

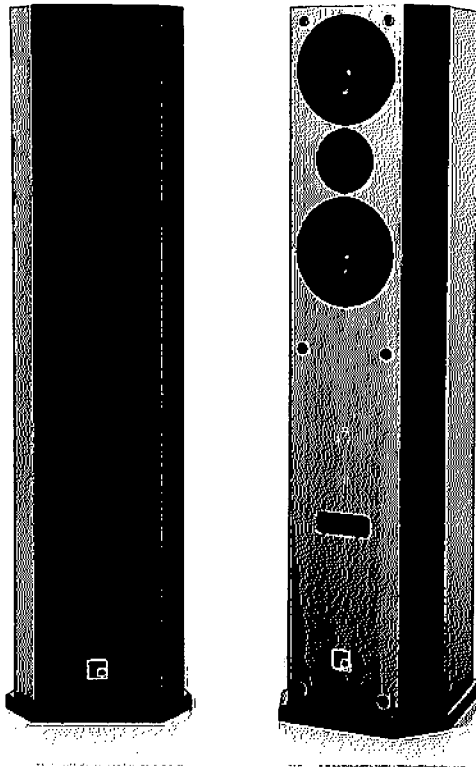
PBN Montana SP3 loudspeaker

It's astonishing to realize that it's been more than six years since I reviewed PBN Audio's original Montana SP loudspeaker, for the January and June 1997 issues of *Stereophile*. The march of progress has been generally beneficial—for me, for *Stereophile* (whose website nears its own sixth anniversary), and for PBN founder and chief engineer Peter Noerbaek, whose product line in that period has grown from three speaker models to eight. Corporate PBN now includes Sierra Electronics, manufacturer of three different power amplifiers and one purist preamp, and the PBN Custom Shop, which designs and manufactures speakers and subwoofers for theaters, recording venues, and architectural installations.

PBN's second major revision of the SP is better than the original in every respect—and bigger, having gained 1" in height, 3" in width, and 1/4" in depth. It's also 10lbs heavier, tipping the scale at 90lbs (41kg). The new driver complement includes larger, 7" Vifa, mid-woofers and a 1" fabric-dome tweeter, and the crossover has metalized polypropylene capacitors, said to improve upper-octave transparency. Some specifications, such as the 90dB/W/m sensitivity rating, remain the same, but others have improved: the SP3's power handling is rated at 180W vs the original's 160W, and the low-bass cutoff is now specified at 30Hz vs the original's 35Hz. The top-end specs have been scaled back to 22kHz from 30kHz, and the price has grown \$500, from \$3495/pair to \$3995/pair.

Apart from the new driver complement and larger cabinet volume, the SP3's biggest departure from the SP is its flared rectangular port, which is on the front baffle rather than on the back. (I believe all Montana speakers are now ported in the front.) This allows the speaker to be moved closer to the wall without generating overly boomy bass from loading effects.

Like the first two pairs of Montanas I reviewed (the EPS model covered in the November 1999 *Stereophile*), as well as the large



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KASes I owned for the better part of two years and the custom-made pair of Montanas that replaced them, the SP3s required a long break-in period—basically, about a solid month of nonstop exercise—before they began to open up. When I asked Peter Noerbaek how he determines a product's ultimate sonic signature, he said that he lives with each prototype for many months before settling on a final design.

The long break-in presented a bit of a problem for me when I took delivery of the speakers last fall. Robyn and I had bought a 35-year-old house just a few months before and were in the midst of remodeling. (We still are.) I didn't have the space to devote to the SP3s, and was reluctant to expose their beautiful zebra-wood finish to daily showers of wood chips and plaster dust. I'm willing to

subject my own stuff to some abuse, but loaner gear? Never.

Into the breach leaped my buddy Carlos Shelton. A lifelong audiophile, Carlos volunteered to break them in for me in the safety of his Tiburon hillside home. He played them several hours per week, using them as the front left and right speakers in his cozy home-theater room. The weeks stretched to months, the winter holidays came and went, and he even rode with me on the long drive from San Francisco to Las Vegas for the Consumer Electronics Show, all the while saying little about the Montanas except to mention how beautiful they looked.

Then, one day in February, Carlos remarked that he thought the SP3s were really beginning to come into their own. What followed were several extended listening sessions at his house, first in his home theater, later in his large, open-ceilinged living room. In the home theater (ca 12' wide by 14' deep), the Montanas hugged the front wall, flanking a 42" Toshiba high-definition television. The source was a Marantz DV-8300 universal disc player feeding a McIntosh HMT-100 home-theater receiver. The electronics were impeccable, and movies were delightful,

but the SP3s really came to life only at music levels at which they overwhelmed the room. After repeated trials, Carlos and I agreed that his recent-edition Red Rose Rosebuds, on dedicated stands, were a better choice for his small room, which dictates a nearfield listening experience.

With his wife, Lucy's, approval, we set up a second system in Carlos' big living room (20' W by 25' D by 14' H), with some of the best stuff in my collection: a SineLock power conditioner, Red Rose Silver Signature Model II power amp, Tom Evans Designs Vibe pre-amp (one of the most transparent audio products I've ever encountered), and an inexpensive but surprisingly good Sony SACD changer, the SCD-CE775. We used Kimber Kable Hero interconnect throughout, with 10' lengths of Monster Powerline 2

speaker cable energizing the Montanas.

Visually, the SP3s were gorgeous additions to the room's tropical décor—even Lucy agreed. Sonically, they were stunning. Here they could really breathe, and we had a choice of positions for them and us. The SACD reissue of Louis Armstrong and Ella Fitzgerald's classic *Louis and Ella* (Verve 314 543304 2) brought the two jazz greats right into the room with us, their vocal interplay as warm and inviting as a glowing hearth on a cold winter's night. My standard pop and jazz test selections were revealed in their seductive entirety—the thumping hedonism of the B-52's' "Good Stuff," the melancholy angst of Fiona Apple's "Never is a Promise," the sheer exuberance of the Scott Hamilton Quintet's "I've Found a New Baby." The SP3s seemed to breathe music rather than labor to produce it. This effortless quality is a Montana family trait.

The SP3s were a joy with almost every type of music we tried—pop, classical, jazz.

Their soundstage was consistently wide and deep, with an ephemeral quality that contrasted nicely with its apparent stability. Bass-heavy recordings, such as Bryan Ferry's *Taxi* (Warner Brothers), Toni Braxton's "Unbreak My Heart," or Haddaway's long-running

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dance hit, "What is Love?," were good—there was plenty of low to mid bass—but lacking that convincing last bit of power at the absolute bottom. Most music-lovers wouldn't object to this—in fact, as Carlos pointed out, it could be perceived as a benefit

—but rap, dance, and action-movie fans will want to augment the SP3s with a high-performance subwoofer. The little 10" Earthquake sub, now discontinued, is a good match; the amazing James EMB-1000 might be even better. That combo would satisfy the most demanding user without alienating a décor-conscious spouse, although pushing it too hard might draw complaints from the neighbors or a visit from the police.

Strength and grace are a seductive combination. The SP3 offered up the essence of the music with all the punch, air, and detail audiophiles demand, and all the soulfulness music-lovers need. It is ideal for rooms of medium to large size, and its slim profile and elegant finish will be compatible with almost any style of decorating.

I was delighted to discover that Peter Noerbaek hasn't rested on his laurels. I confidently renew the Montana SP3 on my personal list of recommended components.

— Barry Willis

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