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NHT M-00 Loudspeakers

If you're like me, you don't get a chance to listen to your high-falutin', fancy-schmancy hi-fi nearly as much as you'd like to. Yeah, my job *does* involve listening to audio components, but it also involves an awful lot of sitting at my desk and staring at a computer monitor with the intention to commit prose. And *that's* time I'd rather be listening to music.

While the details might differ, I bet there are a lot of people in more or less the same situation. Surprisingly, very few loudspeaker manufacturers have addressed this distressing circumstance with any *serious* desktop speakers.

There have been a few, of course, but the majority of powered desktop speaker systems have been pretty, well, *bad*. Not unexciting, not mediocre, but outright crappy sounding. Strange, huh?

Even stranger, there's an entire industry that needs high-quality loudspeakers designed for up-close listening. Unlike the rest of us desk-jockeys, *those* professionals usually get what they want. I'm speaking, of course, about the pro-audio world, where small, powered nearfield monitors are not just common, but ubiquitous. Funny how audiophiles barely register their existence.

That's why I slapped myself in the forehead when I heard about NHT's \$249-USD/each M-00 (pronounced "moo") powered minimonitor. It seemed such an obvious adaptation for the desktop environment. Why hadn't I thought of it? Why hadn't anyone else?

Once upon a time and a very good time it was there was a moocow

NHT is actually the perfect company to bring pro-influenced gear to the consumer market. NHT was founded in 1986 by current managing director, Chris Byrne, and Ken Kantor, who designed the company's extremely well respected line of speakers. In 1990, the two partners sold the company to International Jensen, which in 1996 sold its home and aftermarket car audio business, including NHT, to Recoton.

Byrne and Kantor started a new company, Vergence Technology, in 1998. Vergence was formed as a pro company and created the M-00 and other recording monitors. Vergence was acquired by Recoton in 2001, and Recoton united the consumer and pro products under the NHT brand. The combined company was sold to Rockford Corporation in 2002. This proved to be an extremely good fit; Rockford's economies of scale of technology-heavy corporate culture have allowed NHT -- as the company is once again known -- to venture back into the high-end fold with products designed for use in the home.

Cosmetically, the M-00 reveals its pro-audio roots -- it ain't exactly ugly, but it sure ain't pretty. The M-00 compact monitor is an acoustic-suspension two-way design, housed in a cast-aluminum/zinc-alloy enclosure, with a front baffle molded of rigid, mica-filled polypropylene. Attached to the inside of the enclosure is a discrete 75W power amplifier, with a low-noise, well-isolated preamp with adjustable input sensitivity.

Actually, there are several rear-panel adjustments that add to the M-00's flexibility. First, there's a switch that alters the speaker's response for either NF (nearfield) or MF (mid-field) listening. The NF/MF switch compensates for differences in perceived high-frequency response. When you listen in the near field (within 6' of the speakers), there's a high ratio of direct-to-reflected sound, while mid-to-far-field listening (more than 6' from the speakers) results in a greater percentage of sound reflected



from the room boundaries. Rough translation: The two listening positions are very different in terms of HF-to-midrange blend and the switch allows you some control over that.

The M-00 also features multiple input options: XLR, RCA, and 1/4" phono input jacks. You can run 'em from a portable, a preamp, or even direct from a component (although you'd need an outboard volume control or a device with variable output, since the one thing the M-00 *doesn't* have is an output control). By the way, the XLR and 1/4" inputs are paralleled so that multiple M-00s can be daisy-chained on a single channel, if that prospect turns you on.

I mentioned that the M-00 has selectable input sensitivity. This is a good thing -- it means you can connect 'em to just about any kind of gadget, from computer sound cards or MP3 players to pro mixing boards. The switch has two positions, +4dB and -10dB. You can augment this flexibility by choosing your input connector (balanced XLR giving you a tad more gain).

Since the M-00 is a powered loudspeaker, it has a power switch -- two, actually: one turns the M-00 off and on, while the Autopower switch allows the speaker to sense an incoming signal, powering on the internal amplifier from its standby mode (after 10 minutes without a signal, it will turn off).

There's another useful back-panel option on the M-00: threaded holes that accommodate the ubiquitous OmniMount 50/53 bracket systems. Choose the proper OmniMount bracket and you can hang the little guys from either the walls or ceiling.

The M-00's drivers were developed by NHT using computer modeling, although they seem awfully similar to those contained in NHT's budget masterpiece the SuperZero -- which, by the way, is *another* good thing. The 4.5" paper-cone woofer boasts a two-layer voice coil wound on an aluminum former, and the 1" ferrofluid-cooled, fabric-dome tweeter employs an "underhung" motor driven by a large magnet structure/short-voice-coil combo.

The cast-metal cabinet offers a few nifty advantages. First, the whole structure acts as a heatsink for the built-in amp, allowing it to run cool despite the sealed box surrounding it. And, of course, a cast-metal box is solid enough to anchor those threaded inserts, despite the M-00's considerable (14 pounds each!) heft.

Separate steel boxes and "cans" surround the driver motors and transformer inside the M-00, making the speaker video-monitor friendly.

"Moo" may represent an idea, but only the cow knows

If the M-00s reminded me of the classic SuperZeros, it was for two reasons. They sounded fabulously musical, punchy and natural, with a bright, but never shrill or harsh, top end -- just like the SZs. A lot of that crisp articulation came from the speaker's 100Hz bottom-end roll-off (real room response probably generates useable bottom end down to about 80Hz). That makes for a lightweight tonal balance that most people might find vexing -- if they were listening in the mid-to-far-field in a large room.

Obviously, you could add a subwoofer (and NHT would like that very much, if you chose their companion sub, the S-00), but I'm not sure that many people will be buying M-00s for big-room, far-field listening. It's really designed to be a nearfield monitor, where the listener's proximity to the speakers (and the speakers' placement on top of a boundary, such as a desk top) gives 'em more body than they will have, say, on a stand far from the sweet spot.

I used 'em almost exclusively on my desk, driven by my computer; on the kitchen table, driven by my iPod; and now -- perhaps permanently -- on a shelf over my kitchen sink, driven by the preamp outputs of my Linn Classik. Well, maybe not *permanently*. I am sort of tempted by the thought of wall mounting them with some OmniMount brackets.

I guess that gives away my conclusion. I like the M-00s. I like 'em a lot. They put the *fun* in multifunctional and I've enjoyed every minute I've spent with the little guys.

They're robust and dynamic. They'll play louder than I'll ever want to push 'em. How loud? Something like 110dB, which is deafening (literally) in the near field. What really impressed me wasn't all that grunt, but the dynamics. Unlike any puny little "computer" speaker system I've ever used, the M-00s were absolute wizards at conveying all the shades in between soft and loud (and the even more rarely depicted shades between soft and softer and loud and louder).

Sure, they let me rock out when "Crosstown Traffic" comes up on my iPod's random play file, but it doesn't take much to get me rocking out to Hendrix. More remarkable is the way they capture the silvery sparkle of Emmylou Harris' voice on "Boulder to Birmingham" -- and the way they convey that slight huskiness in her voice as she gets caught up in the song's pathos.

They aren't speakers that limit what you listen to, either. I found myself actively seeking my favorite classical performance, which normally isn't something I'm all that eager to subject to the crude tonal and dynamic reproduction of "computer-quality" speaker systems.

Working at my desk, you'd think I'd be able to sample the wonders of music from all the ages, but on most desktop systems, those ages seem to be the last 50 years -- and mostly popular music to boot. The M-00s don't rival my Dynaudio Microns for layering or that last iota of dynamic nuance, but they wipe the floor with just about any other speaker I've ever heard that was billed as a desktop unit.

And they disappear even better than the Microns if you can place 'em about 3' away from you. Maybe they don't remove the front wall entirely, but enveloping you completely in the soundfield is a pretty impressive trick.

With a moo-moo here and an oink-oink there

Many folks will raise an eyebrow at the \$249/each price tag. Am I really suggesting that you spend \$500 on a pair of speakers to tack on to your computer?

Naturally, only you can decide what that's worth. If you listen to music as a form of white noise to counteract the environmental hash of your office -- or if you work at a cubicle farm, where you can't crank things up to enjoyable levels -- then the M-00s are probably overkill.

Or, if you have an extra receiver lying around the house -- and an extra pair of small loudspeakers, natch -- you can get very good sound without spending a lot of moolah. Maybe any. This is the route I've always taken, but you can't walk into a closet in my house without running the risk of an equipment avalanche.



But even then, finding speakers that are designed to produce reasonably full-range sound in the near field is difficult. Most compact monitors are designed to be placed away from room boundaries, shelves, desktops, what have you -- and they "focus" their drivers to blend correctly about 6'-to-8' away. Does that really describe *your* desktop cartography? Mine neither.

Even when you're comparing the M-00 to other loudspeakers "designed" for desktop use, the NHTs stand out. To begin with, most desktop loudspeakers aren't really designed to be any different from other cheap little two-ways. They're tiny and they're underpowered (I saw an ad recently bragging about awesome *11W* amplification) and, despite the fact that most of those systems include "subwoofers," you're lucky to get any output below 100Hz -- or even close to that. Sure, you might only pay \$150 bucks for 'em, but they sound like crap. *Pfui*.

The M-00 has enough power to take you where you want to go while piloting your desk. They have the detailed sound and natural timbre to convey the true glory of music, and their small footprint and internal amplification ensure they are perfectly adapted for the office environment.

One end is moo, the other, milk

That's probably the best way to think of NHT's M-00 powered compact monitor: perfectly adapted. I believe it was Finnish paleontologist Bjorn Kurten who pointed out that, despite common ancestors, humans and apes are at different points in the evolutionary scale. Well *sure*, you say. Here's the kicker: Kurten maintained that it's the ape that is the more highly evolved critter -- it has more survival mechanisms designed to exploit its highly specific environment.

That's the tale of the M-00 in a nutshell. You can find a speaker with greater frequency response, or a cheaper loudspeaker, or one that has more layered presentation of imaging, but you'd be hard-pressed to find a higher-quality alternative designed to cope with desktop, nearfield, critical music listening. In evolutionary terms, *that's* success.

If you think that's faint praise or too measured a compliment, just take a look around you. Where do you -- or most of your friends, for that matter -- spend most of your time? Is it working, playing, or just wool-gathering while seated at a desk? For many of us, the answer is all of the above.

The broad savannahs of the listening room are increasingly turning into the overgrown forests of the modern office. As perfectly evolved as the Neanderthal loudspeakers were for those limitless plains, the office thickets demand a new breed of loudspeaker.

Enter the NHT M-00, walking upright.

...Wes Phillips
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NHT M-00 Loudspeakers
Price: \$249 USD each.
Warranty: Five years parts and labor.

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