

# 8 Top Speakers Reviewed! the absolute sound

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*Alta Audio Abyss*

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# Loudspeaker Focus



## Alta Audio Alyssa

### A Keeper

Steven Stone

**W**hat would be the characteristics of an ergonomically perfect loudspeaker? It would have to be small, so it could fit into tighter spaces, but produce “big” enough sonics to satisfy hard-rockers and symphonic specialists. Of course, it would also have to be beautiful, so that no one could object to its presence, even in a stylish environment. And, lastly and perhaps most importantly, it would have

to have a voice that can sound like real music, not merely hi-fi. What if I told you that Alta Audio’s Alyssa comes closer to achieving this ideal than any small loudspeaker I’ve reviewed? Would that interest you? If so, join me on a little audio adventure.

#### Tech Tour

At first look, the Alta Alyssa appears to be merely another two-way loudspeaker with a dynamic midrange/woofer combined with a metal-foil tweeter—not an uncommon

arrangement. Most loudspeaker manufacturers using this combo put their emphasis on the tweeter, which usually has lower distortion and a much cleaner response than a conventional dome tweeter. But the star in the Alyssa’s firmament isn’t the tweeter; it is the mid/woofer combined with the technically elegant cabinet.

The mid/woofer is a custom driver made by Morel exclusively for Alta, based on Alta’s specifications. At first glance, it appears to be a conventional design, but it’s not. According to Alta’s Michael Levy, “the basic design of our woofer was only a concept in Oren Mordechai’s (president of Morel) mind that he had put out in a prospective product sheet when we met at CES in 2010. He told me of the virtues of using a titanium former for the voice coil (high stiffness, low weight, good power handling, lower magnetic interference for smoother dynamic response). I decided that I wanted it. It took over 18 months for Morel to deliver the product because of problems dealing with molding titanium, but when I got the first samples, I was not disappointed. The driver in the Alyssa is the latest version. The 3.1”-diameter voice coil, the neodymium hybrid motor, the air-flow design, and the cast magnesium basket are all state of the art.”

The Alyssa’s tweeter is manufactured for Alta by Fountek. It resembles Fountek’s standard ribbon tweeter, seen on many loudspeakers, but this version is custom-built for Alta. It consists of a 2½”-long pure-aluminum ribbon powered by a neodymium magnet system.



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## Specs & Pricing

**Type:** Two-way monitor

**Driver complement:** One 2" ribbon tweeter, one 6" mid/woofer with titanium former

**Frequency response:** 32Hz–47kHz ±3dB

**Impedance:** 4 ohms

**Sensitivity:** 87.5dB

**Dimensions:** 8" wide at top (9.6" at bottom) x 14.5" x 13.25" deep at top (14.25" at bottom)

**Weight:** 28 lbs.

**Price:** \$5000/pr. in piano black finish, \$6000/pr. for beechwood, rosewood, and other custom finishes

## ALTA AUDIO

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The ribbon's inherently low mass allows for smooth output to well beyond the limits of human hearing, while the carefully designed cast-magnesium chamber tunes the output to well below crossover frequency.

The cabinet design combines two well-known and often-used technologies that are rarely found together, a tuned port and a transmission line. The two methodologies work in tandem in the Alyssa. Alta calls this "XTL bass." According to Alta, "our XTL (patent pending) bass design is a hybrid of tuned port and transmission line, where our innovative use gets the best out of both concepts, while eliminating their weaknesses. The concepts of Q (the ratio of reactance to resistance) and impedance-matching explain how we get a box with a volume under 1/2-cubic-foot to produce clear, powerful, defined, well-controlled, sub-woofer-deep bass. (The anechoic room measurement has a -3dB point at 32Hz.)"

The Alyssa's clever design performs like a tuned-port

loudspeaker above its system resonance. Below this point, the transmission line takes over, matching internal impedance and coupling with the mid/woofer. The length of the transmission line determines the tuning frequency. The diameter of the port determines the Q. The design also reduces overall driver motion and increases the loudspeaker's power-handling capabilities.

The Alyssa's faceplate is made of a multi-layered, internally damped, multi-density composite Alta calls "DampHard." When it is used in combination with sonically shaped cabinets, the need for internal damping is minimized, which according to the manufacturer, allows the dynamics to "open up" throughout the woofer's frequency range.

The Alyssa's cabinets must be seen close-up to fully appreciate their beauty. The rosewood veneer is vertically grained with red-brown striations, and the finish ranks among the slickest mirror-finishes I've seen on any loud-

speaker, regardless of price. The seams between the wrap-around side/top piece and the front baffle are so perfectly executed that you need a magnifying glass to see the actual junction. If you demand a perfectly finished, elegant-looking loudspeaker, the Alyssa will easily make the grade.

## Ergonomics and Setup

I employed the Alyssa loudspeakers in two different systems. For the first several months, the Alyssas were installed in my nearfield computer/desktop reference system. Their drivers were approximately two feet away in this setup, so there were minimal issues with the room influencing their intrinsic sound. To obtain optimal frequency response, the Alyssa's needed to be positioned so my ears were below the plane of the tweeter, roughly on the same level as the top of the midrange woofer. After trying several desktop loudspeaker stands, I settled on a double set of high-density foam supports, stacked to raise the loudspeaker four inches above my desktop surface. I used a variety of power amplifiers with the Alyssas, since their sensitivity is 87.5dB. The least powerful was a Class A 10-watt transistor design that was adequate to mezzo-forte levels before showing its limits. On the other end, I used the 150Wpc Benchmark ABH-2, which had no problem driving the Alyssas to well past *my* top volume limits. I used the latest version of the Tortuga Audio LDR 300X as the preamplifier and source switch, while the iFi Zen DAC signature version, Sony TA-ZH1ES, and Gustard X-16 served as digital sources. While I did employ a subwoofer, the Velodyne DS-10+, it was set for a 45Hz crossover point.

After several months I moved the Alyssas to my main-room system, replacing the Spatial X-2 loudspeakers. This system had the Pass Labs 150.8 power amplifier with the Benchmark HPA-4 preamplifier and/or Goldnote DS-10 DAC. Long balanced XLR cabling and USB cables were from Wireworld (Series 8), while short RCA cabling was Kimber KCAG. This system also has two JL Audio f112 subwoofers. Alta makes matching stands for the Alyssas, but I used a pair of venerable 24" Anchor loudspeaker stands.

## Sound

During my career as an audio reviewer, I've reviewed and owned many fine loudspeakers. Some, like the Dunlavy SC VI and Quad ESL 57, were in my systems for years. Also, during that time I've had an opportunity to hear almost every major manufacturer's flagship offerings at the many audio shows I've attended. This being acknowledged, I've rarely experienced a loudspeaker that is both as revealing and as easy to listen to for extended periods of time as the Alyssas. In comparison the Alyssas are as musical as the Quad 57s, but with far better harmonic integration and frequency extension. They are also as detailed as the big Dunlavy's (the SC-VI were 450 pounds each), but with far greater musicality.

One of my reference nearfield monitor loudspeakers is the Audience 1+1, which uses a single full-range driver with two passive radiators. In essence it's a single-driver speaker with augmentation. In some ways the Alyssas are similar, in that most of the sound is produced by the mid/woofer, while the ribbon tweeter

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serves to fill in the top end and the cabinet takes care of the frequencies below the driver's native output. Because of this, the Alyssa shares many of the best characteristics of a single-driver design, virtually disappearing on a desktop or in a room and producing an extremely intimate and detailed rendition of the entire soundstage, with well-defined edges and outlines to all the musical elements.

The Alyssa's imaging characteristics reminded me of the Dunlavy SC VI loudspeakers because, like the Dunlavys, I found that they worked best with a spacing wider than an equilateral triangle. All the imaging occurred between, rather than outside, the speaker cabinets. Also, the front of the image was firmly anchored behind rather than in front of the loudspeaker. The Alyssa's soundstage characteristics were dictated by the source material I chose. On my mono Charlie Christian recordings, the soundstage was as narrow as a nickel. On the latest recording of Mahler's 8<sup>th</sup> from Qobuz featuring the Los Angeles Philharmonic conducted by Gustavo Dudamel on Deutsche Gramophone, the opening passage, with the full orchestra and chorus, was both wide and deep, with the chorus spanning the entire expanse of the rear of a huge soundstage.

One sonic aspect that often separates dynamic driver-based loudspeakers from electrostatic and planar designs is the lack of grain or additive texture of the latter compared to cone loudspeakers.

One of the problems of loudspeaker design is that most drivers, regardless of what materials are employed, have resonance characteristics that are determined by the materials used. Polypropylene sounds like plastic, paper cones have a dry papery resonance, and metal ribbon drivers can have a metallic zing. All these are well-known issues that the best speaker designers account for in their designs. The Alyssa's Morel composite driver is remarkably free of any characteristic material resonance that I can discern. Because of this the Alyssa sounds more like a planar loudspeaker than a dynamic one. It is fast on transients, but even at higher SPLs the Alyssa does not get hard, granular, aggressive, or amusical. A good reference track to prove this point would be any of the selections from Jacob Collier's latest release, *Jacobian Chill*. The first song, "The Sun is in Your Eyes," opens with a stripped-down tune that contains only unprocessed vocals and guitar, establishing the relaxed and natural ambience that contrasts with the next tune, "In Too Deep," with its processed, multi-layered vocals, deep synth bass, and big open soundstage. Kiana Lede's guest vocal tracks have a soft dreamy quality enhanced by the clever processing and imaginative image placement. Through the Alyssas it is easy to hear all the separate multi-tracked vocal stems.

Contrasted with the last "full-range" monitor I reviewed, the LSA-10, the Alyssas have a more cohesive frequen-

cy response. The LSA-10 utilized a large passive radiator which delivered an unfettered bass response that was impressive, but compared to the Alyssa's bass it was not as well-controlled or well-integrated into the rest of the frequency range. The Alyssa's low-end response sounds far more natural and less "jumpy" than the LSA-10's. In short, it sounds more like what I hear from live music. On my own live concert recordings of the Boulder Philharmonic orchestra, the overall sonics were much closer to what I originally heard in the concert hall.

## Summary

Audiophiles have many choices when they look for a high-resolution loudspeaker that delivers a lot of detail. They can also find many loudspeakers with sunny musical dispositions. But in my experience, finding a loudspeaker that can deliver high resolution and inner detail yet remain musical while doing so is as common as a unicorn. In my systems the Alta Alyssa loudspeaker did exactly that. I could listen all day at reference levels without fatigue; yet, during that time I never felt as if I was being spared any of the micro-details.

Longtime readers know that I rarely go gaga over anything I review, but I must admit the Alta Alyssa loudspeaker is something special. For many audiophiles it could well be the loudspeaker that enters their listening rooms and never leaves. It is simply that good. **tas**