

A Compact Charmer

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Monitor Audio Silver RX1 in rosewood

The Monitor Audio Silver Series RX1 loudspeakers come across like many in the seemingly endless parade of unassuming, though attractive, small box loudspeakers on the market. Because of this, the RX1s do almost nothing to prepare you for the sonic excellence that awaits you once they are installed.

"Almost nothing" may be a bit too strong. The British loudspeaker maker Monitor Audio enjoys a reputation for being one of the pioneers in the development of drivers whose diaphragms are made of metal (in order to exploit the light, stiff, responsive characteristics they afford). But perhaps more importantly, Monitor is also known for delivering value for money.

As we've noted before, Monitor has, by tradition, named most of its speaker families after precious metals, starting with the Bronze range and progressing upwards through the Silver, Gold, and Platinum ranges. Of these four families it would be fair to say that the Silver range is Monitor's standard or basic product line—a line sophisticated enough to offer advanced technology, yet affordable. We've reviewed other models in the Silver Series line, and found them to be outstanding, so maybe we shouldn't have been surprised when the baby models really worked. But we're getting ahead of ourselves.

Monitor's engineering team began work on the Silver RX range with the thought that, this time around, they would raise the Silver line's performance bar in substantial ways. To this end, the engineering team spent a full two years refining and reworking its FEA (finite element analysis) design tools in order to develop computer models that could more accurately and precisely predict real-world speaker performance.

That's nice, but oftentimes in the past, the engineering team concentrates on one or two models and then does their best to fill out the line—with mixed results. In this case, though, the \$675 per pair RX1 impressed me as much as the \$1750 RX8 towers did Chris Martens in his recent review for *The Perfect Vision* and upcoming review for *The Absolute Sound*.

OVERVIEW

Consider this system if: You find yourself in agreement with statement like “the midrange is the heart of the music” or “get the midrange right and the rest takes care of itself”. If you place a high priority on sonic resolution and detail the RX1s might make you wonder why people pay thousands of dollars for speakers. Expect a lively, dynamic, and well-defined sound, but without a painful or aggressive character. Your room should be on the small side for the RX1s, but if it is, and you’d like something that sounds remarkably “high end”, your speaker may have arrived.

Look further if: you require full and/or deep bass. You might also prefer another speaker if you’d prefer your sonic character to be slightly warmer or darker than is strictly accurate rather than on the lean side—though again not in a painful way. The RX1 will reward very high quality ancillary equipment; on the other hand, if you aren’t prepared to upgrade you may find weaknesses elsewhere in your system exposed.

Ratings (relative to comparably-priced surround speaker systems)

- Transparency and Focus: 9.5
- Imaging and Soundstaging: 9
- Tonal Balance: 8.5
- Dynamics: 8.5
- Bass Extension: 7.5
- Bass Pitch Definition: 8.5
- Bass Dynamics: 8
- Value: 10

FEATURES

Silver RX1 technical highlights:

- 1-inch C-CAM gold metal dome tweeter that are virtually identical to the tweeters used in Monitor’s more costly Gold-series speakers. According to Monitor Audio, C-CAM is “an alloy of aluminum and magnesium on which a thin coating of ceramic is deposited.”
- 6-inch aluminum RST bass driver. The RST feature creates a distinctive, computer-modeled, “dimpled” cone surface said to “reduce cone break up and provide purer, more natural mid-range clarity.”
- The mid-bass driver features a vented, rigid, non-magnetic cast chassis said to “keep the driver cool as well as reduce internal pressure, resulting in the ability to play louder and cleaner.”
- Port has turbulence-reducing HiVe II port system, said to reduce port noise on high-amplitude bass transients.
- As a means of providing both a stable driver mounting platform and of improving cabinet rigidity, Silver RX drivers are fastened in place by tension rods that pass all the way through to the back sides of the speaker cabinets to reduce “excessive vibration from the



driver and cabinet together, giving lower colouration across the entire frequency spectrum.”

SONIC CHARACTER



The most basic characteristic of any speaker for many listeners will be the broad tonal balance that it offers. I can very simply characterize the RX1s by saying that they have a broad midrange emphasis, with smooth and extended treble and tight bass of limited extension. This is a sound whose frequency response curve I have characterized in the past as being “n” shaped, to contrast it to a “u” shaped tonal curve in which bass and treble are emphasized (listen to a Bose car audio system to hear a “u” shaped curve). My personal feeling is that “n” shaped curves work better musically, particularly in less expensive gear where sizable tradeoffs are inevitable. But you may feel differently (a quick inspection of rental car audio EQ suggests that the population at large prefers the “u” curve), so be sure to take this bias into account when responding to the tone of my remarks here.

It is important to note that in the standard definition, the mid-range runs from about 200 Hz to 5000 Hz. Almost every instrument has its fundamental tones—all of them—in this region. That makes the midrange of music very important. I was impressed by the RX1 because not only do they slightly highlight this region—and thus they sound very clear and resolved, but they also deliver a level of quality in the midrange that is exemplary. One aspect of this high quality midrange portrayal is smoothness. Within the broad midrange there are many speakers that experience peaks and dips that color the sound of particular instruments. I heard less of this on the RX1 than I do on many speakers under \$5000. In addition, the RX1 has a midrange quality that I would describe as having low distortion. I think part of this is due to the dynamic ease with which the RX1 handles midrange transients. Another way of putting this is to say that the RX1 sounds very clear, with high resolution, but without an edge. That makes the RX1 very musical in my mind, because you aren’t constantly getting cues that the sound is reproduced.

In covering the Monitor Audio Silver RX8’s, Chris Martens observed that at times the speaker could seem to be delivering “too much information.” I noticed this far less on the RX1s than he seems to have on the RX8s, and in fact as I indicated above I think the balance of resolution with smoothness is a key admirable quality of the RX1s. There is, however, an area of emphasis in the upper midrange that might trick you into thinking the speaker is too revealing. In fact, to me it sounds like a response peak. This is a relatively mild deviation bump compared to the hills and valleys in many other speakers.

The RX1 handles small-scale dynamic contrasts in a very lively and expressive way—something you’ll appreciate if you like medium and small scale works. When it comes to macrodynamics, the RX1 is limited not so much by its ability to play loudly (it will make your ears hurt if you want), but because it simply doesn’t have the mid- or low-bass punch needed to make some big music sound powerful.

I also really enjoyed the lateral imaging of the RX1. I think a speaker that can get the image “off the box” really helps to convey a sense of a live performance, and the RX1 does this admirably.

That said, the RX1 delivers a truncated vertical soundstage. I find that with many small speakers, and the RX1s are included here, the height of images and soundstages seems to stop at about the top of the speaker. This doesn't happen as much with bigger speakers, though I am at a loss as to why this should be so.

I used the RX1s in a medium sized room (2500 cu. ft.) with two different 25 watt per channel amplifiers (the NAD 320BEE and the Wadia 151 PowerDAC). This amplifier power was adequate in my experience because the RX1 is relatively easy to drive. I do think the tonal balance of the RX1 would suit a smaller room better, because the room resonances would be at higher frequencies to better support the mid-bass region. A speaker with more bass and a different bass balance may not work as well in a small room because it excites the bass modes too much (especially when near a corner as is often required in smaller rooms). I was pleased to see that Monitor provides foam rubber port plugs so that users can fine-tune the speakers/room bass characteristics.

Note that one potential way to transcend limitations of the RX1 while tapping its many strengths is to use the speaker as the heart of a very high performance *desktop* audio system.

MUSIC PERFORMANCE

We can talk about the details of specific tracks in a second, but we should start with a broader view. At CES this year many of our reviewers heard an excellent demonstration of the new Magneplanar 1.7 (a planar, quasi-ribbon-type loudspeaker priced at about \$2000/pair). During and after the show, this demo was easily the most talked about item. And, really, there wasn't much debate, everyone was simply amazed at the quality of sound that the Magneplanar (and Briston) system produced at such a reasonable price.

While testing the RX1, I listened to the Shelby Lynne disc *Just A Little Lovin'* [Lost Highway]. I found myself thinking back to that Magneplanar demo because, again, I kept thinking, "this RX1 system sounds amazingly musical, so much so that it is hard to imagine any system doing much better." If one gets analytical one can find flaws (as I can on my \$200k mbl rig), so my central point here is that on medium and small-scale music those flaws are musically trivial.

Breaking things down a bit, let's start with the title track of the Shelby Lynne disc. First, it is a vocal track and the RX1s do an admirable job presenting Shelby's voice clearly, while also creating the sense of resonances and overtones that are parts of real singing. The RX1s also convey the relaxed flow of the track's pace. I was impressed with the way the rim shot that drives the track along has impact and yet the initial impact doesn't smear over the decay of the reflections.

The electric bass on some of these tracks is detailed and clear, but as the bassist moves down the scale some of air and depth is missing. Thankfully, being a subtractive thing, this may not annoy. This is, however, not the speaker (at least without a sub) for bass aficionados.

On the Gillian Welch disc *Time (The Revelator)*, Dave Rawlings guitar work comes through with superb pace. To create a sense of naturalness, you need to hear the guitar body resonances decay clearly, and the RX1s really shine at this. Rawlings plays a 1935 Epiphone Olympic, which is pretty rare so I don't really know what it sounds like. The key point here, though, is that if you know what an acoustic guitar sounds like, the RX1s give you the impression that you're hearing a real if distinctive one as recorded.

Switching to the Alison Kraus track "Choctaw Hayride" from *Live* [Rounder], we get to see the superb instrumental separation that the RX1s can deliver. This track starts with a Dobro intro, but quickly overlays banjo and acoustic guitar. Alison's band sports superstars at all three positions

(Jerry Douglas, Ron Block and Dan Tyminski), and pretty soon we're in "million notes per second" territory. A speaker that can allow you to hear each line, and know which instrument is which, can fairly be characterized as something special. The RX1 qualifies, and frankly I though it outperformed even the Sennheiser HD800 headphones on this track.

BOTTOM LINE:

The Monitor Audio RX1 is an exceptional speaker, no doubt about it. Its combination of midrange clarity and smoothness gets to the essence of a lot of music. For a listener with a small-ish room (or a high-quality desktop system) who favors music of soloists, small groups and acoustic bands, the RX1 is so good it might do everything you need. No speaker does everything well, certainly not one at this price, so you should know that the RX1 has bass limitations and doesn't present the largest possible soundstage.

SPECS

Monitor Audio Silver RX1 2-way, bass reflex stand-mount speaker

Driver complement: One 1-inch C-CAM gold dome tweeter, one 6-inch RST mid/bass driver

Frequency response: 45Hz – 35 kHz

Sensitivity: 89 dB

Impedance: 6 ohms

Dimensions (HxWxD): 12 5/16 x 7 5/16 x 9 7/16 inch

Weight: 15 lb. each

Warranty: 5 years, parts and labor

U.S. Distributor

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