

EXCE LLEN CE PL US

STENHEIM
ULTIME TWO SX
LOUDSPEAKER

BY ROBERT HARLEY

PHOTOGRAPHY BY FRANÇOIS PANCHARD

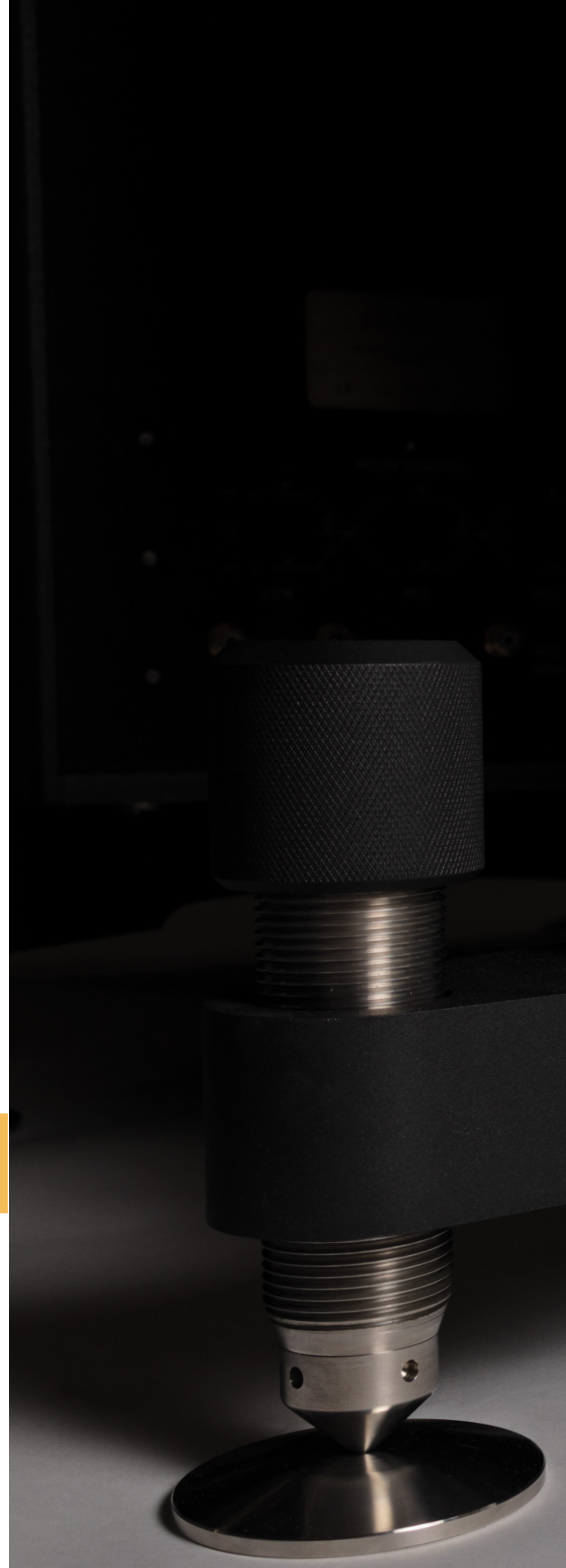


STENHEIM ULTIME TWO SX LOUDSPEAKER

The Swiss loudspeaker manufacturer Stenheim has received quite a bit of critical acclaim in these pages, both in reviews (the Alumine 3 in Issue 304 and Alumine 5 SE in Issue 328) and in many of our show reports from around the world. But at last year's AXPONA show, Stenheim hit it out of the park, winning my Best of Show recognition with its upper-end Ultime Two SX driven by VTL electronics and wired with Nordost cabling. Jonathan Valin and Andre Jennings also singled out the Ultime Two SX in their

reports as exceptional. The Ultime Two SX sounded so promising that I asked for a pair to review.

The Ultime Two is the smallest speaker in the company's Reference Line but is considerably larger than the five models that comprise the Alumine series. This three-way floorstander houses dual 12" woofers, dual 6.5" midrange drivers, and a 1" dome tweeter. The drivers are arrayed in a full D'Appolito arrangement, with one woofer at the bottom of the cabinet and the other at the top, with the midrange drivers flanking the tweeter. The drivers feature paper-based diaphragms and a silk-dome tweeter rather than cones and domes made from exotic high-tech materials. Stenheim contends that its coated paper-based diaphragms have a more natural and organic sound than other materials.



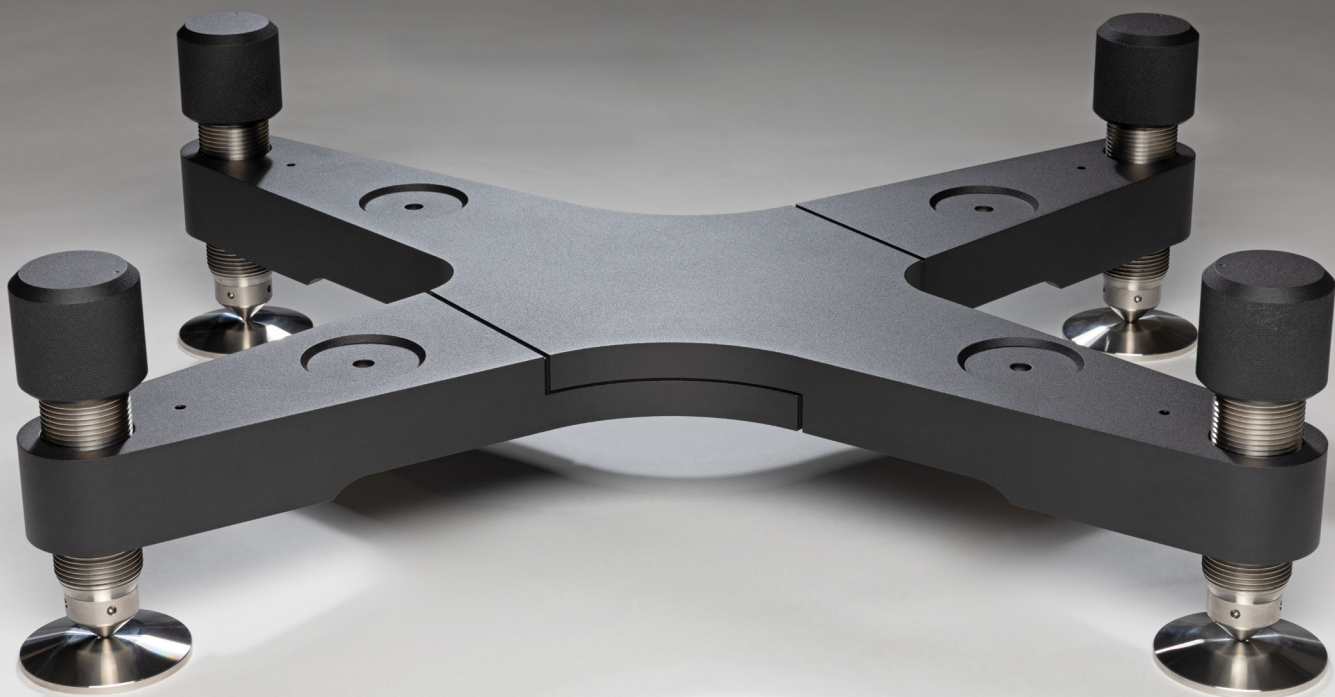




The rear-ported enclosure is made entirely from aluminum, which brings the weight of each speaker to just over 500 pounds. The enclosure features six internal chambers, although you wouldn't know that from looking at the outside. However, the enclosure is visually divided into three sections by a pair of anodized colored bands, either red, gold, or silver. The colored bands are a nice touch, reducing the monolithic look of what is essentially a large rectangular box. The purchaser can specify the enclosure color; the baffle and rear panel are always black, and the top, bottom, and sides can be ordered in black, ivory, or mocha. The Ultime Two SX goes grille-less.

Sensitivity is specified at a high 95dB, but with the provision that this is a "half-space" measurement, which will increase the apparent sensitivity when compared to a speaker measured in an anechoic environment. Stenheim contends that the half-space

THE BUILD-QUALITY IS OUTSTANDING, AS YOU'D EXPECT WITH A SPEAKER OF THIS PRICE, AND THE SX PLATFORM IS VERY WELL ENGINEERED. THE STYLING EXUDES A STRONG SWISS VIBE.



STENHEIM ULTIME TWO SX LOUDSPEAKER

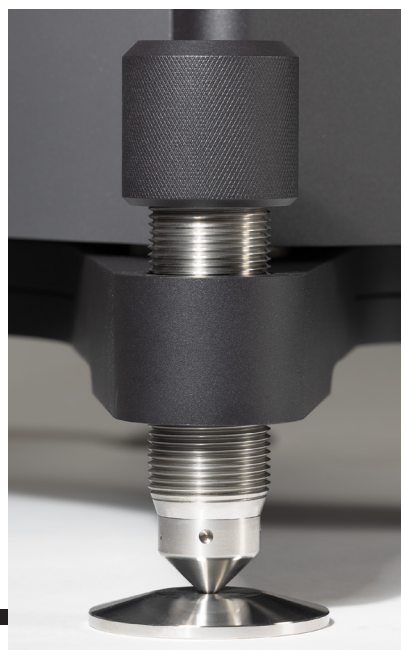
sensitivity measurement more accurately reflects the speaker's real-world in-room sensitivity. Impedance is 4 ohms, and the frequency response is 25Hz–35kHz.

The Ultime Two can be single-wired with jumpers, bi-wired, or passively bi-amped via two pairs of binding posts. A nice feature is the ability to fine-tune the speaker's tonal balance to your room and taste via three sets of rear-panel jumpers. You simply move the jumper from the flat setting to the “+” or “-” positions, with independent jumpers for bass, midrange, and treble levels. If the top end is a bit hot, for example, you can slightly attenuate the treble to better match your system. The amount of boost and attenuation is very small, which sensibly is just enough to nudge the speaker in the right direction for your room.

The crossover frequencies are 200Hz and 2.4kHz, with second-order on the woofer-to-midrange transition, and fourth order between the midrange and tweeter. The exotic and expensive crossover components are not from a single company but are selected from a wide range of companies, chosen after extensive listening tests.

The Ultime Two SX reviewed here is an upgraded version of their standard Ultime Two. The speaker itself is the same, with the SX upgrade consisting of a cross-brace platform with outrigger feet that offers a host of benefits. First, the massive aluminum platform provides a solid anchor for the speaker that transmits any vibration through the outrigger feet to the floor. Second, the four outrigger feet with large knurled knobs protruding from the platform can be adjusted very precisely by hand to level the speaker and dial in the rake angle. As I heard during the setup,

STENHEIM MAKES MUCH OF THE FACT THAT ITS LOUDSPEAKERS ARE HIGH IN SENSITIVITY.





STENHEIM ULTIME TWO SX LOUDSPEAKER

even small changes in rake angle are significant, and that identical rake angle between the left and right speakers is essential. This precise adjustability of each footer is also useful for compensating for variations in floor flatness. Third, the wider footprint makes the speaker more mechanically stable. Stenheim originally developed the SX platform for greater stability and was pleasantly surprised by the sonic improvements the platform rendered.

The Ultime Two is priced at \$179,500 per pair, with the SX version costing \$199,800. Ultime Two owners can add the SX platform for \$28,500. The build-quality is outstanding, as you'd expect with a speaker of this price, and the SX platform is very well engineered. The styling exudes a strong Swiss vibe.

LISTENING

Stenheim hired set-up maestro Stirling Trayle to install and optimize the Ultime Two SX in my listening room. Stirling knows the speaker well; he set up the Ultime Two SX at the AXPONA show I mentioned. He's also set up other gear in my listening room over the years. Stirling travels the world optimizing high-end systems and is relentless in extracting the best performance from a given system. His tag line, "Hear the system you already own," reflects his ability to improve a system's sound quality through expert setup. It says something when a loudspeaker designer hires Stirling to set up the designer's own creation at a trade show or in a reviewer's listening room. As Stirling says, the race-car designer isn't necessarily the best person to drive the car at its maximum capabilities. For more information on what Stirling does, go to his website at audiosystemsoptimized.com.

The Ultime Two SX ended up at roughly the same location in my room as other dynamic speakers I've reviewed in the past. We passively bi-amped the speaker using both channels of each CH Precision M10 amplifier. As I've reported in the past, the M10 can operate as a monoblock, bridged monoblock, stereo amplifier, and in passive or active bi-amp mode. (The latter requires an additional input board.) I've used every one of these configurations at one time or another, highlighting the value of this amplifier's unique versatility. The M10 also lets you adjust the global feedback, in 1% increments, individually for each amplifier channel. That means you can have more feedback on the amplifier driving the woofer, for example, when bi-amping.

Stenheim provides three banana-terminated jumpers per speaker that plug into the rear panel's bass, midrange, and treble adjustments described earlier. These stock jumpers should be replaced with aftermarket ones because they are part of the crossover network and in the signal path. Crystal Cable sent me a set of jumpers made from its outstanding monocrystal silver wire terminated with Crystal Cable's own high-quality plugs. To get the highest possible performance from the Ultime Two SX, replacing the stock jumpers is mandatory.

Stenheim makes much of the fact that its loudspeakers are high in sensitivity. They believe that high-sensitivity speakers confer many sonic and musical benefits beyond reducing the need for amplifier power. That's been my



STENHEIM ULTIME TWO SX LOUDSPEAKER

experience as well; high-sensitivity speakers seem to have greater dynamic expression and a liveliness and immediacy that can be lacking in speakers that need a lot of power. With low-sensitivity speakers, you get the feeling as you turn up the volume that the speaker is acting like a power sponge, muting dynamics and requiring more power to come alive.

The Ultime Two SX is definitely not one of these speakers. Rather, the Ultime Two SX jumps to vibrant life, even at low volumes. At higher listening levels it has a tremendous sense of scale, size, power, and authority coupled with an almost horn-like dynamic verve that infuses music with a lifelike immediacy and dynamic expression. Although the Ultime Two SX is a very large speaker, it plays even bigger—spatially, tonally, and dynamically—than its considerably physical size suggests. And it does so with effortless grace and composure.

The big Stenheim has an extroverted exuberance that immediately pulled me into the music in a way that more polite and restrained speakers don't. This is a speaker that viscerally involves your whole body in the music with its powerful rhythmic drive and physicality. You wouldn't mistake the Ultime Two SX for a sealed-enclosure design with smaller woofers and an overdamped bass alignment. That kind of buttoned-down, tight, lean, and reticent sound has certain virtues—superb pitch definition and articulation in the bass, for example—but compared to the Stenheim, lacks a kind of verve that makes music more engaging and immediate. A speaker with tight and precise bass that lacks body and power may have an intellectual appeal, but it doesn't speak to the heart the way the Ultime Two SX does. This speaker



is so upbeat, expressive, and just plain fun that it made it hard to turn off the system at the end of the evening. I found myself enjoying a much wider range of music than my normal listening fare, always a sign of a great product.

Now for the audiophile stuff. The Uptime Two SX is a bit more forward and immediate than my reference speaker. At first, I thought it was a bit *too* incisive, so I set the rear-panel midrange and treble jumpers to the “–” setting. But I soon returned them to the flat position and came to value the Uptime Two SX’s energy and enthusiasm. The midrange had a powerful sense of presence without stepping over the line into aggression. Vocals had a wonderful tangibility in texture and spatial presentation, with tremendous articulation and clarity. Vocals imaged precisely between the speakers, completely detached from the cabinets. In addition, the Uptime Two SX had a clarity and transparency that stripped away a fine scrim between me and the music, adding to the feeling of lifelike immediacy.

This quality was amplified by the Stenheim’s wonderful three-dimensionality and bloom. On the beautiful piece “Bahia” on the 1962 album *Jazz Samba* by Stan Getz and Charlie Byrd, Getz’s tenor was surrounded by a bloom that expanded dynamically from the instrument, lighting up the surrounding acoustic. The Uptime Two SX reproduced the fine spatial detail that fosters the impression of hearing the instrument itself rather than a recreation of it. What’s more, the Uptime Two SX beautifully conveyed the timbre, color, and texture of his instrument, along with the subtleties of phrasing that make his playing so expressive.

In addition to reproducing small-scale intimate music with such

spatial realism, the Uptime Two SX was nothing short of spectacular with big orchestral works. This speaker can throw a huge soundstage with depth and precise image placement. Moreover, the Stenheim was adept at presenting instruments as separate images without congealing. On the track “Cantaloup (Flip Out!)” from The Manhattan Transfer’s album *The Junction*, there’s a lot going on between the multiple stacked vocal harmonies, piano, percussion, and bass. (The track is a remake of a hip-hop version of Herbie Hancock’s classic composition “Cantaloupe Island.” It sounds like it would be weird, but it’s a great track.) The Stenheim beautifully resolved every instrument with clarity of individual lines, as well as portraying each of the voices as they blended exquisitely into a single complex texture.

I greatly appreciated this quality on all kinds of music, but particularly with Latin jazz, a genre I’ve been exploring lately. I love that music’s rhythms, and the Stenheim beautifully reproduced percussion instruments with clarity and definition. Even during complex polyrhythms played by multiple percussion instruments, the Uptime Two SX never sounded confused or blurred. I could easily hear the tonal and dynamic differences between each instrument, as well as the pitch of the congas. This resolution added to the Uptime Two SX’s sense of taking me one step closer to the live performance.

Which brings me to the Uptime Two SX’s fabulous transient fidelity. The percussion instruments just men-



STENHEIM ULTIME TWO SX LOUDSPEAKER

tioned jumped to vibrant life thanks to the steep transient attacks and equally fast decays. Many speakers dilute this aspect of music by not reproducing the speed of attack, and by storing and releasing energy after the transient is over. Moreover, through the Stenheim, transients decay into total silence thanks to the ultra-stiff and quiet cabinet construction. Speakers have something I've called "self-noise," the less-than-silent background caused by enclosure vibration that blurs very low-level detail. The Stenheim is very quiet at that end of the dynamic scale, resolving the decays of instruments into silence with exquisite detail. When coupled with the Ultime Two SX's ability to reproduce the loudest and

steepest transients without strain or smearing, you have a presentation that is lifelike in its dynamic reproduction. Musically, this transient fidelity better conveys musical expression such as emphasis on certain notes that may go unheard with lesser speakers.

One of the Ultime Two SX's best qualities is its bass performance. It's not the last word in precise pitch definition and articulation, but it has a special warmth, power, and authority that created a powerful and solid tonal and rhythmic foundation that I found captivating. The Ultime Two SX can move a lot of air with its dual 12"

SPECS & PRICING

TYPE: Three-way floorstanding loudspeaker

DRIVERS: 2x 12" woofers, 2x 6.5" midrange drivers, 1" dome tweeter

LOADING: Bass reflex, rear ported

CABINET: Solid aluminum, six independent internal chambers

FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 25Hz–35kHz

SENSITIVITY: 95dB (half space)

POWER HANDLING: 400W, 800W peak

IMPEDANCE: 4 ohms

DIMENSIONS: 14.5" x 60.4" x 19.9" (speaker only without platform)

WEIGHT: 509 lbs. each, net

WEIGHT: 586 lbs. each including platform

PRICE: \$179,500; \$199,800 as reviewed with the SX platform. SX platform sold separately for \$28,500

STENHEIM SUISSE SA

Rue du Rhône 10 Vétroz
Valais, 1963 Switzerland
stenheim.com

NEXUS AUDIO TECHNOLOGY (U.S. REPRESENTATIVE)

Walter Schofield
(781) 775-5650

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

ANALOG SOURCE: Basis Audio A.J. Conti Transcendence turntable with SuperArm 12.5 tonearm; Air Tight Opus cartridge; Moon 810LP phonostage; DS Audio ST-50 stylus cleaner, Arya Audio Orbius clamp

DIGITAL SOURCE: Wadax Reference DAC, Reference Server, Reference PSU, Reference Transport, Wadax Akasa optical interface

AMPLIFICATION: CH Precision L10 linestage, CH Precision M10 power amplifiers

AC POWER: Shunyata Everest 8000 conditioner, Omega and Sigma NR V2 power cords; Shunyata AC outlets, five dedicated 20A lines wired with identical length 10AWG

SUPPORT: Critical Mass Systems Olympus equipment racks and Olympus amplifier stands; CenterStage² isolation, Ayra Audio RevOpods isolation

CABLES: AudioQuest Dragon interconnects and AudioQuest Dragon Zero and Dragon Bass loudspeaker cables

DIGITAL CABLES: Shunyata Omega-X Ethernet, Omega-X USB, Omega-X AES/EBU

ACOUSTICS: Acoustic Geometry Pro Room Pack 12

ROOM: Purpose-built; Acoustic Sciences Corporation Iso-Wall System

STENHEIM ULTIME TWO SX LOUDSPEAKER

woofers and large and very stiff cabinet. This is a very big and powerful sounding speaker with tremendous bottom-end solidity, warmth, bloom, and impact.

I would characterize the bass as leaning slightly toward the underdamped side, with much weight and warmth, but not quite crossing the line into sounding bloated or thick. Nonetheless, you wouldn't mistake the Ultime SX 2 for a sealed design, or one with smaller woofers. It's not a lean, tight, and overdamped sound that some speaker brands favor. I thought that in my room the bass was slightly exaggerated, leading me to attenuate the bottom end with the rear-panel jumpers. The result was improved pitch definition, transient fidelity, and greater midrange clarity and openness. The degree of attenuation is very small, but just enough to nudge the speaker in the right direction for my mid-sized room. I suspect that in larger rooms, the bass attenuation won't be necessary, and indeed, the bass level can be raised to fill a larger space.

That said, the Ultime Two SX's bass is fabulous, and a significant contributor to how much I enjoyed music through this speaker. The bottom end has warmth, power, depth, and effortless dynamics that benefited all types of music from reggae to blues, to jazz, to orchestral, to solo piano. Left-hand piano lines had a wonderful density of tone color, weight, texture, and expression, and could be thundering when called for. The fabulous piano recording of Costantino Catena performing Debussy on a Fazioli F278 conveyed the size, power, and physicality of the instrument. And then there's bass guitar, which had a big, driving, weighty character that involved my whole body in the music. It's the kind of bass that doesn't merely hint at the fundamentals

or just suggest the instrument's true power but delivers the instrument's entire sound with a realism that grabs you viscerally. The bass also had seemingly unlimited dynamics at the very lowest frequencies, reproducing the massive bass-drum whacks on *The Arnold Overtures* (Keith Johnson's amazing recording, available at 176/24 on Qobuz) with a center-of-the-earth solidity and complete lack of dynamic compression.

CONCLUSION

I greatly enjoyed my time with the Stenheim Ultime Two SX. It is a superb loudspeaker in so many ways, meeting all the audiophile criteria for a world-class transducer. But it brings something extra to the party beyond pushing audiophile buttons.

That something extra is an expressive exuberance that conveys music's energy and vitality. The Ultime Two SX isn't a polite and buttoned-down speaker whose sound one admires rather than enjoys. Rather, it's big, bold, outgoing, energetic, and, dare I say, *fun*. It's a speaker that appeals to the heart as well as to the head.

A speaker budget of \$200k gives you many superb options. But if you are fortunate enough to afford a speaker anywhere near this price range, the Stenheim Ultime Two SX is a must-audition. In the world of upper-tier speakers, it's a relative bargain. If you take a pair home, you may find yourself closing the listening room door, abandoning your inhibitions, and dancing. **tas**