



Active application

A luxury loudspeaker and high-end active crossover come together with extraordinary effect. **Ed Selley** is blown away

Say the words 'active speaker' to most audiophiles and there is a good chance the first thing to spring to mind will be loudspeakers with built-in amplification to power the drivers. To be clear, the defining characteristic that makes a speaker active is that it has a powered crossover placed in front of the allocated amplification to best suit the frequency range of each driver, or at the very least each channel.

This active loudspeaker system is a combination of Kudos Audio's Titan 505 loudspeaker and Exposure's VXN

outboard crossover with power supply, pre and power amplification. As you can see, the crossover and amplification system is not confined to a pair of speaker cabinets and, more unusually, brings together two brands that up until now have had no association with one another. It is a different take on an active speaker, but there are very good reasons for adopting this approach.

Priced at £7,000 per pair, the Titan 505 appeared as a conventional standmount in *HFC* 451. The speaker here is identical in every way but

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Exposure VXN
ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
Outboard active crossover

WEIGHT
2kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
218 x 89 x 348mm

FEATURES

- Compatible with two and three-way speaker designs
- 1x stereo RCA input
- 3x stereo RCA outputs (treble, mid, bass)
- Dedicated PSU

DISTRIBUTOR
Exposure Electronics Ltd.

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unlike the original review that utilised its built-in conventional crossover, here it's bypassed via the unusual-looking terminal panel at the back by removing the horseshoe-shaped links to allow the tweeter and isobaric mid/bass drive units to directly connect to external amplification.

Key to making sure the correct frequencies are fed to corresponding

The system has an effortless speed and dynamic flow that underpins everything

drivers is Exposure's £1,545 VXN crossover. This is a single, half-width unit with a pair of speaker crossovers mounted inside. The crossover itself is configured on a speaker-by-speaker basis before leaving the factory and can be used with both two and three-way designs.

To maximise the performance of the crossover, it is powered by an external PSU priced at £995, which combines a custom-shielded toroidal transformer and a veritable forest of smoothing capacitors. It connects to the VXN via

a pair of 30V DC power cables, one per channel, and power is controlled via the on/off button on the front of the power supply. Placed side by side, the units are the equivalent of one full-width component. The VXN crossover is built for Kudos speakers, but can be partnered with any preamp or power amp combination that takes your fancy, offering intriguing possibilities for tweaking the sound of a system.

Of course, Exposure hopes that buyers will opt for its own for the task such as its XM series as seen here fronted by its XM7 preamp and four XM9 mono amplifiers (both reviewed in *HFC* 429) that connect to the crossover. The units claim 80W power output each and are sold in pairs, but if you need more analogue inputs its 3010S2D preamp could be drafted in instead and the 3010S2 stereo power amps would also reduce the box count and up the power output, for example. The VXN receives a signal from the preamp output over RCA and splits the signal to output to the power amplifiers, again over RCA. In this case the outputs are left tweeter, left mid/bass, right

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Exposure XM7/XM9
ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
Preamp/mono block power amps

WEIGHT
5kg each

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
218 x 89 x 363mm

FEATURES

- Quoted power output: 80W (XM9)
- Analogue inputs: 1x stereo RCA; 1x MM phono; 1x AV direct
- Digital inputs: 2x optical; 2x BNC coaxial digital; 1x USB-B port

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tweeter and right mid/bass – the 'midrange' output is unused here.

It's a busy box count with seven separate units requiring six mains power sockets plus considerable cabling – in this case three Chord Company Clearway stereo RCA interconnects (*HFC* 420) and four mono runs of Clearway loudspeaker cable (*HFC* 405). There's nothing particularly complex about hooking everything up, but the penalties for doing so incorrectly are potentially considerable and successfully powering all the components on for the first time feels like a major achievement.

Sound quality

If you're on the fence as to whether this collection of components is worthwhile, the first listen quickly removes any sense of doubt. The key word that crops up time and time again in my notes is "immediacy".

Regardless of the tempo of the music being played, there is an effortless speed and dynamic flow that underpins everything it does. Imogen Heap's *Hide And Seek* is not a rushed or urgent piece of music, but the vocals display an agility and ability to be ready for the next syllable that helps to frame the music in a way that sounds and feels stunningly real.

And 'feel' is not a misplaced word in this context. It tears into the ferocious *Nobody Speak* by DJ Shadow, landing bass notes with blistering speed that does nothing to diminish their considerable impact. The effect of handing each of those isobaric drivers an 80W amp of their own is to ensure they have all the power they need, but on an extremely tight leash to ensure control throughout. Whether you are asking it to reproduce a dirty great lump of electronic noise or the analogue weight of a plucked double

IN SIGHT



- 1 29mm fabric dome tweeter
- 2 4mm active bass and treble banana terminals
- 3 Rear-firing bass port/vent
- 4 180mm mid/bass driver

Q&A

Tony Brady

Chief designer, Exposure Electronics



ES: How did the decision to introduce the VXN come about?

TB: We were asked if we could develop a conventional, analogue, active crossover for use with the higher-end of the Kudos range as they were interested in partnering with another manufacturer to support their active-ready loudspeakers. I'm a true believer in active speakers, in fact I've been using a pair at home for 38 years, so it was relatively straightforward to do a simpler adaption of what I have been using and pair it up with our VXN power supply, which had already been designed ready to be used with our forthcoming VXN phono stage.

How important to the overall performance of the VXN is the use of the external PSU?

It's extremely important because there is no room inside the VXN case for a decent power supply with the two large mono crossover boards using up most of the internal space. Of course, there are other benefits: by having the power supply in a separate chassis it means there is no source of hum near to the sensitive audio circuits – thus making the crossover very quiet.

Would using two stereo power amplifiers instead of the four mono ones here have a significant effect on performance?

All our mono amps have a different topology to their simpler stereo cousins, having separate power supplies for each channel, DC coupling throughout as well as higher power supply rejection ratios. As a result, our mono amplifiers sound much better than their stereo equivalents.

Has there been any interest from other speaker brands in making use of this system?

Yes, we have been talking to a couple of companies about making dedicated crossovers for use with their loudspeakers, but we can't make any announcements at this time.

CONNECTIONS



- 1 Unbalanced stereo RCA inputs (XM9)
- 2 MM phono stage inputs (XM7)
- 3 2x optical and 2x BNC coaxial digital inputs
- 4 2x stereo RCA pre outputs
- 5 Treble, mid and bass outputs (VXN)
- 6 Preamp inputs

bass string, there are precious few standmount systems that will keep up with this one.

It is admirably responsive to any changes in source equipment too. Exposure has supplied its XM CD player for the purposes of this review, but replacing this with Chord Electronics' Hugo M Scaler and Hugo TT 2 DAC as a digital front end opens out what is already a usefully spacious presentation and really starts to demonstrate the three dimensionality this system is capable of. Across a broad swathe of material, the Exposure components work with the Kudos to consistently deliver a soundstage that makes sense in the context of the music, whether it's Regina Spektor sat at her piano in *Consequence Of Sound* or entertaining the Hammersmith Apollo with her live rendition of *On The Radio*.

Finding fault with what this setup is capable of is very much a question of subjectivity. It would be wrong to describe it as coloured because that's far too drastic a term, but it definitely has a character of its own and compared with other systems at a similarly lofty price point, it is more of a big picture device than a micro detail one (see *How It Compares*). What it never struggles with, though, is fun. The incredibly vivacious group studio recording of My Baby's *Mad Mountain Thyme* on the *LIVE!* album is simply outstanding. More than anything else, this setup delivers on the premise of a group of sublimely

talented musicians letting rip and enjoying themselves. It finds emotional content with a deceptive ease and it's this ability to engage that keeps me listening for much longer than is strictly required.

Conclusion

I am utterly smitten by what this Kudos Audio/Exposure system can do. It doesn't so much tick the subjective boxes of what I want a hi-fi to deliver as write an entire manifesto on it. What Exposure has done is take one of the very best standmount speakers you can buy in 2020 and somehow make it sound even better. What truly excites me, however, is that this is simply a confirmation of what is possible with an outboard crossover in place and based on the phenomenal demonstration of its abilities here, the benefits of going active are too impressive to ignore ●



HOW IT COMPARES

This system makes for a fascinating comparison with the Krell and Magico Beautiful System (p88). If unembellished reproduction of music is your final goal, there is little arguing that the American duo is the more capable. This is only half the story, though, as the Kudos Audio and Exposure combo engages more on an emotional level. The active system is more immediate and as tempos increase it stretches this advantage further. I'd be overjoyed with either setup at this elevated price point, but if I had to live with one of these immense partnerships it would be the Kudos Audio and Exposure pairing I'd be angling to take home.

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Superb dynamics and captivatingly vivid presentation

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: A little bulky and complex to set up

BUILD QUALITY



WE SAY: Astonishingly musical system that will delight anyone lucky enough to be able to afford it

FEATURES



OVERALL

