ADAM Audio: S3V Active 3-Way Monitor

REVIEWED BY ADAM KAGAN

German speaker manufacturer ADAM Audio recently introduced its S-series speakers, including the S2V, S3V, S3H, S5V, and S5H. These speakers represent the newest advances in technology from ADAM and include updates in driver, porting, and cabinet design. As many of you know, ADAM speakers use a proprietary folded-ribbon tweeter and waveguide.

Over the past few months, I've had the opportunity to test drive the S3V, the mid-priced model of the line, in my studio. It employs a 9" woofer, 4" midrange, and an S-ART folded-ribbon tweeter. Each S3V is DSP-controlled, with a dedicated power amp for each driver — 500 W, 300 W, and 50 W, respectively. With all that horsepower, these full-range, high-powered studio monitors offer a maximum SPL of 124 dBA at 1 m, with a frequency response of 32 Hz – 50 kHz. On the rear panel of the speakers, one XLR jack is for analog input, and a separate pair of male and female XLR jacks provide digital (AES3) input and thru. A USB Type-B connector allows access to the onboard DSP through a computer running ADAM's downloadable S Control software (macOS or Windows) for EQ and room correction. Alternatively, a physical rotary encoder and OLED display on the rear panel can be used. On the front panel of the cabinet is an LED indicating power status, and the bottom front of the cabinet sports two triangular ports.

In my mix room, I placed the speakers about 65" from mix position, in the typical equilateral configuration, and set the speakers to the "Pure" (flat) factory preset using the rear-mounted encoder and screen. I also plugged a USB cable into each speaker so that further EQ tweaks could be made from the comfort of my mix position, via S Control on my laptop. To break in the S3V pair, I put on an iTunes playlist at a moderate level and let the S3Vs play overnight for about a week. (I have found many speakers change drastically in the first 20–30 hours of use, and I wanted to give the S3Vs an honest first listen.) In my mix studio, I run Sonarworks Reference 3 software [Tape Op #103] to tune my monitors. Before applying any corrective EQ, I wanted to establish a baseline for the S3V, so I ran some tests using Room EQ Wizard [#111] and FuzzMeasure [#111], and found the response of the S3V to be almost identical to that of my main monitors, which happen to be a pair of vintage 12" Tannoy Little Golds with

Tannoy TS10 subs. The frequency response measured flat down to 40 Hz, with a –8 dB roll-off at 30 Hz. From 2 kHz on up, there was a gentle slope down to about –3 dB at 20 kHz. The overall small dips and bumps of the S3V's frequency response matched my main monitors' measured curve, which effectively shows my room's acoustic signature, so it's fair to say the S3V has a generally flat response between 40 Hz and 20 kHz.

After listening to several reference tracks and some current masters that I was working on, I found the ADAMs to have excellent imaging, especially around the high-mids on electric guitars and background vocals. Pianos and pads in pop songs were easy to hear, which speaks well of the midrange clarity, and the bottom end felt solid and weighty. On some material, the vocals sat a bit further back in the mix than I'm used to, and the 80–100 Hz thump of the kick drum felt a little subdued. The clarity is there, but some of the forwardness that I'm accustomed to hearing is tamed by the S3V. I decided to set a "house curve" EQ using S Control and ADAM's onboard DSP. The software installed easily on my MacBook Pro and launched a very good-looking and easy-to-navigate EQ plug-in window. S Control's photorealistic GUI allows setup of the speaker, including analog/digital input selection, volume adjustment (–60 dB to +12 dB), and delay time (up to 5 ms). Also, two factory and two user EQ presets can be recalled. S Control's EQ provides low and high–shelves, plus six parametric bands. Interestingly, all eight bands offer 20 Hz – 20 kHz, ±12 dB of control. I found that, with ADAM's software, you don't hear the EQ until you load the setting into the speaker, and the speaker mutes for about 30 seconds before it fires back up with the new EQ preset — a tedious process that doesn't allow for real-time trials. My workaround was to put an EQ plug-in on my master fader, dial in a curve with the plug-in, and then copy the EQ settings into S Control to load into each speaker. I eventually settled on a wide bell cut of about –4 dB around 50 Hz. That EQ, to my ears, gave the S3V pair a solid, but not overly hyped, low end that left room for a bit more clarity across the rest of the spectrum.

Over several weeks, I found the S3V enjoyable to listen to, with its genre sweet-spots being pop R&B and modern-rock music, where the S3V exhibited a clean transient response, with punchy lows and a clear presentation of vocals and ambience. On some heavy blues-rock, the guitars sounded great, while the S3V's laid-back mid-bass left the bass guitar feeling a little distant. I had been mixing an audiophile country album, and with the S3V I could easily hear the subtle differences between different reverbs. While mixing some modern EDM and R&B vocals, I found that I had a wide range of acceptable high-frequency EQ settings that all sounded good. That caused me to shy away from any extreme EQ changes, since the speakers seemed to smooth out some of the EQ changes I made. The S3V worked great for acoustic-music mixes and even for mastering fusion and chamber

music. For dense pop and rock mixes, my passive speakers provided a bit more detail, especially in the bass tones around 100–300 Hz. I'm sure with some more time, I could become comfortable with the S3V pair as my main monitors.

The S3Vs filled my control room evenly and presented a nice, wide sweet-spot. I think a client sitting off to one side would be able to make informed mix decisions. The amount of onboard amplifier power and the wide sweet-spot make the S3V an effective midfield monitor for large control rooms. I would recommend a listening distance of at least 6 ft from each speaker to allow the 3?way configuration to develop a cohesive sound and image, which may make these speakers too large for control rooms less than 15 ft deep. The S3V provides a much larger sound than one would expect from this size cabinet, and the sound is refined and detailed. With a street price of AU$7,999 per pair, the ADAM Audio S3V has some stiff competition, but its feature set and overall quality put it in a good position to compete well with other speakers at this price point.