

the ear

HI-FI MUSIC GEAR

hardware review



Elipson Prestige Facet 8B

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Entering a crowded marketplace, French brand Elipson goes head-on to compete with some stiff competition with its latest two-way stand-mount. Trevor Butler takes a listen to see if there's any chance of entente cordiale.

When the single carton containing a pair of these French speaker arrived I have to admit that I was a little apprehensive. Could anything at this price (£499 for the pair, sans stands) really be up to the mark? Ten minutes into my first listening session though and I knew that here was something really rather special. A competent speaker which avoids the modern designer's [or, in many cases, design committees'] penchant for a speaker which projects the sound into the listener's lap.

While a recessed sound is not what any serious audiophile is after, to have an overtly forward one is just so unnatural. I am not expecting Madonna to be sitting on my lap (you should be so lucky! –Ed), or to be propelled into the first row of the orchestra. Yet, this is what so many small speakers do now. Presumably this is in an attempt to create a strong first impression? In reality it just sounds absurd.

Another trait I am thankful that Elipson didn't choose to follow is that of employing metal drive units. Again, the fast transients create an immediate wow-factor, but such speakers soon become tiring and, after several hours of listening, really fatiguing. Those are not criticisms which can be made of this French design.

So, instead of telling the Editor that I'd be sending these little boxes back, I really grew to like them. Now, don't expect the same quality and performance from a similar-sized (or even smaller) cabinet costing three- or four-times as much. No. That's not what the Prestige Facet 8Bs are about. Here we have a high-volume product engineered in France but constructed in the Far East to keep costs down. And that is the key. Like so many hi-fi designs, this one has been made to a price-point. But, unlike so many hi-fi designs, here it has been done well – without sacrifice to sound quality and avoiding techniques which, while giving an immediate sense of satisfaction in fact reveal engineering ineptitude.

Design

The Facet 8B is the second-smallest in Elipson's Prestige range; the diminutive 6B also being a two-way and one which can properly be described as a bookshelf model. It would have to be a sturdy shelf indeed to accommodate the larger 8B, and a deep one, the speaker is 348mm front to back, with a rear-firing port which required considerable clearance from the back wall for

greatest neutrality. Ideal mounting was on a pair of Hi-Fi racks stands placed out in the room, toed-in just very slightly.

The cabinet is a large one, being almost as deep as it is tall and designed with careful thought to minimising vibrations and internal resonances. The baffles are composed of two materials, of different density and thickness, while the enclosure benefits from numerous internal braces. Audiophile components are employed in the steep-slope crossover network, and the cabinet corners rounded for pleasing aesthetic effect. Finish options are the pretty walnut vinyl



with black-lacquered front which we tried, or solid white or solid black. To the rear are bi-wire silver-plated terminals for those who wish to experiment. In the box are black cloth-covered grilles and an optional, screw-on base plate for each speaker to act as a plinth when required. In our set-up, we did not find it beneficial.

A 170mm doped-paper mid/bass driver (with large bullet-shaped phase plug at its centre) is combined with a 25mm soft-dome tweeter, both incorporating Elipson's own imaginative and distinctive synthetic-rubber crowns surrounding the drive units. Yes, they provide something of a trademark but are also deployed to improve acoustics by aiding dispersion and reducing baffle effects with the aim of producing a more linear response. This Facet crown is how the speaker series acquires its name.

The move away from the bog-standard polypropylene midrange and metal dome tweeter is something to be applauded, and undoubtedly contributed to the 8B's appealing and relaxed sound.

Setup

Sensitivity is quoted at a high 91dB, negating the need for a muscle-bound amplifier. Indeed anything from 30-120W/ch is suggested as adequate, and the speaker is said to handle 85W RMS, so should be loud enough for party-volumes in even quite large rooms. As it was, the 8B went plenty loud enough to let the neighbours know what we were auditioning. This is no slouch.

With our trusty Hegel Röst amplifier connected it was time to put the Elipson two-ways through their paces. Sources included a satellite TV decoder for off-air signals, streaming via Apple Music, and a Pioneer Blu-Ray player for CD and DVD sources.

A variety of speaker stands were tried and best results obtained when the listening axis was between the tweeter and midrange – although it would be helpful if all manufacturers advised where they had designed this optimum. A distance of around a metre from the rear wall produced the most natural, realistic sound, while a minor toe-in of a few degrees created the most believable stereo imaging.

Sound quality

It soon became clear that soundstage depth, width and height are this speaker's strengths – they produce an image far bigger than their size would suggest. This is impressive in itself and made large-scale recordings, including the great choral finale of 'Mahler 8' (Solti/CSO from 1971) live up to its name of 'Symphony of a Thousand'. The grand gestures of music of this scale were handled well by the small boxes which benefit from their capacious volume. The performance acoustics were brought home to the listening room in a convincing manner, well above that expected from a model at this price. Here we have a loudspeaker capable of rendering large-scale classical forces with substance, combining adequate levels of low-end grunt with great fluidity, combined with an effortless midrange and smooth treble. Impressive stuff and lacking the harshness one often finds at this level.

Moving to Thomas Tallis' 'Spem in alium' (Winchester Cathedral Choir under David Hill) and the 1989 Hyperion recording really brought home the magic of this work, with the boys' voices resonating in a most musical manner to bring home the wonderfully open acoustic of the majestic cathedral in all its splendour.

Still trying to find the Elipson's nemesis, I turned to my acid test: the human voice. So often speech reveals a speaker's deficiencies; but, with the 8B, a variety of pieces including some BBC Radio Four dramatisations of the Old Bailey barrister Rumpole and a recording of the mellifluous Charlotte Green reading the shipping forecast showed just how neutral these little speakers are. Almost to monitor quality, and that is an accolade I do not grant lightly. It is clear that the 8B has been voiced so as not to add any coloration to the input signal.

A member of the listening panel requested some Leonard Cohen, an artist I am used to hearing on the hi-fi show circuit if not at home. Apple Music offered various tracks and his unmistakably dry bass vocals opened up to create an alluring sound devoid of harshness or unpleasant aberrations. Without wishing to sound corny, the 8B's really do offer a window to the performer in an engaging and satisfying way, producing a large and open soundstage with a smoothness which makes listening effortless.



Only when turning to some rock repertoire was there a hint that this speaker was struggling to cope, timing wasn't spot-on throughout Queen's 'Bohemian Rhapsody'. This was a characteristic heightened with synthesized electronic 'music' where drive and aggression appeared muted. For example, with American Eminem's Encore dynamics could become a little suppressed, and the bass was not as taut as one might have liked. More aggression would have aided the experience and increased the excitement level – but that is perhaps to expect too much from a sub-£500 enclosure of this size.

Conclusion

France has brought us many wonderful things in life: vintage Champagne, wonderful Cognac, delicious calvados, and now the Elipson Prestige 8B. Here we have a design with good drive unit integration; one where listeners did not pinpoint specifically the bass, nor the midrange, neither the treble. This shows that there is a seamless soundstage presented as a coherent whole. That in itself is an achievement worthy of note.

Elipson have demonstrated in the 8Bs that competent speakers can be created at this price-point and, in so doing, have set a benchmark which other manufacturers would do well to follow. In any A/B comparison of similarly priced models at a high street shop, the Elipsons might seem a tad restrained, laid back even. But, consider this: it is the other speakers being auditioned which are too forward, while the French design is, in fact, creating what the recording engineer intended you to hear. As in most things, it's horses for courses – and each listener must decide on personal preference. That said, it carries my recommendation – especially for classical and jazz listeners who are constrained to this level by size and/or budget.



Specifications

Type: 2-way, two-driver stand-mount monitor with rear-ported bass reflex enclosure.

Driver complement: soft dome 25mm tweeter, 165mm doped paper mid-bass

Frequency response: 47Hz – 25kHz +/-3dB

Cable terminals: bi-wire

Impedance: 6 Ohms

Sensitivity: 91dB/W/m

Dimensions (HxWxD): 230 x 200 x 347mm

Weight: 10.15kg

Finishes: black, white, black/walnut