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Atlantic Technology's big-sounding little speaker takes it to the max



by Steve Guttenberg | February 11, 2012 7:46 AM PST

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I admit it: I like big speakers, the bigger the better as far as I'm concerned.

Big speakers sound more realistic, they play louder with lower distortion, and they have better and deeper bass than small speakers. Then again, I'm an audiophile, so I prioritize sound quality over almost everything else. I also know big speakers are out of the question for most folks, but what if there was a reasonably sized speaker that produced big-speaker sound? The Atlantic Technology AT-2 is such a speaker.

It was just last year when Atlantic's AT-1 tower speaker (\$3,000 a pair) rocked the audiophile world and garnered a slew of rave reviews, so when I heard the smaller AT-2 (\$1,800 a pair) was about to be released I just had to get it for review. It did not disappoint.

How little is it? The AT-2 is 15.3 inches by 8.9 inches by 12.6 inches, and it has a 5.25-inch woofer and a 1.1-inch soft dome tweeter. The side panels are finished in a sharp-looking black metal flake paint. The rest of the speaker is matte black. The rear panel has all-metal bi-wire speaker connectors and a three-position tweeter level switch. That's a nice touch, you can fine-tune the speakers' treble balance to your taste.

Speaker designers use bass ports and equalization techniques to boost bass, but small speakers' bass quality and quantity have always suffered in direct comparison with the best larger designs. The AT-2 is a game changer on that front, thanks to Atlantic's new bass-enhancing technology called H-PAS (Hybrid Pressure Acceleration System). It's a purely acoustic (non-electronic) approach that uses a series of tuned chambers inside the cabinet to coax an ex-

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traordinary amount of bass from the 5.25-inch woofer. The AT-2 has a large rectangular bass port on its front baffle, which is covered with a perforated metal grille. The AT-2's bass was very smooth down to around 45Hz in my large room (that's very deep bass), but it was the quality of the bass and the overall sound that clinched the deal for me. Most tower speakers in the AT-2's price class don't go a lot deeper than that. So if you have a hankering for towers, but you need something small and manageable, the AT-2 should be on your short list.

I played Philip Glass' "Koyaanisqatsi," which opens with an ominously deep organ passage and the AT-2 didn't complain. Almost every other small speaker I've tested has come undone with "Koyaanisqatsi," but not this one.

Now, sure, you could add a subwoofer and have deep bass from a system with small speakers, but there's no way the sub and speakers would blend as well as what I'm getting here with the AT-2; it really does sound like a mighty tower. The bass isn't overblown or exaggerated; it's tight, well-defined, and nimble.

That's also an apt description of the overall sound of the speaker. Dynamics are strong and gutsy, again far beyond what I would expect from a small speaker. The 1.1-inch tweeter is smooth and clear, and beautifully integrated with the woofer. I cranked Tom Petty & the Heartbreakers' "The Live Anthology" CD nice and loud, and didn't feel the AT-2s were holding anything back.

I auditioned the AT-2 in a stereo system, but it would be terrific in a home theater, matched with Atlantic's 4400C center-channel speaker (\$625); 4400SR surround-channel speakers (\$1,000 a pair); and the 642eSB subwoofer (\$1,250). Atlantic is readying its first H-PAS soundbar speaker, and I will definitely want to be among the first to review it here. It will be under \$1,000.

It's only February, but I think the AT-2 has a good chance of being the Audiophile's Speaker of the Year for 2012, it's that good!