

HOME Theater

Athena's on the money
with a petite 5.1 system.

by Kevin Hunt

Micra. Economics

It's called Micra—as in micron and minute—but Athena Technologies really didn't have to be so modest when naming their latest, and smallest, home theater speaker system. Micra, although dead-on accurate, somehow doesn't do justice to this rockin' little package. Visually, it's Micra. Monetarily, it's Micra. But sonically, it's definitely maxi, as in maximum volume... and maximum value.



Athena Micra 6 Speaker System

The Maxi Micra? Whatever, let's just call the Micra 6 the ground-work for assembling an authentic home theater for around \$1,000. With the Micra system, Athena has entered an area virtually ignored during the stunning wave of HTIB success—serious, affordable, and small home theater speaker systems that sell for about \$500.

four of budget-speaker design—with the Micra 6. Athena sends their Micra speaker designs to China for manufacturing but produces the subwoofer at their Toronto plant.

Here's what came out of API's research facilities, which include access to the National Research Council of Canada:

- Four MS satellites not much bigger than a cantaloupe: 7 inches

high, 4.5 wide and deep, and about 2.5 pounds each.

- The MC center-channel speaker, a low-profile variation of the MS that's been stretched to 11 inches wide but weighs a little less than 5 pounds.

- The M225 subwoofer, the Micra's muscle, which is built more like a svelte tower than a traditional boxy sub. It reaches almost 17 inches, yet it's only 9.4 inches wide and about 14 deep.

a double-bloated midsection. Flat-screen owners, take note: This roller coaster of a center-channel speaker has lots of curves and would make a nice fashion match for an LCD or plasma TV. Also note that each speaker is adorned with a sliding, metal mounting bracket that allows for easy placement on the wall or ceiling, with a single screw for the satellites and two for the center channel. It's the simplest mounting system I've seen. (Optional MS-STB-1 stands for the satellites are also available.)

The M225's distinctive cabinet is black with a long, silver face that features a gaping port, a volume control the size of a silver dollar, and a power-on/standby LED. The M225 stands on four plastic, silver cones that look good and help control resonance. Inside the walls of medium-density fiberboard (0.75 inches thick on the sides, 0.5 inches on top) are an 8-inch, down-firing, molded poly cone driver with a 20-ounce magnet and a 75-watt Class AB amplifier that's purportedly capable of 225-watt peaks. Looking at the sub's backside, I can almost hear the sighs of relief from prospective buyers. It's a model of simplicity, with a low-level RCA input finished in gold, spring-clip speaker-level inputs, an on/off switch, and a power cord. Run a single RCA interconnect from your A/V receiver to the M225, adjust the volume to your liking, and you're in business.

With a bottom end so limited (rated at 100 hertz), the little satellites need, and receive, a hall-of-fame performance from the M225 to make the Micra 6 system



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A. The Micra 6 features four 2.5-pound MS satellites, the 5-pound MC center-channel speaker, and the 22-pound, tower-esque M225 sub.

Energy Loudspeakers—which is, like Athena, a division of Canadian speaker giant Audio Products International—brought the compact, six-speaker package to prominence in the mid-1990s with the Take 5 system. In that spirit, the Micra 6 is even smaller and, at \$549, less expensive. And don't think that an HTIB is that much easier to set up. With the Micra 6, fittingly, it's no big thing.

Athena, and specifically chief engineer Gord Van Kessel, has hit upon a balance of style, function, performance, and price—the fab

At 22 pounds, it's about 1.5 times the weight of the rest of the system.

The satellites' contemporary silver cabinets, made of injected-molded resin, are impregnated with a 3.5-inch, polypropylene cone driver (yes, the cabinets bloat at the midsection) that uses a 9-ounce magnet, a substantial endowment for a driver of this size. The tweeter is a 0.5-inch textile dome with a neodymium magnet.

The MC adds a second 3.5-inch driver that flanks the center-mounted tweeter and thus requires



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sound so big. The fact that the M225, a simplified son of Athena's Audition Series AS-P300, purportedly delivers bass down to 30 Hz (excellent, at least by sub/sat standards) is only part of the story.

The M225 also sonically blends with the satellites without human assistance. Athena retreated to an anechoic chamber to custom-tune the subwoofer's crossover circuit, developing a filter system

that specifically complements the satellites. This way, there's no messing with a set-it-yourself crossover-frequency control.

With the Micra 6 system only visiting, I didn't use the satellites' mounting brackets. Instead, I placed each satellite on a stand (not the MS-STB-1). The MC sat atop a Samsung TXN3071WHF widescreen HD monitor. All of the speakers are magnetically shielded, so placing them near the TV wasn't a problem. Athena includes clearly marked cables for each speaker but no RCA cable for the subwoofer. I chose to stick with my own cables and suffered the consequences. I wrestled with the tiny spring-clip speaker terminals before the front speakers accepted the funky banana plugs on my Analysis Plus Oval 9 cables. The MC kept spitting them out, so I finally used bare wire. The satellites accepted conventional dual-banana plugs fed with Straight Wire Rhythm cable. Still, a lesson learned: Most Micra 6 owners will be perfectly satisfied with the supplied cables.

I matched the Micra 6 system with other exemplary budget components: Pioneer's \$249

DV-563A universal player (this progressive-scan DVD player also accepts DVD-Audio and SACD discs) and the 30-inch Samsung HD monitor, which has an MSRP of \$1,099. I also used a slightly aged but still active Marantz SR7000 A/V receiver.

Even in a smallish room, about 14 by 11 feet, the M225 had to be pushed to nine on its 10-step volume control to match the speakers' volume during calibration with the *Avia Guide to Home Theater* test DVD. As it turned out, this was nothing to worry about.

To find out right away what the M225 could dish out, I

reached for an old favorite, the *Glory* DVD, and called up the Battle of Antietam (Sharpsburg). In terms of graphic violence and shock value to start a movie, *Glory* is the Civil War's *Saving Private Ryan*. Although the scene only sets up

Captain Robert G. Shaw (Matthew Broderick) as the future leader of the 54th Massachusetts Colored Infantry, the chaos of cannon blasts, musket fire, and shocking violence (like someone taking a cannonball to the head) leaves a lasting impression. Sonically, it's a good measure of a surround system's ability to bring home big-screen realism. The M225, whose 30-Hz rating is legitimate, didn't flinch under the weight of heavy artillery. Hardly. The floorboards rattled beneath my chair.

On the more-contemporary but medieval-like *Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*, the Micra 6 system reproduced the crisp clang of

swords and the snarl of the big-hair wolves in the "Wolves of Isengard" chapter. The sound seemed much more lifelike than the computer-animated wolves, which in the clarity of a progressive-scan DVD player and an HD-ready set, looked more like a video game than wild game.

As for subtlety, the Micra 6 entered *No Man's Land*—Danis Tanovic's story about Serbs and Croats stuck in a trench between the warring sides in Bosnia that won a best-screenplay award at Cannes in 2001—and discovered nature. In the "Help Is Coming"

chapter, as the stranded men await help from U.N. troops, I could hear an injured soldier's breathing in the front speakers and the sound of flies and crickets in the surrounds. It becomes a Tanovic theme: war in the

midst of nature's beauty. Thanks for the early tip, Micra 6.

Athena did more than just match the subwoofer to the speakers. It also did a nice job of tonally matching the MC with the MS satellites. If I were handing out MVP awards in this system, they'd go to the M225 and the MC; the MC reproduced dialogue with such clarity and breadth. And that goes for such relatively low-fi material as *Curb Your Enthusiasm: The Complete First Season* and its Dolby 2.0 soundtrack.

Smaller sub/sat systems invariably show their deficiencies when

HIGHLIGHTS

- Instant sub/sat integration
- Superb sound for the system's size and price
- Simple, built-in mounting brackets

B. Notice anything missing from the M225's back panel? This sub is designed to automatically blend with the MS and MC speakers, so you don't need to fiddle with a crossover control.





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shifting from soundtracks to music. Because the satellites are so small, the subwoofer must cover a much larger frequency range. When a sub is a system's main source of energy at 100 Hz, it's asking for trouble. Let's just say that the sub usually gets a little clumsy, just a bit too boisterous. Sure enough, at times, the M225 experienced turbulence. Ewan Vernal's double-bass on "Lord MacDonald's," a traditional Gaelic tune on Karan Casey's *Distant Shore* (Shanachie), is double trouble for the M225.

Although the sub didn't make a seamless transition into music, all I had to do was drop the volume a couple of steps on the M225's

control to restore system balance. In another room, in another system, that step might be unnecessary. With the M225's easy-access volume control, I didn't mind making the adjustment.

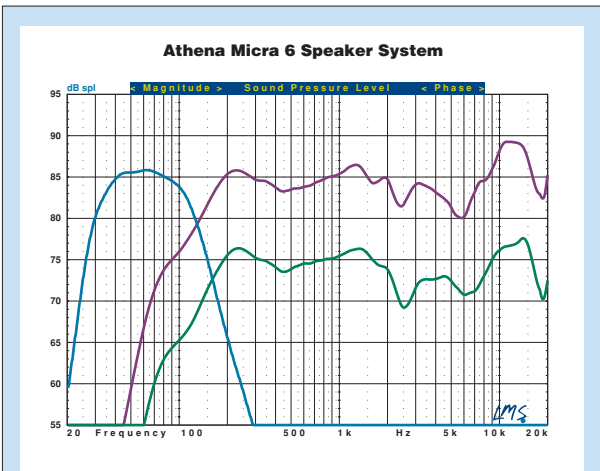
Only occasionally did the MS satellites sound somewhat coarse, as on Eddy "the Chief" Clearwater's "Hillbilly Blues" from *Rock 'N' Roll City* (Rounder), a session with guests Los Straitjackets. (Picture a bluesman in a headdress with a masked backup band, and you'll begin to understand how things can get rowdy.) Not once, though, did I hesitate to give the Micra 6 system some juice. You don't have to tiptoe around this system.

ECM's first SACD, Stephen Hartke's *Tituli/Cathedral in the Thrashing Rain* with the Hilliard Ensemble, only hints at what's to come from this label, whose close-miked, perfectionist chamber recordings are made to order for a high-resolution format. Even through the tiny Micra 6 system, there's a surprising sense of space and ease in the Hilliard's evocative voice. Nuances like Lynn Vartan and Javier Diaz's cup bells, wood block, and shakers on "Columna Rostrata," the fourth segment of *Tituli*, are preserved. What this might sound like on a set of full-size, full-range speakers, one can only imagine, but it sounds mighty good here.

Is that Take 6 with a guest spot on Big Phat Band's *XXL DVD-Audio* (Silverline), singing "It's

All Right With Me"? Absolutely, unmistakably Take 6—make that wall-to-wall Take 6 in high-resolution. It's easy to get spoiled by the high-resolution formats. *The True Love Waits: Christopher O'Riley Plays Radiohead* CD, the classical pianist's interpretations of the rock band's catalog, sounds somewhat emasculated by comparison. You don't hear the decay of notes as you might with a high-resolution recording.

Well, that's not the Micra 6's fault. In a small to midsize room, this is a dynamic little powerhouse of a surround system. For that \$1,000 home theater, how about the Micra 6 and Pioneer DV-563A universal player with Onkyo's \$299 TX-SR501 receiver that features Dolby EX, DTS ES, and multichannel analog inputs for SACD and DVD-Audio?



HT Labs Measures: Athena Micra 6 Speaker System

This graph shows the quasi-anechoic (employing close-miking of all woofers) frequency response of the MS satellite (purple trace), M225 subwoofer (blue trace), and MC center channel (green trace). All passive loudspeakers were measured at a distance of 1 meter with a 2.83-volt input and scaled for display purposes.

The MS's listening-window response (a five-point average of axial and +/-15-degree horizontal and vertical responses) measures +3.12/-4.88 decibels from 200 hertz to 10 kilohertz. The -3dB point is at 152 Hz, and the -6dB point is at 126 Hz. Impedance reaches a minimum of 3.99 ohms at 379 Hz and a phase angle of -50.25 degrees at 216 Hz. Sensitivity averages 85 dB from 500 Hz to 2 kHz.

The MC's listening-window response measures +1.81/-5.29 dB from 200 Hz to 10 kHz. An average of axial and +/-15-degree horizontal responses measures +1.95/-4.94 dB from 200 Hz to 10 kHz. The -3dB point is at 150 Hz, and the -6dB point is at 129 Hz. Impedance reaches a minimum of 5.78 ohms at 17.4 kHz and a phase angle of -56.81 degrees at 224 Hz. Sensitivity averages 85.5 dB from 500 Hz to 2 kHz.

The M225's close-miked response, normalized to the level at 80 Hz, indicates that the lower -3dB point is at 33 Hz and the -6dB point is at 29 Hz. The upper -3dB point is at 111 Hz. —MJP

Micra 6 Speaker System \$549

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But don't stop there. With the Micra 6, you can put together a complete home theater with high-resolution audio and an HD monitor for around \$2,000. Just pair the suggested \$1,000 setup with the Samsung HD-ready set (or maybe the step-up TXN3098WHF with a DVI connection). That would be an ultra-Micra system—a lot for a little. 🗨️

