

Raising a Smile

AudioSmile Kensai loudspeaker

by Paul Messenger



There's no getting away from it: the hi-fi industry is getting old. Most of Britain's leading hi-fi electronics brands (Arcam, Naim, Linn, Meridian, Rega etc) all started out in the 1970s, when hi-fi was still the height of consumer fashion, so most of its prime movers are now getting close to normal retirement age.

By the time the 1980s came along, the music had arguably become less interesting, and the personal computer had started peeping over the parapet, providing a different distraction for those coming of age. Hi-fi had rather lost its glamour, and bright young things were becoming thinner on the ground. Musical enthusiasms still lead a good number of younger people to explore the world of hi-fi, as Britain's most successful hi-fi retailer Julian Richer will confirm. But there aren't that many people under 35 trying to start up hi-fi companies today.

Which is why I was both surprised and delighted to find a decidedly youthful Simon Ashton occupying a room called AudioSmile at last Autumn's Heathrow hi-fi show, and making some very enjoyable sounds therein too.

AudioSmile currently operates on three fronts. It has add-on supertweeters; it modifies Behringer DACs and active crossovers to make them more audiophile-friendly; and it makes a complete miniature speaker system called the Kensai, which is the subject of this review.

Why review a tiny and obscure speaker from a relatively small start-up company? Because it's actually a very impressive tiny and obscure speaker. In the wake of the impressive Heathrow demonstration, I suggested Simon brought a pair down for me to try. I hate trying to make any sort of judgement under the unknown system and room conditions found at hi-fi shows, and wanted to check them with my own familiar sources, amplification and ancillaries. ▶

► By chance I happened to have the excellent Sendor SA1 (about which both Roy Gregory and Chris Binns got pretty excited in Issues 60 and 61) on hand when Simon arrived. While I agree with both fellow reviewers that the SA1 is an exceptional small speaker, the even smaller Kensai was every bit as good, albeit in its own rather different way. And any speaker that can hold its own with the SA1 definitely deserves to be given the full *Hi-Fi Plus* treatment.

The Kensai is both tiny and expensive, but there's long been a niche for speakers that are both very small and very good, irrespective of price. An interesting bonus is a matching flight case, available as a £150 optional extra, for those who want to travel around and still have access to a decent pair of speakers. The price of the speakers (*sans* case) is £x,xxx per pair, which might seem a lot, but if you want something small, ultra-discreet, and potentially easily transportable, yet which is good enough to make your music (or radio, or whatever) totally engrossing and communicative, I can think of no better.

Naturally it's a two-way design, with a 120mm bass/mid driver and a relatively large isoplanar ribbon tweeter. Said tweeter has a 40x56mm visible area, albeit somewhat occluded by a cellular structure that presumably provides the magnetism, (and which looks very like the transducer used in Wharfedale's famous Isodynamic headphones some decades back). The bass/mid unit looks like a very classy SEAS affair with fixed copper phase plug, and has a 75mm diameter magnesium alloy cone, and is loaded



According to AudioSmile, the tweeter incorporates an acoustic lens to widen dispersion, the main driver has a 9mm travel and its motor uses copper rings to reduce distortion. The crossover is hard-wired, phase-aligned, uses poly-film capacitors and is covered in

a butyl rubber compound to avoid vibration effects.

by a heavily damped (aperiodic) front slot port. Signal is applied to a single pair of terminals, each fitted directly through the woodwork.

Finish and presentation are top class. Solid wood side panels – beech on our samples, though alternatives are available – while the top, base, front and back are covered in white (or black) leatherette. There's no grille to mess up the sound.

You might expect a speaker this small would work well with a little extra bass help by being sited just in front of a wall, and that is very much the case. Indeed, the Kensai coupled beautifully to the wall in our room, so that the far-field averaged 'power' response is smooth and even right across the audio band. It's flat too – it delivers a +/-3dB in-room response from below 40Hz up to 16kHz – though there is enough variation to add character. The bass is strong 45-75Hz, but output is then weak (about -4dB) through the upper bass and lower midband (80-600Hz), before a forward upper mid and presence (800Hz-5kHz). Happily, the the transitions are smooth. Not surprisingly, sensitivity is low, my measurements confirming the claimed 83dB/W, though it won't stress the amplifier too much as the load stays comfortably above 6 ohms throughout. Centred on 48Hz, the port output is well damped. ►



● EQUIPMENT REVIEW

▶ Listening immediately confirmed the extraordinarily good close-to-wall integration, and the excellent bass alignment. The sound shows a fine freedom from boxiness with no obvious reflection effects to cause unpleasant midrange colorations.



Indeed, provided that the volume level is kept in sensible bounds, the little Kensai can do amazing things even with bass-rich material. Seeking to catch it out, I slipped Massive Attack's *Mezzanine* onto the turntable and deliberately selected 'Inertia Creeps', one of my favourite subwoofer test tracks. Much to my surprise, the Kensai wasn't in the least discommoded – in fact rather the reverse. What it might lack in terms of party-level power handling, it more than makes up for in taut timing, fine agility and an impressive ability to discriminate between different instruments and musicians and the way they are playing. So struck was I, when *Mezzanine* finished, I dug out *Blue Lines* as an encore. "Eat your heart out LS3/5a", I thought, as Grandmaster

Flash's 'The Message' came pounding out of the speakers.

Although the bass is thoroughly impressive, the best thing about this speaker has to be its total and seamless coherence. Just prior to trying the Kensai, I'd been listening to a pair of those lovely single-driver egg-shaped Eclipses, where a solitary voice-coil ensures total coherence. Not only does the Kensai supply a degree of coherence that's at least broadly comparable, it does so alongside the sort of flat and wide frequency balance that no single-driver system can yet approach.

Tonally, one is aware of the Kensai's slightly light, bright and forward overall character, at least when using the speakers in a fairly large room. (A smaller room could well help here.) The sound therefore has a certain coolness, while at the same time the voice band detail is very explicit – not unwelcome, since it's not at all peaky, especially with speech.

Stereo imaging is very effective, especially for a wall-mount, helped by the lack of boxiness, the small size of the sources, and the way these speakers seem able to ignore the wall immediately behind them, acoustically speaking. A degree of depth is apparent with appropriate recordings, and even some height is sometimes audible.

AudioSmile claims that the relatively large area of its ribbon tweeter contributes to the speaker's "impressive dynamics". It's not an argument I've heard before, but, I can't argue with the observation that the dynamic expression is impressively vigorous, especially so (again) from something so small. The top end is also attractively sweet and clean, although it should be added that there's not a lot of grip

or dynamic tension low down in the audio range.

Any small speaker is bound to have constraints as well as benefits, but I have to admit that the Kensai hides the former remarkably effectively, while displaying the latter in abundance. The more time I spend time listening to it, the more impressed I become by its extraordinary ability to sound as big as a full size speaker, while almost disappearing visually.

Simon tells me he's making progress on a new big loudspeaker design, so I'm going to start saving my pennies now. Meantime, anyone in the market for a tiny loudspeaker should at least try to hear the Kensai before making a decision. ▶+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

AudioSmile Kensai

Type:	Two-way, stand-mount, reflex-loaded speaker
Drivers:	1x 40x56mm isoplanar ribbon tweeter 1x 120mm mid/bass unit with 75mm magnesium cone
Bandwidth:	48Hz-20kHz ±3dB
Sensitivity:	83dB
Nominal impedance:	8 ohms
Minimum impedance:	6 ohms
Crossover frequency:	2.2kHz
Dimensions (WxHxD):	150x250x200mm
Weight:	5kg each
Finish:	Beech or Walnut (with black or white leatherette)

Manufacturer:

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