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# Axiom Audio

REVIEW

## AXIOM M5 REVIEW 'Highlights'



Recently, in response to an editorial he'd written, fellow reviewer and SoundStage! Access editor Hans Wetzel received an e-mail from a reader. In his article, Hans had said that he was more interested in affordable loudspeakers (i.e., those costing \$1500-\$2500 USD per pair) from venerable manufacturers than in speakers retailing for north of \$5000/pair.

All of this brings me to the subject of this review: Axiom Audio's flagship bookshelf speaker, the M5.

### Sound

Although, like most audio reviewers, I tend to throw around a large number of descriptors to convey the sounds of products, that doesn't guarantee that the reader is left with clear sens-

## CLEAN EFFORTLESS NEUTRAL

es of those sounds. While I can (and do, below) use many adjectives to describe the aural character of the Axiom M5, much of what I heard from them can be summarized in three words: **clean, effortless, neutral.**

Listening to a favorite seasonal album of mine: Loreena McKennitt's *To Drive the Cold Winter Away* (16-bit/44.1kHz AIFF, Quinlan Road). The M5s' retrieval of details from the opening track, "In Praise of Christmas," was exemplary. As the song begins, the sound of McKennitt's accordion emerges from the rear of the stage, before her harp enters. As the music reverberates off the walls and ceiling of the Basilica of Our Lady, in Guelph, Ontario, where this and some other tracks on this album were recorded, the Axioms conveyed a sense of the grandeur of this sanctuary; however, what most caught my attention was the patter of footsteps, and the general low-level clatter captured by the microphones. This sort of transparency depends heavily on the quality of the recording, of course, but it takes a revealing system -- and, in particular, a pair of revealing speakers -- to appreciate it.

With "Snowflake," from Kate Bush's *50 Words for Snow* (16/44.1 AIFF, Anti-), the piano sounded gorgeous through the Axiom -Bryston (B135) pairing. This intimate music is made even more so by the warm fullness of the piano's lowest register. The percussion, set far back on the stage, seems almost distant, in sharp contrast to Bush's voice, which, positioned front and center and suspended between the speakers, sounds almost ghostly. All of this was communicated beautifully by the M5HPs, whose lucid sound was impeccably clear.

Listening to "Broken Homes," from Tricky's *Angels with Dirty Faces* (16/44.1 AIFF, Island), I found that the Axioms did a fine job of conveying the cavernous reverb of the percussion. Fellow Brit PJ Harvey appears on this track, her voice distinctly separate from Tricky's as the two voices



seem to float between the speakers. A choir behind the lead singers' voices seems to come from farther back on the stage, giving the sound a tangible sense of depth, and offering an interesting contrast to the drums, played in a rhythm reminiscent of a military band.

The M5s' outstanding clarity was evident with everything I played through them. With "Could We," from Cat Power's *The Greatest* (16/44.1 AIFF, Matador), Chan Marshall and her band had a palpable presence courtesy the Axiom's ultraclean sound and sharp imaging. The bass had warm punch, and the tweeters conveyed the shimmer of the cymbals with commendable precision. Marshall's voice sounded natural, and was positioned squarely between the speakers.

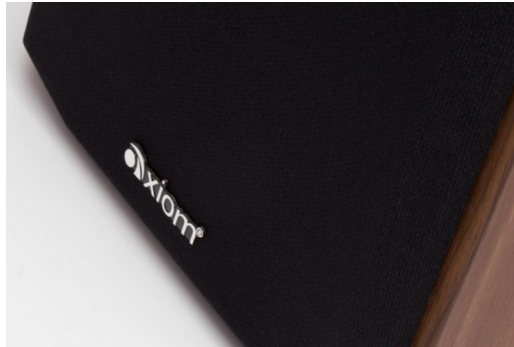
"Tombstone Blues," from Bob Dylan's *Highway 61 Revisited* (16/44.1 AIFF, Columbia), offered a significant contrast to Cat Power in terms of recording quality. Though it will never escape the shadow of "Like a Rolling Stone," which precedes it on this album and is probably more synonymous with Mr. Zimmerman than anything else in his catalog, "Tombstone Blues" is a favorite of mine. The sound isn't bad, but compared to *The Greatest* it lacks that sense of a three-dimensional acoustic space, sounding thinner and more compressed -- though this never manages to detract from its infectious, toe-tapping rhythm. What it did do was illustrate that the Axiom had little character of its own and was faithful

# THE CLARITY WAS EVIDENT WITH EVERYTHING I PLAYED

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to the recording. The M5's inherent neutrality bodes well for the long-term enjoyment of a wide-ranging music collection.

To hear how the M5 handled music with lots of beefy bass, I listened to "General Patton," from Big Boi's *Sir Lucious Left Foot: The Son of Chico Dusty* (16/44.1 AIFF, Def Jam). It took almost no time to hear the character of the Axiom's low end: powerful but neutral. "General Patton" features a weighty bottom end that speakers less disciplined than the M5 tend to make fat and boomy. I saw Big Boi tour this album, and from what I heard at that show, I'm pretty certain that's exactly how he wants his music to be experienced.

The problem is that sloppy bass performance not only sounds bad, it overwhelms and muddles everything else. Through the Axioms, "General Patton" had a strong low end that was actually articulate -- the quality of the bass wasn't masked by the quantity of bass. The speakers sounded full, and made plenty of impact, but did so even as their sound remained crystal clear and apparently effortless. If you had enough amplifier power and space to push these speakers hard, I'm fairly certain you could play them continuously at dangerously high levels and they would remain entirely composed.

There are speakers that cost multiples of the M5's price that can't handle such abuse; this is pretty remarkable.

The M5s' ability to play loudly, cleanly, and effortlessly should be apparent the first time you throw something rambunctious at them and turn up the volume. M5s will have you questioning whether spending more will buy you sound that's genuinely better or merely different. If it were possible, I'd love to hear them in a double-blind listening test pitted against some speakers costing ten times their price. Depending on the model, I think they might be good enough to hold their own.

## Conclusion

Because so many audio manufacturers sell products priced far beyond the reach of most of us, it's easy to become jaded and assume that you must spend a small fortune to get outstanding sound quality. Many reviewers, too, would have you believe that if you want great sound, you'd better be ready to pony up a lot of cash.

But here's the thing that we in the audio press don't tell you often enough: Forget about the highest end of the audio market. If your goal is great sound, it doesn't matter if you can't afford to spend thousands of dollars on your system. A speaker like Axiom's M5 is proof that you can get incredible sound, superb engineering, and fantastic build quality at a reasonable price. You will still need money for amplification and source components -- but the M5s require little power, and excellent DACs are fairly affordable.

If you skip the fancy speaker cables and interconnects (you don't really need them), the only thing you'll be

# THE AXIOM M5 GETS MY UNRESERVED RECOMMENDATION

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missing to get the Axioms to sound their best is a pair of sturdy stands, all without falling into the trap of overspending that plagues so many audiophiles.

Over the past few years I've spent a lot of time writing about speakers that cost well over \$2000/pair. After spending time with the Axiom M5, I think I need to take Hans Wetzel's lead and get back to what got me interested in audio in the first place: high-quality speakers and components that normal folks can aspire to own. In the meantime, Axiom Audio's M5 gets my unreserved recommendation.

Philip Beaudett  
Soundstage



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