

Alta Alec scales the heights

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Alta Audio Alec loudspeakers

Alta Audio is a classic boutique brand. Based in Long Island, New York, Alta is run by Michael Levy who makes a small range of distinctive looking loudspeakers of which the Alec is the smallest floorstander. It stands 39 inches (99cm) high before you add an inch and a half of spike. The cabinet is fabulous; hopefully the images do it justice but as that's not always the case. Take it from me and the visitors that saw Alec in the flesh, the rosewood veneer and lacquering make this speaker look very attractive indeed. I like the shape too. It's a decent size box but by tapering from the top down it doesn't dominate the room.

Alta Audio is a relatively young company but apparently Michael Levy "helped bring CD, DVD, HDTV and surround sound technologies to market", so it's safe to say that he's been in the industry longer than average. Today he dedicates his expertise to building speakers that "convey the sense of sitting 10th row centre in an acoustically sound concert hall, or dead centre in an old school jazz club." This isn't something you find on many company's websites where the talk is usually of transparency, power and precision; all useful qualities but recreating the live event is a different challenge.

It suggests that Alec is capable of higher than average volume levels without distress and that the voicing has been tuned by ear rather than measurement alone. Of course, many very enjoyable loudspeaker designs have taken this approach, but it's quite different from that taken by larger speaker companies where the desire for neutrality and good measurement results in a different sound.

The Alec combines a large ribbon tweeter with a near nine inch mid/bass or woofer. The latter looks fairly conventional but apparently the cone is a composite that pairs Kevlar with paper to achieve a degree of self-damping with low mass. A phase plug is incorporated which is usually beneficial to imaging. More significant is the fact that the cabinet uses a hybrid of transmission line and reflex loading that Levy calls 'Extended Transmission Line'. He describes it thus: "The difference between Alta XTL and a standard transmission line is that we tune the

cabinet at multiple frequencies, not just one. Think of it like a cello amplifying and extending the notes played off the strings.” On the back there’s what looks like a regular reflex port but no other vents.

The cabinet itself is made of a composite that Alta calls ‘Damphard’, which appears to be a laminate of woods having both soft and hard layers in order to provide stiffness without the ‘ringing’ propensity of conventional plywood. There is no damping inside the cabinet because, according to Levy, damping slows down the bass and his cabinet shape prevents internal resonances.



Set up

Connection is via bi-wire terminals that are supplied with cable jumpers. This is a sign that someone has listened to the usual metal plate types and realised that something better is required. There are threaded inserts in the base to combine with Alta’s three piece spikes but being of an anti-spike persuasion I left these in the boxes and used Ansuz Darkz S2T feet instead.

Or at least I did once distributor Andy Baker and I were happy with placement - a process which took rather longer than usual. Although the ribbon driver has good horizontal dispersion, spreading the sound sideways well, it’s limited in the vertical domain by design, which means that ceiling reflections are less of an issue than those from a sidewall. However, this dispersion,





combined with the unusual bass loading system, made it hard to find the optimal position for the Altas. In the end they were widely spaced (2.4m) and angled so that they fired directly at the listening position with a gap of 70cm to the rear wall - further into the room than average in this space but not excessive.

Sound of Alec

The Alta Alec sounds quite different to my regular PMC twenty5.26i floorstanders, which are a similar size and have (advanced) transmission line loading. The Alta's have a warmer balance that while open and detailed is not as expansive. However, after spending a little more time with them this contrast became less obvious while the music being played was as engaging. Essentially you can hear that the Alec has been voiced by ear rather than measurement, which means that it isn't quite as neutral as some alternatives, but boy does it like to boogie. Give it just about any rhythm and it will get your feet and often your body moving, because the bass is so well controlled and, when necessary, extended.

This quality is evident whatever the tempo or material. The first piece from Bill Evans' *Waltz for Debby* is *My Foolish Heart* was recorded live in a place where people are eating and talking. Once the playing begins the sound of the audience becomes less obvious, but it creates an ambiance that can be heard in the background along with a sense of spaciousness behind the musicians that the Alecs love to expose. The playing is immensely calm and confident with a restraint that you rarely hear. All of this becomes clear alongside the beauty of the composition. On the rather more up to date *Remembrance* by Yussef Kamaal, things are more upbeat with Yussef Dayes playing a killer beat on the drums while Kamaal Williams floats around on the keys producing shiny sounds that peel away into the atmosphere. And backing them up is an elastic bass line that the Alecs latch onto so that your body knows exactly what's going on, while your mind relaxes in tune with the melodies.

These results were achieved with a Moor Amps Angel 6 power amplifier. Moving to a lower powered Rega Elex brightened up the balance and brought an extra nimbleness to the results. This seemed to suit the Alecs rather better and did make me wonder if these fairly high sensitivity (93dB/4 Ohms) speakers might be suitable for tube designs. I didn't have a suitable option to hand and even though I'm aware the Alecs were created for solid state, it might be interesting to try them with glass power. The Rega (in power amp mode) did prove a worthy partner however and delivered the precise and solid kick of Deadmau5's *Seeya* in muscular fashion. It must be the nature of the cabinet design that gives the Alec its speed in the bass because a regular ported cabinet of this shape would be hard pressed to achieve the same. Imaging is good too, especially with the spacious live sound of Ryan Adams, which stretches out across the room while retaining that electric energy that you only get when there's an audience in place. I was impressed by the way the Altas separated the voices on *Helplessly Hoping* too: Crosby, Stills and Nash are in perfect harmony, but you can hear the character of

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each very clearly, which isn't always the case. Another vintage live recording, the Grateful Dead's Europe '72, provided the full tilt boogie of Cumberland Blues. This can often sound rough around the edges with a bit of glare in the mid, but the Alecs delivered the energy and the drive without emphasising its shortcomings.

Results with vinyl were also rather good. The Alecs revelled in the pulse of Bugge Wesseltoft's New Concept of Jazz with real blast from brass and a dark cherry tone from bass clarinet, the quality of timing ensuring that the band played totally in sync. After a streamer



upgrade (Auralic Aries G2.2) the atmosphere on Waltz for Debby went up another level, the sound enveloping the room and the quality of playing placed front and centre. Now the Cumberland Blues bass line was as clear as day and the brilliance of the band at its peak readily apparent. The Alta Alecs prefer to play at higher levels for which you need decent but not excessive power, the 90W of the Elex was certainly sufficient to open up everything from John Scofield's recent rendition of Mr Tambourine Man to Donny Hathaway's powerful live version of The Ghetto.

Conclusion

The Alta Alec is a bit different in its presentation and it takes a while to acclimatise yourself to its way of doing things. Once you're there however it makes a lot of musical sense and will let you enjoy a wide variety of styles, especially if those styles include a bass line. Set up is more critical than usual but patience rewards with an extremely engaging and revealing sound that more than lives up to the depth of the shiny lacquer finish.



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