loudspeakers — our first adjective would be 'smooth', our second 'mellow'. The new bass/midrange drivers are undoubtedly mostly responsible

for this sound, while the good ol' 'old technology' fabric dome would also play a significant part, despite the fact that the old-tech dome is being driven by a decidedly high-tech (neodymium-boron) magnet.

But despite being smooth and mellow, it does not achieve this by being laid back. Instead, there's a dynamic 'punch' to the sound, particularly across the midrange, vibrant and exciting, with a real 'you are there' presence. Contradictory? No, whereas it used to be that you could choose 'either the one or the other', it now seems that we can have our aural cake and eat it too.

Bass was deep and strong... in fact surprisingly extended, matching the extension possible with larger drivers. Midrange clarity was outstandingly good: perhaps not quite up to the precision from a dedicated midrange driver in a true three-way design, but outstandingly good nonetheless.

The real surprise was that, track after track, we preferred the sound of the Epic 5s when the grilles were on — the 'non-audiophile' option. We have no idea why this should be.

And leaving the best until last — the stereo imaging of these speakers is to die for... jawdroppingly good. And combined with all the Epic 5's other attributes, it means that when you're sitting in the 'sweet spot' in front of the speakers, it's as if you're in the best seat in the house, with the musicians spread right across the stage, side-to-side and front-to-back so you can 'hear' where every one is located so clearly that you can visualise them in your mind's eye.

Conclusion

If you're choosing between the Epic 2 and the 5, it's worth doing the sums, because if you add in the cost of the recommended stands for the Epic 2s (the Epos ST12i, at \$285), you're only \$15 below the Epic 5s, which makes the floorstanders look even more like a stunningly sweet deal. We have nothing but admiration for the way these speakers have been engineered and voiced — outstandingly good sound quality, truly extended bass, and a stereo soundfield that is so deep and so wide that it simply must be experienced to be believed. At this price-point, we don't think we've heard their like before. ■

Epos Epic 1 / 2 / 5 stereo loudspeakers

Price: \$800 / \$1200 / \$1500
Warranty: Five years

- Incredible imaging
- Smooth and fluid performers
- Excellent build and finish

- Storage of spare grille
- Limited finish options

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