ESI nEar08 eXperience | £266

Can these competitive German/Korean monitors step up to the mark? ***Marco Migliari*** gets on the front row

WHAT IS IT?

Active monitor speakers

CONTACT

Who: Time+Space
Tel: +44 (0)1837 55200
Web: timespace.com

HIGHLIGHTS

1 Very competitively priced
2 Solid construction
3 Simple, professional look

SPECS

Cabinet: vinyl laminated MDF, bass-reflex design

LF driver: eight-inch Kevlar curved cone with high temperature voice coil and damped rubber surround

HF driver: one-inch neodymium soft dome tweeter with ferro fluid

Frequency response: 40Hz – 24KHz

LF Amplifier Power: 70 watts

HF Amplifier Power: 70 watts

S/N ratio: >100dB below full output, 20KHz bandwidth

Input connectors: XLR balanced, TRS balanced and unbalanced

Input impedance: 20kohm balanced, 10kohm unbalanced

Input sensitivity: 250mV input produces full output with Volume control at maximum

Controls: Volume control knob (from no signal to maximum output), high frequency level selection (-2 to + 1dB in 1dB steps), low frequency boost selection (50Hz, 65Hz, 80Hz or 100Hz).

Dimension:
255 x 322 x 358mm

Weight:
10kg each

The official distributor of the nEar08 monitors (ESI Audiotechnik GmbH) is a recently founded German company, which acts as the European leg and main headquarters for Ego Systems Inc., a Korean company specializing in audio and MIDI interfaces. Active for over a decade, ESI Audio and its far eastern partner have made their mark developing audio interfaces, audio software and now monitors. Their nEar range of speakers comprises the original nEar05 Classic, the smaller nEar04 and the upgraded nEar05 eXperience, as well as the model reviewed here and the SW10K subwoofer. The nEar08 active monitors are a conventional bass-reflex design.

Lookin' good

First impressions were rather positive. The nEar08 cabinets feature a professional, scratch-resistant finish and feel pretty sturdy. A single 8-inch Kevlar bass driver, topped by a 1-inch soft dome tweeter, populate the unassuming front panel. The silver plastic flange fitted around the LF driver hosts a single blue LED for power on indication.

The rear panel sports an analogue XLR input socket coupled with a TRS jack input. These two inputs appear to be physically paralleled and therefore not intended for summing or buffering, but it is possible to connect unbalanced signals. Active controls are the low frequency roll-off, with four fixed positions set at 50Hz, 65Hz, 80Hz and 100Hz, the high frequency boost/cut, also with four positions between -2 and +1dB in 1dB steps, and the volume attenuator – this latter one rather laconically ranging from min to max (where min is actually complete audio cutoff).

The bass-reflex port (through which it's possible to see the back of the tweeter unit – visual proof that there's no internal acoustic padding) is the only remaining feature of the rear side. The nEar08 are bi-amped by two 70W internal units, and the usual set of electronics protections is available against abuse, although there's no limiter on the audio path.

nEarly good

I've used the nEar08 monitors in the studio for mixing and general listening. Setting up was easy, although it would have been useful to have a dB scale on the volume control to facilitate level matching between different sets of speakers. This time I compared the nEar08 to a pair of Mackie HR824s, my trusty KRK V6s and the studio's PMC LB1s and Yamaha NS10s.

It's a tough but varied field of competition and the first casualty for these well-priced newcomers was the mid range clarity. The nEars have a resonance around 800-900Hz and upper octaves (1.6-1.8kHz and 3.2-3.4kHz in particular). This also affects their balancing.

This feature is sided by a concomitant lack of bottom end. The lack of low frequencies in an eight-inch driver is very unusual, and I could almost certainly point my finger at the roll-off filter as the culprit.

As a consequence, the overall image isn't great – the tweeters are also on the bright side but choosing the -2dB setting on the selector tamed them a little.

Power handling is average, with some mid range distortion creeping in at what I'd call 'tracking level'. The perceived lack of bottom end encourages the listener to push the monitors louder, which has the unfortunate effect of increasing the perceived harshness.

Although keenly priced for the spec (that price is per pair) there are better sounding alternatives for similar cash, making the 08s a secondary choice. FM

FutureMusic VERDICT

BUILD
VALUE
EASE OF USE
VERSATILITY
RESULTS

A reasonably priced pair of well speced monitors, but lacking a comfortable working balance.

FMU196.rev_esi 82 4/12/07 15:10:23