

Nothing but the truth...

Passive Studio Monitors SE-MF-2 and SE-NF-3 from Strauss Elektroakustik

Text: Fritz Fey

Photos: Dieter Kahlen

A few weeks ago I visited my dear colleague Günter Pauler in his studio, who was intensively occupied at the time with various digital and analogue equalising systems for his newly acquired Strauss MF-2 monitoring system. I used not only the opportunity to be present at the tests but also at the same time wanted to spend the day to hear this new monitor system, as they wouldn't fit into my studio due to the large dimensions of the monitors. Passive monitors are often considered likeable anachronisms nowadays in the age of compact active mid/near field monitors, but when given a closer look, or correctly, a closer listen, then the arguments for a passive system are much more viable, providing of course that the designer has done his homework properly. Jürgen Strauss had arrived from Switzerland to take part in the tests and so we had the opportunity for a round table discussion on the topics of "Monitoring and Acoustics" and all it's aspects. Previous to the test, the control room at Pauler Acoustics had been retro-fitted with special absorbers according to plans drawn up by Jürgen Strauss and so I found optimal conditions for testing the MF-2 monitors. Parallel to my visit, a pair of NF-3 nearfield monitors had been sent on route to my studio so that I could set up and test them on my return. Finally, Günter Pauler decided in favour of an analogue equaliser for the minor adjustments necessary for room equalisation and is now one hundred percent satisfied with the results. Strauss Elektroakustik, based in Switzerland, was established in 1996 and involved with loudspeaker development for the hi-fi, PA and studio sectors. Three systems have been developed for the professional studio application until now. Under the name MF-1, the latest system has been developed and with it's



dimensions, exactly fills the gap between the large MF-2 and the compact NF-3-Systems, but due to organisational and time limitations, could not be considered as well in the tests. As an uncompromisingly thinking contemporary, Jürgen Strauss makes highest demands on his loudspeaker development which represents a combination of approved traditional elements and innovative technologies. His orientation towards a physical ideal of a sonic point source has resulted in producing a monitor for medium and short listening distances that has been optimised over a longer period of time not only with the choice of speaker chassis but also the construction of the passive cross-over and the design of the bass reflex system contained in the housing. What has resulted are studio monitors with large bandwidth, higher linearity, elaborate micro dynamics, proportionate directivity and a time alignment with finite mechanical component placement. Many loudspeaker developers are still of the opinion today that a high grade passive cross-over filter cannot be surpassed by any active digital filter and so one must view the compact active monitor market of today as a well suited marketing package, relying among other things, on the comfort of the users. It is analogous to the concept of room acoustics: A precise, intelligently designed mechanical solution cannot be replaced by electronic methods. Furthermore, a passive loudspeaker construction offers the free choice of an amplifier stage that expresses the personal preferences or the degree of expected quality, desirable by the user.

Strauss MF-2

The MF-2 is a very large monitor designed for medium listening distances and, on the basis of it's housing and selection of chassis, also for higher volume levels and with a frequency range of 25Hz to 24 kHz (-6 dB). I must admit, the sight of a constant-directivity-horn slightly downwards inclined in it's housing and equipped with a 2" compression driver at first didn't prompt me to think of the term "micro dynamic" but reminded me of previous painful studio sessions in the truest sense of the word from earlier bad experiences with horn systems. Principally it was a horn and a standard 15" woofer with a paper membrane.

What therefore can have changed dramatically in the last 30 years? The cross-over frequency between horn and bass woofer is 750 Hz and the horn radiates vertically at 40 degrees and horizontally at 90 degrees. Fine, as unprejudiced as I possibly could, I sat down in the

listening position and waited with anticipation at what would be forthcoming. When Günter Pauler, as a hypercritical colleague, had decided in favour of these loudspeakers, then something had to be interesting about them.



I listened more or less over the entire day to a colourful mixture of classic, jazz & pop, interrupted occasionally only by measurements of the demonstrated FIR-Systems from Trinnov and AudioVolver and so could extensively occupy myself with the sound of the loudspeakers. How can I best describe my impression? Firstly, maybe with the remark that I could not hear any horn effect. The loudspeakers stand out with a homogeneity and precise orientation, for which one simply must call sensational. The spatial imagery, the finite transient reproduction, yes, now I can understand what micro dynamics is all about. Relaxed contoured lows, open and airy highs, which I only come to expect from a soft dome tweeter and a well balanced mid range without irritation or over swinging. Everything was just as it should be. You may be asking yourself how I can distinguish between loudspeakers of this high quality from different manufacturers by using words like "sensational", "fantastic or outstanding". Here, language and memory are really not sufficient enough for description. However, I can assure you that it is very rarely that I ever get to hear something similar to this. There are only two or three other loudspeakers that fill me in such a way with enthusiasm. The stereo basis opens itself out as if viewed with a magnifying lens, the differences between various productions are more than clearly distinguishable without any concentrated effort, and finally we also heard the small marginal differences between the different room equalisation systems which in themselves demanded a high standard of reproduction. I can really only congratulate Günter Pauler on his choice of monitoring. He has made the correct decision for his mastering control room. The ease with which one can analyze dynamic nuances, the sureness with which you are able to judge mix parameters; an ideal starting position for creative mastering or to be able to intervene successfully with repair measures if necessary. Of course, this exceptional quality has it's price. With a price tag of 16.890 Euro ex VAT this precision monitor presumably remains an accuracy tool for a limited clientele only, who strive for the ultimate in perfection, but in a mastering studio, one should not compromise anyway when it comes to accurate listening judgement. A precision monitoring system in a professional acoustical surrounding is the biggest capital that a mastering engineer can have.

Strauss NF-3

Biased by all this previous experience, I began with the setup of the smaller NF-3 in our studio some weeks later. The German distributor, d.c. electronic, kindly supplied me with two digital mono amplifiers for the listening test. The NF-3 is a monitor loudspeaker with a double housing. Tweeter and bass chassis enjoy the luxury of having their own respective separate „rooms“. The components consist of a 1" soft dome tweeter and a 5" bass woofer with a coated paper membrane, both housed separately.



This comparatively small monitor triumphs considerably with a frequency range from 38 Hz to 25 kHz (-6 dB), and a wide dispersion in the horizontal plane (100 degrees) and a (60 degrees) dispersion in the vertical plane. I had a SACD of Norah Jones laid aside for the initial test, and a somewhat older production of CPR (Crosby, Pevar & Raymond) that I very frequently use and therefore know very well. What I then heard, was the alarming difference between a well produced, but very flat sounding (CPR) and an extremely live, three dimensional production (Norah Jones) with real spaces and fine dynamic details, in which one could truly hear the depth of the recording. I really never had heard the difference so blatantly before in my studio. How does the man do this? How does one get such a precise reproduction with relatively simple, but yet probably very cleverly refined construction details? And where does this bass depth come from? Clean, solid and precisely contoured? I am really not the person that can be filled with astonishment when it comes to loudspeakers, but I had never imaged that this would be possible coming from such a small loudspeaker. However unspectacular the loudspeaker appears externally, the sound emanating from it is really spectacular: Open highs, exact orientation, detailed fidelity, true spatial representation, exact transient reproduction, all first class. What more can I tell you than to say "totally convincing"? You must hear this, because this loudspeaker is also well within reach of smaller budgets. The catalogue price is 2.130 Euro ex VAT. I don't know what influence the two Flying Mole mono amplifiers had on this sound experience, but that doesn't really matter for me, because at a price of 333 Euro ex VAT per amp, this is really no big deal.

Summary:

Whether large or small the Strauss loudspeakers belong without a doubt in the category "absolute top class", even when such a formulation doesn't quite so often go beyond my lips as people who know me will agree. Both loudspeakers, MF-2 and NF-3, are a marvel of precision and performance. These perfectly manufactured loudspeakers have a modest and inconspicuous appearance, yet are full of surprises however when it comes to their true spatial time and frequency reproduction characteristics. Whoever thought up till now that passive loudspeakers were something of the past, a discontinued line for professional studios, and only meant for hi-fi enthusiasts – then think again! You have not heard Strauss Monitors yet! They have my unconditional regards and admiration.

Fritz Fey, Studio Magazin September 2007