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MARCH 2012

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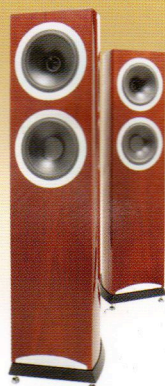
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USHER DANCER MINI-ONE LOUDSPEAKERS *EXCLUSIVE!*
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7 PAGES OF LETTERS - THE BEST WINS A PAIR OF
KEF Q100 LOUDSPEAKERS! (UK ONLY)



Diamond Life

Bring a Diamond into your life with Usher's Dancer Mini-One loudspeaker, Noel Keywood says.

Usher, a Taiwanese company, have an impressive factory by global standards and an engineering department, including anechoic chamber, most companies would die for. They rely on advanced engineering to produce a high technology product and our measurements show little compromise to the notion of accuracy. The Be-10 we reviewed in the June 2009 issue was a stunner, but this is a big loudspeaker with a big price tag – £10,000 no less. The Dancer Mini-One reviewed here lies in the same series, with the same cabinet shape and finish, but is scaled down to suit smaller rooms and pockets. It also comes with Usher's own specially developed Diamond tweeter, recently added to all Dancer series models.

Standing just over one metre tall (1062mm) this loudspeaker hits the common 1m benchmark. At 320mm wide the cabinet is relatively slim and relies on a base for stability. The sturdy curved cabinet is heavy, total weight with base being 37.3kgs. Usher's website (www.usheraudio.com) shows five finishes, deep gloss Enzo Read and Piano Ivory, plus Walnut, Violin and Maple wood veneers. The veneers have a silk finish; they are not lacquered.

This is a two way loudspeaker with 7inch (178mm) bass unit and 1.25inch (32mm) dome treble unit. They cross over at 2.3kHz according to Usher. The bass unit is reflex loaded by a slot port at the base of the front panel. The rear carries a sturdy bi-wire connecting panel able to accept heavy gauge bare wire, 4mm plugs or spades. Links are removed to enable bi-wiring. The Mini-One is a premium loudspeaker and the quality of cabinet finish, trims and the connecting panel is first class.

Usher explain that diamond coating is a process that has been around for some time, and used on tweeters too. However, it adds too much mass and, sure enough, B&W's Diamond tweeter does peak up at 15kHz our measurements of the 804D (February 2011 issue) show, confirming this. To avoid this effect Usher have used a laminated dome with diamond-metal-diamond structure that does not resonate sharply in the audio band, they say and sure enough, measurement confirmed this, although there is a peak above 19kHz. So the problem hasn't disappeared, it has been pushed upward out of the way. It leaves Usher's DMD Diamond tweeter with a flat in-band frequency response and a sound far removed from the clatter of saucopans that

aluminium dome tweeters suffer. Diamond tweeters are known for lacking the metallic zing, even rasp, of metal domes and deliver masses of fine detail.

In our experience though, synthetic materials in loudspeakers demand a very long run in process, far longer than traditional natural materials. Where two days continuous run-in (48 hours) is adequate for most loudspeakers, our B&W 804Ds were obviously not right until they'd been run for 120 hours. B&W don't acknowledge

measurements suggested, the Dancer Mini-Ones were light in balance, their broad treble lift pushing percussive transients forward. Amy Winehouse sang 'Tears Dry on their Own' crisply from centre stage and drum strikes cut out of the loudspeakers strongly. Fine detail was thrown outward and initial transients of hand claps jumped out. The diamond treble units were sparkingly clean in their handling of cymbals and metallic percussion instruments but overall the sound was a little on the hard side. Bass was firm and went low but it wasn't

"his violin was intensely lit, full bodied and perfectly placed on the sound stage"

this need, which complicates the issue about whether a loudspeaker is fit and ready for review. Usher interestingly quote 60 hours minimum and 180 hours as fully run in and that seems about right – but in practice it means the speaker must be run continuously in a room or chamber for seven days, no less. We put 120 hours on ours with overnight and weekend running, even though they came run-in, the importers said. Diamond tweeters I suspect need very long running in. This requirement affects audition. If loudspeakers on demo or under review have not been run for a sufficiently long period they will not be representative and in my experience can sound quite unpleasant. This can skew people's perceptions of a product and it is a particular difficulty with diamond tweeters. So before auditioning the Dancer Mini-Ones be sure they have been fully run-in and are not fresh from the box, an observation that applies equally to B&W Diamond loudspeakers.

SOUND QUALITY

The Dancer Mini-Ones were run in using pink noise and then Monitor Audio's peculiar De-Tox disc. As they had been used by importer Hi-Audio they were pretty well used by the time serious listening began.

I started off using our in-house Musical Fidelity AMS50 Pure Class A amplifier. Most loudspeakers are developed using solid state amplifiers and used with them too, so this is an initial benchmark reference point. As our frequency response

prominent.

Usher like a technically accurate sound and the Dancer Mini-Ones were no exception. They image nicely and I could hear right around Amy Winehouse at the microphone but





our AMS50 has a dry delivery and it wasn't a symbiotic partner for these Ushers. So our Icon Audio MB845 Mk II valve amplifiers were given 30 minutes to warm up and I continued with them.

With the MB845 MkIIs, bass became bigger if a little soft around the edges due to its lower damping factor, but it had plenty of presence and the loudspeaker's sense of control was good. Where this combo worked was in allowing the Usher's excellent midband insight to be a benefit rather than a drawback, a strength of a good thermionic source. Amy Winehouses' vocals stretched out, hard wrought against a clear background, fine decays around cymbals, drums slowly fading away around her. Treble wasn't as sugar sweet as that from B&W's Diamond tweeter, but the Dancer Mini-Ones were a better integrated and more balanced loudspeaker overall, without the one-note treble of the B&Ws. They displayed treble emphasis with the 'Back to Black' album and this persisted with Angélique Kidjo's 'Fifa' album. 'The Sound of the Drums' had nice rolling deep bass and plenty of it, with an emphatic note structure. Percussion stretched across a wide sound stage in front of me, in the plane of the loudspeakers. Cymbals were ringingly strong and clear and quite obvious, even with the loudspeakers pointing straight down the room, not angled in. But this album does have strong treble and the Ushers did not disguise the fact. They are dry and very analytical, setting up an intensely detailed sound stage on which every little nuance is heard. The way the Dancer Mini-Ones laid out backing vocals in broad sweep across the end of the

room was impressive.

Lady Gaga's vocals stood out against a background of thunderous bass from 'Bad Romance', synth staking out a simple theme at left, interjections from far right, with Gaga's strenuous delivery given good force centre stage, elaborated by intense detail. The tweeter had some sting though; it takes no prisoners. This is likely explained by a steep resonant peak above 19kHz. Diamond coated tweeters tend to be like this; B&W's diamond tweeter peaks lower down.

Whilst Rock sat firmly between the loudspeakers, as it is mixed, the Dancer Mini-Ones opened out impressively to display the scale of the London Symphony Orchestra playing Tchaikovsky's 'March Slave'. Kettle drums thundered weightily, cellos were intense whilst pipes and horns played out the military theme in a sense of clear open space. The fast pace and tight timing of the LSO was beautifully portrayed, if again cymbal crashes were a little intense.

The wide open sound stage and excellent imaging of the Ushers was again apparent with Nigel Kennedy playing Vivaldi's 'Spring'. His violin was intensely lit, full bodied and perfectly placed on the sound stage. The English Chamber Orchestra stretched out majestically behind him, sitting

in a clear open space. I would have preferred a little less emphasis on the upper harmonics of the higher strings but in exchange I heard the richness of the instrument and the whole picture hung together beautifully.

CONCLUSION

The Dancer Mini-Ones are very Usher, meaning superbly engineered, beautifully made and technically closer to perfect than most. What you get is a very 'correct' sound, one that is coolly accurate, with excellent bass and a super clear midband; they successfully offer a taste of the wonderful Be-10, in a smaller package.

The Dancer Mini-Ones are impressively well engineered, made and finished, and capable of wonderful results. Like the Be-10s though you do need a very good amplifier, one that is powerful yet silky smooth at the same time, to avoid hearing the amplifier's own limitations. A great loudspeaker then, wonderfully engineered and impressively built, but demanding of all around it.

REFERENCE SYSTEM
Electrocompaniet ECD1 DAC
Icon Audio MB845 MkII power amplifiers

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

Our third-octave frequency response analysis shows a smooth and even characteristic typical of Usher. There are virtually no dips or undulations across the audio band and the dip at 180Hz is attributable to a vertical mode in our measuring room. Forward output from the bass unit extends down to 50Hz and below this the port takes over, extending coverage right down to 25Hz, into subsonics.

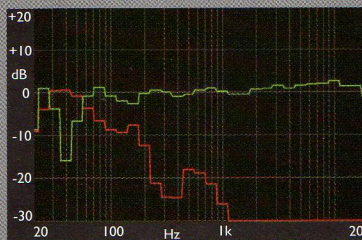
Points to note here are that a frequency response as smooth as this suggests very low coloration, and this property was borne out in our 200ms decay analysis. There is a steady lift in treble output with rising frequency, enough to result in a light balance and, finally and not shown, the diamond coated tweeter has a peak at 20kHz that subjectively may be relevant.

Sensitivity was low at 85dB SPL from one nominal watt (2.8V) of pink noise. The reason for this is that Usher have used a high DCR bass unit measuring 7.2 Ohms, where most are 4 Ohms these days. Consequently, overall impedance is high, the reactive component adding as a vector sum to produce an overall impedance value of 10 Ohms no less. The Dancer Mini-One needs quite a lot of power to go loud as a result, a minimum of 50 Watts; as floorstanders go it is not

especially sensitive.

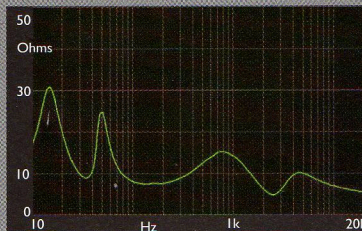
The Dancer Mini-One is a technically accurate loudspeaker enhanced by smooth treble lift, to give obvious treble sheen, perhaps to emphasise the Diamond tweeter. It is engineered well and cannot fail to give good sound quality. NK

FREQUENCY RESPONSE



Green - driver output
Red - port output

IMPEDANCE



VERDICT A clean and clear sounding floorstander with a bright demeanour from its Diamond tweeter.

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www.hiaudio.co.uk

FOR

- seamless clarity
- clear treble
- tonal neutrality
- low coloration

AGAINST

- treble sheen
- require long run in & careful system matching