HI-FI WORLD

AKTIMATE MINI £399

Two years ago, there were precious few iPod speaker systems on the market. Indeed, one of the best was Apple's own Karl Heinz Fink-designed iPod Hi-Fi, which did what most people would want such a device to do – sound good, make a big noise and not take up too much room. In the intervening period of time though, we've been swamped with the darned things; from TK Maxx to Currys Digital, you can't go anywhere without seeing some form of active amplified speaker system for the pesky little 'Pod...

How then should we greet the Aktimate Mini? First impressions aren't good – there's nothing actually wrong with this pair of piano gloss lacquered boxes, complete with a rather ungainly iPod port on one of them, but frankly it's no oil painting. Worse still (for its sake), it's not a B&W Zeppelin, which the iPod *cognoscenti* at this magazine at least, agree to be the current state of the art. Along with Quad ESL57 and Michell GyroDec, the Zeppelin is about as great an exemplar of form and function in perfect harmony as you'll find – it looks great, it sounds great, it's beautifully designed; what more is there?

Well, that's precisely the question the Aktimate has to answer, and it doesn't answer it with its dazzling good looks. No, for me, the interesting thing about this little active speaker system is its DNA – effectively it's a Creek. Which is to say that the internal amplifier circuitry was designed by Creek Audio, and the drive units were licensed from Epos (now Creek's loudspeaker brand). That means, despite its plain Jane looks, this is one exceptionally well bred iPod speaker system. It's not a Zeppelin, but in certain respects it's better - which is really saying something!

What you get is a pair of 300x185x210mm two-way active loudspeakers, fully magnetically shielded. The mid/bass unit is a 130mm moulded polypropylene cone, and the tweeter a 25mm metal dome with neodymium magnet. Inside is a National Semiconductors LM4766 Overture amp on a chip, pushing out 2x40W in Class AB, via a Burr-Brown PGA2311 digitally controlled analogue volume control, fed by a 120W toroidal power transformer.

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The 'master' speaker has RCA phono inputs for an auxiliary source, and a single speaker cable running to the slave speaker. The dock has a full set of adaptors for every iPod. There's a single volume control on the master speaker, with a push-to-standby function. A basic remote control is bundled, and there's a rear USB input (for charging MP3 players only), plus an additional 3.5mm minijack input. Finally, there's a video output for connection to a monitor.

The system sounds superb, but so it should – at this price it's one of the most expensive iPod speaker systems on the market. The choice of polypropylene mid/bass drive units works really well, investing what is quite a tonally dry source (i.e. an iPod) with real richness. Blondie's 'Hanging on the Telephone' showed it to be a walk on the warm side of iPod speaker systems (the B&W is the reverse; quite dry tonally), investing everything with a full-bodied bloom that proved a joy to listen to. There's no obvious disparity with the metal dome tweeters (not always a famously synergistic match with Polyprop cones, it must be said); the former are crisp and smooth (with just that touch of zing, as per all metal domes), and invest a degree of speed to the soft but fulsome bass.

Kate Bush's 'Moving' showed how good an iPod speaker could sound; even running at 320kbps, the Aktimate Mini made her voice rich, taking the emphasis off its icy coolness unlike other less euphonic rivals. But when the band kicked in, with that sumptuous bass guitar sound, those massive, thundering pan rolls and shimmering hi-hats, this system wasn't in the least bit perturbed. Even at high volumes, it held everything together with consummate skill, proving itself able to go impressively loud without losing the plot. Indeed, my only note of caution is about placement of the boxes - because the bass is so full, you have to be careful to keep the speakers off the floor and not too near corners, lest they get just a little too overpowering.

The overall effect however is superb; exceptionally musically inviting, they reward extended listening like no other iPod speaker. They lack the 'military precision' of the big B&W balloon, but make up for it with their big hearted, emotionally convincing nature – and there's no shortage of power either. Your average iPod user would be gobsmacked by the combination of clarity, detail and finesse the Aktimate Minis offer – and even hardened audiophiles will love them. No oil painting then, but a joyous performer all the same. DP

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