

SOUND & VISION

TESTED
P14
▶



Where Technology Becomes Entertainment™ ■ soundandvision.com
ZEPPELIN IV: A Bowers & Wilkins Classic Returns

APRIL
MAY
2022

ONKYO

ON/STANDBY

PURE AUDIO

LISTENING MODE

TONE

HYBRID STANDBY

PURE AUDIO

SONOS

ZONE 2 ZONE 3 QUICK MENU

BD/DVD GAME CBL/SAT STRM BOX PC AUX CD TV

BIG-TIME BASS
DEFINITIVE TECHNOLOGY
DESCEND DN15 SUBWOOFER

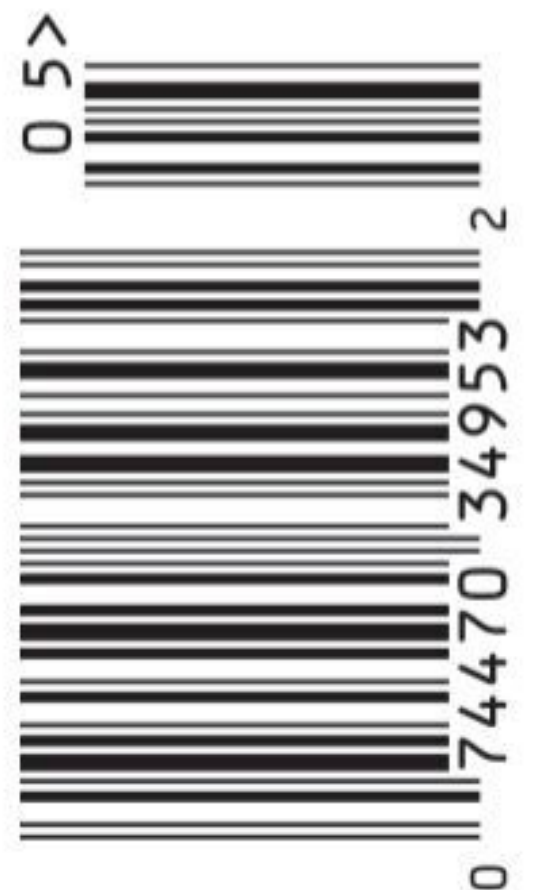
UNI-FI REFINED
ELAC UNI-FI REFERENCE
SPEAKER SYSTEM

4K FOR 5K
SONY VPL-VW325ES
LCOS PROJECTOR

▶ ONKYO'S AFFORDABLE
TX-NR7100 AVR
WITH DIRAC LIVE

SOUND SOLUTIONS

\$6.99 US
\$7.99 CANADA





RATING

PERFORMANCE



FEATURES



BUILD QUALITY



VALUE



Style and Substance

By Thomas J. Norton



GERMAN SPEAKER company Elac has had quite a run over the past few years, with designer Andrew Jones turning out new models on an annual basis after setting the audio world on its ears in 2016 with the Elac Debut. Following the Debut's launch, the company came out with the pricier Uni-Fi. A three-way bookshelf design, the Uni-Fi incorporated a coincident midrange-woofer that positions the tweeter at the apex of the midrange cone where the dust cap usually sits.

Coincident drivers offer significant advantages, including less destructive interference at some listening angles where the responses of the woofer and tweeter overlap (comb filtering). They have downsides as well, including design complexity and cost. But Jones worked with British speaker-maker KEF in the 1980s when that company launched its now iconic UniQ coincident drivers, and he had extensive experience with this type of design. (He also used coincident drivers in speakers

he designed for TAD and Pioneer.)

Jones recently left Elac. But the new Uni-Fi Reference series, an upgrade of the original Uni-Fi and now with additional models, could be considered his going-away gift to fans of the designs he created for the brand. (The company's new acoustical engineering manager is Oleg Bogdanov, who previously was the acoustical engineering manager for Canadian speaker manufacturer Paradigm.)

The new Elac collection consists of three models. The Uni-Fi Reference UBR62 bookshelf (\$1,200/pair) is a significant refinement of the original Uni-Fi, and the UFR-52 (\$1,200 each) is a tower design with three 5.25-inch woofers plus the same 4-inch Uni-Fi coincident midrange-tweeter used in the UBR62. The UCR-52 center (\$700) employs the same mid-tweeter plus two 5.25-inch woofers. With all three speakers, the crossover in the coincident driver is at 1,800Hz. The woofer crossover is 220Hz for the floor-stander,

"The Elac UBR62s had an ease and sweetness that invited extended listening."

The Elac UBR62 (above) is a three-way design that uses a coincident midrange-tweeter array.

260Hz for the bookshelf, and 240Hz for the center. All midranges and woofers are black anodized aluminum, while the tweeters are 1-inch soft domes.

Elac sent me two pairs of the UBR62s, one for the front left/right channels, the other for the surrounds, plus a single UCR52 center. (The floorstanders are not reviewed here.) All speakers come with magnetically attached, gray cloth grilles, though I didn't use them during my evaluation. The cabinets are available with either Satin White baffles with Oak sides or Satin Black baffles with Walnut sides. The wood grain isn't real wood veneer but a rather convincing-looking vinyl wrap. The seam of the vinyl falls directly in the middle of a cabinet side on each model but is for the most part invisible.

The cabinets are solid and made from CARB-rated MDF. (CARB-rated does not relate to density or strength, but rather states that it meets the California Air Resources Board's emission standards for formaldehyde.) A thin sliver of metallic trim surrounds each driver, and while I didn't mind this, its reflective nature might bother some users if they prefer not to hide it by using the grilles. Two pair of quality binding posts suitable for bi-wiring or bi-amping are provided. I reviewed the Elacs in a mono-wire setup, with the included shorting straps in place.

I've long preferred three-way center-channel speakers, and with its concentric driver, combined with a low crossover to the woofers, the UCR52 fits the bill. While hardly a bargain-basement center, it's far from the priciest available. Contrary to what many think, a center speaker isn't just for dialogue. By some measures, and depending on the source, it can also carry over half the load of the music and effects.

There are no subwoofers dedicated to the Uni-Fi Reference range, so we

didn't request any Elac subs for this review. The company's best subwoofer, the SUB3070, is still in its lineup, but that was originally designed for the now-discontinued Adante series. (I reviewed that model as part of an Adante system in 2020.) Rather than plow the same ground, I used a pair of SVS PB-3000 subwoofers that were already on hand as needed (and in my large, open concept floor space, they often were).

SETUP

I set up the UBR62 front speakers about 3.5-feet from the closest walls. Since concentric drivers don't always perform best when aimed directly at the listener, I made a point of angling the fronts inward with a sharper than normal twist toward the main listening seat. Each of the front speakers, the UCR52 center included, were set up on heavy stands.

The system's front end included a Denon AVR-X6700H A/V receiver, with three of its built-in amp channels driving the UCR52 center and the second pair of UBR62s that I used as surrounds. Two channels of a Parasound Halo A 52+ multichannel amplifier drove the L/R front speakers. The SVS subwoofers were positioned where they would provide reasonably consistent results for music and movies and crossed over to the front speakers at 90Hz (and slightly higher for the surround and height channels).

Because my room lacks deep bass support and is prone to audible peaks between 100-200Hz, I elected (both here and in previous reviews) to engage the Audyssey XT32 room correction feature of the Denon AVR but limited its response to 300Hz and below. I first auditioned the Elacs

with music, initially using only the front UBR62 bookshelves driven full-range without Audyssey, and after with Audyssey processing engaged. For a third variation, I engaged the two subwoofers (plus Audyssey below 300Hz) to compensate for the UBR62's lack of substantial deep bass in my very large room. For movies, both the subs and Audyssey (again, only below 300Hz) were always engaged. Four small overhead speakers (from PSB) were also active when Dolby Atmos was on the listening menu.

PERFORMANCE

I used CDs played on a Marantz UD7007 for all music listening. Starting out with the subwoofer- and Audyssey-free UBR62s, the sound was consistently open, natural, and detailed. A wide range of familiar well-recorded female vocal tracks that I played sounded just right, without excess sibilance or sizzle. Male voices were a bit warmer than I like, but not so much that most listeners would be bothered, and some might actually prefer it that way. Hard transients sounded crisp without going over the top. There was little "wow factor" in the performance of the UBR62s for better or worse, but their ease and sweetness invited extended listening.

As anticipated, the Uni-Fi Reference pair lacked adequate bass in my room. (Most such speakers when used on their own will end up in far smaller rooms.) On at least one recording a softly struck drum which I know to be there simply disappeared. So, at this point I moved to step two and engaged Audyssey below 300Hz but kept the subwoofers switched off. The bass was better, though in-room measurements didn't show

much improvement below 50Hz. That came as no surprise since Audyssey is designed to avoid overdriving speakers below their bass limits, and while it can't do this perfectly, it did prevent the Elac bookshelf speakers from being pushed into obvious distress.

The effects of Audyssey processing, which removed a significant bump in my room's unequalized response between 100Hz and 200Hz, opened the overall sound up and made it noticeably better. (Problems in this upper bass region nearly always originate from the room and/or placement and not from the speakers themselves. Also, excessive high bass can obscure deep bass, particularly when the latter isn't strong.)

Another effect of smoothing out excessive upper bass is a clarification of the entire audible spectrum, and that's what happened here. Aspects of the speakers' performance that were good before were now even better. The differences weren't dramatic, but complex musical threads sounded cleaner, with the warmth referred to above (and likely due to that 100-200Hz rise) naturally sorted out.

While the bass was now cleaner than before, it wasn't significantly deeper. But engaging the two SVS subs, together with Audyssey room EQ, totally transformed the performance of the UBR62s. With the subwoofers added, the Elacs now sounded as big and imposing as any loudspeakers I've yet had in my system, including larger floorstanders, with organ, bass guitar, Taiko (Japanese) drums, and other bottom-end-heavy recorded material proving to be no challenge at any sane volume level. Even with more subdued recordings, including vocals, choral selections, and solo or small

At a Glance

- + Clean-sounding dialogue
- + Silky detail
- + Big, open presentation
- Limited deep bass (without sub)

Price: \$3,100 (as tested)

elac.com

instrumental groups of many types, the subwoofers and EQ added a sense of ease and a freedom from boom or bloat that improved on the already fine performance offered by the Elacs themselves in my room.

When it came time to check out the speakers in a full 5.0 configuration (5.4.2 if you add in the non-Elac supporting cast of four overhead Atmos speakers and two subs) for movies, I redid the Audyssey setup for a range of reasons. The measured results weren't quite as good as in the stereo configuration described above, but the differences didn't compromise the audible performance.

I began with *Blade Runner 2049*, perhaps the best-sounding Ultra HD Blu-ray in my collection. Hans Zimmer's brilliant score is a key element here. In the quiet moments as Agent K visits an orphanage in an abandoned plant, the reverberations and echoes are endless while the music subtly flavors the environment before building to a groaning, almost formless crescendo. Later, in an abandoned Las Vegas showroom, K faces off against Decker as they trade punches accompanied by intermittent, holographic entertainers. Hard-hitting bass also punctuates the film throughout. While the SVS subwoofers can claim much of the credit for the bottom-end



ELAC UNI-FI REFERENCE UBR62 SURROUND SPEAKER SYSTEM

Test Bench

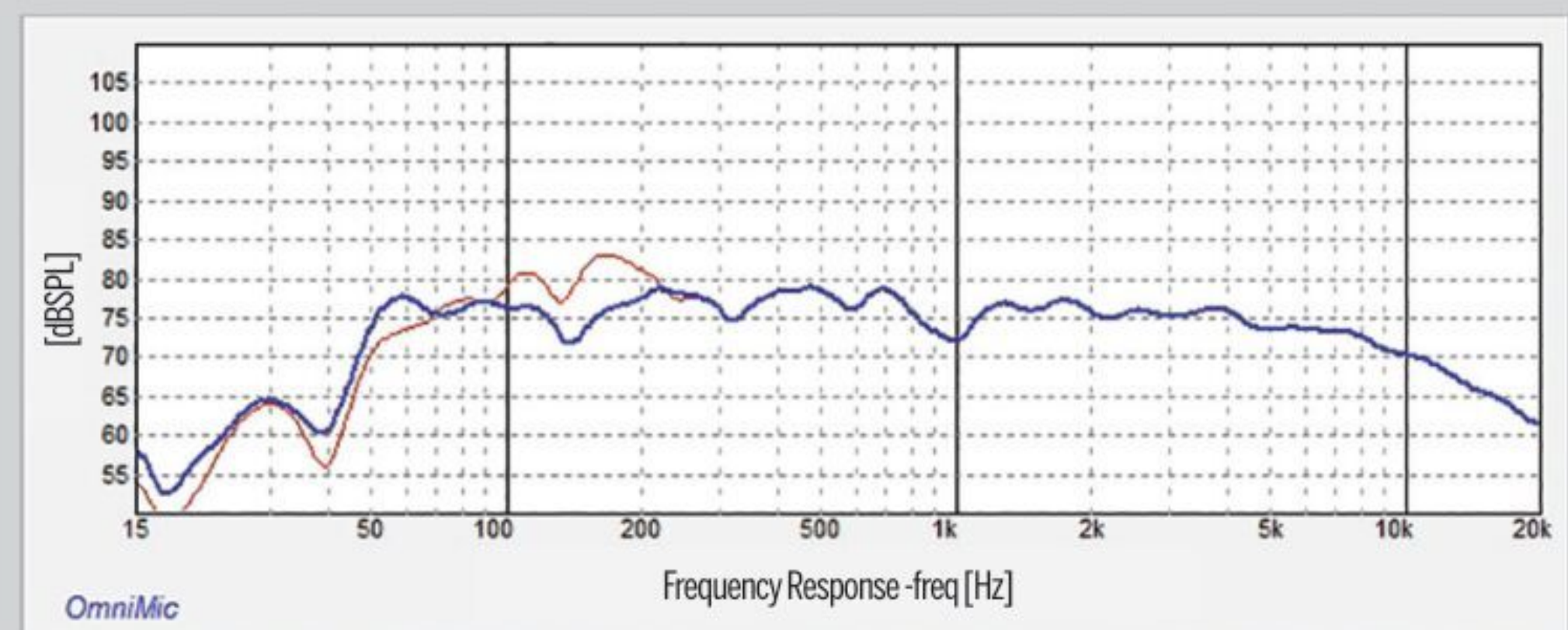
I conducted several in-room measurements using the Parts Express Omnimic measuring software and microphone, a \$300 package that offers a usefully accurate response of a speaker at the main listening seat. The results shown here are for my room. All of them were taken at the single, seated ear position about 10 feet from the speakers, not an average of several positions. (Experience in my room has shown that an average of several readings, taken across a span of about 2 feet, differs little from the single position measurement apart from smoothing out small ripples.) All curves here are 1/6th octave smoothed.

The graphs here are for the L/R Elac UBR62s. Fig.1 is for the left channel only, without subwoofers. Red is without Audyssey, blue is with Audyssey used only below 300Hz. The latter is obvious from the graph in which the two curves overlap so precisely above that frequency that they can't be seen separately. Audyssey here corrected for room-related peaks between 100Hz and 200Hz and slightly but usefully extended the Elac's response between 50 and 60Hz.—TJN

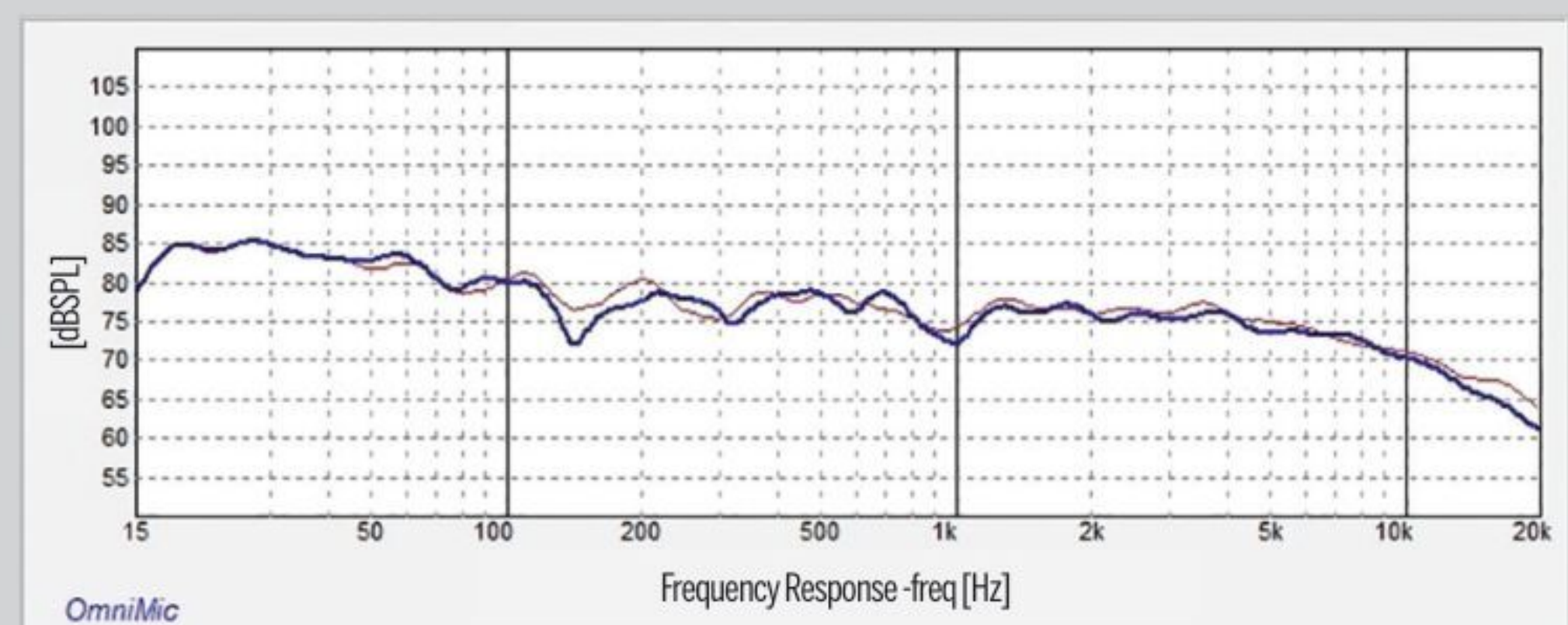
Specs

UBR62 BOOKSHELF: (\$1,200/pair) 6.5 in aluminum cone woofer, 4 in Aluminum cone midrange driver, 1 in soft dome tweeter; 8.19 x 14.3 x 13.15 in (W x H x D); 23.54 lb

UCR52 CENTER: (\$700) 5.25 in aluminum cone woofers (2), 4 in aluminum cone midrange, 1 in soft dome tweeter; 20.75 x 7.28 x 13.15 in (W x H x D); 29.04 lb



► **Fig.1** Elac UBR62 Left only, no subs. Red without Audyssey, blue with Audyssey below 300Hz.



► **Fig.2** Elac UBR62 with both Audyssey (below 300Hz) and 2x SVS PB3000 subwoofers. Red is the left channel, blue is the right channel.

weight, the Elac speakers blended perfectly with them into a unified, organic whole.

Anonymous is a Tudor-period film based around the theory that Shakespeare was not the actual author of his plays. Despite some unlikely twists and turns in the script, the story here nevertheless makes for compelling drama. There is plenty of dialogue and the UCR-52 center speaker delivered it with no obvious coloration, with the three-way design contributing to the clear and natural sound even at off-center seats. While the film offers little deep bass, the subwoofers again blended with

the Elac speakers to produce a good overall balance. This was particularly evident in an extended sequence beginning in chapter seven, an engrossing compilation of key scenes from several Shakespeare plays accompanied by sweet-sounding period music.

To check out multi-channel music on Blu-ray, I subsequently dropped *Trolls* and *Animusic* into my disc player. *Trolls* has an uneven story, but it's distinguished by vivid color and—of prime interest here—elaborate musical numbers. The Elac speakers handled the latter beautifully. Also worth noting is one effect near the end of chapter

21 where the lid of a cook pot in which the Trolls are imprisoned gets lifted. This was a brief but stunning ear-opener on the Elacs, with reverberation that spread outward dramatically from the front stage to the surrounds. I also appreciated here how the well-recorded dialogue was easily distinguishable on the UCR-52 center compared with the slightly canned-sounding voices heard on the film's more elaborate but inferior sequel, *Trolls World Tour*.

Animusic is a very different animal, one dedicated to even more complex musical creations. It's not a story, but rather a collection of animated, computer-generated musical numbers ranging from the stunning (a reimagining of the Mussorgsky suite *Pictures at an Exhibition*) to the odd (pogo stick instruments bouncing along on an undulating track). The dynamic range of this disc is wide, particularly on *Pictures at an Exhibition*, and the Elac system kept up with every note.

CONCLUSION

While this Elac Uni-Fi Reference system can't definitively prove that good bookshelf speakers are the equal of tower models when used with suitable subwoofers, their three-way design certainly helps. My resident Monitor Audio Silver 10 towers (two generations removed from the latest) have a small leg up on them when it comes to punch, top end air, and bass extension. Nevertheless, these Elacs make a strong case for themselves. I found their overall sound to be clean, sweet, and open, and when paired with a good subwoofer or two, they delivered exceptional performance with both music and movies.

The Verdict

Elac's new Uni-Fi Reference series can hang with many far larger and pricier loudspeakers. Just add a subwoofer or two to this system for movies, and you'll be good to go.

