

ADAM Audio A3X Nearfield Monitor (\$299 each, list)
High Quality Sound Within Arm's Reach
www.adam-audio.com

By Jon Chappell

Probably like many home recordists, I have a pretty good set of nearfield monitors. When I finally get all the tracks in the can, the virtual instruments programmed, and the effects tweaked, I can finally enjoy some good sound. The problem is that before that, in my daily life, I'm dealing with garden-variety "multimedia" speakers—the cheapo, consumer-level kind that plug into the back of my computer. They might be OK for the most basic audio-housekeeping tasks and YouTube viewing, but for serious audio work, they come up way short.

For those people who, like me, suffer through low-quality audio when just tooling around on the computer, ADAM Audio has come to our rescue with the release of the A3X two-way powered monitors (50 watts; 25 for each speaker). ADAM Audio's A5 and A7 monitors are wildly popular among the recording crowd, and the company also recently release their high-end SX series. ADAM has now taken their world-class speaker-design and engineering skills and applied them to the small-box format, producing a set of monitors that fits very well on a crowded desktop or computer table, yet still delivers outstanding sound—faithfully reproducing full-frequency program material that can be enjoyed and worked with at the most critical listening level. The A3X's provide the bridge from workaday audio routines to critical monitoring environments. In the period I had to test them, I grew to rely on them for increasingly more important decisions. When I sent them back and re-attached my old pair, the results were striking, and not in a good way (for my old speakers, that is).

Monster in a Box

The A3X's may be small, but they are mighty. The heavy-duty and well-built cabinets have a stylish bevel on the top two corners and house ADAM Audio's new X-ART tweeter, which the manufacturer reports has a 4 dB higher efficiency, a 3dB higher maximum sound pressure level, and an increase in frequency response up to 50 kHz (from 35 kHz) when compared to the original. There's also a high-excursion woofer that produces big, clear sound at high volume levels.

The front panel has just two controls: an on/off rocker switch and a separate volume control. The volume control spans from -infinity to +16 dB, with a center detent at 0 dB—a nice feature if you must set the two speakers at unity gain quickly. Two green LEDs indicate power status and signal overload, and two front-facing ports round out the presentation. Around back, you find the tweeter level control (± 4 dB, also with a center detent at 0 dB), threaded collars for mounting, the power receptacle, a switchable AC power switch (230 V or 115 V), as well as the audio I/O. The A3X's sport both unbalanced RCA and balanced XLR inputs. In addition, you can take advantage of the Stereo Link feature, which is an RCA In and Out that slaves the other speaker, allowing you to control both with just one volume control.

Stereo Link came in quite handy in my setup, because my CPU sits right under the left speaker. I connected both computer audio outputs to the left speaker—one in the Left Input, the other in the Stereo Link Input. This allowed me to “jump” the right channel from the left speaker to the right with a short cord, keeping things neat and tidy in the airspace under the desk. This setup also enables one-handed volume control, which sped up my work routine considerably; I never had to let go of my pencil or my mouse in my right hand to make a volume tweak with my left. Also, the volume control is at the very bottom of the cabinet, meaning you can just slide the heel of your palm across the desktop over to make the tweak with your fingers—never lifting your hand in the air. These little attentions to detail, when factored over the life and considerable use you make of desktop speakers, improve your work rhythms and efficiencies greatly!

In Situ

In the week that I had the A3X's for review, I put them through the ringer: I monitored my Pro Tools recording sessions on them, I played pre-recorded audio (including classical symphonies, world music, and small acoustic jazz combos), and I moved them to the living room to watch DVDs with the family. In these varied settings, I was particularly impressed with the low end. Even without a subwoofer, and from relatively small enclosures, the bass frequencies came through tight and distinct, including such acid-test passages as the fast unison bass and cello melodies in the Scherzo movement of Beethoven's Third Symphony. I was also impressed with the high-end response—transparent and airy, without a trace of shrillness. The upgraded Accelerating Ribbon Technology (X-ART) design of the tweeter seems well suited to this format; the sound was balanced from low to high, sweet sounding, and appealing. I noticed I could work for much longer periods without suffering from ear fatigue.

In addition to their faithful reproductions of frequencies across the spectrum, the A3X's can help you in more mundane tasks, like revealing tuning discrepancies, fingering squeaks, and breath noises in much more detail. My only concern was the exposed woofer (the tweeter is safe behind a guard), because it sits in relative proximity to pencils, rulers, extended fingers, and other desktop hazards. (I brushed the driver a couple of times just moving stuff around.) But sonically, these are first rate speakers, regardless of size, and their portability makes them irresistible for desktop work, Netflix streaming, and all desk-situated or mobile applications.

Conclusion

I've used various monitors for my computer work before, but never of the caliber of the A3X series. Before these, I would have to redo my mixes significantly when transitioning from the small cheapies to the big “real ones.” The ADAM Audio A3X's save me a step by providing both great sound in a compact format and by changing mundane audio task-work into a quality listening experience. If you use good monitors from the outset, you'll learn your music that much faster so that when it comes time for mixdown and mastering on your big boxes, you'll already be acclimated to your song's subtler sonic aspects— aspects revealed only by the A3X's with their sweet, smooth top end, and impressive handling of bass frequencies. Highly recommended.

ADAM Audio A3X Specifications:

Woofers	
Basket diameter	5 inch
Voice coil diameter	1 inch
Cone material	Carbon fiber
Tweeter	
Type	X-ART
Diaphragm area	3.5 inch ²
Equiv. diaphragm diameter	2.2 inch ²
Velocity transform ratio	4:1
Diaphragm weight	0.17 g
Control panel	
Input Sensitivity	+14 dB/-∞
Tweeter gain	±4 dB
General data	
Frequency response	60 Hz – 50 kHz
THD	> 80 Hz ≤ 0.8 %
Long term output	≥ 98 dB
Maximum peak	≥ 106 dB
Input impedance	10 kOhm
Weight	4.6 kg/10.1 lb
Height x Width x Depth	252 x 150 x 185 mm
Warranty	5 years
Price	\$299 each, \$599 pair

Jon Chappell is the author of Digital Home Recording (Backbeat Books), The Recording Guitarist: A Guide for Home and Studio (Hal Leonard), and Build Your Own PC Recording Studio (McGraw-Hill). He has also written five music- and audio-related books in the well-known For Dummies series (Wiley Publishing).