

Guitarist John Petrucci (Dream Theater) shares recording secrets!

RECORDING

The magazine for the recording musician

Recording Guitars

Hot Tips—Cool Tricks

Lay Down The Perfect Track!



M-Audio
EX66 Monitors
Dual-woofer design goes digital

7 GUITAR PRODUCT REVIEWS:

IK Multimedia AmpliTube 2, AmpliTube Jimi Hendrix, and StealthPlug
Line 6 Pocket POD • Peterson StrobeFlip tuner
TC Electronic Nova Delay and Reverb pedals
plus Soundware from Vir2 and M-Audio



VOL. TWENTY ONE
NUMBER TWO
NOVEMBER 2007
USA \$5.99
CANADA \$6.99



BY JUSTIN PEACOCK

If you're reading this, and thinking about turning the page—hold on! Stay with me. It's worth your while.

I know what you might think. M-Audio isn't exactly known for pro-level loudspeakers. Yet here is a review of a speaker that streets for about \$1200 a pair. Not expensive by high-end standards, but still a sizable chunk of your disposable income.

Sometimes it's difficult to treat a newcomer with an open mind. We have preconceptions about things, and that's just part of being human. But my job as a reviewer is to keep an open mind. So pretend you have my job, and carry on...

Good timing

Just by convenient circumstance, my head has been in speaker world for the past couple of months. I just finished reviewing the Genelec 8200 Series DSP speakers (October 2007), am working with the Avantone MixCubes (also October 2007), and just recently got a new (old) set of Yamaha NS-10M monitors for my home studio. I also have a pair of Mackie HR824 monitors (May 1999). Needless to say, I was glad to welcome the EX66 pair into the bunch; they provided a welcome point of reference.

Out of the box

Cracking the box I was first surprised with a really good manual (cheers to whomever wrote it!), a CD of test tones (bonus!) and a frequency response plot (double bonus!). The speakers themselves have two 6" woofers with a 1" titanium-dome tweeter between them. There's a huge port in the back of the heavy MDF cabinet. Full specs are available from M-Audio's website, but some highlights include: 37 Hz – 20 kHz response (no tolerances given), biamplified with 104 W each for lows and highs, and a loud 115 dB peak SPL at 1 meter (for a pair).

M-AUDIO
EX66

*Uncompromising studio monitors
from a possibly unexpected source*

Out of the box, I was happy with the build quality and feature set of these speakers. Each EX66 sports a full complement of stuff on the rear panel: XLR and 1/4" TRS balanced analog inputs, along with AES/EBU and S/PDIF digital inputs, which allow you to feed the EX66 basically anything up to 24-bit/192 kHz.

Additionally, there are switches for tuning the speakers to the room and your preferences. You can set the acoustic space for full, half or quarter space, depending on the speakers' placement in the room. There are also ± 2 dB cut/boost switches for high frequencies and midrange. Another switch controls the low-frequency cutoff, useful if you have a sub with no built-in crossover.

Lastly, there is a volume knob (actually an analog input trim) on the back. This control has no stepped pots with detents. Why not? How is the user supposed to balance the left and right monitors? In order to properly balance the system, you should use an SPL meter (or an accurate meter in your DAW) while you run pink noise through the speakers... but it would still be nice to have preset clicks on each knob, making it easy to balance left and right. Oh well. At least the EX66 has a really high-quality and very smooth knob as the control, where other speakers have little trimpots that require a jeweler's screwdriver to turn.

So, what's with the two woofers? You may not be familiar with this design, but it has a lot of advantages. My first-ever encounter with a MTM (midwoofer-tweeter-midwoofer) design happened to be with a very high-end speaker manufacturer called Avalon Acoustics. I worked on their version of a MTM design for a number of years, and always loved it. So I was really glad to see this in the M-Audio design.

Basically, using two woofers in parallel gets you really wide horizontal dispersion for good imaging and a wider sweet spot, yet limits the dispersion vertically. Since the speakers focus less energy towards the desk or console, cancellation effects are minimized over a conventional 2-way design. Also, don't be fooled: just because the drivers are only 6" does not mean the low end is anemic. Quite the opposite is true!

The other unique design feature of the EX66 lies in the digital realm. Speakers, just like microphones, have internal resonances. The components and structure will resonate at certain frequencies, and it's up to the manufacturer to compensate for these and voice the speaker so it sounds good. To further improve and smooth out the frequency response, the EX66 actually uses DSP internally to tune the cabinets and crossovers. In case you were wondering, the analog signal is converted to digital, then back again to analog. Because of the DSP design it

was easy enough to add digital inputs, which is great for improving the monitor's flexibility.

Time to listen...

Right out of the gate I was impressed. There's a definite wow-factor when you fire these speakers up. They are very extended from top to bottom. In fact, the low end has a great extension and clarity that is hard to achieve without a subwoofer. Settling in, I spent some time adjusting placement and the amount of toe-in. For the best imaging, the manual suggests you actually face the speakers straight back instead of angled in. I found a good compromise around 10–15 degrees of toe. They don't "disappear" as well as the considerably costlier DSP Genelecs, but image very well for speakers at this price point.

After more listening time, I was impressed with the smoothness of the EX66 in comparison with my other reference speakers. Some users, including one of the Editors of *Recording*, are fans of the HR824's sound, but they're not to my personal taste because of what I personally look for when mixing. Unlike the HR824 or NS-10M, no segment of the frequency range was hyped or over the top. The upper midrange is very forward without sounding bright or edgy. While not always the most "fun" or "pleasing" sound, this really helps when you're balancing vocals and guitars—remember the goal here is accuracy, not prettiness.

Also, the EX66 monitors seem to have slightly scooped low-mids. They are very linear, but some low mid warmth was missing in familiar recordings. Compared to other speakers they sound a bit cold, but I find this to be a good thing. I have trouble mixing on speakers that sound pretty. If a mix you create sounds good on a pair of EX66s, it should translate well to many other listening systems, large and small—and *that's* what you want in a set of studio monitors.

Final thoughts

I was really impressed with the EX66 monitors. These are professional-quality tools that represent an excellent value given how they sound. I'm sick of hyped "pro" speakers; it's so nice to find monitors in this price range that aren't deceiving and actually tell me the story I need to get a good mix. You need to listen to the EX66s for yourself. ☺

Price: \$699.95 each

More from: M-Audio, 5795 Martin Rd., Irwindale, CA 91706. 626/633-9050, www.m-audio.com.

