

# Affordable\$\$Audio

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## ACI Sapphire XL

By Sean Fowler

### Specifications:

#### ACI Sapphire XL

FR (anechoic)	48-20khz (-3db)
Impedance	6 ohm
Sensitivity	85.5 db
Tweeter	1" Silk Dome
Woofer	5.5" Long Throw Paper Cone
Dimensions:	12"H, 8.5"W, 12"D
Bi Wire capable:	No
Weight	22 lbs
Price \$	1500pr

### AUDIO CONCEPTS, INC (ACI) A Short Intro

For Mike Dzurko, 2007 represents a significant milestone for not just himself, but for his company, Audio Concepts, Inc. The journey began in 1977 when Mike, who was then hardly into his twenties, took his love for transducers and turned it into a successful speaker business that now celebrates its 30<sup>th</sup> year. Having developed hundreds of designs which have generated thousands of happy customers, Audio Concepts Inc, or ACI for short, is still running strong and looks to expand their facilities later this year. Like SIA, Mike decided that the only way to provide the best value for his customers was to invest his money into the product and not into the pockets of advertisers. There is just one significant difference; ACI was one of the first to do it. In fact, ACI could rightfully be considered one of the founding fathers for the consumer-direct business model; cutting out the middle man long before the idea was fashionable. Now days, this model has become a growing trend in our hobby as more audiophiles begin to discover the sonic rewards. While ACI has managed to evade the industrial whiz-bang paparazzi, they have become widely recognized by the collective virtual community for their first rate products and customer support. Have any questions? Just log-on to their virtual forum or pick up the phone and call; chances are you will be speaking with Mike himself. With all respect to the major brands, this is *my* kind of company.



It is for those reasons that inspired me to discover what ACI is all about. In short, I found a man after my own heart. Much like my own self, Mike is drawn to anything with musical soul; the kind of products that seduce you into your favorite chair, stimulating your mind with hours of foot tapping rhythm instead of a neurotic break-down of electronic devices. Kicking back for a moment, I will take a short pause and to give you his story;

“Music is my inspiration: I grew up a musician. Built first speakers when I was 12 . . . I've always been surrounded by live music and have wanted to be able to replicate that on my own system whenever I want.”

“For the last ten years or so we've leased the upstairs of our building to a recording studio. The studio is headed by one of my teen heroes, one of the best musicians ever to come out of this area. He spent about 20 years in LA doing sessions work, mastering, etc. He records just about everything but rap. Massed choral, solo piano, rock, jazz, blues . . . Some of the guys I used to play with that kept going :) They also do live, on-site recordings, etc. So, anytime I want I can be immersed in the sound of live voice and instruments. All three of my kids were heavily involved in music, and pretty talented, so I was bombarded with a lot more live music . . . all three of my kids are now away at school or on their own, so I need to fill that void of music. Fact is, lots of speakers to choose from, few that really play music.”

## THE SAPPHIRE XL – The Design

When the forces of knowledge, experience, passion, and exposure to live music all mesh together into one product, you can expect something good – *real* good. While ACI's is most famous for creating award winning subwoofers, they are no strangers to building high quality two-way monitors. Verily, they've been at it for decades. When it came time to develop the seventh iteration of the decade-old sapphire series, Mike knew he wanted to make something special – something the market has not seen before.



It is a vision that is far easier to recite than to execute. The sub 2k two-way monitor market has become a saturated battlefield with hordes of designers fighting to build the better mousetrap. In the natural world subject to the laws of yin and yang, most of these monitors hide significant compromise in one form or another. On the field a designer must choose his preferred weapon and work to hide its inherent weakness. Mike Dzurko sought a different tact; choosing instead to build a speaker that could re-create the musical experience while providing all the strengths audiophiles pine for. It would be a speaker to embrace both solid state topologies along with valve circuits. After nearly two years of development, the Sap-

phire XL was born.

The XL is an odd shaped rear ported two-way monitor boasting two quality drivers of notable pedigree; a 1" silk dome tweeter from the Scan-Speak 9500 series offset to a complimenting Scan-Speak 5.5" revelator long-throw woofer. Having flirted with the scan-speak revelator in the past with Totem Acoustic's Hawk and Sonus Faber's Cremona Auditor; I reserved a high yet measured expectation of the Sapphire XL's ability to dig deep. A quick glimpse over their literature indicating an in-room response of 38hz – 40khz satisfied my demands. Boasting a modest efficiency of 85.1db with a nominal impedance of 6ohms – it was clear that the Sapphire XL was never destined to share vows with low

powered SET's, although Mike assured me customers have tried this combination before and met with surprising success.

Undeniably unique, at first glance the Sapphire XL appears to have a separate box attached to its back. This well endowed rear end has purpose beyond a good laugh; it's there to offer varying dimension in what Mike calls a dual depth design. When combined with thick MDF construction and plentiful cross-bracing, its shape and build serves to reduce internal standing waves. Measuring 12" (H) x 8.5" (W) x 12.5" (D) with a respectable weight of 22lbs a piece, the XL stretches the limits of the term; mini-monitor.

"Appearance is not an afterthought. The physical appearance of the speaker is firmly connected to the performance of the speaker."

On the surface, such commentary can be interpreted as bold with few points of true merit. Yet here we all are, collectively entwined in an age where slim-line profile speakers are the demand. Can anyone really deny that visual appeal plays a crucial role in the selection process? Moreover, can a beautiful speaker subdue your senses into living with an extra compromise or two? One thing is certain; Mike managed to bridge the gap.



Pony up the extra two-hundred clams and you will be treated with a piano-black finish that exudes class and luxury. The reflection, pristine and clear, illuminates the surrounding landscape much like the surface of a pond on a clam day. With a slim front profile accented by rounded edges, the XL manages a compact, suave and elegant look that will instill a major sense of ownership pride.

## THE SOUNDS OF A GEM – Sapphire XL

### Initial Set-Up

Like most speakers that are 85db sensitive, the Sapphires XL is best suited for moderate to high powered amplifiers. Between my eclectic taste in music and the occasional jam session, I set out to match the XL with an appropriately accommodating amp. Surprisingly, what I ended up with was an inexpensive light-weight integrated amplifier, the Naim Nait 5i. While this British classic could not provide the dynamic head-room of the more powerful Classe CA-2200 or Rogue Stereo 90 – its harmonic tone formed a pleasant synergy with the Sapphire XL and had just enough drive to make them sing. Content, I decided to use this piece as the benchmark for the review.

Being far less fussy about exact placement than most other loudspeakers I come across, setting up the Sapphire XL was a *relief*. After setting both speakers atop 26" solid steel stands with both tweeters facing inward with slight toe-in, I was about ready to go.

To these ears, the Sapphire XL requires little bass reinforcement. Although both speakers come with port inserts, I preferred their tonal balance without them. Still, they come in handy when in tight listening quarters. I found you can fine-tune their performance depending on how deep you push in the foam inserts.



### The Sound

Writing about the Sapphire XL is a difficult task. When it comes to affordable two-way monitors, most designs carry with them the standard set of extreme virtues and extreme vices. Yet, here I am with a pair of speakers that present an even sonic balance that does virtually nothing wrong and everything exceptionally well, leaving me with very little to dissect. That folk's, is a good thing – at least for you.

Whether placed in a large open room or in a small and sealed space, the Sapphire XL always managed to fill the area with vivid and engaging sound that never

over or underwhelmed its boundaries. In short, they never became “lost”. They always remained true to their stripes; giving off a lush and palpable sound with more of a relaxed mid-hall perspective. Their sound-stage focuses less on achieving wall to wall sound and instead offers a more mature, insightful, and deep presentation that projects rich harmonics in such a way to where their sound was enjoyable even when outside of the coveted “sweet spot”.

One major prerequisite of mine is a product's ability to handle a variety of music that extends well beyond the usual audiophile collection of little girls with their guitars. A speaker's got to rock when called upon just as its got to get out of the way when its expected to. The Sapphires did not disappoint. In fact, they handled everything I threw their way, whether it was hard hitting Metallica metal or the atmospheric and diverse electronic styling of Dj Tiesto. While the Sapphires never delivered gut wrenching slam, I always felt the impact of every drum strike and bass line. No matter what genre music I threw at the Sapphire, the sound was always beautiful, emotional, and physical.

If there is one thing that I need to make clear, it is that the Sapphire XL does not sound like a tiny speaker. When called upon to play Niyaz's self-titled debut album – a demanding composition of new age music fusing Persian classical with electronica, the haunting vocals of Azam Ali filled the room with eerie and ambient presence. The unique ensemble of instrumentation just hung in the air completely separate and distinguished from the raw intoxicating and powerful beasts. This is the kind of music that begs to be played at levels which fill the space with impact. The Sapphires delivered the fully monty without ever alerting me to their small pedigree.

For good measure, I threw on Eric Clapton's “un-plugged”. As expected, the Sapphire's extracted the atmosphere in vivid fashion; capturing tone, separation, and body. Eric Clapton's foot tapping the wooden floor in “Old Love” was distinct and ambient with the slight over-lapping attributed from the venues acoustics. The piano sounded full and less ‘honkey tonk’ while the acoustic guitar was more warm and less sharp.

The treble on the Sapphire XL will often be associated with the words “laid back” or even “dark”. Instead of presenting information in prominently detailed fashion, the high end is passive and non-offensive. The trademark tang of Michael Hedge’s guitar lacked that sharp and attention grabbing attack as it fell more into a polite back-round. The trumpet section from Wynton Marsalis’s “Baroque for Trumpet” was also more relaxed and subdued than I’m used to. While these are more nit-picks than actual vices, this is the one aspect of the XL that takes some getting used to. Once you are however, it’s hard not to become addicted to their lack of bite or edge. Such a mellow high end allows me to listen for hours and hours without the slightest bit of fatigue.

The mid-range is classic scan-speak revelator; Quick, palpable, rich in both tone and texture. This is the exact driver found in speakers costing upwards of 10x the price of the Sapphire XL, and for good reason; it is relatively neutral and reproduces music in an effortless, linear manner. Fans of male or female vocals will love the volumetric and well anchored feel that often attributes to the “they are in the room” illusion. In short, this is the way mid-range ought to be.

Bass response has always been the Achilles heel of compact monitors. In the ultimate sense; there is no replacement for displacement and at the very end of the day, you can only expect so much from something so little. So how much slam can this particular stand-mount monitor provide? Quite a bit, actually. Digging well into the upper 30hz range, what they lacked in ultimate extension they made up for with a robust and controlled response that hits with authority. Whether called upon to reproduce quick fingered bass lines from bossa nova themed jazz to thunderous power chords from modern rock bands – the XL remained fast and articulate adding no over-hang. With the XL, bass is a living and breathing force – which again, is the way it ought to be.

The ACI Sapphire XL is a music lover’s delight. Never before have I listened to music for such extended hours. Never before have I frantically dusted off those old LP’s to re-discover music I long discarded upon developing a critical ear. Between their mature presentation and rare ability to integrate with both valves and transistors; I’ve found a pair of monitors to settle down with for the long haul. Mike, consider me a new card-carrying member of the ACI family.

*The tides are beginning to change. Divided aural boundaries are crumbling. Value takes on a new face. – the word is spreading - Viva La Revolución.*

**Associated Equipment:**

**Turntables:** Rega P1, Clear Audio Champion Magnum

**Digital Sources:** Musical Fidelity CD PRE 24, Classe CDP 102, Naim CD5x, Ayre C-5, E-MU 1212M

**Preamps:** Musical Fidelity CD PRE 24, Classe CP-500, Rogue Perseus, IRD Purist

**Power amps:** Musical Fidelity A3CR, Classe CA-2200, Rogue Stereo 90, H20 S-150

**Integrated:** Naim Nait 5i , Harman Kardon 3470

**Cables:** Tributaries 16 awg, Straightwire Rhapsody S speaker wire, Straightwire Sonata interconnects, homebrew diy interconnects w/ eichmann bullet plugs, Naim NACA 5

**Reviewed Component Retail Price:** \$1335 / pair – Stone Image Rothschild A2 , \$1500 / pair ACI Sapphire XL (\$1700 in piano black as reviewed)

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