



# Rock Da House

**Noel Keywood's abode shakes to the gripping sound of Unity Audio's The Rock active loudspeaker system...**

**W**ith its ribbon tweeter and alloy bass midrange unit The Rock is an active loudspeaker tuned for speed, it appears.

Think superfast dynamics with plenty of punch, a loudspeaker that hits and runs. Unity Audio have put a 75W bass amplifier into each one and a 30W treble amplifier, so all you need is a CD player and volume control

and you're up and running with these £2,850 standmounters.

Oh, and a pair of stands and a mains supply. For The Rocks are compact standmounters whose onboard amplifiers need connection to a mains supply. There's no port anywhere; I looked and looked! So they can be placed against a rear wall if you so wish and they have been balanced to cope with such a position, we found.

At 11.2kgs apiece The Rocks are heavy but liftable. They measure 325mm high (13in), 220mm wide (8.7in) and 290mm (11.5in) deep. Inside lies Class A/B power amplifiers designed by Tim de Paravicini no less (using transistors, not valves, I should add!). It's coupled to a ribbon tweeter through an impedance matching transformer, as ribbons have very low impedance; the crossover is electronic.

The rear panel carries an IEC power input, a sensitivity (volume) control, a balanced XLR input and an unbalanced phono socket input, all of good quality. There's a rocker power switch with green power on LED; could editor DP's campaign against blue LEDs be working? Switch on and off were virtually silent and there were no violent cone excursions caused by d.c. offset in the power amps. caused by the power supply lines running up at differing rates. All this induces confidence, as does excellent build quality and finish...

Very impressively, Unity Audio use an Elac Jet tweeter (a folded ribbon) and an Elac bass unit, with alloy sandwiched onto a pulp fibre cone. Harold Leak obviously had a good idea then! I don't know whether you can stand on Elac cones though, as Harold did on his Sandwich cones.

**SOUND QUALITY**

Active loudspeakers have their own particular style of presentation, their own special strengths – and The Rock displayed most of them. In case you've never heard an active, let me explain. Think *control*. As you might expect they keep a grip on absolutely everything, meaning timing is metronomic and attention to detail intense. Eliminating loudspeaker cables improves electrical damping so you get tighter bass, strengthening the overall feeling of control. They also spit out detail, again because there's little between drive unit and amplifier.

The Rocks tick all these boxes with ease. As Eleanor McEvoy's 'I Got You to See Me Through' kicked off, some microphone bumps were made rudely obvious. The Rock catches small events and makes them starkly apparent. Actives are exciting and impressive in this way, but be aware that they can also be stark and a little dry, according to design. What Unity Audio have done here is to combine two high quality drivers into an accurate whole and I was aware that The Rocks have little response irregularity across most of the audio range – subjective upper treble excepted. Basically, there's nothing to sugar the pill; you get the recording warts and all.

Running The Rock away from the rear wall to assess this position, I soon realised that they had to be placed further back to add some lower midrange warmth and body to vocals, as measurement had suggested. Their bass peaking made bass bouncy and obvious whatever I played, and there was plenty of clarity across the mid and in the treble but

they are not warm or full in balance. I have never come across a sloppy sounding active and The Rock fitted this mould comfortably. It is coolly accurate and very, very revealing, so cue the awkward recording of Duffy and the track 'Rockferry' with the 'graunch' of deliberately added digital distortion. The sound stage arced gently upward between the loudspeakers but stayed fairly well within their limits. Stage depth was a little limited. Strings on this disc, likely electronically generated, were thrown out by the ribbon tweeter and were less than sweet. The ribbon was a little acerbic with this track, but then I expected it, as the recording isn't so good. Some loudspeakers get through 'Rockferry' well; many don't. The Rocks threw out so much inner detail and upper treble energy that the track was done no favours; the Rocks are more revealing than

'Agolo' start and stop with measured power. It was just so: not too loud or resonant, nor too muted. As 'Aye' span I was aware that although bass was strongly outlined and kept under good control, the small sealed cabinet makes for a resonant system that even the grip of an internal amplifier cannot quite disguise. The end result is a springiness to bass that came over as a little one note at times, as 'Azan Nan Kpe' made obvious with drum strikes of homogeneously similar character.

Yet with 'Lon Lon Vadjro' the bass line was superbly outlined, in genuine active fashion, each note in good accord with the last, so notes didn't come and go in level as they can with passive 'speakers. The strong walking bass line that kicks off 'Houngbati' was propulsive, speeding along with verve and seemingly perfect control. The Rocks

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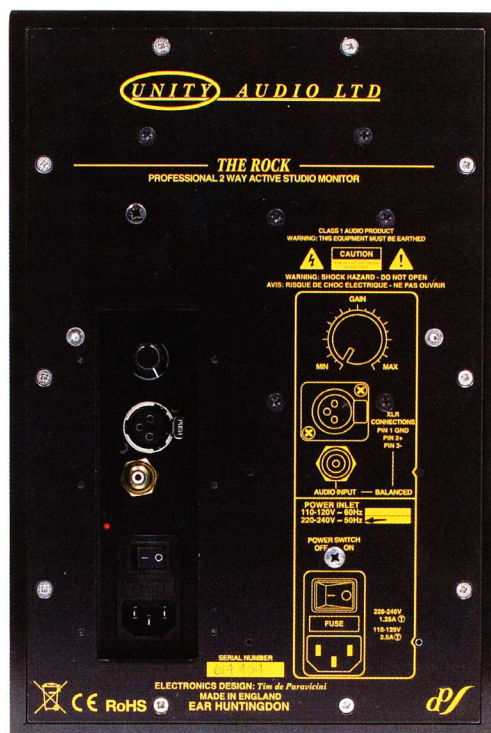
complimentary.

As 'Warwick Avenue' slid into view the gentle ring of cymbals was spotlit and strummed guitar made vibrant. But with 'Serious' I started to notice that the tweeter was a little obvious and somewhat dominated proceedings, adding some sibilance and a sheeny nasality to Duffy's voice that compromised her richness of vocal expression.

Being active and graced with a ribbon tweeter The Rocks have everything in their favour without need for further emphasis and at times I felt there was a shade too much emphasis in the upper midband. This spits out a torrent of conspicuous treble detail, but at the expense of naturalness and ease.

Spinning Angélique Kidjo's 'Aye' album to tax the bass department had the solo drum strike at the start of

were quite different from passive loudspeakers in the way they played bass and their confident and speedy nature is something to behold. You don't get subsonics, but it's just as well because when small bass drivers in small cabinets are forced to go low by the use of equalisation (basically, bass lift) the result is a sonic disaster, and distortion measurement shows



The rear panel carries balanced XLR and unbalanced phono inputs, a gain control and switched IEC mains socket.

why. Unity Audio avoid this mistake so The Rock remains relaxed in what it does and our measurements show that at normal bass frequencies – meaning 40Hz and above – distortion was very low.

And finally, before leaving the difficulties of reproducing 'Aye', the complex arrangements remained well sorted and free of muddle.

How would Nigel and his amazing violin fare? Well, the ribbon tweeter did add extra sheen, bringing a lightness of presentation. But it also showed all those qualities ribbons are known for, such as incredibly explicit outlining of strings so that individual instruments in the backing orchestra stood out in stark relief. Meanwhile Mr Kennedy's solos had a pristine clarity that brought Massenet's 'Meditation' into perfect focus, the violin displaying impressively stable tonality, across the note scale and across an entire range of inflexions, from the gentlest long bowing of notes to accelerandi. The Rock benefitted from good inter-driver phase matching here and would please any listener I feel.

With orchestral music of broader scale, the Royal Harmonic playing Tchaikovsky's 'Marche Slave', The Rocks sounded large and dynamically unstrained. With the same verve and delight, keeping perfect timing, the orchestra bounced along gleefully, pipes trilling eagerly, strings suddenly interjecting with a fervour that was exciting. The Rocks seemed fast, although of course loudspeakers and orchestras don't speed up through particular hi-fi products; The Rocks just made it seem that way due to their grip on timing; events came and went in a flash; the Royal Phil were playing their hearts out it seemed.

Violins *en masse* were well lit, if a little short of rosin. There was a fine sense of dynamic scale in orchestral crescendos,

more than you'd get in a passive standmounter of the same size (if lower price). Toward the end of 'Marche Slave' though, the tweeter hardened quite audibly with repeated cymbal crashes, obscuring the music so much I had to swap to another system to be sure what

was on the disc (Spendor S8e loudspeakers and Robson Acoustics Regis with ribbon tweeter, plus Musical Fidelity AMSS0 amp). I thought "this is Class D" before suddenly remembering it was not. The Rocks were less

than couch and capable here, where the Spondors and Robsons were fine.

Run a clean and simple Rock recording like Skunk Anansie's 'Hedonism' and The Rocks sounded great – this is their *metier*. Skin's

vocals were thrown out with gusto, and bass strode along sounding strong and very much under control.

In a similar vein I knew that Toni Braxton's 'Spanish Guitar' would gain a new dimension through this loudspeaker and I wasn't wrong. Gentle clicks of the drum stick suddenly became impacts of fierce force; strummed guitar strings were lacerative. It was eye popping, but larger than real. Backing vocals were again a little hardened and pinched, an effect I noticed on 'Rockferry'.

**CONCLUSION**

The Rocks are distinctively voiced and excel at a particular type of presentation. Think speed and incision, strong dynamics and firm bass. They are cohesive too. But I had reservations about their treble behaviour at times, to the point where I had to switch to another system to get my bearings. Our measurements suggest midband peaking was responsible for this and some honing would not go amiss. As they stand their strengths are considerable; good quality components have been used all round and the resulting sound will appeal to anyone wanting lightning fast transients and a snappy pace.



**MEASURED PERFORMANCE**

Our frequency response analysis, here using third octave measurement of pink noise, shows The Rock has a slight roll away in output below 400Hz. This will give dry bass and suggests The Rock is designed for near wall use. There is no port, so our usual red port output trace is absent.

Notable features are an absence of any high treble lift from the ribbon tweeter; designers commonly choose to boost ribbons so their contribution can be easily heard, because they possess a bright, incisive and razor sharp cleanliness that impresses. The Rock has been balanced more for accuracy however, although it will still have quite prominent upper frequencies.

Moving the measuring mic up and down showed excellent phase matching between the drive units, which gives a consistent sound from a wide range of listening angles, and a smooth reverberant field. The peculiar peak and undulations around 3kHz will add sharpness or spit of some sort.

Our 200mS decay spectrum was reasonably clean and resonance free except for a few hot spots at and below 200Hz, especially overhang at 70Hz, but small powered cabinets usually do this. There's no free lunch in loudspeaker design.

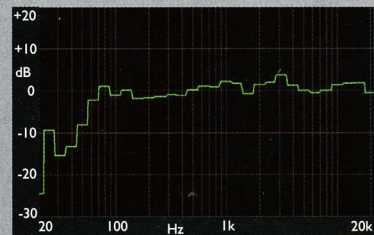
Sensitivity was very high, The Rock delivering 90dB Sound Pressure Level at 1metre from 120mV of input. That means it will go loud from a phono

stage, not bad!

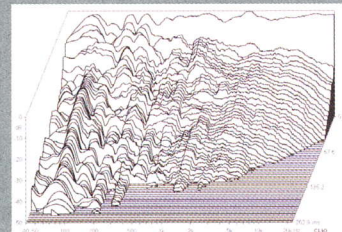
Distortion measured 4% at 40Hz, falling progressively to 1% above 70Hz so results here were good, although a small cone working hard was evident in a high peak value of 16% at 25Hz. Distortion was higher than usual above 100Hz too, measuring around 0.6% up to 900Hz, not so good as 0.2% is common.

The Rock is an active loudspeaker engineered for basic accuracy, clean clear treble and tight bass. It measured well generally, with a few blemishes. NK

**FREQUENCY RESPONSE**



**DECAY SPECTRUM**



**VERDICT**

Fast and with firecracker dynamics, these are a bracing listen, but fun!

**THE ROCK** £2,850

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**FOR**

- superb dynamics
- transient speed
- build & finish

**AGAINST**

- well lit treble
- limited sound stage