

## Monitor Audio Gold GX50 Speaker System

No home theater system is complete without both a big screen and surround sound. But it's no secret that the former is more popular than the latter. Surround's Achilles' heel is the audio/video receiver, with its peculiarly named features and labyrinthine menus. On the other hand, speakers are fairly straightforward. They usually have no controls aside from a few on the sub. Cable connection is red to red, black to black. Placement is key to performance but as much a matter of simple experimentation as knowledge. You don't need to be a nuclear physicist to hear bass get louder when you shove a speaker toward a corner.

Perhaps the folks who sell specialty home theater gear for a living should focus more on speakers like the Monitor Audio Gold GX: on their seductive curves, on their quality of construction, on the startling clarity of their ribbon tweeters. Consumers have become more open to persuasion, according to a MarketSource survey, which found that 39 percent of respondents were interested in buying audio components over the next year, as opposed to 35 percent a year before. Get them interested in speakers, and maybe then they'll consider the A/V receiver (or surround processor and power amp).

### Over There

Born in Essex, in the United Kingdom, Monitor Audio has been a well-regarded brand since its inception in 1972. Although its manufacturing has gone global, it remains very much a British company. All R&D—including the use of an anechoic chamber, nirvana for serious speaker designers—takes place in Essex. The company has its own Chinese plant for assembly and crossover manufacturing. Drive units and cabinets are also built in China.

One of its early floorstanding models was among the first speakers to include a metal-dome tweeter. Today's successor is the C-CAM alloy used for both tweeters and woofers. Its ceramic powder-coated aluminum and magnesium hails from the aerospace industry—it's the stuff of jet engines. Monitor says its "higher resistance to bending stress" fosters fidelity from top to bottom.

The Gold GX is the newest of Monitor's many speaker lines, which include conventional, on-wall, in-wall, and outdoor speakers. It's one of only two lines to include some form of ribbon tweeter, in addition to the Platinum Series. The Gold GX line includes two monitors, two towers, two horizontal center speakers, a dipole surround, and a subwoofer. Reviewed here are the GX50 monitor, GXC150 center, and GXW-15 sub.

Available in three veneer and two lacquer finishes, these speakers are easy to fall in love with as the A/V specialty salesperson hovers expectantly. My review samples came in Bubinga veneer, whose dark wine-red satin finish would stand up to close inspection in a bright, fastidiously decorated room. At these prices—the 5.1-channel review configuration weighs in at more than seven thousand dollars—you expect your speakers to look like hot stuff. And they do.



Both the monitor and the center speaker have fairly thick enclosures, 0.79 inches of medium-density fiberboard, with both radial and cross bracing for greater rigidity. Coned drivers are attached with a single bolt through the rear of the cabinet, which is claimed to further improve rigidity and aid in decoupling the drivers from the baffle. Speaker terminals are metal-nut binding posts set into a shiny die-cast metal plate proudly bearing Monitor's M logo. A feature that's unseen is the internal silver wiring.

Behind the GX50's magnetically attached metal grille are two C-CAM drivers, including a ribbon tweeter measuring 0.75 inches wide by 2 inches high and a 5.5-inch RST woofer. RST stands for Rigid Surface Technology: The woofer's radial dimples improve rigidity, allowing the use of a lighter cone that's said to be more responsive.

### Tie a C-CAM Ribbon

The Gold Series ribbon tweeter is a thicker variation of the one used in the bleeding-edge Platinum Series. It may look the same, but in fact it's slightly thicker because it has to work with a lower crossover (2.3 kilohertz for Gold, 2.8 kHz for Platinum). Whereas ordinary tweeters have a dome driven by a separate voice coil, Monitor's ribbon serves both functions. Elimination of the separate voice coil (and the mass it brings with it) is claimed to result in "lightning-fast response," as my contact said, "communicating a sense of space, air, and involvement, particularly in the tone and texture of the leading edge of instruments."



Monitor specifies the ribbon's high-frequency extension up to 60 kHz. Although your cat might enjoy it, human hearing doesn't go anywhere near that high. In theory, some say, what you can't hear and what you can hear are both part of the same harmonic structure, and it's desirable to keep it whole to the extent possible.

As you'd expect, the GXC150 center speaker has two of the woofers in a larger enclosure that echoes the monitor's curved sides. However, in contrast to the back-ported monitor, the center has a sealed enclosure. When I asked them why, the Monitor people offered some unexpected insight into their design process and attention to detail: Unlike the monitor, which some may use in a two-channel configuration, the center will usually function in a subwoofer-equipped system and therefore doesn't have to play as low. The designers also wanted to avoid possible port noise.



As impressive as the monitor and center are, it's the sub that takes your breath away. It comes in the same gorgeous finishes with an even thicker 0.98-inch sealed enclosure, and with a 650watt RMS-rated amplifier driving a 15-inch C-CAM woofer backed with a 3-inch voice coil and double motor assembly. It's among the few subs with onboard room correction, D2Audio's LEO, the setup of which is a simple process involving a supplied microphone.

Using either the remote control or a push-turn button on the sub itself, you can turn the room EQ on and off, pick from a generous selection of phase settings (0, 90, 180, and 210 degrees), or select from three memory settings per input (the sub has both LFE and line-level inputs and outputs). There are three preset EQ curves: Music, Movie, and Impact (plus Off). The manual includes a graph that explicitly illustrates the curves. Music gets more of a low-bass boost than the others, while Movie is said to be flat down to 30 hertz. Impact offers a more aggressive midbass.

The remote lets you dim the sub's red LED display, although you might not want to bother—it usually shows nothing more than a small dot unless you're fiddling with the settings. There are Mute and Night Mode controls; the latter limits output by 20 decibels at the push of a button. You can also set auto-on or a more straightforward on/off from the remote. After I watched the sub flip off and on during some dynamically varied movies and music—a lot of subs do this—I opted for manual on/off.

If you've struggled with the auto setup functions in A/V receivers and certain subwoofers, you'll be relieved to hear that LEO is as simple as sub room correction gets. I strung the setup mike to the prime seating position and placed it on a tripod. Since it didn't have a threaded insert, I just wound the cable around the top of the tripod and situated the mike on the platform as best I could. I held down the remote's Cal (Calibration) button for three seconds and saw "Cal" appear on the sub display.



A few seconds of test tones followed, then the display reverted to its usual red dot. The sub was ready for use.

Associated equipment included a Rotel RSX-1550 A/V receiver, OPPO BDP-83SE universal disc player, Rega Planar 25 turntable, Shure M97xE phono cartridge, and Bellari VP530 tube phono preamp.

#### Treble Cornucopia

Game of Thrones (Blu-ray Disc, DTS-HD Master Audio) stars Wesley Snipes as a virtuous CIA hit man caught up in a high-stakes game of greed and betrayal. In less violent moments, the movie activated the Monitor ribbon's full and extended high-frequency response in a manner that was surprisingly smooth and sweet. As glass shattered and gunshots got louder and more frequent, all the treble information became almost too much of a good thing. It was most listenable at moderate volumes. Dispersion from the ribbon tweeters was excellent throughout, letting me catch dialogue regardless of where I migrated on the sofa. In the course of multiple movie demos, I migrate a lot.

The Covenant (BD, high-resolution PCM) is about teens with supernatural powers—addressing feelings of powerlessness as many movies and TV shows have done since the economy went south. The plot's irrelevance is acknowledged by the casual recording of dialogue, which tested the Monitors' dialogue-delivery powers to their utmost. But I didn't miss a single banal word.



Just as I regularly return to, say, the symphonies of Beethoven, I also have a chronic addiction to Star Trek (as well as a pocketful of free non-new-release rental coupons from Blockbuster). And so it was that Star Trek: Insurrection (DVD, DTS) found its way into the OPPO. The ribbon tweeters handled the old-school lossy-encoded soundtrack with aplomb, revealing its true nature, but not too cruelly. The orchestral score sounded as good as it could have under these circumstances. Vocal clarity was outstanding—don't actors always sound better in space? Swooshing weapon trajectories, especially those moving forward from the surround to the front channels, scared the stuffing out of me.

Throughout the movie demos, the subwoofer handled aggressive effects like a pro, achieving a fine balance of low bass extension and control. I liked it in both Music and Movie modes, although Impact was too much of a good thing. Music firmed up the lowest bass effects, while Movie lent slightly more prominence to the midbass. Despite their differing approaches, both benefited enormously from the LEO sub EQ, which mitigated my room's midbass hump. EQ on/off mattered more to the net effect than the choice of bass preset.

### **Sax on Wax**

Desmond Blue is one of my treasures, a vintage 1962 RCA Living Stereo LP unearthed (along with hundreds of others) at New York's now-gone Tower Annex. Two GX50s operating in stereo combined with the tubed phono preamp to conjure magic from this period vinyl. Amazon user reviews of the CD release either love it or hate it, but none of them refers to the peculiarity of the mix, which shoves the scraping strings hard-left while Desmond's suave alto sax blows mellifluously just right of center. In contrast to the spatially limited strings, the sax was like an undulating three-dimensional living thing—in fact, it reminded me of the jellyfish in the New England Aquarium in Boston, with holographic imaging and a lush, golden smoothness. Cruder speakers would have leaned to one side or the other, emphasizing either the rawness of the strings or the sweetness of the sax. Monitor managed to hold both these truths in the palm of its hand simultaneously. This was a deeply pleasurable and enlightening experience.



Best-case demo material was Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 5 on a PentaTone SACD circa 2010. The Russian National Orchestra—the first founded in post-Soviet Russia—was conducted by its founder Mikhail Pletnev. Right from the opening moments, with clarinet borne aloft by strings, I was entranced. The speakers favored some instruments over others. Whenever reeds or woodwinds emerged from the mix, it always felt like a special occasion, with a good balance between midrange solidity and high-frequency detail. Strings were pleasingly detailed at low to moderate volumes, although at their highest swells, their treble richness sometimes sounded like too much information. These speakers have a definite personality. The overall feel was vibrant and challenging, not mellow or laid-back.

That a revealing speaker can be a two-edged sword became all too obvious with *A Pile of Rock: Live* by Dave Edmunds. Not that the bandleader's rocking ability was anything less than confident or his Telecaster anything less than incisive. But the speakers turned his voice—even in a high-resolution DVD-Audio release—into a tinny specter, and I couldn't enjoy this live album at anything greater than a low volume level. Cue Jack Nicholson: You can't handle the truth!

The Monitor Audio GX Gold speakers are for the questing audiophile who wants to transcend the limitations of run-of-the-mill dome-based tweeters and low-tech woofers. While they can be fussy about your choice of content, please don't get the impression that these speakers are the kind that make a few things sound amazing and most others sound nasty. They loved great content, but when they protested against substandard content, the main consequence was a need for lower volume, as opposed to sheer lack of musicality.

Special commendation goes to the GXW-15 subwoofer, one of the most cleverly designed I've ever reviewed. Its LEO room correction makes a difference yet requires no particular technical expertise to set up. The inclusion of a remote with preset EQ modes is inspired. As compelling as the speakers are in their own right, the sub is even more so for its advanced design and features.