Usher X-708 Speaker

Usher speakers are made in Taiwan, one of the top consumer technology centers of the free world. In order to field quality products, Usher hired Dr. Joseph D'Appolito, renowned speaker designer, to oversee the design of their speakers. It was money well spent. Usher never forgets that their speakers will be used in peoples' homes, and their designs are very attentive to appearance. To my eyes, the Usher speakers range from very attractive to drop-dead gorgeous. But how do they sound?

My first exposure to Usher speakers was a demonstration by Usher distributors (Stan and Carter Tracht of Thee High End) at a prospective dealer's showroom. Of the three models demonstrated, I was most impressed with the X-719, a stand-mounted model that exhibited very strong bass and good dynamics. At only $1000 per pair, it's one of the best values I've heard and seen. So I asked for a pair to review.

Unfortunately, the buzz had already gotten around, and lots of other reviewers had also asked to review that model. So Stan asked if I would consider reviewing the Usher X-708, a slightly smaller and even cheaper model in the model line. How could I refuse?

Description

The X-708 is an average-sized, two-way stand-mounted speaker. Drivers consist of a one-inch silk dome tweeter and a seven-inch cone mid/bass driver. The mid/bass driver uses a paper cone, with a rounded metal phase plug. A high order crossover divides the frequency range at 2.23 KHz. Power handling is rated at 80 watts, and efficiency is specified at 88 db at one watt at one meter distance. Impedance is eight ohms. The speaker weighs 26.5 pounds, and measures 9.6 X 14.1 X 15.1 inches (width/depth/height).

Clad with wood side panels, and with painted top/back/front/bottom [gloss black (at extra cost), matte black, matte pearl, matte silver, or matte white], the cabinet is not just a rectangular box, but sports slanted, non-parallel front and back to minimize internal resonance, and time-align the drivers. The sample I reviewed had the matte white finish, which I found to be a refreshing change to the ubiquitous black cabinet, but my household decorator opined that it looked like plastic. So much for WAF! Although you can't tell by looking, the speaker uses 1½-inch thick MDF walls, and then adds the decorative (and resonance-controlling) wood side panels. That's sturdy!

Two sets of terminals on the rear panel make it possible to biwire the speaker. Copper-plated brass jumpers connect the mid/bass unit to the tweeter. The terminals are recessed into the back of the speaker, making it slightly challenging to connect cables with large spade lugs like the WBTs on my speaker cables. The cabinet is ported, venting to the rear just above the terminals.

Setting Up

Usher makes a strikingly attractive stand for its stand-mounted speakers, which adjusts to suit their height. The stand rests on a two-inch thick slab of marble that measures about two by two feet. The entire stand weighs nearly 40 pounds! So not only is it sturdy, but with its wood trim, it's attractive.

Unfortunately, the Usher stand was not available for the evaluation, so I installed the X-708s on a 24-inch Studio Tech stand. This stand has four large steel support columns, which I had filled with sand to make them more massive and inert. The Soliloquy speakers that normally reside on the stands are Blue-Tacked in place, but since the Ushers were temporary in my laboratory, I rested them on one-inch Sorbothane squares. Connecting the speakers to the variety of amplifiers I tried was an eight-foot length of Blue Marble Audio speaker cable, which is very transparent and neutral. It is also rather flexible, making it easy to connect to the amplifiers I used.

After a little experimentation, I placed the stands about 34 inches from the back wall, and 65 inches between the tweeters, a position I found to work well for my similarly sized Soliloquy SM-2A3 speakers. Initially I pointed them directly at my listening position, which seemed to work ok, but later discovered that toeing them out about 15 degrees produced a better image.

I started the audition with the stock jumpers in place between the tweeter and mid/bass terminals. I later tried biwiring, and finally, used a jumper made by the company that made the speaker wire. The grills were removed and not used throughout the review period.

The Amplifiers

While it was in-house for a separate review, I connected the superb Sophia Electric KT-88 integrated amp to the X-708s. Although the Sophia amp is rated at 50 watts per channel, it drove the X-708s without breaking a sweat. The speakers easily revealed the amp's gorgeous tonal qualities, and highlighted a robust, punchy bass. Of course, it's a bit goofy to use a $3750 amp with $900 speakers, but one has to seize a target of opportunity. Unfortunately, the Sophia Electric amp had to be shipped onward to the next reviewer, so I wasn't able to use it throughout the review.

Next, I connected a Parasound HCA 2200II stereo amp, a 250-watt monster that provides two sets of speaker terminals to facilitate biwiring. Now you may be wondering if I fried the X-708s with such a powerful amp, and I'm pleased to report that by exercising lots of caution with the volume control, I did no damage to the speakers. The Parasound amp is a very smooth, non-fatiguing unit with extended frequency response. Designed by John Curl, it enjoyed a good reputation in its day, but has been out of production several years.

Although it was in the middle of a modification process, I couldn't resist the opportunity to try a little amplifier there seems to be buzz about in the audiophile underground: the Applied Research and Technology Studio Linear Amplifier Model 1, hereafter shortened to ART SLA-1. This is a professional 100-watt/channel solid-state amp that is very economical, if not downright cheap. But it uses pro-style connectors only, and needs to be modified to work with spade lugs and RCA plugs. This amp was a better match, power-wise, for the speaker's 80-watt power rating. Its clipping indicators never came on during the tests, although the protection lights did, when I shorted out the output trying and failing to force two sets of spade lugs into the binding posts. Fortunately, the protection circuitry works extremely well.

The Sound

From the very first, the X-708s impressed with the power and depth of its bass. You seldom hear this kind of bass from such a small speaker, especially at the $900 price point. With the stock jumpers in place, the speaker cables were connected to the mid/bass terminals, so they got the full signal without passing through the jumpers. The midrange and treble were pleasant, but sounded a little congested, and seemed to lack dynamics. This was the case with all three amplifiers, although the Sophia Electric KT-88 amp seemed to minimize the problem. Highs were extended, but the overall sound had sort of a bleached quality that deprived the listener of hearing accurate timbres of instruments, and on loud, heavy passages, exhibited some coloration. Had I stopped here, I would have written a polite, unenthusiastic review that described the X-708 as a nice, but uninspiring speaker, which sounded ok for its price, but was no big deal. But I didn't stop there.

The next step was to remove the jumpers and run separate speaker wires to the mid/bass terminals and to the tweeter terminals. Unfortunately, I lacked two identical runs of the Blue Marble Audio speaker cable. A raid on my closet yielded an eight-foot long run of Alpha-Core MI-2 speaker cable. I remembered it had always produced extended, open highs, so I selected it for the tweeter connection, leaving the Blue Marble Audio speaker wire connected to the mid/bass driver. The results were quite interesting. I used the Parasound amplifier for biwiring.

Biwired, the X-708's highs and mids became more prominent, and more dynamic. Gone was most, though not all of the dynamic constriction, and the highs were more open, as well. The midrange was also affected positively, showing that the stock jumper bars were having an effect on the lower driver, too. Bass remained stellar, and the slight congestion I had noticed was reduced. But there was a sonic discontinuity due to the fact I was using different cables on the tweeter and the mid/bass driver. Also, the full dynamic range of the music was not being realized. I wanted to see how the speakers would sound with the same type of wire feeding both drivers. So I borrowed a set of jumpers from Blue Marble Audio's proprietor and good friend Roger Tiller. For some time, Roger had been telling me that his jumpers, made from the same wire as his speaker cables, actually sounded better than biwiring, but of course I was skeptical; how could that work? After all, you'd still be using jumpers, instead of a direct connection to the amplifier. But why not humor Roger, and give it a try?

I was unprepared for the results. The X-708's dynamics improved even more (a lot more, actually) and the slight midrange congestion I had heard was gone. Music flowed easily from the speakers, with better definition and timbral accuracy. Using the Blue Marble Audio jumpers in place of the stock jumper bars had turned the X-708s into excellent speakers.

It was time to begin critical listening, and I was faced with a dilemma. One of my pet peeves with audio reviewers is that some of them modify the equipment they are evaluating, so the reader doesn't get an accurate picture of how the device under test will sound when they get it home. And some of those modifications are not easy or accessible to the normal techno-klutz user like me. In this case, replacing the jumpers was about as hard as changing a light bulb. I'm not sure that only the Blue Marble Audio jumpers would have such a positive effect; I suspect any jumper made of the same wire as the main speaker wire would work as well, and so would biwiring with the same wire on both sections. Finally, I realized I really didn't want to listen to

the X-708's stock jumper bars, so I conducted all my serious listening with the Blue Marble Audio jumpers.

Listening
For serious listening, I used both the Parasound amp and the SLA-1 amp.

Custer LaRue is the delightful soprano in my favorite musical group, the Baltimore Consort. They specialize in songs of the Elizabethan period, as well as some early American songs. The five instrumentalists who make up the remainder of the group are impressive virtuosi, for whom the music holds little technical challenge. When you see the group perform live, you realize how much fun these people have with their music, and then you realize that their enjoyment extends to recording sessions. Their song *Soldier Boy for Me*, on Dorian DOR-90213 (*A True Lover's Farewell*), begins with a suitably martial drum, followed by the soprano and instrumentalists. Through the SLA-1, the drum had real impact and was well defined. Custer's voice sounded like it does in person, and I could hear her modulate the voice to suit the words. Soundstaging was deep, but images weren't precisely defined. Still, the song was lots of fun to listen to, and I could sense the performers' enjoyment. The much more powerful Parasound drove the bass lower, had a spacious, three-dimensional sound field, and smooth vocals. Highs were less extended than the SLA-1.

My favorite cut for evaluating soundstaging is Allegri's *Misere*, on Gimmell 454 939-2. A main choir and a solo group sing from different positions in a large, quite resonant space (actually, a church). Through the SLA-1, there was a particularly good sense of the spaciousness, as the sound reverberated across the soundstage. The tonal qualities of the singers were very accurately depicted. It was not always clear that there were two separate groups singing in different locations, however. The Parasound threw a more cavernous soundstage, but voices were less distinct, and highs were slightly rolled off. There was a clear spatial distinction between the main choir and the solo group.

My admiration of Jennifer Warnes' songs, both from artistic and sonic standpoints, is well established. One of my favorite audition tracks is her song *I Can't Hide*, from her CD *The Hunter* (Private Music 01005-82089-2). Through the SLA-1, the opening drum roll was unusually powerful, with real weight. I almost checked to see if I had inadvertently turned on my subwoofer. The deep, well-defined bass was remarkable from such a small speaker. On the other end of the audio spectrum, the chimes which sound later in the piece were distinct and well-defined. Jennifer's voice, however, sounded just a little dry and grainy. The Parasound amp smoothed out the voice considerably, but rolled off the highs slightly. But its bass was dramatically better, going deeper with more impact and lots of detail. Power rules!

My all-time favorite cut to evaluate how a system or component handles details is Jordi Savall's performance of *Rodrigo Martinez*, from the Alia Vox CD *La Folia* (AliaVox AV9805). Through the SLA-1, the opening castanets rang out clearly, and it was clear how each note from the initial impact decayed over a period of several seconds. Dynamics were good, but slightly smoothed out. Jordi's viola da gamba was tonally accurate, but slightly too polite. The Parasound produced a better depiction of the deep bass drum than I have ever heard, even through a subwoofer. Not

only was it very deep, the detail of the drum rolls and the drumstick hitting the heads, was superior to even my much-higher priced ReTHM speakers.

By the time I had played through these songs, I was convinced that the SLA-1 amp was imparting a slight edge to the sound. I had tried driving it directly from the CD player, since the amp has individual volume controls for each channel. Just for the heck of it, I decided to try feeding the amp from the output of my preamp. Perhaps that would take the edge off the sound. It did. The sound became rounder, and warmer, with improved spatial definition. Was this a case of tubes slowing down the transient response? Perhaps that contributed, but I suspect it was really due to the low input impedance of the amp, coupled with the high output impedance of the preamp and somewhat high capacitance of the interconnect cables all interacting to slightly roll off the highs. Whatever, the reason, the sound through the X-708s became much more pleasant. I replayed the *Rodrigo Martinez* cut with the preamp in the circuit. The sound was warmer, with better pitch definition and timing. It was also easier to follow melodic lines. So, using the X-708 as an analytical tool, I had identified and isolated the problem, proposed and tested a solution, and verified the solution worked. That's a testimony to the X-708's transparency.

Summary

The Usher X-708 speakers can provide refined, distinguished, or even gutsy sound, and could easily form the basis of a respectable small audio system. Its bass is remarkable for a speaker of its size and price, and it exhibited a notable transparency that always let you know what was going on in the rest of the system. I tried three amplifiers with the speaker, and it clearly showed me the difference among them. Unfortunately, the Sophia Electric KT-88 amp was not in house for the duration of the evaluation, so I couldn't use it for the detailed listening test. Neither of the two solid state amplifiers was ideal; the Parasound HCA 2200 MkII rolled off the highs, had spectacular lows, and lacked a little detail and dynamics in the midrange. The ART SLA-1 was more extended in the highs, had deep bass with good detail and depth, and more spatial resonance and dynamics. But in its present state, its highs, though much more extended, are a bit edgy. But the modification process has only begun, and I hope the rough edges are eliminated, while the strengths grow stronger.

The stock jumper bars between the tweeter terminals and the mid/bass terminals detract from the speaker's sound by reducing dynamics and causing congestion on loud passages. Biwiring or replacing the jumper bars with jumpers made from better speaker wire will improve performance greatly, and my overall high opinion of the speaker is based on this being done. Biwiring reduces a slight but annoying dynamic constriction that reduces the liveliness of the sound. I find the appearance attractive, and the wide variety of finishes available should make it easy to match to your décor.

The Usher X-708 was better than I expected. It looks good, sounds good, and somehow, only costs $900 per pair. If this is your budget range, I highly recommend you give it a listen.

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