

Usher X-708

A Top Notch, Entry Level Loudspeaker

Review By Scott Faller

Trivial Bits

Anybody that's been in the audiophile realm, even for a short time, is certainly familiar with the name Dr. Joseph D'Appolito. Dr. D'Appolito has made a significant mark on the speaker design and manufacturing industry. Everywhere you look, you see copies of his ideas. Case specifically in point is the ever so common MTM (mid-bass-tweeter-mid-bass) speaker design.

Usher Audio is a Taiwanese corporation that began back in the early 1970's repairing high end, imported stereo gear. Within a few short years the company had begun manufacturing it's own line of electronics. Over the years, several different incarnations and branded names emerged for the factory. Eventually in the late 70's, the factory came up with the brand name Usher and it stuck.

In 1999 the owner of Usher, Tsai Lien-Shui, decided to employ Dr. D'Appolito to develop new designs for their speaker line. Word has it, the Usher factory had entered into negotiations with one of the major driver manufacturers to supply drivers for these new speaker designs. When Usher placed a *more than* sizable order for drivers, the driver manufacturer balked. Bad move. Little did they realize, they were just about to lose not only a sizable but large recurring order. That's just what happened. Rather than search out another driver manufacturer, Usher decided to build their own. This time they would be built to Dr. D'Appolito's specs.

So here we have a speaker that has been designed top to bottom by a well respected industry mover and shaker being built in Taiwan with true, custom manufactured drivers. Now, quite a few manufacturers claim to have custom manufactured drivers but what they do is have other major driver manufacturers build a driver to their specification. It's not quite the same as building your own.

The Usher line came to my attention by Bill Baker of Response Audio. This is the same Response Audio that has allowed me the use of his RAM 301 amplifier for a (somewhat extended) series of speaker reviews at my old haunt. In talking to Bill one day, he mentioned that he had just picked up the Usher line in recent months. Not only is he selling the standard speakers, he is doing crossover mods to the stock units also. If you know Bill at all, nothing comes in his door that doesn't get looked at for mods.



Anyway, Bill said, "Hey, I've got these Usher X-708's here and I think you would like them. Want a stock pair for review?" well, 'Of course.' I said. A short time later, two well packed factory boxes showed up to the old homestead.

Fit Finish And Basic Design

As I unpacked the X-708's I couldn't help but notice the size of these speakers. There is no way you could consider these a bookshelf speaker, they are really in the monitor size category. Roughly 50 percent larger all over and having a sloped front baffle presumably for time alignment, these speakers weigh in at almost twice that of a pair of Dynaudio 42's.

The Ushers have solid wood, decorative side cheeks. This pair has lightly stained solid Birch panels. The panels have been milled with rounded corners. They come with a removable MDF speaker grille of typical manufacture. The main enclosures are manufactured out of 0.75-inch MDF and have a mat silver finish.

The driver compliment is a 7 inch long throw woofer with a phase plug and a 1 inch fabric dome tweeter. The crossover frequency is 2.3kHz. On the back of the enclosure you will find two pairs of what appear to be WBT midline binding posts for bi-wiring or bi-amplifying and a heavy gauge, gold plated jumper.

Setup And Placement

The Ushers aren't too picky when it comes to placement. Since they are a rear-ported design, you can expect the typical back wall issues. Get them too close and they can get a little boomy, pull them out too far and they can get a little lean. I settled on having them out about 30" from the back wall as a good balance for most music. I also decided to have the speakers facing almost straight forward. Not toeing in the speakers let me get plenty of detail without being overrun by the upper mids and highs. Again for me it's all about balance. For this review I was using my Stubby speaker stands. So let me tell you how they sound.

Treble Clarity And Extension

I started with a bit of Jazz. Gary Burton's latest release Generations is an excellent recording and *well* worthy to be used as a reference. The Ushers delivered the little hidden details on this recording in spades. The highs are extended and articulate. The gentle taps of Clarence Penn's cymbal and crack of his snare drum are crisp and clean.

Another great test is Sheffield Labs release of Harry James, Still Harry After All These Years on vinyl. The cymbals recorded on this direct to disc release come through nice and clean. There is enough 'air' around all of the instruments that you begin to get the sense that the band is performing right in front of you.

Midrange Clarity

Moving on to some classic Jazz, Coleman Hawkins Today and Now on vinyl. On this Impulse release, we've got Coleman at his best. It's a marvelous record. The Ushers did a fine job on Coleman's sax. I was able to pick up most of those little recording artifacts like breathes between notes, that whoosh of air at the ends of Coleman's blown notes.

Next I thought I'd try some Classical. After listening to the Hawk, I was in a mellow mood so I went for Pachelbel's *Cannon in D* (RCA FRL1-5468 Red Seal) performed by John Francis Paillard and his Chamber Orchestra. This is a beautiful piece of music that on the right stereo sounds absolutely magical. On lesser loudspeakers the violins can get strident and very forward. The little Ushers performed extremely well considering these are their entry level speakers. There was a fair amount of 'air' around the instruments and I heard decent placement and definition of the Chamber members. I've had quite a few loudspeakers through here that didn't do *near* the job the X708's did on this piece.

Bass Clarity And Extension

I decided to start off a little slow for this part of the review. Listening to Buddy Guy's tribute to John Lee called *Blues Singer*, the Ushers do a great job at reproducing bass at low volume levels (75dB average). Track 9 "Bad Life Blues" has Tony Garnier playing a bass track on an upright that reaches down into the mid 40Hz range. The low bass is surprisingly well defined and clearly audible at even these low listening levels.

Another great test for bass is Bela Fleck's *Left Of Cool*. Victor Wooten just cooks on the bass. The bass track on this CD drops well into the 30Hz range and has tons of bass detail on it. Track 9 "Oddity" is a great test for how well a speaker handles deep, clean, fast bass. When Victor goes off on one of his trips and starts running the scales as if he were a lead guitar player, quite a few speakers have a hard time keeping up. This is where the Ushers shined. They kept up with Victor and his finger gymnastics without sounding muddy or excessively slow in the least. I have a hunch, the bass produced by these loudspeakers should satisfy most everybody out there.

Since these loudspeakers extend solidly down to 40 or so Hertz in room (my room anyway), integrating a sub might be a little tricky. If you decide to integrate a sub with the Ushers you will need to pick your sub wisely if you feel the need for deeper bass. Make sure that the sub has a crossover point at 40Hz as a minimum. It's that or you can always actively cross the Ushers over.

Soundstage, Imaging And Focus

Listening to my usual test track Pink Floyd's, *Momentary Lapse Of Reason*, Track 1, the water lapping on the shore, the Ushers cast a virtual images about three to four feet beyond the edge of the speaker. That's easily on par with most of the other quality speakers in this price range.

The Ushers ability to zoom in on center stage is quite remarkable. Listening to Eric Johnson's *Alien Love Child*, *Glass House* on your typical loudspeaker under \$1000, when Eric stomps the foot switch and goes to dark, heavy distortion the sound is spread almost as wide as the speakers are apart. That same passage on the Ushers, the image is nice and tight.

Going back to Bela Fleck's *Left Of Cool*, on the first track "Throwdown," Bela and Victor Wooten start trading licks in time towards the end of the song. The way this is mixed, Victor starts in the left channel on the bass, Bela and his banjo on the right. Then the engineer starts smoothly swapping channels with each of them. That transition should be extremely smooth and you should be able to follow each of them as they seamlessly dance back and forth through the air. So many speakers do a poor job of following the image. Not the

Ushers. The image was rock solid and very tight as those two bounced back and forth like a beach ball.

Sticking with Bela, I found the musical image to be on the same plane as the speakers. The depth of the image (at least in my system) was a solid six to eight feet behind the loudspeakers.

Moving on to Joe Jackson's *Body And Soul* on vinyl, this is a marvelous recording to tell just how big the recording venue sounds on speakers. This is a minimally mic'ed, live recording done in a Masonic Temple specifically to utilize its natural ambiance. It's a great test disc. The Ushers present a nice large image. Much larger than you would expect from a speaker this size. I think much of it has to do with the great bass extension these little loudspeakers have.

Dynamics

Paired with good equipment, the dynamics of the Ushers are very good. From top to bottom, you get relatively fast and tight dynamics. From the crisp crack on a snare drum that leaps out at you, to Victor Wootens slap bass, the dynamics are quite good considering these are an entry level pair of loudspeakers.

Overall Coloration

Putting on some more Jazz, Gary Burton's latest release *Generations*, this is another excellent recording. The Ushers deliver details very nicely, especially for a speaker in this price range. The highs are extended and articulate. The timbre of the instruments like Mokoto's piano is very close. The reproduction of Gary's vibes are full and rich, almost identical to the way they sound in real life. There is only a minor hint of veiling from these loudspeakers.

Now don't get your panties in a bunch over what I just typed. I'm not saying these speakers are so veiled and you shouldn't consider them. Please keep in mind we are talking about a pair of mini-monitors that are less than \$1,000. Compromises must be made. The compromises are usually in driver selection and crossover components. It's sheer economics fella's. Also these are their entry level speakers and they are designed as such.

Weirdness

I tried the Ushers with a variety of different gear and wires. They aren't too picky at all. They worked just fine on lower powered tubed and solid state gear. The loads they presented to the amp seemed fairly stable at all volume levels. Looking at the graphs on the Usher website, I see that the load the Ushers present they don't dip much below 6 ohms and don't go much above 14 ohms. On the gear I used, nothing weirded out on me. The images and tunes stayed relatively stable across the board at all volume levels.

For the majority of this review, I listened to the Ushers using 75 watt EL34 amps. The Ushers mated very well to them. In fact I far preferred the sound of tubes and the Ushers opposed to the solid state gear I used. The tubes warmed them up a bit making them not quite so forward sounding. But that's just me I suppose, as always YMMV.

As usual, you can experiment with wires and interconnects. Want a slightly forward and detailed presentation, use some silver plated copper. If they are a bit too forward for you or your system, try some standard copper wires.

So....



In the end, I feel the Usher X-708's are an extremely nice speaker. They seem to be very tube friendly which makes gear matching fairly easy. They aren't pretentious in the least. The Ushers don't try to overwhelm you with bass slam or sizzle like so many speakers do today. They provide a good overall balance to the music.

The Ushers provide solid, even bass down to just above 40Hz in my room then roll off. Pretty impressive for a mini-monitor. With solid bass like that, there is little need for a sub. If I had to put your placement in a concert hall, I'd say these speakers place you somewhere between the 5th and 10th row.

If they have one weakness, it's that they are slightly veiled (see my notes above). Nothing major mind you but the mids and highs could be a little more open which would help with the timbre also. When you think about it though, that's a pretty tall order for an entry level speaker priced at \$900. But then again, if you run some overly forward source gear, you'll be thanking your lucky stars for the little bit of veiling these loudspeakers have. It's all relative.

The Ushers do a fine job on all of the different types of music I threw at them. They played pretty much everything with ease and finesse. These speakers provided a nice amount of detail. In fact they are some of the most well balanced speakers I've heard in this price range. They have great bass for a monitor class speaker, extended clean highs plus a nice smooth midrange. I don't think you could ask for much more in this price range. Of all the different music I listened to while the Ushers were here, I think jazz was my favorite.
















Finally one question begs answering. Are they involving? Absolutely. I usually type while I listen to the gear I am reviewing. On loads of occasions, I'd drop the needle on something to hear it again so I could describe it for this review but inevitably I'd get lost in the music and have to go back and listen again. You know, as good as the X-708's are as an entry level speaker, it really makes me wonder what their big brothers sound like.

Bottom line, if you are in the market for an affordable stand mounted speaker, I think the Ushers are well worth listening to. Keep in mind that the X-708's are a relatively forward sounding speaker, a (near) front row speaker if you prefer that analogy. If your tastes in speakers are for something a bit more relaxed, the Ushers may not be your cup of tea. On the other hand, if you like the sound of Dynaudio's, Paradigm's or any of the other highly detailed sounding speakers on the market, the Ushers will fit right in. They show a fair amount more control and bass extension than others I've heard in its price class. They are well worthy of an audition.

Before You Read The Ratings, Read This

Please keep in mind this rating system is used to compare the Usher speakers against absolute perfection, or a money no object pair of speakers. The low(ish) marks you see aren't really representative of how good these speakers actually sound considering their price range and their surrounding competition. Taking that into consideration, these marks are actually pretty darned good in my estimation. Many of the well renowned speakers in this same price class would rate less favorably in my eyes (and ears).

Look at it this way, I have to leave room in the ratings for loudspeakers like Lowthers, Classic Audio Reproduction's Hartsfield's, Edgar Horns, Dynaudio Evidence Masters and Maggie 3.6's.

Tonality	
Sub-Bass (10 Hz - 60 Hz)	
Mid-Bass (80 Hz - 200 Hz)	
Midrange (200 Hz - 3,000 Hz)	
High-Frequencies (3,000 Hz on up)	
Attack	
Decay	
Inner Resolution	
Soundscape Width Front	
Soundscape Width Rear	
Soundscape Depth Behind Loudspeakers	
Soundscape Extension Into Room	
Imaging	
Fit And Finish	
Self Noise	N/A
Value For The Money	

Specifications

Type: Two-way monitor loudspeaker
 Tweeter: 1 inch fabric dome
 Woofer: 7 inch paper
 Sensitivity: 88dB

Impedance: 8 ohm
Frequency Response: 45Hz to 20kHz
Power Handling: 80 Watts
Crossover Frequency: 2.3kHz
Weight: 25.5 pounds each
Dimensions: 10 x 14 x 15 (WxDxH in inches)
Price: \$900

Company Information

Usher
67 Kai-Fong Street, Section 1
Taipei 10041, Taiwan

Website: www.usheraudio.com

www.usherusa.net

Providing Dealer
Response Audio
212 Carl Street
Endicott, NY 13760

Voice: (888) 785-9773
Website: www.responseaudio.com