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PBN Montana EPS2 Loudspeaker

A speaker to satisfy every style of music

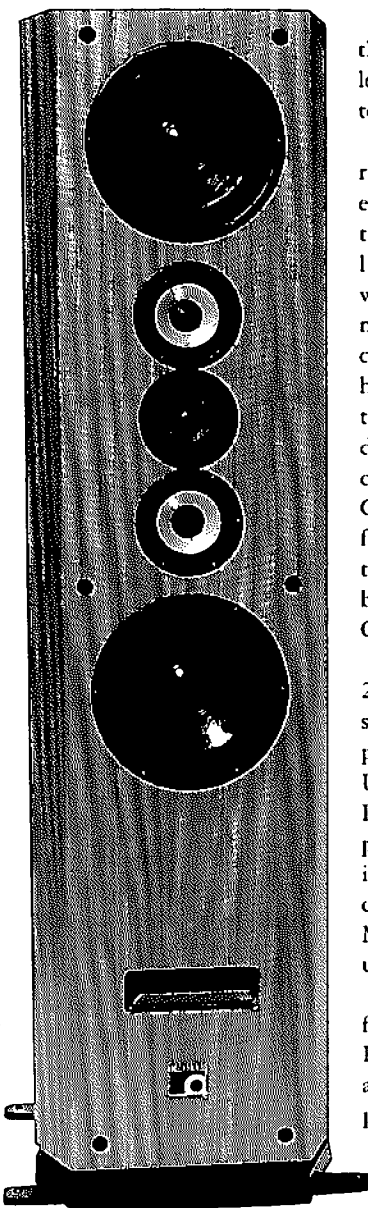
Barry Willis

Fact: Many types of loudspeakers sound better with some kinds of music and not with others. Large electrostatics can sound heavenly with string quartets but congested with symphonic works or heavy rock. Mini-monitors may offer uncannily three-dimensional imaging with female vocals, but an unreal absence of bass with instrumentals.

The problem extends to specific brands. Bozak loudspeakers (remember them?) were reputedly ideal for organ music, the designer's favorite. Arnie Nudel, of Infinity IRS and Genesis Loudspeakers fame, was legendary for his disdain for rock. Musical favoritism is the rule at gatherings like the specialty audio exhibits at the Consumer Electronics Show, where demo material is almost entirely nice recordings of polite performances. The designer who welcomes all challenges is a rare bird indeed.

PBN Audio's Peter Noerbaek is that kind of designer. Enter his suite at any hi-fi show, ask him to play one of your own discs, and he graciously obliges. Whatever your choice, he's confident that his Montana speakers and Sierra electronics will deliver it as faithfully as possible. "You can't know your customers' taste in music," he explains. "And you certainly can't dictate it. Therefore, your speakers have to do everything well."

Universal compatibility is the most appealing aspect of Montana loudspeakers. I've reviewed several and owned three different models, including the EPS (PBN's most popular product), and the earth-shaking KAS. "I'm so glad this isn't another stand-around-and-chat party," shouted an art-world friend



through the chest-compressing sound pressure level at our post-9/11 New Year's bash. Rock on; tomorrow may be too late.

Unlike audiophiles whose listening rooms are fitted with revolving doors for an endless chain of dance partners, I settle in for the long haul with what works for me. My library includes classical and operatic warhorses; jazz, blues, rock, and pop from many decades; Klezmer and gypsy tunes; current indies; uncategorizable ephemera; a healthy dollop of country 'n' western; a smattering of rap; and divas galore. Genre be damned. What's good is good. Whether I'm cueing up a heart-rending ballad from Eva Cassidy, a Middle Eastern disco-thumper from Turkish pop star Tarkan, a Piazzolla tango from Sergio and Odair Assad, or a big-band reverie from the Tommy Dorsey Orchestra, I want it delivered straight.

The Montana EPS2 launched in January 2005, marking a new era for PBN. It debuted shortly after the company's move into a new plant in El Cajon, east of San Diego. Unmistakably one of the Montana family—D'Appolito driver array, signature hexagonal ported cabinet, and outrigger feet—the EPS2 is new in several ways. A subtle change is its cabinet angles, now consistent across the full Montana line, thanks to the production shop's upgrade to a large automated CNC router.

The EPS2 is also the first model with a full array of custom-made SEAS drivers. PBN long relied almost exclusively on Vifa and Scan Speak drivers, also custom-made to precise specifications. That relationship began to change when Noerbaek noticed that his 90-day-net orders were being

sold to third-party financial organizations. "That was a tip-off that something was wrong," he recalls. "I didn't want to get stuck unable to fulfill orders if my supplier went down." Montana owners needn't fear. PBN has enough replacement drivers in stock to take care of all Montana products in the field "for at least the next ten years," according to Noerbaek. (In March 2005, Silicon Valley startup Tymphany Corporation merged with Danish Sound Technology, owner of the Vifa, Scan Speak, and Peerless lines.)

Noerbaek negotiated with Norway-based SEAS for the same sort of narrow-tolerance/high-performance designs he had enjoyed for years from Vifa and Scan Speak, and soon started incorporating them in prototypes. The EPS2 is the first of what will eventually be a fully redesigned line of Montana speakers. The dome tweeter, yellow Kevlar midrange drivers, and 9" woofers look totally familiar, but they are all new, as is the crossover network that connects them. Also new is the fully veneered front baffle, a concession to Montana owners who've suggested that the speakers might be more attractive that way. The black baffle that's long been a Montana signature will eventually disappear from the line, Noerbaek says.

The new look is quite décor-friendly, especially in the pale-blond beech veneer of the review pair. The EPS2 is slim, elegant, and light on its feet. It's a clever deception. Only 53" tall, the speaker weighs in at a stout 150 pounds. This substantial mass both minimizes cabinet resonances, and makes the loudspeaker immune to external vibration.

Experience told me that Montana speakers sound vastly different after breaking in than they do fresh from the crates. When new, they can be ultra-lean, cool-sounding, almost astringent. Therefore the EPS2 didn't go straight into my listening room, but spent nearly two months in my garage, cov-

ered with layers of moving pads while a yard-sale receiver worked them in with nonstop rock. By summer, I thought they might be ready to come into the house—this is reading more

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like a treatise on training puppies than a loudspeaker review—and indeed, they had opened up, but I knew they could do better. I played them a lot—Sirius satellite radio almost all day at background levels, and an hour or more of CDs in the evenings at levels just shy of annoying the neighbors. Although I listened to a huge amount of music, I avoided hasty conclusions because I knew that what lay ahead would probably exceed what I was hearing at the moment.

Fast-forward to post-CES 2006. Like a new car that had been pampered for months, the EPS2 was finally ready to open up and go. Dynamic attack was fantastic. Drums and bass leaped out with the Dixie Chicks' hard-driving "Tonight the Heartache's on Me," from *Wide Open Spaces* [Sony] and their superb cover of "Stand By Your Man" on *Tribute to Tradition* [Columbia], but despite the high volume, the Chicks' sweet southern voices weren't even slightly strident. On *Ten New Songs*, Leonard Cohen's bass-baritone was rich and enveloping, the haunting voices of his backup singers floating above and behind him during "Boogie Street" [Columbia]. The EPS2 effortlessly passed two low-frequency musicality tests: Gary Karr's heart-rending doublebass transcription of Albinoni's "Adagio in G minor," from *Adagio d'Albinoni* [Cisco Music], and MC 900' Jesus' "The City Sleeps" from *Welcome to My Dream* [Nettwerk]. The speakers

likewise aced the low-bass impact test. Kool Moe Dee's *Knowledge is King* [Jive]. The title cut's empowering message, erudite lyrics, and dramatic delivery make it the best rap song ever.

On Paganini's Violin Concerto No. 1 [EMI], Sarah Chang's violin was sweet and pure, hovering somewhere in the middle distance, but in *Le Quattro Stagioni* [Philips], Viktoria Mullova's was immediate, dark, and raw. The ability to differentiate two similar instruments is a hallmark of true high-end gear. The EPS2 delivered the full fury of protracted despair in No Doubt's "Don't Speak," from *Tragic Kingdom* [Trauma]—betrayed lovers have always been a strong theme in pop music—as it did in a more melancholy manner with Chris Isaak's cover of "Solitary Man," from his *San Francisco Days* [Reprise], a more mature treatment of the same subject. The house

SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Three-way, five-driver dynamic loudspeaker system.

Driver complement: One 1" dome tweeter, two 4" midrange drivers, two 9" woofers

Frequency response: 25Hz–25kHz

Nominal impedance: 4 ohms

Recommended amplifier power: Up to 800 watts

Dimensions: 15" x 53" x 15"

Weight: 150 lbs.

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Lexicon RT-20 universal disc player;

Marantz CC-65SE CD changer; April

Music Stello DA-100 DAC; Margules

Audio Magenta ADE-24 harmonic sweetener; Olive MUSICA music server;

Parasound Halo C2 preamp/controller;

Parasound Halo A51 power amp; Red

Rose Music Spirit integrated amp; APC

S15 power conditioner; Nordost SPM

speaker cables and interconnects;

Nordost Quattro-fil interconnects; Kimber

Kable Hero interconnects; Shakti stones;


Walker Audio high-definition links; James

10 SG subwoofer

was rockin' with The Black-Eyed Peas' *Elephunk* song "Let's Get Retarded" [A&M] and The Allman Brothers' "One Way Out," from *Eat a Peach*

extension at the frequency extremes, tremendous dynamics, and amazing build-quality, the EPS2 is ideal for those who often venture outside nar-

can sound seductive with tubes.

The EPS2s' only drawback is the long break-in period. PBN doesn't have time or space to let each pair "cook" for a few hundred hours before it is shipped. No manufacturer has that luxury. As Noerback puts it, "The average audiophile lives with new speakers for five or ten years. A few months break-in isn't much of a penalty, is it?" Put another way, you buy a puppy, but get a full-grown dog—a companion who'll share every sorrow and every joy for a very long time. Patience is more than its own reward. 

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[Polydor]. On *Way Out West* [Fantasy], Sonny Rollins' sax had just the right balance of honk, rasp, and bite, while Renee Fleming's *By Request* [Decca] was a revelation.

For the eclectic, few discs can top Pink Martini's *Symphonique* [Heinz Records]. From the Cuban big-band sound of "Donde Estas, Yolanda?" to the ethereal "Song of the Black Lizard" to the spare, quirky title cut, the disc is a musical world tour in under an hour. The Montana EPS2 proved the perfect vehicle. With great horizontal and vertical dispersion, excellent

row musical categories.

It's an all-positions player. Its strength doesn't lie in one outstanding attribute, or in its affinity for one genre, but in its ability to play so much music so well. If your collection includes Benny Goodman and Ben Folds, Shostakovich and Shakira, this loud-speaker is for you. Its high sensitivity makes it easy to drive. This pair of EPS2 sounded great powered by my Halo A 51, and wonderfully musical driven by a 35Wpc Red Rose Spirit. I didn't try a tube amp, but know from experience with other Montana speakers that they

MANUFACTURER INFORMATION

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