

Audioengine 5+

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A while back, Audioengine introduced the [Audioengine 2](#) (\$199, 4 stars), powered desktop monitors that are the closest thing to flat response, audiophile-level [speakers](#) you'll find under \$200. The Audioengine 5+, also referred to by the company as the A5+ are an update to the [A5](#) (\$349, 4 stars), and the size, price, and performance are raised to another level. Sure, \$399 (direct) is an investment, but considering most entry-level, high performance stereo speakers start at around \$400 *each* (so double that for a pair), the self-powered A5+ seems like a deal. The speakers deliver beautiful high-frequency clarity and a tight (though never booming) bass response. Perfect as monitors for your home studio, or simply a giant leap up from typical PC speakers, the A5+ earns an Editors' Choice for its excellent value and performance.

Design

Measuring 10.75 by 7 by 7.75-inches, the A5+ takes up more desktop real estate—if that's where you choose to keep the pair—than a typical set of computer speakers, but they're about par for the course when it comes to quality home recording studio monitors. Offered in glossy white, satin black, or a lovely bamboo finish (that costs \$70 more), each two-way speaker houses a 20mm silk dome tweeter and a 5-inch Kevlar woofer. The tweeters, which are situated on the top half of the front panel when the speakers are placed vertically, are set slightly off-center; it's a clever design decision that allows for a slightly wider stereo field, as treble frequencies determine our sense of sound location and direction more precisely than lower frequencies do. The left speaker has a power LED indicator that glows white when the speakers are on, slowly fades in and out when in sleep mode, flickers when the volume is adjusted, or turns off when the speakers are powered down. The left speaker also has a Volume control knob on its front face.

The 15.4-pound left and 9.6-pound right speaker connect to each other via a typical stereo speaker cable, with the left, powered speaker delivering the juice to the right passive speaker. All of the remaining connections are on the back panel of the left speaker. From top to bottom, the connections are: a 3.5mm audio input, USB Power port (for charging devices like an iPhone), an RCA input, an variable output (for connecting a subwoofer or another speaker), the output to the right speaker, the Power switch, Voltage select (between 115 and 240 Volts), and the AC Power input. Both speakers have a rubberized bottom, which keeps the speakers from dancing across slick surfaces and also cuts down on vibrations caused by the speakers. There's also a ¼-inch threaded insert on each speaker for securing them to stands. The system ships with the power cable, a 3.5mm audio cable for connection to PCs, smartphones, and portable media players, and a RCA speaker cable.

A cheap-looking and feeling black remote control also ships with the pair—it has membrane buttons and only controls the Volume, Mute, and Sleep functions. Since the speakers do not integrate with iTunes or your computer's playback functions, however, this is just about all you can control. Some users will wish there was a way on the remote or the speakers to tinker with the bass and treble levels.

Before we discuss the A5+'s audio performance, let's briefly discuss the differences between it and the older A5, which is \$50 cheaper and still available from Audioengine. The A5+'s most notable upgrades are the inclusion of a remote control, the variable preamp line out (for subs), RCA and mini-jack inputs, and most importantly, a speaker cabinet with that includes a rear-ported waveguide, which helps deliver better clarity and power in the low frequencies. So, yes, the A5 looks very similar, but the connectivity and actual performance have been upgraded enough to warrant the \$50 price difference.

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Performance and Conclusions

If you're looking for a thunderous 2.1 system, the system as it's sold is not exactly a deep bass lover's dream, though it can be augmented with a subwoofer. This isn't to say it lacks bass response—in fact, the low frequency response of the A5+ system sounds phenomenal. Audioengine's signature sound, however, like Etymotic's in the earphone world, is a clear, flat response, with no muddiness, and almost no exaggerations across the entire frequency range. The 5-inch woofers are extremely capable of handling deep bass frequencies without distorting at high volumes, but they are not likely to rattle the frames on your walls, at least not like a 2.1 system with a massive subwoofer, like the [Cambridge SoundWorks MicroWorks II](#) (\$249.99, 4 stars). This places the A5+ firmly in the category of audiophile-worthy, powerful speakers.

The A5+ pair can get incredibly loud before even a hint of distortion appears. Even if you're using them in a home studio, it's highly unlikely you'll ever hear a hint of distortion, even on songs with deep bass like The Knife's "Silent Shout." Of course, at absolute maximum volume, you will likely not only encounter distortion, but you run the risk of damaging the speaker—and your ears. But to put this in perspective, at 50 Watts a channel, this system at half volume is likely going to be louder than many sub-\$200 systems can get near their maximum volume levels. In other words: the distortion is not going to be an issue, unless you plan on using these speakers in weird, unadvisable ways.

On classical tracks, like John Adams' "The Chairman Dances," the tweeters sparkle as they deliver the mid and high frequency ranges with precision. The lower frequencies of the percussion and larger stringed instruments are less powerful and resonant than they are on other speakers. The effect, however, is stunning. This is how most high-end speakers used to sound, before booming bass was king. It's not that deep bass doesn't exist through the A5+; it's that, as it did for decades, it plays a dutiful supporting role to the crisp, enthralling mids and highs. Rock, hip hop, and electronic music sound excellent on the A5+, but it is instrumental music that shines the most. From a recording studio perspective, the lack of booming bass makes the A5+ an ideal reality check for your mixes—this type of flat response, with a focus on the clarity of the mids-to-highs, used to be what all studio monitors aspired to.

If \$400 is too much for your budget, but the description of the flat response A5+ is to your liking, the Audioengine 2 follows a similar path, though it lacks the same powerful output and is a bit less capable with bass response. If serious bass is what you crave, you're most likely going to want a 2.1 system. Beyond this price range, the [Focal XS](#) (\$599, 4 stars) sounds fantastic—it's a 2.1 system that still tries to adhere to some flat response standards. On the lower end of the price scale, [Harman Kardon's SoundSticks III](#) (\$169.95, 4.5 stars) is a tried and true classic PC speaker set, and the [Antec Soundscience Rockus 3D 2.1 PC Speaker System](#) (\$199.99, 4.5 stars) is a \$200 gem. If \$400 is not out of your budget, however, the Audioengine 5+ is a superb stereo speaker set that delivers audio in a classic, flat response style that is rare these days.