

Boenicke W8 SE+ loudspeaker

by Chris Thomas

How excellent it is when a new loudspeaker both strays from the conventional and challenges your ideas about the shape of music in the home and indeed the music itself. From the set-up, positioning sequence and hearing the way that music flows from them, the Boenicke W8 SE+ from Switzerland will prove to you just how different it is. But simply putting together a loudspeaker design that doesn't conform to the usual styles we see every day and giving it a genuinely new voice is easier said than done. Designer, Sven Boenicke is a Swiss recording engineer and his speakers show the world how he hears music and I would say, how he relates to it, because what we have here is something genuinely out of the mainstream. Yes, it's a little unusual at first, strange even. But I assure you that is not different purely for the sake of it. My time with them started off as a bit of a roller-coaster of emotional responses alongside quite a bit of positional experimentation and several days of full-blown listening went by before I took a couple of days off and then came back to them with a more relaxed, less comparative mindset perhaps and it was only then that I began to really appreciate what a remarkable speaker the W8 SE+ really is. Because sitting there and waiting for any system to prise open your emotional receptors is a trap we've all fallen into. The music is the message but the messenger may speak in different voices and you surely need to be entirely open to its influences because audio enlightenment has many faces and comes in many forms.

The W8 SE+ is small. Depending on your point of view of course but, looking at the pics, I'd say it's smaller than you probably envisage. Its drivers are obviously small too as that fascinating cabinet is narrow enough get a hand round and lift clean off the floor. This is a good thing though as you will certainly spend some time moving them around your listening room, searching for the right placings and it means a small baffle too which bodes well for interesting images. So, what follows is a massively shortened version of what I found when I embarked on my voyage through the W8 SE+'s relationship to both my listening room and of course myself. It is, I stress, probably likely that your journey will be similar but, I'll try to discuss various aspects of their design as I go. It is not my usual review format I admit, but this isn't your usual speaker.

There are three versions of the W8. The standard, the SE and the SE + that I have been listening to. Bear in mind that this version costs ▶





▶ about double the price of the standard model. The SE+ variant means that it has a number of internal upgrades that add considerably to the cost of the standard version. The electromechanical parallel resonators and the acoustic phase linearisation network sound very grand upgrades and I am reliably informed that the first comprises of a tuned cable of absolutely exactly defined length, connected to the positive speaker terminal to offer what sounds to me like a resonating tuning fork, perhaps there to counter any mechanical resonances present. The latter comprises a capacitor/resistor network which apparently bends the phase to endow the design with better imaging. Neither of these in-cabinet improvements are new to me. I have seen the first devices used outside the

cabinet in a free-standing cable design and the internal phase correction is a widely employed device too. But the SE+ endowments go further. There are a pair of Steinmusic Speaker Match Signature devices, designed to eliminate EMF plus an improved Mundorf Silver Gold Oil capacitor on both, widebander and rear tweeter, which replaces the KZK white line version found in the standard W8. The widebander's main cap is even bypassed by a Duelund tinned copper cap. Also, attached to the magnets of the aluminium-coned wideband drivers are a set of Harmonix RF 5700 Tuning Bases. The upgrades continue with Bybee Quantum Purifiers which are also present in the SE version, and two series 16-cm series resonators added to widebander and the 4" driver. Oh and the Swing Base comes as standard too. At this stage, let me say that, without a standard pair of W8's for comparison, I have absolutely no way of commenting on these sonic upgrades. It's a lengthy list, I asked the UK distributor to comment on the differences between the standard and SE+ versions and he said that they were "massive".

Each cabinet interior is a work of art although you'll never see where most of the design beauty lies. They are formed from solid wood sections and not MDF or any of its ilk. Imagine the cabinet split vertically in two lengthwise and ▶

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- ▶ both sides being machined out in a complex labyrinth of enclosures including a loading for the side-mounted bass unit which curves through elegant radii, carefully designed to avoid any turbulence. It meets the outside world through a slot vent at the bottom of the rear of the cabinet. I doubt that there’s a single piece of superfluous cabinetry in that 15 litres of internal volume. You couldn’t achieve this with MDF and even with solid wood you would never arrive at something so exquisitely executed without recourse to a computer controlled CNC machine. This is where a lot of the extraordinary presentation of the W8 SE+ starts life. The individual loading and positioning of the drivers within this cabinet is really what the speaker is all about. Then the two mirror image sides of the cabinet – oak in the case of the review samples – are glued together and beautifully finished with subtly curved top and bottom edges. It is extremely elegant.

Before moving on I should describe the Swing Base set up. There is a slot cut at the bottom of each cabinet and a metal bar fitting slips into this and runs along the back edge. It’s a loose fit, but each bar terminates in circular pieces that are used to suspend the rear of the cabinet from two precise lengths of steel cable, terminated with a ferrule and hung inside two outriggers rather like a suspension bridge. Hooking each of these onto the cables decouples the rear of the cabinet from the floor while a ball bearing, sitting in its own cup nests into another cup submerged within the cabinet toward the front. When floated like this the whole cabinet sways around at the smallest touch. It’s an interesting solution to decoupling the cabinet though it doesn’t work as well on carpeted floor, but the company has its own ‘Carpet-Aid’ for this.

Siting the speakers begins with working out how much free air you can afford them. Initially and after a day’s listening in my usual and intuitive spots I found that they were too close to the wall and moved them halfway across the room toward a near-field position with the bass units facing out. I’ll spare you the details of the lengthy process as your own room will present you with enough challenges. I ended up with them about one-third the way across the room with the bass units facing inwards but after all this, I have to say that they sounded really interesting no matter where they were.

They are relatively inefficient at around 86 dB and have a nominal impedance of 4 Ohms, dropping to 2 Ohms above 5 kHz. Too much power is unlikely to be an issue and rather than recommending specific power requirements I would just say that you should prioritise quality above all else. Increasing the volume ▶



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► shows how the W8 SE+ drinks amplifier power. I had the best results driving them with the Vitus SIA-025 in full class A. More power wouldn't go amiss but the quality of the Vitus was lapped up by the W8 SE+ and I never wanted to drive them to enormous levels. A high-end source came in the shape of a dCS Bridge streamer with Vivaldi transport and DAC.

Drivers are interesting, if only because I have zero previous experience of any of them. The side-facing bass driver is a 165 mm model from Tang Bang, a company from Taiwan that now produces its models in China. This has no connection to the crossover and is driven directly from the amplifier. The two interconnected drivers on the front baffle are, at the top, a custom Fountek Widebander 75 mm unit with a 52 mm aluminium cone. Unusual to find a cone unit here but it has a claimed response to over 20 kHz. Below this is another Tang Bang driver, the 100 mm paper-coned model with a prominent phase-plug fashioned from what looks like wood. There is a conventional tweeter though and this is found at the rear of the cabinet, near the top. It's a perfectly named Lucky Sound, it's a custom-made model and I was expecting that it provided some ambient information to reinforce the work of the Fountek unit. I have come across this arrangement before but here I was surprised at just how much level this provides. So, as you see, this is a completely custom speaker where the intricate design of the cabinet innards has been carefully matched with specific drivers, albeit unusual ones.

The presentation is immersive and is certainly the first thing that grabs you. Soundscapes are laid out before you without the usual bass, mid and treble layers being the overriding character. The concept of depth is different with the Boenickes. The dimension extends not only from front to way, way back but hugely sideways too. Small changes in instrumental placements and shape are fascinating and pull you into the music. I would say that the presentation is virtually cinematic in its scope and it never stops surprising. You look at the drivers and where they are situated and wonder how this speaker can knit the music together with such amazing balance, shape and integration. But, put the comparisons with what you are used to aside and let the speaker talk to you because it can tell wonderful stories. It can show the full tonality ►



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► of instruments in surprising ways. Colour and beautiful harmonic structures hover in the air, disconnected from the cabinet yet in harmony with the whole picture. I found that their scale and dimension had far reaching influences. It seemed to free the instruments from the cabinet and perhaps as a result of the harmonious whole I have seldom been more aware of interplaying melodies. Voices are a total stand out too. Anyone who loves vocals, be they solo or massed, is going to be blown away by what they hear. The sense of voices being suspended in the air is superb and the classic singer-songwriter with sparse accompaniment speaks in such a intimate, personal and eloquent way that it's precious and indeed memorable. Add strings to the mix and the W8 SE+ will again wow you. Something very special happens to bowed instruments through the Boenicke W8 SE+. Lovely weight, beautiful textures and colours just float out of those cabinets, in wide-screen too.

This is a speaker that looks at the whole picture and never softens any tonality from the music. I was initially stunned at how good it was on piano. Herbie Hancock's *New Standard* album [Verve] surprised me as I had never thought his piano on this album was particularly nicely recorded. Yet here it was, rock solid and expansive. Warm but with great dynamic articulation and fully sensitive to micro changes in playing pressures. 'Love Is Stronger Than Pride' was just so solid, yet rhythmically loose. The piano, so intense and yet so clear with beautiful timing and marvellous phrasing shows you what art a truly great musician brings to a piece. There is a clarity of musical purpose here and a relaxed ability to unravel musical complexities. The conversation between the bass player and the drummer is opened up brilliantly within that intriguing landscape. Just when you think you understand the speaker it will delight you by revealing musical nuances that you really never expected and it often does this by drawing vividly coloured musical pictures in front of you.

I should also add as a minor caveat that tiny children and big roaming dogs will only serve to highlight the relative ease with which they might suffer driver damage. To be fair though, there are many speakers with exposed and accessible drivers so I wouldn't want to make too much of that one.

But, what a fascinating loudspeaker the Boenicke Audio W8 SE+ is, especially the way that the cabinet and 4 drivers have been so beautifully balanced. I really enjoyed just about everything about the time I spent with them and they certainly illuminated my listening and appreciation of the music, which is what really good products always do. Actually, I could have written a review twice this length about my experiences with them and it's worth bearing in mind that there are both larger and smaller models in the range designed and built with the same ethos. It would be remiss of me not to suggest that you consider them, especially if you love music and have a taste for something different because they are certainly that. +



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Four-way floorstander

Cabinets: Solid wood with internal enclosures and rear vented bass

Drivers: 1 × 165mm Tang Bang, 1 × Fountek Wideband 75mm (aluminium cone), 1 × 100 mm Tang Bang (paper coned), 1 × Custom Lucky Sound rear tweeter

Impedance: Nominal 4 ohms – dropping to 2 ohms above 5 kHz

Sensitivity: 84–86db

Dimensions: 77.6 × 11.4 × 26 cm (H×W×D)

Weight: 10kg

Finishes available: Oak, Walnut, Ash and Cherry. To name but 4

Price: £14,995 per pair

Manufacturer: Boenicke Audio

URL: boenicke-audio.ch

UK Distributor: Whole Note Distribution

URL: wholenotedistribution.co.uk