

## Audio Note AN-E Lexus Signature loudspeaker,

By Art Dudley • May, 2006 Stereophile

Given Audio Note's early dominance of the low-power scene, you'd expect any loudspeaker from them to be a high-efficiency design, and you'd be right. What you wouldn't expect is how they go about doing it, since none of the 20-odd models in their speaker line appears to be much more than a plain-Jane two-way box, with nary a horn or whizzer in sight.

So it goes with Audio Note's latest, the AN-E Lexus Signature, which takes the company's basic E-size loudspeaker—at just under 70 liters, the largest of Audio Note's cabinet sizes—and refines it in a number of subtle and mostly invisible ways.

Before tackling the specifics, some history is in order. Audio Note's involvement in the loudspeaker world dates to the early 1980s, when audio maven Peter Qvortrup represented the Snell Acoustics line throughout Europe. Qvortrup admired Peter Snell's design innovations—not only were their cabinets precisely sized and shaped to support a particular range of frequencies, but Snell Acoustics was among the first companies to hand-match every crossover component to its own unique set of drivers. As Snell's distributor, Qvortrup enjoyed particular success with three relatively efficient models: the Snell Type J, Type K, and Type E.

Everything went swimmingly until fall 1984, when Peter Snell dropped dead on the factory floor—and his surviving business partners hired Canadian designer Kevin Voecks, late of Mirage, to take his place. Almost immediately, Voecks began to take Snell's product line in a direction that had nothing whatsoever to do with Peter Snell's original work, as far as Peter Qvortrup was concerned. I agree.

That left Qvortrup—who would soon team up with Hiroyasu Kondo to sell products under the Audio Note name—in a bit of a jam. He bought up all the remaining stock of Snell Js, Ks, and Es, and when they were gone, he bought the remaining unfilled cabinets, too. After that, Qvortrup took the only route left: He sought and obtained permission to continue building Js, Ks, and Es on his own, crediting the original designs to Snell and selling the finished products under his own label.

Thus, more than two decades after his death, you can still acquire Peter Snell's finest "bookshelf" loudspeakers, the ensuing evolution of which may be in keeping with their designer's intentions.

### Description





The original Snell Type E was a bass-reflex design with a 1" soft-dome tweeter and an 8" paper woofer. According to a spec sheet from 1984, it had an electrical sensitivity of 90dB and a nominal impedance of 8 ohms. I suppose the Type E would have been a pretty decent mate for some of those low-power tube amps that didn't yet exist (footnote 1). But over the years, Peter Qvortrup worked to refine the E formula, in an effort to wring even greater efficiency—among other things—from the very same box. That brings us to the AN-E Lexus Signature, whose cabinet is made entirely from Russian birch plywood (as opposed to the particleboard of its antecedents). Its rear-firing port is 5" long and 2.5" in diameter, and although I wasn't able to pry apart the review samples and see for myself, a photo supplied by Audio Note's US distributor, Triode & Co., shows the use of some strategically placed hardwood braces.

The AN-E Lexus Signature's 1" tweeter is a special high-efficiency type, with an impregnated-fabric dome and a voice-coil wound from silver wire that Audio Note supplies to the tweeter's manufacturer, Tonegen/Foster of Japan. Audio Note's silver wire is also used for the voice coil of the 8" paper woofer, manufactured in Norway by SEAS and also appearing here in a high-efficiency configuration. Some electrical padding is used in the crossover for level matching—Qvortrup suggests that the woofer's theoretical maximum sensitivity is in the neighborhood of 100dB—and the overall system sensitivity is stated as a very high 98dB.

A lot of what makes the Lexus Signature special lies outside of the box—literally. Peter Qvortrup builds this model's crossovers into individual outboard enclosures (alloy chassis and cover, acrylic front panel), not only to protect them from the microphonic effects of speaker vibrations but to accommodate the sheer physical size of Audio Note's upmarket paper-in-oil capacitors. The speakers themselves are hardwired, with separate meter-long cable pairs for the woofer and tweeter, terminated with Audio Note silver banana plugs (footnote 2). The cable itself, inside and out, is Audio Note's best copper Litz, sold separately under the model name Lexus XL (\$226/meter pair, less termination). The crossover frequency is an unusual choice, not only because it's close to the tweeter's resonant frequency ("You're not supposed to do that," Qvortrup says, "but then there's a lot of things you're not supposed to do"), but also because it differs slightly from one finished loudspeaker to the next, given Audio Note's efforts to match individual drivers to individual capacitors. Thus the stated crossover range of 2.1–2.3kHz.

My review pair of AN-E Lexus Signatures was supplied with the recommended metal stands, which are 10.5" tall and exceptionally massive—they're filled with a mixture of sand and lead shot. Audio Note recommends coupling the speaker cabinets to the stands with pea-size balls of Blu-Tack plasticine (available in the US as Elmer's Poster Tack), which I duly did. I actually tried it both ways, but without the putty, the Audio Notes somewhat exaggerated the room and hall sound of certain recordings—such as the Midori-McDonald recording of Elgar's Violin Sonata (CD, Sony SK 63331), where the natural acoustic of the Snape Maltings threatened to swamp the subtleties of Midori's charming but less than passionate fiddling.

I could write at least 1000 words on the AN-E's appearance and not be done with the subject. Aesthetically, the Lexus Signature is a refreshingly simple thing, yet the depth and complexity in the grain of its flamey maple veneer—every surface comprises two flip-matched pieces—make it look as rich as it is serene. There's something else that sets the AN-E's cabinetry apart from the norm, although it took me a while to realize what it was: Apart from the two drivers, the front baffle is undisturbed by anything else, including the visual blight of those cheap-looking plastic sockets for a grille that no one wanted in the first place.

Before I began making serious notes on all of the serious listening that lay ahead, I used the AudioControl SA3050 spectrum analyzer to help fine-tune the Audio Notes' placement in my main listening room, and to give graphic evidence of their best-case performance. Bear in mind that Peter Qvortrup intends for these speakers to be installed close to the wall behind them—preferably in the corners—for maximum bass reinforcement (footnote 3). I tried that, and while I was amazed by their extension—flat to 25Hz!—I simply didn't care for their spatial presentation that way, being more used to a nearfield experience with my Quad electrostatic panels. I proceeded to move the Es away from their corners a little at a time, listening and measuring to ensure that other aspects of their response didn't suffer as well. (I have nothing but sympathy for the manufacturer whose products are reviewed in an incorrect manner and then condemned for the shortcomings that ensue.) I can say with confidence that an AN-E Lexus Signature, positioned approximately 4' from the wall behind it and a little more than 2' from the sidewall, exhibited the same basic frequency response as when standing in the corner—except, of course, for that bottom octave.

As to which: In my room, with the AN-Es out of the corners, it was possible to get a generally smooth response curve, flat down to 40Hz. The only significant shortcomings were a dip centered at 2.5kHz, and a more severe one at 50Hz that may have been room-related.

## Listening

The first notes I wrote about the AN-E Lexus Signatures—which their distributor had already broken in during various shows and demonstrations—centered around the fact that they sounded "immediate, tactile, emotive, and above all, musically right [I underlined the last word so forcefully that the ink came out on the page below], all without being in-your-face, overbearing, or anything even approaching bright or brittle." A month and a half later, my enthusiasm has only increased.

Listening to "Time Has Told Me," from Nick Drake's *Five Leaves Left* (CD, Island 422 842 915-2), through the Audio Notes was an absolutely wonderful experience. The realistic sibilance of Drake's voice in the middle eight was pleasantly startling, and every note in Richard Thompson's electric guitar part was a joy. And on good recordings of more straightforward rock—try almost any song from Classic Records' great LP reissue of Neil Young's *Greatest Hits* (Reprise 48935-1)—the sound of the electric bass was deep, full, and strong, with believable timbre and excellent clarity of attack. The Es were also excellent in their sense of sheer impact, as in the percussion on that album's "Heart of Gold": That sound was more forceful and dramatic through the Audio Notes than either my Quad ESL-989s or my comparatively bass-shy Lowther horns.

Throughout their time here I was consistently impressed by how loudly the Audio Notes could play, and by how utterly big they could sound when doing so with orchestral music. There was something of a disconnect, seeing those not-terribly-large speakers with their 1" tweeters in front of me, yet hearing them make flutes sound like real instruments moving reasonable amounts of air, and not like precise little images in some audio nerd's fantasy-ass "soundstage." The crescendo at the end of János Starker and Antal Dorati's recording of Dvorák's *Cello Concerto* (a recent and brilliant *Speakers Corner* LP reissue of Mercury SR90303) showed that off especially well—as did Ruggiero Ricci and Ølvin Fjelstad's wonderful recording of the *Sibelius Violin Concerto*, also on a *Speakers Corner* LP (Decca SXL 2077).

Also on orchestral music, the overall spatial quality of the Audio Note AN-E Lexus Signatures was closer than usual to the way I hear things in the concert hall—although it must also be said that a great many speakers are "better" at stereo imaging, in the accepted sense, than these (not the least of which being my own Quad ESL-989s). With Cecile

Ousset's early-1980s recording of Poulenc's Piano Concerto (LP, EMI ASD 1077851), the Audio Note speakers suggested that the piano was clearly in front of the woodwinds, the woodwinds were more or less in the center of things, the violins were off to the left somewhere (the whole section seemed to be at an angle relative to the rest of the orchestra), and the brass instruments, which Poulenc used to such wonderful, colorful effect in this piece, were off on the other side and a little ways back. And that's about all. But I found the experience to be satisfying because it was completely real and no more; on the other hand, if you're the sort of listener who uses a hi-fi as a homing device for the sounds of loose cufflinks and bows hitting music stands, these might not be for you.

If that sounds glib, I assure you that I haven't been glib enough: The AN-E told me more about the changes in Mlle. Ousset's intensity—having met her and heard her live, I know how powerful a performer she can be—than the vast majority of speakers I've auditioned, the only exceptions being my Lowthers and a few other horns. I'll take emotion over location any old day.

All the above applies to the AN-E Lexus Signatures' performance in my regular listening room, which measures 12' by 18' with an 8' ceiling. I also tried them in my significantly larger living room (20' by 27'), where I did wind up placing the speakers very close to the long wall behind them (though not in the corners), toed-in rather drastically and separated from one another by a little more than 14'. If they sounded big in my smaller room, they were positively huge in the larger one—yet their spatial abilities, such as they were, didn't suffer at all. As a matter of fact, given the opportunity to spread the sound of a drum kit over several feet, certain good pop and jazz recordings revealed imaging details I'd never before noticed. And fine old mono recordings—including a fun Italian CD of Birgit Nilsson and Hans Hotter performing Wagner's *Die Walküre* at Bayreuth under Joseph Keilberth (Melodram MEL 36102)—emanated from the exact center of the space between the speakers, good physical scale notwithstanding: This wasn't the amorphous sonic blob that certain other speakers present in that space.

Piano recordings were also immensely enjoyable through the Audio Notes in the big room, where the instrument was allowed a greater-than-average sense of physical presence, while at the same time avoiding an exaggeration of its size. The only drawback: With the sound spread out like that, it was easier to pick up on the kinds of small frequency-response glitches that gave some notes in the left hand a bit more or less prominence than others. I don't think the average listener would consider the Lexus Signature to be severely colored, and it's surely more neutral than, say, the Hørning Perikles ("Listening," February 2006), a fine speaker in its own right. But people who are sensitive to departures from perfectly flat frequency response should consider themselves forewarned.

## Conclusion

On one of their last nights here, back in my smaller listening room, I used the Audio Note AN-E Lexus Signatures to play David Grier's *I've Got the House to Myself* (CD, Dreadnought 0201), and skipped to the Civil War-era fiddle tune "The Girl I Left Behind Me." Eight or so bars in, my attention was completely captured by how real the performance sounded—not in the Quad sense of heightened neutrality, transparency, and spatial precision (fine though those things are!), but real in the sense that the notes started, flowed, and stopped in a manner that was eerily convincing, for hi-fi. It was also dynamic as all get-out.

Then, at almost the same moment, my wife walked into the hi-fi room from where she was scouring pans or some such thing, and asked, "What's this?" I told her it was the most recent David Grier CD. She paused for a moment, then said—and I swear this is true—"For a minute I thought it was you playing." ("The Girl I Left Behind Me" is in my own humble picking repertoire, although I know that my efforts and Grier's are about as far apart as you can get and still be on the same planet. In fact, now that I think about it, I heard something else in my wife's voice that night: an implied question, wondering how my playing had got so much better all of a sudden.)

I don't mean to suggest that the Lexus Signature is the sort of product that impresses every time out; there are lots of things like that in the audio world, some of which are charming or truthful or soulful enough that their appeal

lasts longer than a few months, though the majority of which are not. The Audio Notes are on a different plane altogether: easy, adaptable, and, in the best sense, mostly invisible. That they manage all that while being compatible with the very-low-power amps that some of us love is a heck of a thing.

Who would've thought? Who would've guessed that a speaker so unassuming, and so steeped in quiet tradition, might be the one that a whole subset of our hobby has been looking for all this time?

Anyone with this kind of money who's looking for a very musical and exceptionally efficient loudspeaker simply must try the Audio Note AN-E Lexus Signature: It's joined the Lowther horns and Quad electrostats as one of the very few speakers I know I could live with and love, indefinitely. (Interesting how the youngest of the three basic designs is already a quarter-century old—and the oldest is close to three times that!) Similarly, it seems at least reasonable to ask if other, less expensive models in the same E line—which range in price down to \$4300/pair, for the 94dB-sensitive AN-E LX—might also deserve the attention of single-ended-triode enthusiasts.

I used to wonder if there'd ever come a day when I could write about a SET amplifier without framing it as an oddity: an electric car, a green cocktail, an American who doesn't have a credit card. The answer is yes—but only when speakers like this are more common.

Footnote 3: For the newbie: This isn't a horn effect, but rather a simple means of countering the difficulty that a small loudspeaker has when it tries to disperse low-frequency sounds toward the listener. (As notes descend below the frequency whose half-wavelength equals the diameter of the radiating surface, dispersion becomes increasingly spherical and nondirect.) To place a loudspeaker near one or more room boundaries is to close off that many paths to the meandering low-frequency waveform, and thus increase the likelihood that bass energy will make its way to the listening area.—Art Dudley

### **Specifications**

Description: Two-way, reflex-loaded, stand-mounted loudspeaker. Drive-units: 1" fabric-dome tweeter, 8" paper-cone woofer. Nominal crossover frequency: 2.1–2.3kHz. Frequency response: 17Hz–22kHz, –6dB. Impedance: 8 ohms. Sensitivity: 98dB/W/m.

Dimensions: 31" (795mm) H by 14.25" (365mm) W by 10.625" (270mm) D. Weight: 41 lbs (speaker), 20 lbs (crossover), 25 lbs (empty stand).

Finishes: 18 different real-wood veneers, 5 piano-lacquer finishes.