



Lap of the gods

Michael Jones goes to the temple of a new loudspeaker deity, Athena

For a grizzled old hi-fi scribe, the opportunity to be one of the first in the world to write about a new loudspeaker is very tempting. Couple that with the fact that the importer has been a leading light in the New Zealand music and recording scene for decades (leading to long and enjoyable discussions about music and musicians) and my fate was sealed – I had to audition the new Athena range.

It is a little unusual, as the concept behind the loudspeakers is different to anything I've come across before.

Railway work

The Athena range consists of three bookshelf speakers, three separate subwoofers and a centre channel. Nothing unusual about that? Yes, there is. You see, the bookshelf (or satellite) speakers are designed to *morph* together with the subwoofers to form one larger speaker. The bottom of each satellite speaker, and the top of each subwoofer, has two rails. Slide them together and the satellite and sub are both physically and electrically connected as one. They even look like one speaker!

While the smallest satellite speaker (the S1) only physically matches the P1 subwoofer, the S2 and S3 satellites can be matched with either the P2 or P3 subwoofer.

One of the characteristics of the Athena range is that you can mix and match at will, and add on at any time. For example, you don't have to have two subwoofers with a pair of satellites. You can have one subwoofer and set the controls on the subwoofer to suit. All this is clearly laid out in the owner's manual.

For this review, I had the mid-range set of Athena speakers, a pair of S2 satellite speakers (\$1099 per pair) and a pair of P2 powered subwoofers (\$1099 each).

The S2 is a two-way speaker, standing 362mm high, 241mm wide and 323mm deep. It's a vented (or ported) loudspeaker

cabinet, which means that there is a hole in the back to extend the bass. The drive unit lineup consists of two drivers. Most of the work is performed by a 165mm woofer with a 25mm dome tweeter (made out of Teteron – anyone know what this is?) filling in the higher frequencies. The front baffle is moulded from some plastic



material. This gives a great deal of flexibility in the shape of the baffle. The baffle is slightly angled so that the tweeter sits a little behind the plane of the woofer. As well, Athena has gently curved the top of the front baffle, giving the units a distinctive look.

Vinyl junkies

No discussion of the Athenas would be complete without discussing the veneer. The pair I had came in a cherry vinyl veneer. But it is the best non-wood veneer I've ever seen on a loudspeaker. It's so good that it even had a cabinet-making friend of mine confused for a few seconds!

The P2 subwoofer is finished on all sides and the top in the same veneer. Inside the P2 is a 100-watt mosfet amplifier, driving a 200mm (that's 8-inches in the old measurements) woofer. The

woofer is at the bottom of the cabinet, facing the floor. The P2 is ported at the front.

On the front of the P2 are a number of controls, including two rotary controls and two switches, one of which is for sub level and volume. There is a tendency among many people to crank the subwoofer as loud as they can – a far better result will be gained by matching the level to that of the satellite speakers.

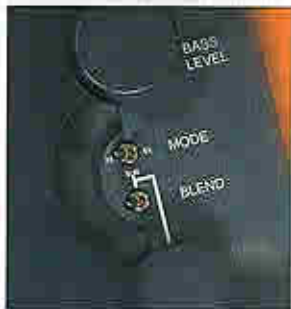
Next to the sub control is the 'mode' switch which activates the built-in equalisation to match the subwoofer to either the S2 or S3 satellite speakers. This eliminates one of the major problems with using subwoofers – the need to match speakers and amplifiers – and is a great feature. One position of the mode switch turns off this equalisation, so that the Athena sub can be used with other subs.

Listening post

After Athena importer Glyn Tucker delivered the speakers, the next thing to do was to listen to them. I decided to listen solely to the S2 satellites for a few days, to get a handle on their sound without the subwoofer. And I'm glad I did, as the S2 satellites on their own are very appealing. While moderately small in size, the S2s sound *big*. The sense of scale of the sound coming from these boxes was totally out of proportion with the size of the speakers. I believe that this will be one of their major selling points. Many smaller speakers sound noticeably below scale compared to real life, which is one reason many people find small speakers unacceptable. With their large-scale sound, the Athenas neatly sidestep that problem.

Tonally, the S2s are a little on the warm side, with the balance weighted towards the lower frequencies. The higher frequencies are present, but the tonal balance may fool some listeners into an initial impression that the Athenas lack highs.

In absolute terms, the bass that the S2s produce is a little





The family of Athena S2 satellite speakers

WHO IS ATHENA?

Athena? No, I've never heard of her either – unless it's that Greek goddess? Oh, she's a loudspeaker company?

Unlike most new loudspeaker companies, Athena already has an established organisation around it. You may not have heard of Canadian company 'Audio Products International', but you're sure to have heard of two of API's brands – 'Energy' and 'Mirage'. Both have been around for several years, have gained strong reputations and both have good representation in New Zealand. Athena Technologies is a new brand of loudspeakers from API. So the name may be new, but the loudspeaker lineage is well solid.

overcooked, with a definite emphasis in this area. This has been rather carefully and cleverly engineered, however, so that the largest drawback of this – one-note bass – has largely been avoided.

Low down

On many pieces of music, adding the subwoofers appeared to make no difference whatsoever! But turning the subwoofers off, I did notice a change for the worse.

The amplifiers within the subwoofer switch to standby mode after a few minutes of no signal. Play some music with bass and they suddenly spring to life. The P2s appeared to require both bass frequencies and a certain level of those frequencies before they switched on. Playing music quietly sometimes left the



subwoofers switched off.

But when the subwoofers were on, there was an improvement. There was deeper bass (of course!) which added a solidity to some music but, although many people add a subwoofer just to get deeper bass, often that's the least of the improvements. With the Athena setup, the overall sound felt more at ease, without any sense of strain. The subwoofers added tremendously to the sense of space in the music, even on some of my string quartet CDs which – as you'd expect – don't have a great deal of deep bass to start with.

It's important to keep in mind that most of the sound is still coming from the S2 satellite speakers. So most of your perceptions of the sound quality will be from the \$1099 satellites.

As good as the S2 speakers are for the money, you shouldn't be under the impression that adding the subwoofers will give them the clarity, the detail or information retrieval properties of a conventional quality \$3000 loudspeaker but then, your conventional speaker won't have the bass capabilities of the S2/P2 combination.

Athena is on to a winner with this range of morphing loudspeakers. You can start small and add on to create powered towers or even a complete home theatre system.

These speakers should do very well. **Tone**

TOWER OF POWER

Alert watchers of the loudspeaker world will have noticed, over recent years, the rise of both 'powered towers' and active subwoofers. The two are definitely related.

A 'powered tower' is a floor standing loudspeaker with amplification built into the speaker to drive the woofer(s) (often erroneously called *subwoofers*). When an Athena top module and subwoofer are docked, they effectively become a powered tower.

An active subwoofer is a speaker dedicated to reproducing only the lower bass frequencies and which has amplification (and normally some crossover functions) to match the subwoofer to the main speakers.

There have always been subwoofers available, often at high prices and almost always without built-in amplifiers (these are known as 'passive' subwoofers). Active subs and powered towers have certain advantages over passive subs (all things being equal, of course – placing an amp in a subwoofer does not necessarily make it a good product).

One of the biggest problems in both amplifier and speaker design is that the designer can't know what the product will be coupled with. By building an amplifier into the subwoofer, the designer knows the exact parameters of both the subwoofer and the amplifier. For example, there are certain physical requirements for reaching low frequencies. Low frequencies need to move large volumes of air to be reproduced effectively – thus, they need large speaker cabinets. By placing the amplifier into the subwoofer cabinet, the designer can equalise (alter the frequency response) of the subwoofer. Usually, this means pushing the low frequencies beyond the natural capacities of the cabinet, resulting in lower bass than could be achieved in a passive subwoofer.

Of course, nothing is free. There's a danger that the subwoofer driver (the cone woofer) will then be over-driven. A good speaker designer will take care to avoid (or at least minimise) this potential problem.



TONE VERDICT

ATHENA SPEAKERS

Athena S2 satellite loudspeaker \$1099/pair

Athena P2 subwoofer \$1099 each

Finish ★★★★★

Sound ★★★★★

Value ★★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★