

M-AUDIO EX66

POWERED STUDIO MONITORS

by Francis Preve

Bi-amplified reference monitors.

PROS

Amazingly detailed response, even at low volumes. Wide sweet spot. Extensive analog and digital input options. Customizable sound via multiple switches.

CONS

Tall design requires extra consideration for stands and placement.

\$699.95 each

M-Audio
www.m-audio.com



It may seem a little odd to begin a review by talking about unpacking a product from the box, but in the case of M-Audio's flagship studio monitor, the EX66, it's definitely worthy of mention. All documentation, frequency charts, and a handy reference signal CD sit nicely in their own nested area in the protective foam (no sharp corners — only protection here). I mention this because it increases the chances that if you mail-order a pair of EX66s, they'll arrive intact. I wish all manufacturers took this much care with their packaging.

The back panel offers connectors for nearly every type of audio signal you might run directly into a powered speaker: balanced analog with separate XLR and 1/4" jacks, and somewhat unexpectedly at this price, digital audio inputs for S/PDIF and AES/EBU sources. These can handle signals up to 24-bit/192kHz, and the EX66 thoughtfully lets you use a single AES/EBU or S/PDIF connection to one speaker, then daisy chain via a S/PDIF output to the other. The speakers handle the stereo splitting for you, which makes perfect sense given that when it comes to digital outs, many audio interfaces have only a single stereo S/PDIF or AES output. Good thinking here!


Some monitors forego volume knobs, opting for input trim pots you need a screwdriver to get at. Not so with the EX66's rear panel. Just below the bass port is a high-quality volume knob with smooth travel. In light of the EX66's digital input options, I liked this approach, since it lets you quickly set a volume ceiling, then vary your listening volume on your audio interface or mixer. If you've ever had a sudden crash cause full-volume digital errata to spew from your speakers, you know what I mean. Since every room has its own acoustic properties, there are additional switches to tailor the sound to everything from converted bedrooms to purpose-built studios. A three-position switch labeled "Acoustic Space" adjusts response for various ways the speakers might get placed in a room, which is indispensable for home and project studios with desks up against a wall or booth window. There are also individual switches for tweaking the high-, mid-, and low-frequency ranges. After tinkering with the switches for some time, I ended up leaving everything flat for my initial tests.

The first thing I did after plugging in the EX66s was to test them against my beloved Mackie HR824s. After a great deal of going back and forth between the two pair, I got on the phone to M-Audio and asked to purchase the review units. That's not to say

that the Mackies weren't up to snuff. They're practically an industry standard. It's just that for my purposes — electronica and club music — the EX66s have low-end detail that audibly surpassed the Mackies, at least in the context of my home project studio. To my ears, this is one benefit of the extended sweet spot that M-Audio touts in the EX66 literature and frankly, I think they're dead on.

On the topic of detail, some speakers have artificial sweetening sprinkled throughout their frequency spectrum. That is, their charts may appear flat, but the end result is skewed in terms of clarity and detail in certain bits of the overall frequency range. This is subtle, subjective, and not easily shown on a response chart. The EX66 sound is direct, clean, and delightfully balanced, with separation that really is breathtaking. The bass is extremely transparent without that "project studio boominess" that even some higher-end monitors exhibit. As for that sweet spot, you can really move around — or even sit way off center — and still get the big picture. I also love jazz as well as modern classical pieces, and recordings in both genres sounded crisp and full, without noticeable peakiness.

I like to mix at quiet to moderate volumes for long stretches, in order to avoid the exaggerated sense of bass you get when you only mix at loud volumes, and these babies sound awesome at moderate sound pressure levels. On the other hand, after a louder session, I liked the sound best with the high-frequency switch at -2dB, as the highs proved to be somewhat forceful at raised volumes. Maybe it's my particular room or my ears, but hey, that's why the switch is there.

The EX66s blew me away. If you make music, they will actually inspire you. Don't believe me? Believe this: I bought the review units and gave my old monitors to my best friend. Color me converted. 

VITAL STATS

WOOFERS
6" x 2.

TWEETER
1" titanium dome with wave guide.

FREQUENCY RESPONSE
37Hz–20kHz.

BUILT-IN AMPLIFIER
104W to woofers, 104W to tweeters (208W total).

MAXIMUM VOLUME AT 1 METER
109dB (stereo pair, 115dB).

ANALOG INPUTS
XLR bal. line, 1/4" TRS bal. line.

DIGITAL INPUTS
Coaxial S/PDIF in and thru, AES/EBU on separate XLR jack.

CONTROLS
Overall volume; switches for room size, low cut, midrange boost, and high cut/boost.

POWER SUPPLY
Internal w/ standard IEC 3-prong power cord and external fuse, user-switchable for 100V, 115V, and 230V.

DIMENSIONS/WEIGHT
19" H x 8.25" W x 9.5" D; 24.65 lbs.