

Art Dudley & Jim Austin

Audio Note AN-E/SPe HE loudspeaker

Good dramatic impact, a believably human sense of touch, and altogether superior note-to-note flow: If those things top your list of musical qualities that a high-fidelity system should honor above all others, then the Audio Note AN-E line of speakers should top your list of loudspeakers to covet and consider.¹ That the AN-E is electrically sensitive and easy to drive with a low-power tube amp may be a plus, but I no longer think of that as its sole reason for being: Even if I were cursed with a high-power amp, I'd probably want a pair of these.

In the May 2006 issue, *Stereophile* published my review of Audio Note's AN-E Lexus Signature loudspeaker—see www.stereophile.com/standloudspeakers/506an—one of 11 variants of the AN-E that the British company offers, and which range in price from \$5000/pair to \$130,000/pair. Like its 10 little stablemates, the AN-E Lexus Signature (\$13,900/pair) descended from the late Peter Snell's original Type E design, a deceptively simple thing that had been the result of several years' worth of painstaking, math-soaked research—especially in terms of determining the correct dimensions of its cabinet, and the sizes and positions within that cabinet of the two dynamic drivers.

I've returned to the subject of the Audio Note AN-E for a number of reasons, not the least of which is the development of a new woofer for the line, one whose 8" cone is made of hemp. (Like the junior-high gym teacher who's just mentioned athletic supporters for the first time, I pause to let the inevitable Beavis-esque giggling subside.) The new, blue material is said to endow the cone with greater stiffness, yet without penalties in other areas of performance—mass, self-damping characteristics, etc.—and so to increase detail and perhaps extend upward the woofer's unperturbed response.

¹ Manufacturer: Audio Note UK Ltd., 25 Montefiore Road, Hove, East Sussex BN3 1RD, England. Tel: (44) (0)1273-220-511. Fax: (44) (0)1273-731-498. Web: www.audiotele.com. US distributor: Audio Federation Inc., PO Box 19950, Boulder CO 80308. Tel: (303) 546-6503. Web: www.audiofederation.com.

Because the handmade, exotically veneered AN-Es are somewhat thin on the ground, and because swapping woofers in and out of an E is no simple

Essentially, the SPe HE is a less sophisticated version of the AN-E Lexus Signature I reviewed two years ago, lacking the Lexus's generously sized outboard crossover. Wiring inside the SPe HE is Audio Note's own AN-SPe silver wire, and the voice-coils of its high-efficiency tweeter and woofer are also made of silver. Its intentionally thin-walled, minimally damped cabinet is made of Russian birch plywood, veneered on all surfaces. Signal connectors are through a biwirable quartet of Audio Note's proprietary banana sockets, heavily plated with pure silver: a joy to use.

As with most type Es, whether from Snell or Audio Note, the SPe HE is intended to be placed near a wall; my experience of it bore that out, and suggested that corner placement is best—for bass reinforcement as well as for the pleasantly and realistically enhanced sense of scale that comes from using the corner of the room as a horn. In my room, the AN-E/SPe HEs performed best when they were a little more than 15" from the wall behind them, almost touching the sidewalls, and angled so that their tweeter axes crossed in front of the listening seat. Although I could hear a very entertaining boost at 31.5Hz from a seat near the



Note the green masking tape on the floor: It took a while to find just the right position for the Audio Note AN-E in the corner of Art's music room.

matter—drivers are individually tested and matched to one another at the Audio Note factory using a proprietary computer program, then sealed against the baffle with a tar-like adhesive—a direct comparison of the old and new woofers was not an option. For that reason, and because I wanted to hear whether Audio Note's less expensive versions of the E have the same potential for good musical performance, I settled for a comparison of a less direct but no less interesting sort: among the first Audio Notes with the new hemp woofers to arrive in the US was a pair of AN-E/SPe HEs (\$6900/pair), which made their way here.

wall across from the AN-Es, I heard the smoothest response when sitting far from any and all room boundaries: The best-case listening seat position was about 9' away from the speakers (*ie*, three-fifths of the way down the length of my room) and slightly to the right of center. (Regarding this widthwise asymmetry, John DeVore predicted as much when he delivered and installed the DeVore Gibbon Nine loudspeakers I wrote about in December 2007.)

Best case was good case: Bass was almost flat to 31.5Hz (about 2dB down), with some content at 25Hz—not too shabby for a liftable box with an 8" woofer. But the woofer's size—

or, more to the point, the challenge of crossing over an 8" driver to a very small tweeter while maintaining flat lower-treble response throughout the entire listening area—made itself known as a persistent response dip centered at 2kHz. Sure enough, every Audio Note AN-E speaker I've tried has made voices and some instruments sound a little dark and thick through a portion of their range.

Yet even with that mild darkness in the midrange—that coloration, that timbral thickness, that whatever—the AN-E/SPe HE was a *remarkably* good retriever of detail. The first time I heard the banjo in Larry Sparks' "John Deere Tractor," or the organ at the end of the second verse of "Power Failure," from Procol Harum's *Broken Barricades* (LP, A&M SP 4294), was through these speakers.

Was the hemped-up SPe HE in fact *more* detailed than the Lexus Signature? I think so. I also think that the newer, less expensive speaker was marginally less colored, and had an even better sense of musical flow. I won't pretend that these are anything but the most subjective of observations, given the passage of time, the changes (for the better) in my system, and the lack of an opportunity for a direct comparison. That said, I'll go one subjective step further in saying that the SPe HE is my favorite of the two AN-Es—and, in fact, my favorite of *all* the newly made loudspeakers I've heard in recent years, flaws and all.

That may also be because I'm an older, smarter listener than I was two years ago, with an even clearer sense of what I like, especially when it comes to the *spatial* aspect of music reproduction. And I know that I like the perspective of the AN-Es better than that of most other loudspeakers. I love listening to music—closely, carefully, and passionately—but I like having it in one part of my room, with me in the other. I don't want to be all tangled up in it.

Conspiracy buffs should note that I painted the walls of my listening room blue at about the time that Audio Note was just looking into hemp woofer cones—the blue hue of which is a near-perfect match. My inner designer thinks the new AN-E would also look nice in rooms with white walls, cream walls, dove-gray walls, and in other such neutral territories—yet green walls, red walls, and some paper walls would probably be out of the question.

Caveat hemptor.

Another caveat: I've been enjoying this speaker for so long that I've forgotten how long it takes to run in. I do know, however, that if you stop using an AN-E for a while—as any audio reviewer must, from time to time, with the products he or she really loves the best—you'll find that its performance has slid backward, and the thing must be run in again.

A note on value: Just a short while ago, I saw a thread on AudioAsylum.com suggesting that Audio Note loudspeakers must be wildly overpriced,

Dynaudio C1 loudspeaker

Love is a lot to expect from a new relationship, especially when it's with a partner made of wood and rubber. But, jokes about "big racks" and Elliot Spitzer aside, true love is what most of us are seeking when we lay down our money for something expensive and potentially gratifying—like a new pair of speakers. I'm happily married and a dad, but on the audio side, I'm on the prowl and looking for love.

I have found that in audio, as in other aspects of life, love is hard to come by.

Highfalutin audio dealers are notori-

IN CONTRAST, APPARENTLY, TO SOME OTHER MAGAZINES, EDITOR JOHN ATKINSON DOESN'T ALLOW HIS WRITERS TO USE THEIR POSITIONS TO COLLECT EXPENSIVE GEAR VIA LONG-TERM "TRIALS."

given their very plain appearance in comparison with most other expensive speakers. One savant noted the E's lack of a grille: a notorious scheme for cost-cutting by devious manufacturers, he said. I felt as if I'd stepped into a world where an expensive car would be criticized for lacking low-profile wheels, a rear-view videocam, a spoiler, and a fancy paint job—until it occurred to me that I'd never left that world in the first place. I didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

A product such as this confounds a mindset such as that. In addition to the happy prospect of buying a thing that sells for less than its predecessor and sounds at least as good, the latest version of the Audio Note AN-E/SPe HE offers the kind of performance that simply must be heard to be understood: more music than sound. Like its stablemates, the AN-E/SPe HE is not the sort of audio product that prompts its new owner to pull special record after special record off the shelves just to hear the bass depth on this one, the imaging specificity on that. Rather, the SPe HE is the sort of thing that will compel you to play *every* record you own, all the way through, without interruption—arguably because it does a better job than most of *really* connecting the listener with the dramatic, intellectual, and emotional intensities captured in every groove. I can't recommend it strongly enough.

—Art Dudley

ous for playing hard to get, which makes their products pretty inaccessible. Unless you dress like money, or they remember you from the good times you've shared, some dealers won't give you the time of day, let alone let you have a smooch. Even harder is finding a dealer who'll let you take his expensive merchandise home for a free trial, packed in the back of a '96 Jetta with a leaky trunk. In a human relationship, you can try before you buy. That's not so easy in audio.

"But you're a *Stereophile* reviewer!" I hear some of you saying, or imagine I do. "You can listen to anything you like."

Not so. In contrast, apparently, to some other magazines, editor John Atkinson doesn't allow his writers to use their positions to collect expensive gear via long-term "trials." With few exceptions, if you want to give something a spin, you have to put in the work of reviewing it. And believe me, it's work. Capt. JA's tight ship inspires admiration in his crew—and it should inspire loyalty from *Stereophile's* readers, in my opinion—but, like most types of discipline, this one can be annoying. What fun is being a *Stereophile* contributor if you can't play with lots of expensive audiophile toys whenever you want to?

There's an obvious, if imperfect, solution, one that's not available to most audiophiles: If I want to hear a piece of equipment at home, I agree to review it. It's not a perfect solution—it's hard work, as I've said—but I get to have the