

Contour 1.3 SE



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Reviews: Speaker
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When you leave the airport in Denmark to visit Dynaudio, the first thing you see is a stack of gigantic Lego blocks. Dynaudio's factory is in the same neck of the woods, and Lego is the region's most famous concern, so you gotta figure that this particular strain of Dane will be, uh, quirky. The region—pure end-of-the-millennium, politically correct, CE-approved Northern Europe—certainly heats the hell out of belching smokestacks or the congestion of Southeast Asia. We're talking clean and green, a Scandinavian idyll that just happens to be the home of one of the most sophisticated speaker manufacturers on the planet.

Huh? Dynaudio? Doesn't it make drivers for other speaker brands? You've just nailed the company's identity crisis, as most people think of Dynaudio only for the drivers it has supplied to makers as admired as Wilson Audio Specialties (woofers) or Sonus Faber (which once used Dynaudio's Esotar tweeter). But at least three times during my visit, I was reminded that raw drivers account for as little as 5% to 10% of the company's sales. It's not that they're bitter; the guys at Dynaudio simply want the world to realize that they're one of the world's dozen or so largest makers of complete speaker systems and that the company has been around for more than 25 years.

Given that its speaker line ranges from \$700/pair compact two-ways to the \$85,000/pair Evidence, Dynaudio certainly isn't missing any market niches; it even manufactures some serious studio monitors that compete with Genelecs. I recently auditioned its Contour 1.3 SE ("Special Edition"), a new speaker that's sort of a statement in a series launched in 1986 with the Contours 1 and 2. Taking a page from the British speaker designers' handbook, Dynaudio positioned the Contours in the middle of the classic two-way box market—too refined and therefore too expensive to be entry-level speakers but affordable enough to compete in the real world. Dynaudio is one of a diminishing number of speaker companies making everything from its drivers to its cabinets (okay, so maybe it doesn't weave its own grille cloth), and the Contours have always oozed quality and solidity and had a frisson of individuality—qualities that you rarely get from speakers assembled from other companies' ingredients.

Following the DNA chain back to the moment of arousal, I remember a project from the early 1990s, when Dynaudio engineers hot-rodged a Contour 1 by incorporating then-cutting-edge technologies to produce a speaker devoid of compromises in materials, build, or performance. Planned as a severely limited edition, it went on to sell more than 5,000 units. In 1993, the Contour 1 was replaced by the Contour 1.3, which acquired MK II status in 1998. And that's where the Contour 1.3 SE enters the picture.

First, the carcass. The Contour 1.3SE's cabinet measures a tidy 15 x 8 x 11 inches but weighs a chunky 22 pounds, attesting to its solidity. I saw the regular Contour's enclosure under construction and noted its extensive internal bracing, the girth of the woofer magnets, and the complex crossover, so I can't attribute that weight to, say, lead ballast. This baby is intrinsically heavy. (Don't laugh; I know of one manufacturer who did fit ballast to make his speakers heavier.) Although it lacks styling fillips in the Italian manner (except for a slight chamfer around the 20-millimeter-thick MDF baffle), the 1.3 SE earns a "handsome" tag because its finish is so classy. The enclosure is veneered in gorgeous, light bird's-eye maple with a satin surface, set off by the black grille. You don't have to be a carpenter or a furniture expert to appreciate this element of the "SE" appellation.

Still, it's what's behind the grille that counts. Compared to the standard Contour 1.3, the SE version is actually an entirely new loudspeaker that just happens to be based on the cabinet, as described above, of the regular model. Since Dynaudio develops and produces all of the drivers in-house, it was hardly a major effort to manufacture special ones for limited editions. The front plates of both drivers are coated with an aluminum-metallic lacquer, in contrast to the black of the standard versions. The 6-inch long-throw woofer employs a Neodymium double-magnet system and a 3-inch aluminum-wire voice coil on a Kapton former, to improve bass transient response. These refinements are said to make the voice coil's movement much more linear and give the speaker deeper, more dynamic bass reproduction. The woofer crosses over at 2.6 kHz (at 6 dB per octave) to a 1/8-inch soft-dome tweeter that has ferrofluid cooling and damping, a pure aluminum voice coil, a double-magnet system with its own rear chamber, and a 4-millimeter-thick die-cast aluminum front. The crossover network is a sight to behold, two circuit boards—not one—bearing more than 20 components. Dynaudio says it uses individual boards for the woofer and tweeter sections so it can separate them enough to prevent interactions.

In keeping with European regulations, the Contour 1.3 SE features overkill, CE-approved WBT terminals, but they accept banana plugs, spades, bare wire—you name it. Dynaudio skipped bi-wiring, which seems to be going out of fashion. The terminals are fitted to a handsome cast metal plate on the rear panel. At the top of that panel is the port; Dynaudio supplies a foam plug to insert into it if you place the speakers too close to a wall and suffer a surfeit of bass. I found it best to follow the instructions to the letter, using the SEs on sturdy stands and positioning them well into the

room, some 5 feet from any walls.

Setup was surprisingly noncritical, once I got the 1.3 SEs away from boundaries. Toe-in wasn't as fussy as with Wilson Audio WATTs or most Sonus Fabers, and I found the Dynaudios gave their best when firing straight ahead, if I was seated more than 6 to 8 feet from the speaker line. By virtue of their benign impedance and middling sensitivity, I was able to use the 1.3 SEs with a wide range of amplifiers, from low-to-medium-power amps (such as the Roksan Caspian integrated), to Unison Research's single-ended triode Smart 845, to serious powerhouses (like Musical Fidelity's Nu-Vista 300 and two of the 200-watt channels on the three-channel Acurus A200X3). Sources included the wild new SME 10 turntable and arm with a Lyra Lydian cartridge, a Pioneer DV-414 DVD player, and a Musical Fidelity XRAY CD player.

Admitting to prejudice, I expected the Contour 1.3 SE might have an over-etched, hyperanalytical sound, maybe a bit bass-shy but with exceptional imaging. Why? Because I'm as guilty as the next guy of judging Dynaudio by the way its drivers are used in other companies' speakers. I was only partly right, and I didn't realize quite how deceptive Dynaudio's reputation could be until I pulled out Tom Waits' latest album. Don't read too much into this. I'm not a big fan, but I find Waits somehow reassuring after seeing a film noir or reading a novel set in urban squalor in the 'SOs; he has that effect on me. Anyway, Waits' *Mule Variations* (on Epitaph) is full of lower-octave activity, his trademark growling and gravel, some stupendous piano figures, and the kind of atmosphere you could cut with a knife. Above all, though, it is warm, almost close and muggy. You can almost smell the Sterno.

In track 8, the bizarre "What's He Building," there's Blair Witch-y clanking and buzzing, and the narrative never lets you forget Waits played Renfield in Brain Stoker's *Dracula*. From a purist's viewpoint, I suppose that this track is a sonic nightmare (it's certainly a nightmare as far as the lyrics go) because you know it was assembled in a studio, all percussion and sound effects and spatial trickery. But the Contour 1.3 SEs did two things that made me sit back and re-think my prejudice about Dynaudio sound.

For one thing, they untangled that sub-300-Hz stew with the facility of big, fat circa-1978 BBC studio monitors. And they gave me a sense of scale that's hard to better for less than the price of Wilson Audio WATT/Puppies. I heard churning, roiling bass—a veritable flood of industrial noises—with such clarifying three-dimensionality that I had to try the Dynaudios with three different amplifiers to see if it was repeatable. It was.

With something as atmospheric but more musical—live Taj Mahal on *An Evening of Acoustic Music* (Ruf)—it was the same story: lots of air and plenty of room but clearly defined boundaries. Taj Mahal's rich vocals (only slightly less gravelly than Waits'), in front of banjo and tinkly, metallic guitar, vied for space with audience sounds. The clapping during "Blues with a Feeling" enjoyed its own spatial layer, complementing rather than competing. And all from a box no bigger than a microwave oven.

Spatial concerns and bottom-octave activity are only part of the deal. What forced me to alter my response to the Dynaudios was the way the Contour 1.3 SEs handled vocals, and not just the growls of Waits and Taj. How far away from them is Cilla Black? Try 35 years and 6,000 miles. Yet her work in EMI's Abbey Road studios—with a roster of tunes from Lennon/McCartney, Bacharach/David, and the like—exhibited an equal level of coherence, competence, and naturalness. I felt the same about the 1.3 SEs' handling of material in a whole 'nuther sonic spectrum: mono-era Louis Prima; Dolly Parton's bluegrass homage, *The Grass Is Blue* (Sugar Hill); Overmars' stunning punky/poppy debut, *High life* (WEA/Lightyear); and the newly remastered James Bond themes. This is not a genre-sensitive speaker but a deceptive little gem.

No, make that a mini-masterpiece. Dynaudio's Contour 1.3 SE is a real slice of high-end sensation, in a small package and with a price tag that's high but not obscene. Then factor in that it's also an import and a piece of fine furniture that should blend into almost any decor. Besides, there ain't nuthin' you can't make from a box of Legos if you put your mind to it.