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After the revolution

Thinking of spending more on a loudspeaker?
For just \$410, the AUDES 105 is "godunov." Haw.
Review by Mike Trei.

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(212) 938-9283
www.audesusa.com

For me, one of the real highlights of the January CES was the reintroduction of the original Quad Electrostatic Loudspeaker. This model has been my speaker of choice for the last seven years, so as soon as I saw the Quad GmbH room at the show, I rushed right in. And sure enough, they were there-but the room was being shared by several manufacturers, and the Quads were not being played when I arrived. As I proceeded to photograph the static electrostatics, a man with a Russian accent was trying to capture my attention.

"Pleeze seet down unt leesten to dees speekur." I was trying to ignore him as he gestured to a stand-mounted monkey coffin, but he was persistent. One of the biggest problems with CES is the sheer scale of the event: If you sit down to spend just five minutes in each room, you only have enough time to see half the show-so you have to be selective, and you need a sixth sense to know when it's worth spending a few precious minutes to check something out.

"Seet down," he said again. So we did - and actually the sound was good. Quite good.
"Is this a Russian speaker?" It seemed a reasonable enough question given his accent.
"No, dees ees Estonian speekur."
Now he really had my attention.

Let me say right from the outset that I am totally biased in favor of this speaker. As an Estonian, I am bound to cast a favorable light on this tiny country's first foray into hi-fi exporting. Estonia is the most economically successful of the former Soviet Republics. Since declaring independence in 1991, Estonia has forged ahead, and is pushing for inclusion in the European Community. Entrepreneurship has taken over, and there is good money to be made for those with initiative.

Now: One result of having been a key strategic part of the Soviet Union for so long is the abandoned remains of a formidable military infrastructure. The AUDES speakers are reputedly built in a former military plant, by people who used to build parts for MIG fighter jets (which, as Art has pointed out in the past, contain vacuum tubes). This combination of precision manufacturing know-how, and low labor costs allows AUDES to build a high quality product-yet maintain very competitive pricing. **The AUDES 105 looks as if it could easily sell for \$800 a pair; in reality it's half that.**

The 75AC-105 (let's forget that catchy name and just call it the 105) is a small two-way with a 6-1/2-inch woofer. At 10-1/2 by 11 by 14 inches (W x D x H) it should fit on many bookshelves, but I found the best results were achieved with the speaker out into the room on stands around 24 inches high. Sensitivity is moderate at 86 dB, but I found I could drive the speaker easily with amplifiers delivering as little as 17 WPC. Finish is excellent, and cabinet diffraction has been minimized by flush mounting the drivers and rounding off the vertical corners.

As I usually do with speakers, I tried several amplifiers, and found the Audio Note P2-SE to provide the best, if somewhat costly, match. I even used a Teac A-H500 integrated amplifier with excellent results. The most likely combination would pair these speakers with an amplifier like the Creek 4330~ sonically they would compliment each other well.

For a full month I used the 105s for all my everyday listening. **The first thing I was struck with was the bass: These babies have a surprising ability to move some real air without becoming bloated or boomy.** Many small speakers compensate for a lack of real deep bass by pumping up the mid bass region, giving a thump that makes the speakers sound big. This can be impressive in a quick audition, but quickly becomes tiring unless you listen only to hip-hop. A better test of bass can be had by listening to Primus, a rock band fronted by Les Claypool, player of a Carl Thompson fretless six-string bass. His style is very funky, and in Primus his instrument often takes over the lead. On "Southbound Pachyderm" from Tales from the Punch bowl, the AUDES 105's were able to reproduce Claypool's funky runs and chords adeptly, giving a good sense of the weight of the lower strings while maintaining a fine sense of rhythmic pacing and funkiness.

I've never been a big fan of The Boss, but I do like his quieter, darker albums like Nebraska and, more recently, The Ghost of Tom Joad. On the title track of the latter, Springsteen's voice is recorded up close, with little compression: The big sound that results is captured well with the 105's -which show no sign of distress even at surprisingly high listening levels. The track moves along nicely, and the 105's again prove themselves to be rhythmic performers. This track also shows up the 105's weakest area-its tweeter. There's a touch of brightness, but the main problem is a simple lack of smoothness: Voice can become a bit peaky, and instruments can sound a bit cheap. This quality never really intrudes, though, and I'll bet that without a direct comparison to something better, it would probably pass unnoticed.

As with many small speakers, the 105s are good at presenting a credible soundstage. Images are well focused, and the soundfield is projected well into the room. I did notice that removing the grilles results in a worthwhile improvement in resolution. For instance: I know that Eric Clapton's Prom the Cradle has been the subject of mixed reviews, but I like this record of straight-ahead blues standards. **On "How Long Blues," the 105's sound very open, with the sound projected both in front of and behind the plane of the speakers-all the while giving a good sense of the space in which the recording was made.**

The 105's biggest strength, however is really in the area that I consider most important-namely the ability to communicate, getting across the sense of attitude or emotion present as the recording was made. I have found this capability to have very little to do with equipment cost, speaker size, or amplifier power. (In fact, the JVC FS-1000 system reviewed in the last issue has this quality in spades.) I played the 1959 Columbia recording of the Shostakovich First Cello Concerto with Rostropovitch and Bernstein. This is the premier recording of this piece-which was written for Rostropovitch - and through the AUDES 105's it captures a palpable sense of momentous occasion. The recording is a bit "in your face," as was typical of Columbia in those days, but that only adds to the excitement. The 105's capture all of this energy easily, and should be able to make you understand why this is my recording .of choice.

Hey: These speakers would be a great choice for someone putting together a system in the \$1200 range. They're also good speakers to recommend to friends, siblings, or the guy at a party who ask for a suggestion of good speakers to replace his moldy Larger Advents. I would try to steer away from overtly bright sounding sources or amplifiers, is all: These would highlight the slight weakness of the Audes tweeters. With carefully chosen ancillaries, real music making is possible.

Of course, I did tell you I was totally biased, right? Don't worry: **Once this speaker gets its chance at a larger audience, mine won't be the only rave you'll hear. Strongly recommended.**

Quality: **-3/4

Value: * - plus**