

Robin Marshall's new Epos ES11 is one of the most impressive newcomers in a long while.



Hi-Fi Choice

For reasons that lurk in the murky past of loudspeaker review controversy, *Hi-Fi Choice* never got around to evaluating the Epos loudspeaker, the £475 ES14 – which hasn't stopped Robin Marshall's brainchild from carving out a niche as one of the most successful medium size speakers around.

With Epos now a premium specialist brand within the Mordaunt-Short operation, giving Robin Marshall time to concentrate on design work, the long awaited smaller Epos is now a reality.

The £500 ES11 is roughly two-thirds the volume – and the price – of its bigger brother, though it has just as many drive units. Apart from exceptionally fine finish and very solid build, on the surface it looks like a straightforward enough medium sized two-way 'bookshelf' model. However, there's a little more to the '11 than meets the eye.

Following the example set by the Mordaunt-Short 3-series, both front and back panels are injection-moulded plastics. Here the process has been taken one stage further, the frame of the main driver itself being an integral part of the moulding. Should you blow one up, it would be necessary to change the whole baffle, but M-S doesn't reckon this would cost more than a normal driver replacement.

Nicely decorated in real wood veneer, the carcass wrap is 25mm MDF, further braced with an O-section internally, which helps account for the substantial weight. The whole thing is held together by four back-to-front bolts, clamping the ported back panel and baffle tightly against the wrap.

Perhaps controversially, but probably sensibly, there's no grille as such. The 25mm metal dome tweeter has its own mesh protection, and a purely protective overall cover is supplied, but must be removed before playing music.

Although two pairs of (very poorly distinguished) terminals are fitted, this was apparently more at the behest of the marketing department than the designers, the crossover being minimal – indeed non-existent as far as the main driver is concerned. The latter has a 110mm plastic cone and phase plug pole-piece extension.

test report

Sensitivity is a little below average, partly because the impedance represents a very easy amplifier load. Bass extension is also surprisingly limited compared to other models of a

similar size, having more in common with miniatures than compacts in this respect.

The response traces are significantly more even than most through the mid and treble, with fine crossover transition, showing just mild perturbations from 3-6 kHz. The top end of the main driver's working range shows unusually good control, with just a small step transition down to the tweeter, which is very creditable considering there's no electrical compensation whatsoever.

The overall response evenness clearly benefits from a little wall assistance, but beware of adding too much, and of rooms that unduly exaggerate the output around 50Hz.

sound quality

The ES11 did very well in the listening tests, with comfortably above average marks from all panelists. The bass is decidedly nimble, if a little short of genuine scale and weight, while the midrange is delightfully open and detailed, focusing well with commendable stereo soundstage precision and depth. Colouration and boxiness are both low, though there's a slight upper range 'glare' that threatens to be exaggerated by poor system set-up.

Quite independently, two panelists even went so far as to mention a lump coming to the throat during Mary Black's plaintive *Columbus* (on CD, to boot), such was the level of involvement and emotional communication.

conclusion

Though a trifle short of scale and welly compared to some of the competition, this loudspeaker's greatest (indeed almost unique) strength lies not in its performance in any one area, but in the way it seems equally capable of satisfying those looking primarily for speed and dynamics whilst not in any way offending those whose main preoccupation lies in the sort of stereo soundfield only achievable with low colouration, out-of-box transparency and fine focus – and vice versa for that matter.

To give a more concrete example, the ES11 delivers much of the drama and involvement of a Linn *Index*, alongside the sort of delicacy and transparency associated with a Celestion SL6Si. Which is quite an achievement in a market that frequently seems all too strongly polarised between these two extremes, and an excellent justification for a Best Buy rating.

TEST RESULTS

Size (h x w x d)	37.5 x 20 x 25cm
Weight	9kg
Recommended amplifier power	29-70W
Recommended placement	stands 30-60cm from wall
In room averaged response limits 50Hz-10kHz	±7dB
Large room/space LF rolloff (-6dB ref midband)	45Hz
Large room/wall LF rolloff (-6dB ref midband)	45Hz
Estimated midrange sensitivity (ref 2.83V, 1m)	86dB
Impedance characteristic (ease of drive)	very good
Typical price per pair (inc VAT)	£300

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

Everybody sat in front of this loudspeaker early one evening, after our word processors had gone into collective meltdown, preventing anything more constructive happening. I am not going to tell you about the loudspeakers that get this treatment, receive a barrage of invective and get rapidly packed into their boxes, to be sent back to the manufacturer. Quite often – often enough thankfully or we'd have nothing to put in this magazine – we get products like the little ES11s that we all sit in front of and enjoy. There was a chorus of approval for the little Eposims, possessing a unanimity so far rarely heard on this publication. No fewer than four tired hacks (the ad. manager being relegated to a position under the settee) thought the ES11s were smooth but very engaging. The quality we all appreciated was the way they communicated the emotion in music so well.

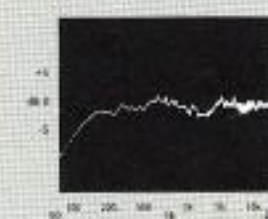
This is a function of many individual factors, I feel. They sound superbly integrated; the metal dome tweeter is completely unobtrusive, injecting no character of its own. Most metal dome tweeters usually remind me of the sound you get when washing a load of aluminium saucepans – but not this one.

The ES11s have sweet treble that attracts no attention. Look at the frequency response plot below and you'll see why: there is no peaking or unevenness at all over its operating band, which stretches from 5kHz to 20kHz. Peaks suggest resonances, which colour

the sound. No peaks – no colouration. That's one reason why the ES11s sound so smooth. The other is concerned with the unusual but interesting approach of having one drive unit to cover the entire audio band (the 8in unit), with a tweeter to fill in any loss of treble. This gives a beautifully coherent sound but it can only be used if the main driver breaks up gracefully. This means it has to be of inherently high quality, since a crossover cannot be used to keep out unwanted signals.

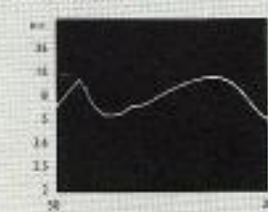
The impedance plot below shows that the ES11s are an easy load, since eight ohms is almost a minimum value.

Frequency Response



Very smooth treble is shown here

Impedance



Impedance is above eight ohms

that the ES11s are to a large extent transparent and define the signal well, I do not believe that they are the most detailed loudspeakers in the arena. At their price, £500, I cannot think of any other loudspeaker that can resolve detail better than the ES11s, although many are as good, but I still maintain that their absolute detail resolution is below the ideal.

precision

Moving away from hyperbole, I found these speakers very easy to listen to over a long period of time. Although slightly over-blown in the bass, everything was followable and precise, in as much that I could define what type of Fender bass guitar (Jazz or Precision) was being used in a particular track. I could wax lyrical about the loudspeaker's imagery, deep bass and so on, but I feel that it detracts from the nature of these loudspeakers. The ES11s are not the type of speaker that one can criticise in broad, sweeping statements. As with all products they have idiosyncrasies, but ultimately the Epos are about music. The word that appears on the note pad repeatedly is "enjoyable". Although the gastronomic analogy earlier was in jest, the ES11 has a similar enjoyment factor to a fine claret, except the hangover is not so bad with the Epos.

It would seem obvious to compare these loudspeakers against their larger brethren, the Epos ES14. While we were not given a pair of ES14s for comparison, I know their strengths well enough to suffice. Sonically the two are similar, differing largely in the bass response. In some respects the ES11 could be a superior loud-

speaker, particularly if one's listening room is very small. The ES11s partner lesser equipment better than their brethren, which can sound bland if not placed with top-flight sources and amplification.

The ES14s do resolve information better and have a more dynamic presentation than their little brothers, if one accepts my reservations. As the ES14s are about £200 more expensive than their brothers this is only to be expected. Comparing the ES11s to loudspeakers in their own class is a somewhat more complicated matter. There are many very well produced designs at the

sub £550 level, many of which have a considerable following. With some of these loudspeakers, I find it difficult to understand why they are so successful. I would have no such difficulty comprehending the popularity of the ES11. There are also very competent loudspeakers in this price bracket and I am sure that they will see some healthy competition from Epos.

One can be guilty of heaping praise upon products as much as damning a product for no justifiable reason. Both can be equally damaging in their own way. The Epos Acoustics ES11 are worthy of a small heap of praise, primarily because of their inherently musical nature. In what should be a part of the music business, it is disturbing how few products are designed with musical enjoyment as a major consideration. The Epos loudspeakers rise above the masses in this respect. If good music, not good hi-fi, is important to you, the ES11s should be listened to.