

## Usher Audio Technology X-718 Loudspeakers

Several years ago, when I was fairly new to high-end audio and before I began reviewing equipment, I visited a Toronto audio shop to inquire about a pair of loudspeakers designed and built in Asia. The salesman explained to me that while great electronics were made in Asia, the best speakers came from Britain, Canada, and the US. Therefore, his store didn't carry what I was looking for. At the time, I didn't know if what he told me was true. But even if it was true then, it isn't today.

When I received for review a pair of X-718 loudspeakers from Usher Audio Technology, a company based in Taiwan, I'd never seriously listened to a speaker from an Asian company. Now, having spent some time with the Ushers, it's obvious that the British, Americans, and Canadians aren't the only ones who know how to build speakers (not that I ever took the salesman's words as gospel; after all, he was trying to sell me something he had in stock). In fact, I'll echo fellow SoundStage! Network writer Jim Saxon, who muttered, in his "[Jimmy Awards](#)" feature on [January 15, 2005](#), that Usher might be on the brink of turning the audio world upside down.

### Well-kept secret

Although a relatively new quantity in global hi-fi circles, Usher Audio Technology is not a newcomer. They began 35 years ago as a repair facility for imported high-end audio gear, a year later began researching and designing amplifiers and speakers, and by 1979 had introduced preamplifiers as well as class-A power amplifiers. What's interesting is that, until 2001, Usher sold almost nothing outside Taiwan. That year, to expose their products to the international market, they showed them for the first time at the Consumer Electronics Show, in Las Vegas. The response was reportedly good; ever since, Usher's speakers have won praise and recognition on this side of the Pacific.

Usher's design work is not done exclusively in Taiwan. Well-known American engineer Joseph D'Appolito, inventor of the midrange-tweeter-midrange driver configuration that bears his name, works for Usher as a technical consultant. The company has combined its knowledge of driver design, cabinet construction, and manufacturing with D'Appolito's expertise in crossover design to establish a product line that has been consistently applauded for its value-for-money offerings.

### Description

Usher's X series, of which the X-718 is part, is the second from the top, just under the flagship Dancer series. The X series comprises three bookshelf models, a center-channel, and a floorstander. The X-718 is a two-way bookshelf measuring 15.4"H x 10"W x 16"D, weighing 30 pounds, and costing \$1300 USD per pair. The speaker's considerable weight owes itself in no small part to the 1.5"-thick (!) MDF panels and solid-wood construction, which, combined with extensive internal bracing, makes for one of the least resonant cabinets I've ever rapped a knuckle on.

Each of the five available finishes -- piano black, ivory, or silver; Gallardo yellow; and Enzo red -- is made using six coats of lacquer. The hand-rubbed wood side panels tone down the high luster of the cabinet a bit, to give the speaker a softer look. The review pair came finished in piano ivory, and I was surprised when I saw and held them for the first time. The styling is striking; the wood panels and sloped front and rear baffles give the X-718 a dramatic flair. And its



substantial weight seemed a good sign; most of the heavy, well-braced speakers I've auditioned have had solid, well-damped sound.

The X-718 boasts a wide rated frequency response for a bookshelf design: 42Hz-28kHz, +/-3dB. The high frequencies are reproduced by a 1" silk-dome tweeter fronting a chamber with a vented pole piece said to reduce internal resonances and thus allow the tweeter to play to lower frequencies, thereby making a smoother transition between it and the midrange/woofer at the crossover point, which is about 2kHz.

The mid and low frequencies are reproduced by a 7" paper-cone midrange/woofer driver. This has a copper ring and a large aluminum phase plug that Usher claims improve its linearity. The magnet and suspension systems of all X-series woofers also employ Usher's patented Symme-Motion technology, which is claimed to result in "precise symmetry in the forward and rearward movement." In other words, each time the driver moves out, it then moves backward in a perfectly symmetrical motion. Furthermore, the slope of the X-718's front baffle is said to improve the phase alignment of the drivers and to reduce internal resonances (presumably because of the fewer standing waves produced inside an asymmetrical enclosure).

The X-718's nominal impedance is rated at 8 ohms, its sensitivity at a moderate 86dB/W/m. The speaker has dual binding posts, should you wish to biwire them. Overall, the X-718s weren't hard to drive, but I found myself turning up the volume knob of my integrated amplifier a little more than I usually do to get them to play at a level I found suitable.

## System

My review system consisted of the Bryston B100DA SST integrated amplifier connected to the Ushers by AudioQuest Type 4 cables terminated in banana plugs. The source was an NAD C542 CD player feeding the PCM signal to the Bryston's onboard DAC through its coaxial digital output via an AMX Optimum AVC-31 cable.

## Sound

Audio reviewers sometimes say that a component let them "see further into" or "opened a window on" the music. If you've never heard music reproduced in such a manner and didn't understand what the writer was trying to convey, listen to the Usher X-718. It was the clearest, most open-sounding speaker I've ever reviewed or owned -- the pair of them was extraordinarily transparent. This was obvious when I listened to Low and Dirty Three's cover of Neil Young's "Down by the River," from *In the Fishtank* [CD, Konkurrent LC6110]. The soundstage was so expansive that I felt as if I could have gotten out of my chair and walked around the performers. Sonic illusions such as this are remarkable because they create an atmosphere so far removed from the one in which the listener is sitting. To put it simply, listening to the X-718s was *fun*; they did things as well as or better than any other speaker I've auditioned, including some costing far more.

It bears repeating that the midrange is the heart of any speaker because that's where a lot of the musical energy lies. If something's wrong in the midrange, the most extended highs and the deepest bass won't make up for it. The Usher X-718 had the clearest, most engaging midrange of any speaker I know. It managed to walk that fine line between sounding too lean or too full; instead, its sound had a "rightness" that I could listen to for hours at a time. It left me wanting for nothing. It was neutral to my ears, its portrayal of voices and instruments being more dependent on the recording than on anything the X-718 itself was doing.

The pristine clarity of the mids had me focusing on different aspects of recordings I've listened to many times before, aspects I hadn't always paid much attention to. For example, I always concentrate on Elliott Smith's vocals -- not as a conscious choice, but because I like his voice and think he is a gifted songwriter. Listening to "St. Ides Heaven," from *Elliott Smith* [CD, Kill Rock Stars krs246], I was more drawn to the sound of Smith's hand moving up and down the fretboard of his guitar than to his singing.

His voice was still crystal clear, but the quietness of the background made other aspects of the music, such as this one, jump out at me. As I listened, I began to think about how sophisticated sound reproduction has become. In the right system, it can be amazingly lifelike and tangible, letting me really *feel* the performance and more easily connect with the music, because it sounds more present, more real. If you want to experience listening this way, I strongly urge you to audition the Usher X-718s. They were a portal into the music.

The lucidity of the X-718's midrange owed itself in large part to the black background created by the speakers. Voices emerged from emptiness, yet their presence immediately gave me a sense of the acoustic space in which they'd been recorded. "Snow," from Loreena McKennitt's *To Drive the Cold Winter Away* [CD, Quinlan Road QRCD102], was recorded at Glenstal Abbey, in Ireland, and is a good test of tweeter performance. The soft dome used in the X-718 passed with flying colors, remaining smooth and composed as McKennitt's voice soared to great heights. "Snow" can sound a bit grating through a bright tweeter, and force me to back off the volume before it gets irritating. The Usher's highs were extended, but climbed to the Abbey's rafters with such ease that I wanted to turn the volume *up*. However, what most struck me about "Snow" wasn't the ease of the vocals, but the expansive way in which McKennitt's voice filled that cathedral. In my listening room, the wall-vanishing act was in full effect, again owing to the X-718s' low noise floor and their ability to convey the sound of a huge recording venue.

Convincing image placement was another strength of the Ushers. Listening to "So What," from Miles Davis' *Kind of Blue* [CD, Columbia/Legacy CK 64935], John Coltrane's tenor sax sounded absolutely sublime. The Ushers drew a sharp outline of him up front and left of center as his instrument's shiny tone electrified the stage. Once again, as with many of the discs I played, I found myself focused on something I'm not typically drawn to: in this case, Paul Chambers' double bass, which had no added warmth but exhibited enough weight and depth to give the music a solid rhythmic foundation.

Interestingly, when I'd first started listening to the Ushers, I'd thought they were perhaps a bit bass deficient. I'd ended up positioning them 33" from the front wall and 24" from the sidewalls, so the bass reinforcement from the room was limited -- I'm not one to sacrifice a big three-dimensional stage just to get a little more *oomph* in the low end. But as I listened more, it became obvious that the X-718s didn't lack bass. They just sounded so clear that at first I hadn't realized how deep they were going. If you're accustomed to speakers that bloom in the low end, the X-718s might be a revelation for you.

"The Gates of Istanbul," from Loreena McKennitt's *An Ancient Muse* [CD, Quinlan Road QRCD109], features percussion whose low-end extension is far out of the reach of any bookshelf speaker I've ever auditioned. However, through the X-718s I heard such powerful, well-controlled bass that, even though I wasn't feeling its full impact, the extraordinary clarity got my full attention.

The X-718 performed remarkably well across the board. I enjoyed the pair of them with all types of music, and found myself in awe when listening to discs I thought I knew well. Its biggest shortcomings are those faced by all bookshelf speakers, owing simply to their size: restrictions in extreme low bass and high-output capability. But within its limits, I know of no equal at the price; even at \$1300/pair, the X-718 has "Bargain" written all over it.

## Comparison

I compared the Usher X-718s with the PSB Platinum M2 stand-mounted speakers I've owned for almost two years (\$2000/pair without stands). I've heard a few different speakers since buying the M2s, but had found nothing I thought could match their overall performance -- until the X-718s showed up.

Although the Platinum M2 is extremely clean-sounding, the X-718's midrange reproduction elevated cleanness to another level. Before the Ushers arrived, I hadn't known how much better voices and solo instruments could sound. The answer came as a revelation, and was made all the more impressive by the fact the X-718 costs \$700 less.

Playing Low and Dirty Three's cover of "Down by the River" again, I found that the M2s sounded fuller through the mids, with images more fleshed out and a soundfield that was a bit more dense. The M2s are fairly small speakers with an uncanny ability to sound huge and create an enormous soundstage. With the X-718s, the stage was still wide and deep, but the background was so quiet that I heard more of the air around Mimi Parker's voice as she crooned the lyrics to what, in Neil Young's original version, is a rock anthem. The intimacy of the Ushers brought me even closer to the music. As much as I love my Platinum M2s, I preferred the Ushers' midrange presentation and the way they let me hear further into the music.

According to the manufacturers' specs, the Usher is down only 3dB at 42Hz, while the PSB is down 3dB at 50Hz; I thought I'd hear quite a difference in the low end. But despite that discrepancy in rated low-frequency extension, I heard little difference between the two in this region. Neither speaker lacked for bass, but the Usher didn't play *that* much more deeply. The M2 is just as impressive in this regard. However, the X-718's low noise floor made it easier to hear the attack and decay of bass notes, and in the process yielded superb low-level detail. The M2 does this to a degree; the X-718 made it even more apparent.

At the other end of the spectrum, the PSB and the Usher both offered smooth, extended treble that was usually pleasing, unless the recording itself was of poor quality in this regard. I can't say I preferred one over the other. Both tweeters were highly detailed without being fatiguing, and invited hours of extended listening, which speaks well for both speakers -- although, again, it must be pointed out that the X-718 costs about a third less. If PSB's Platinum M2 is a good value, Usher's X-718 is a great one.

## Conclusion

Usher Audio Technology's X-718 is a marvelous loudspeaker that anybody looking for a bookshelf model needs to hear. Even if you're considering spending more than their asking price, you should at least audition them -- I think you'll be impressed by the high-quality fit and finish that \$1300 can buy. More important, you might fall in love with their sound, as I did. The X-718 is very easy for me to recommend -- it's the best speaker I've ever owned or reviewed.

...Philip Beaudette

