



VISONIK E352

LISTENING ROOM

The name is eerily familiar, isn't it? Let's play a little free-association game. We say *Visonik* and you say... Right. *David*.

In the early days — starting around 1975, “Visonik David” might as well have been a single name, because the David (named for its relative size rather than its sartorial choices) was *the* Visonik model. Who needs a second model when you can ship three million pairs of that cute little aluminum-boxed speaker? When recording studios and broadcasters (including the CBC) adopt it as a nearfield monitor? When you can add a subwoofer to it? That part was left to a US firm, M&K, who built a custom sub for the David, called, inevitably, the Goliath.

But a few years later, Visonik found itself in the wrong place at the wrong

time. Though it was nominally West German, its factory was in East Berlin, where labor was cheap and environmental and safety standards were open to creative interpretation. When the Berlin Wall fell, so did a lot of those gritty smoke-belching Dickensian factories to the east. Ever drive a Trabant? Nor does anyone else now.

The dormant company began its comeback in 1995, when entrepreneur Frank Urban bought the company name and of course the David's design. First order of business: bring back the David.

**Small can be good.
Affordable can be
good too. How about
both?**

Second project: follow it up with a series of other speakers, which would be small and nicely-made, with price tags that wouldn't make owners of the David feel as if they had wandered into the wrong store.

The E352 is the smallest of the company's Evolution series (the other series is called Concept). Though it is inexpensive, the designers have avoided making it look cheap in any sense. They borrowed not only from the David, but also from one of their major competitors, namely Totem. The MDF box has rounded front side edges, to avoid diffraction. It is nicely veneered in real wood (a dizzying array of choices can be had at no additional cost). The veneer is applied *inside* the box as well as outside, to keep the panels stable. And the damping material is *painted* onto the interior walls rather than being stuffed into the cavity. Unless you're reading this issue back to front, all of this will sound familiar.

Visonik makes its own crossover network, though the two drivers — like those of many loudspeaker manufacturers — are Scandinavian. The long-throw woofer is a specially-made 12 cm unit (Visonik exaggerates it to 14 cm, probably using one of those rulers they sell to fishermen), with a fixed phase plug in the centre. The tweeter uses a silk dome. Handsome grilles are included, though hard core audiophiles without curious tots will prefer to stash them.

We would have hoped for better binding posts, though possibly that's asking for a lot considering the price. There are four of them, linked with flat plates if you won't be biwiring, but they are round, making it impossible to tighten them with our Postman wrench. There isn't much space to get one's fingers in there, either. We did finally get them tight, though not without leaving tiny nicks on the posts with pliers. Fortunately, they stayed tight after that.

Of course the E352 is best mounted on a quality stand (the rear vent precludes flush mounting on a wall). We placed them on the very solid Focus Audio Foundation four-pillar steel stands we had used for the Totems, stabilized by three dollops of Audio-Tak

under each one. We agonized only for a moment over the fact that the stands cost nearly twice the price of the speakers themselves!

As with the other two speakers, we did our listening with vinyl...and high-energy vinyl at that. We knew, of course, that this would put maximum stress on a speaker this size, but then we're not out to give anyone an easy ride. Our first disc (*Trittico* on the Reference Recordings label) includes a dangerously wild amalgam of brass, other wind instruments, percussion and more percussion.

Oh, did we mention the percussion?

The initial seconds brought us the first of a series of surprises. We ran the Visoniks at the same level as our far larger 3a MS5's (they seem to have about the same efficiency), and they took the abuse with ease. Sure, we could see the small woofer make some alarming motions, but there were no audible signs of distress even when the entire brass section of the Dallas Wind Symphony was joined by fresh troops. All three of us used the phrase "great dynamics." You can pump a lot of electrons into these elegant speakers, and nothing will bend.

Of course the rendition was not identical to that of our reference speakers. "There isn't the same bright sun," said Albert, "you can hear that some clouds have moved in." The large bell which rings in the first half of the piece was more distant, and the cymbals were blurry and not quite distinct. The tone was rather cooler.

Still, you look at the speaker's tiny dimensions — not to mention its price — and you figure it's not going to have much talent for bottom-end energy. Yet it does. Oh, the Visoniks can't come even close to matching our reference, but there was no disastrous imbalance in favor of higher frequencies. This is not a bright speaker, and that helps maintain the balance. Albert would have liked a little more tofu in the lower midrange, to make the sound warmer.

By the way, something else inexpensive components mostly get poor marks on is reproduction of detailed soft passages. The Visoniks are an exception.

Our second disc (*Façade*, also on

Reference Recordings) contains so many variations in both mood and instrumentation that we could actually do the test with just that. How would the E352's do on the often shrill piccolo?

Well, we've heard it smoother than these speakers made it sound. Not only were its upper notes jarring, but we continued to notice it even when it was joined by the other instruments of the Chicago Pro Musica. That's wrong. The different instruments should mesh into an ensemble, but the speakers couldn't manage the trick.

Still, there was plenty more it *did* manage. Gerard particularly liked the clarinet, which was smooth and lifelike, as well as the snare drum and the soft woodwind passages. There's quite a lot of subtle percussion in this recording, and the Visoniks did well with it. The music sounded less lyrical than we would have liked, but the speakers negotiated the tricky counterpoints in the middle of the work like a mountain goat in the Rockies.

We've already noted that we were perhaps a touch heavy-handed with the volume control. We dropped the volume by 4 dB and listened to the opening segment again. The shrillness was much less apparent this time. Reine, on the other hand, voted for going full steam and damn the torpedoes.

Which was a problem with the third recording for reasons noted in the previous tests. This LP (*Needed Time* from Eric Bibb on Opus 3) is quite flat, made of particularly heavy vinyl, but our copy has a slight ripple that translates into extraneous low-frequency energy. The fact that the record spins at 45 rpm

SUMMING IT UP...

Brand/model: Visonik E352

Price: C\$699 (about US\$455)

Dimensions: 19 x 31 x 24 cm

Warranty: 5 years, transferable

Most liked: Great balance, strong rhythm, sure-footed musicality

Least liked: Sensitive to infrasonic information, occasional harsh notes

Verdict: Not that it's a surprise, but "small" and "good" are not antonyms

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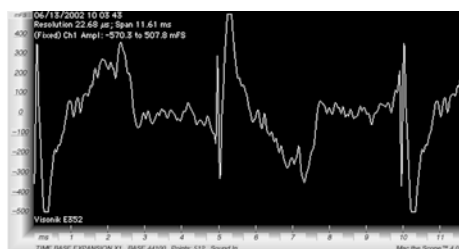
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doesn't help. Like all bass reflex speakers, the E352 is underdamped below its resonant frequency (just below 40 Hz). We could see the small woofer flapping, and — what is worse — we could *hear* it.

Oh, not directly. But the rapid back-and-forth movement caused Doppler distortion (see the previous review for the grim details). It showed up as a noticeable tremolo on Bibb's guitar. Some guitar amplifiers actually have a control for doing this intentionally, of course, but we don't like to hear it on acoustic guitar!

Of course, such low-frequency artifacts belong strictly to the analog world, which means the digital crowd can pretty much ignore the problem. What's more, Doppler distortion is volume-related. As we lowered the volume, the distortion quickly receded. It occurred to us that in a home theatre system, where a subwoofer would be on hand to help out, these speakers might be a killer choice. Yes, this Visonik series does include a subwoofer, as well as a centre speaker.

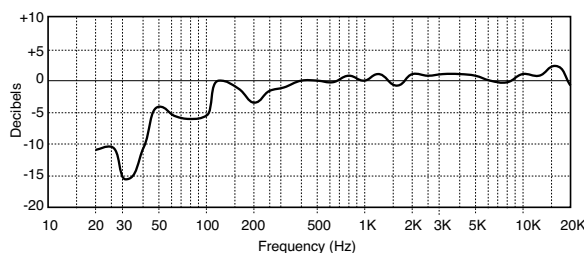
Oh...we hadn't quite finished with



the *Needed Time* recording. Once we had edged the volume down a touch, we noticed the strongly-rendered rhythm and the expressiveness of both Bibb's voice and the harmonica.

We then went into the intimate but noisy surroundings of Stockholm's *Stampen* pub ("The Pawnshop"). *How High the Moon* opens with the usual noise of patrons who were no doubt unaware of the historical milestone *Jazz at the Pawnshop* would turn into. Then comes a warm, sensuous saxophone solo from very close in.

Close...and potentially shrill too. The overall tone of Arne Domnérus's sax was smooth, though it took on a harsher and shriller tone as it moved to the top of the scale, and "close" became *too* close. The rhythm of this delightful swing piece was engaging. The stereo image, for which this recording is justly famous, was well rendered. We liked the detail, and we also liked the way all of those details came together into a coherent



whole. We could even follow the string bass's melodic line. Everything sounded rougher and less polished, but that was only to be expected.

We ended with *Secret of the Andes*, with its broad variety of exotic percussion instruments. As at the very start of the session, we had been impressed with the aura of energy surrounding these speakers, and they amazed us again. "This is the best piece yet," said Albert, "and yet it should be the most difficult." Not only were the larger drums reproduced with good impact, but it was *clean* impact. The more conventional jazz instruments — the electric bass and Victor Feldman's piano — were excellent. No instrument was buried by its neighbors, as we have heard from some speakers which cost more than the Visoniks just in sales tax. The rhythm was strong, as before.

Were the percussion timbres perfect? Perhaps not quite. Gerard pointed to one of the large drums in the open-

ing sequence, which seemed to have an oddly hollow sound he guessed to be actually that of the speaker enclosure. The same problem popped up in the kick drum later in the recording. Still, this is the sort of thing you notice if you've gone looking for trouble rather than sitting down for a good time.

In the lab the 100 Hz square wave (at left) was nicely shaped, though the zigzag sides indicate a phase problem between woofer and tweeter. The frequency response curve (shown above) was excellent for a speaker of this size and price. The dip at 200 Hz may be a room effect, though it was accompanied by a disquieting rattle coming from inside the speaker. Response extends down to 50 Hz, a good figure at the high level (100 dB reference at 1 m) at which we test. Below 50 Hz, the output is heavily contaminated with noise.

This is an impressive small speaker, which deserves to become every bit as famous as the David was. It handles most music with aplomb, yet it spits fire when it has to. Plug some decent upstream gear into a pair of these, and they'll astonish you.

They certainly surprised us.



CROSSTALK

It's obvious, I think, that Visonik has been singing from the Totem song book. By sheer coincidence, the original Totem speaker that is its likely inspiration is reviewed right in this issue.

The E352 is, of course, not a threat to the Totem Model One, no matter what the measuring tape might tempt you to conclude. But it has the qualities you should look for in an affordable speaker. It sounds at least all right with any recording, and it's sublime with some. You can drive it with the amplifier you probably already have. It has no bad habits. And it looks good while it's working.

The low cost means more money available to buy a competently-designed source and amplifier, and possibly some cables that are not made of recycled string. Check it out. It may be exactly the speaker you need.

—Gerard Rejskind

I can say right off that if I had but a modest budget to set up my system, I would be sorely tempted by these speakers. Of course when you put them alongside our reference speakers they don't measure up — if it were otherwise we would have to ask ourselves some serious questions, no? But the minor shortcomings don't exclude a series of qualities: excellent separation of timbres, flawless rhythm, power, impact, and plenty of subtleties. I was often surprised by the dynamic range of the pieces we heard.

In short, what comes out is music. And that's what counts.

—Reine Lessard

There is something about inexpensive components which always affects my first experience. I want so much to uncover, say, the miracle speaker that I tend to be disappointed, even when the music sounds good.

And it did.

After my first reaction, I found myself happily carried along with the voices, the rhythm and the instruments. Yes, in some cases, some instruments didn't quite sound as they do in live music but, hey, that's true for most systems I've listened to. So it always is a matter of degree.

Actually, stores are filled with inexpensive speakers, but few offer that rare feature, affordable *quality*. And that's what the Visonik speakers do. You can afford to build a good system ahead of them and upgrade that system in the future, while enjoying the improvements through them.

You'd have to spend a lot more to upgrade them, though, so why not first try pairing them with a Mirage subwoofer, for instance, another affordable quality component? You may have to skip work the next day.

—Albert Simon