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NEAT Motive SX2

Anybody who has been reading my reviews over the past fifteen or so years might have detected my sincere affection for products of the North East of England loudspeaker manufacturer, NEAT Acoustics.



I use their loudspeakers in my office (the Iota), my AV room (the Motive) and my main Music room (the Ultimatum XL10) and I keep a pair of Petite SXs handy for comparison purposes when I am reviewing price-competitive models. I guess you could call me a fan. Mind you, they are an exceptional breed: their designer, Bob Surgeoner is a semi-pro musician and his factory listening room doubles as a recording studio. His accomplice, Paul Ryder, also plays guitar in a gigging band and is a useful recording engineer. The usual place of competitors' loudspeakers outside the NEAT listening room is taken by a variety of musical instruments – most of which, the multi-instrumentalist Bob can play, I have to add. This, I would imagine might just explain the speakers' intense musicality – provided you partner them with an appropriate source and amplification, although I have heard them sing on the end of some weird and wonderful 'high-end' set-ups – albeit not to their utmost capabilities. As luck would have it all NEAT loudspeakers function beautifully and harmoniously when partnered with Naim Audio electronics, another brand that has long figured in my domestic systems for over thirty years.

The Motive SX2 floor-stander, reviewed here, features a number of 'upgrades' over the original model, including a discrete internal cavity to house the tweeter, a revised and upgraded crossover, and modifications to the reflex tuning, whose port exits beneath the cabinet through the spiked plinth. Like its counterparts in the NEAT family, with whom it quite understandably shares many qualities: foremost among those admirable merits is a neutral tonal balance that extends from the deepest bass, which is only conveyed when truly present on the recording, to the highest of highs, which, similarly, needs to be present on the original to be heard. There is not a trace of boom, tizz or artifice within a mile of this speaker. The Motive SX2 certainly sounds much larger than it truly is but it does not sound at all exaggerated or 'obvious': for the most part it appears wholly natural and placid until someone plays a low note on the bass guitar, cello or keyboard that excites its low frequency response, which then drives the room with unexpected power, control and authority for such a modest, port-loaded, floor-standing two-way. In fact, the bass will likely persuade you that you are listening to a much larger loudspeaker and one with much more grip and control than you would expect from a speaker that costs only £1395 in the UK and stands just 76cm tall.

I listened to the Motive SXs on the end of my Quadraspire Sunoko Vent-mounted Naim reference electronics (including an HDX-SSD/n-DAC/XPS2 combination (in UPnP streamer mode) and NAP250 power amplifiers with Chord Company-terminated Naim NAC A5 speaker cables. I placed them in roughly the same position I had used for my XL10s – about 3 feet clear of the rear and side walls – but a foot or so closer to the rear wall and several inches closer to the sides, with an identical small degree of toe-in. They seemed to respond agreeably to the added boundary reinforcement this placement provided. The Naim NAP250 power amplifier is almost certainly overkill with this 86dB sensitive loudspeaker even though its rated output power into the SX's 8-Ohm load falls comfortably towards the upper limit of the 25 – 100 Watt recommended band.

Positioned thus the Motive exhibits a very neutral if naturally slightly warm tonal balance that affords acoustic instruments in particular a highly life-like character – Jane Scarpantoni's enthusiastically bowed cello on "*Venus In Furs*" on Lou Reed's "*Animal Serenade*" album sounds vividly spell-binding. Yes, it is one of those Touched By The Hand Of God moments that you often hear through NEAT speakers when the music assumes a magical communicative urgency. NEAT and Naim certainly seem to bring out the best in each other, in particular the supreme fluency and cogency the combination can provide.

The Motive SX2 has that wonderful cohesion and rightness that usually seems to be found only in the finest two-way stand-mounted designs. Detail emerges energetically from a coherent background with an unshakeable rhythmic impetus and unflinching musical cogency. There is a wholesome simplicity, directness and a charming clarity about the presentation of this unassuming loudspeaker, which is thankfully free of BS such as bi-wiring terminals and suchlike. It is also wonderfully free of the bass bloat that accompanies so many floor-standing two-ways, when the designer feels obliged to offer more LF in order to justify the increased cabinet dimensions as many have invariably felt obliged to do.

Having said this the Motive SX has a decidedly much larger, more muscular sound than your typical two-way. This is evidenced by its full-blooded presentation of live albums – including Lou Reed's marvellous "*Animal Serenade*" where the instrumentation has a corporeal depth and vitality – especially the aforementioned Jane Scarpantoni cello, whose spirited bowing alongside Fernando Saunders' fluid bass playing can easily shock the unprepared listener out of his seat.

The NEAT Motive SX2 is a phenomenal loudspeaker with a presentation that is so musically beguiling that it verges on the supernatural. It is so devoid of artifice that there is absolutely nothing to come between you and the performer. It is, in old-fashioned hi-fi speak, an "open window". More valuable than its transparency and other such cosmetic aspects is its sheer communicative ability. It informs you demonstrably, for example, why Lou Reed chooses the magnificent Fernando Saunders for bass playing duties in his 'Live' band. It is equally revealing about other musicians – be they classical, jazz or rock – and the creative choices they make. In all honesty what more can one ask from a compact floor-standing loudspeaker, especially one this inexpensive and easy to integrate into one's room and hi-fi system?

