

EXCEPTION

STENHEIM
ALUMINE FIVE SE



Prodiges suisses

La Référence de Stenheim est l'absolu en matière d'enceinte acoustique, mondialement acclamée. Elle est déclinée en 2016 par l'Alumine Five plus abordable, qui rassemble des qualités dont peu de constructeurs peuvent se prévaloir. La haute sensibilité et la perfection de sa conception s'unissent pour un résultat sonore exceptionnel, sous des dimensions encore logeables. Un miracle franco-suisse ?

La gamme qui compte quatre modèles débute par l'Alumine Two, une émette tribio trique 2 voies déjà appréciée ici par le passé, suivie de la colonne 3 voies et quatre haut-parleurs Alumine Three récomposée dans notre numéro 246. Le puissant Sub Alumine modulable permet de réaliser un système Movie Home-Onema prestigieux, alors que le modèle Five offre par le haut la ligne Alumine, décliné aussi en SE et Signature. Le poids

élevé de 105 kg (!) par enceinte démontre une construction ultra-rigide, constituée de plaques épaisses en aluminium massif délimitant quatre chambres indépendantes, dans un ajustage mécanique sophistiqué. Un amortissement interne soigné des parois supprime toute résonance parasite, libérant de façon spectaculaire les microdétails qui ne sont plus masqués. La sensibilité de 94 dB annonce la philosophie de Stenheim voulue par le directeur Jean-

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Swiss prodigies

The Stenheim Reference is the absolute as regards acoustic loudspeakers and has been globally acclaimed. It gave rise to a little brother in 2016, the Alumine FIVE which is more affordable and which encapsulates qualities which few manufacturers can lay claim to. High sensitivity and the perfection of its design combine to produce an exceptional sound in dimensions you can still find room for. Could this be a French-speaking Swiss miracle?

The range numbers four models which start with the 2-way bookshelf Alumine TWO that has already impressed us in the past, followed by the 3-way, 4-driver, floor-standing Alumine THREE which received an award in our edition number 246. The powerful, modular Alumine Sub allows you to create a prestigious home-cinema system while the FIVE model tops off the Alumine line, available also in SE and Signature derivations. The weightiness (105kg per speaker!) is testimony to an ultra-rigid construction made up of thick billet aluminum plates which form four independent chambers that have been engineered in sophisticated fashion. Careful internal damping of the walls eliminates any unwanted resonance, spectacularly freeing up micro details in the music as they are no longer stifled. A sensitivity of 94 dB demonstrates the Stenheim philosophy which is dear to the heart of the director, Jean-Pascal Panchard, where high resolution goes hand in hand with out-of-the-ordinary dynamic capabilities, enabling a listening experience which is as close as possible to the sensations experienced at a concert. And as we will see, these are not empty promises in regard to this SE version which saw the light of day in 2019.

ALUMINE AS IN ALUMINUM

The rounded-edge, rectangular proportions of the Alumine FIVE are highly classical and take up little floor space: only 28 cm wide by 38 cm deep and 120 cm high. Their visual impact is very reasonable, unlike certain designs which are difficult to integrate in a typical living room. Nonetheless, they are truly exceptional speakers whose price puts them out of the reach of all but a lucky few. The beautiful powder grey of the aluminum walls, broken up by red sidebars, and the black front panels with no outwardly visible screws which enclose the four drivers do not shout ostentatious luxury but exude a typically Swiss discretion and efficiency. You won't find any exotic materials here, such as beryllium or diamond, but only an unparalleled expertise resulting from years of patient development according to the Stenheim philosophy. This finds completely rigid form thanks to the meticulously put-together 12mm thick billet aluminum panels which form the walls, the back being held in place by 26 allen screws. The internal volume is comprised of four independent chambers, two of which are closed for the medium and the tweeter and two opening on to thin (25mm) frontal laminar vents for the bass. These vents have flared edges to prevent any sound of air turbulence. The upper port separates the top from the bottom of the cabinet, with the former housing the tweeter and the medium driver, which are slightly offset from the vertical axis, for good phasing. The tweeter also has a small horn tip to regularize the

emission lobes and slightly increase efficiency. The centers of the tweeters and midrange drivers should be oriented towards the inside, as the speakers are handed.

There are threaded holes in the lower plate machined to accommodate wide spikes made of solid aluminum which are easily adjustable to achieve levelling of the cabinets. Washers to sit under the spikes are also provided to protect delicate floors.

FRENCH DRIVERS

Stenheim puts its trust in the PHL Audio brand of loudspeaker drivers, well-known for their high-quality and highly sensitive transducers used for professional applications where requirements go well beyond what is needed in an audiophile context. This long-established design is based on a unique savoir faire developed by Philippe Lesage, the founder of PHL, now retired, which is capable of developing custom-made units to fulfil specific requirements. The two 10-inch (25cm) bass units and the 6.5-inch (17cm) medium driver are constructed out of exclusive multilaminated cones with double-sided, tropicalized-treated membranes, their positive-return suspension systems made from double-rolled, impregnated cloth, coupled to extremely powerful magnets, made of neodymium, in the case of the medium driver. The sensitivity of 94 dB is remarkable and allows the speakers to be easily driven by amplifiers which provide high definition at the expense of power. The tweeter is a Scan-Speak Revelator with a 26mm textile dome, just as on the THREE model, powerfully motorized by a neodymium magnet. It is equipped with a non-resonant aluminum back chamber and its ample peripheral suspension enables wider diffusion. This medium-high combination is the same as that used on the high-end Stenheim Reference speakers – proof of its superior quality. The passive 3-way filter is separate for the bass and medium/high sections; it has been developed after hours of critical listening, paying meticulous attention to the choice of components. This SE model turns to a variety of European brands famed for the excellence of their products: Jantzen Wax Coil ribbon selfs, Mundorf MCap Evo and Miflex capacitors (copper foil oiled paper), Dueland carbon and Mundorf wound resistors, WBT bi-cabled connectors which are the same as those to be found on the Reference models. The internal wiring cables have been developed in tandem with the Swiss company Brandt Audio.

LISTENING

Timbre: The Alumine FIVE SEs are capable of enabling the listener to discover an unheard-of palette of nuances, so long as the sources and the electronics are up to the job, as they themselves have almost no limitations. Sensitive to the least musical inflexion, they never alter the beauty of a sound palette, and render all the microdetails thanks to a complete absence of coloration coming from the cabinets which is due to their phenomenal rigidity, something that wooden cabinets simply can't achieve. On the album *Till Christmas* by Till Bröner, the purity of the trumpet, its attack and extreme precision are a delight typical of the instrument as well as being totally transparent. The bass extension is just astonishing, as is its clarity, without mentioning the phenomenal acoustic power delivered by the Alumine FIVEs. Voices are precise and highly differentiated, easily modulating the vocal ranges, such as John Martyn's astonishing voice on the album *The Church With One Bell*, recorded at Abbey Road, which is enchanting and sensitive, whilst his guitar is a sonic assault. The Alumine FIVEs, hooked up to our darTZeel 8550 Mk2, provides moments of joy which encourage us to rediscover Martyn's entire back catalogue.

Dynamics: Stenheim's approach melds technology and feeling, paying close attention to the relationship between genuine physical constraints and their impact on subjective quality. This is made manifest by a phenomenal freedom of expression when it comes to inflections and instantaneous dynamics which are almost limitless. The travel in the woofers allows for incredible power and it is possible to maintain ridiculous listening levels without any problem at all, rather as with pro monitor speakers. As it happens, the Stenheims are used as monitors on the excellent recordings of Jean-Claude Gaberel's Label G, such as that of the Trio Charl Du Plessis. If the amplification is up to it, the Alumine FIVE SEs are probably the most dynamic that we have ever heard. You only have to put the Sheffield Lab, direct-cut *Discovered Again* by Dave Grusin with Ron Carter on bass and Lee Ritenour on guitar, on a top-quality turntable to be riveted by the ferocity of the attack, totally immediate, crystal clear and articulate: fabulous!

Sound stage: On a live vinyl recording like *The Who Live at Leeds* from 1970, reckoned by The New York Times to be the best live album of all time when it came out, the sensation of realism is indescribable. You can hear everything as you bathe in the febrile atmosphere where the group's energy and the audience's reception can be felt palpably, filling the venue like water, while powerful guitar riffs, given voice through tube amplifiers, are unbelievably present. There have been those who have wondered whether the album really was fully recorded live – it must at least have been remixed – but the result is just fantastic on the Alumine FIVES.

Another masterpiece, Mozart's *Le Nozze di Figaro* conducted by Teodor Currentzis, recorded in 2014 (Sony): we are right there in the hall, so real does the orchestra sound, its size apparent through its volume, the voices of an incomparable beauty. This digital recording which has been superbly committed to vinyl is capable of revealing the huge aptitudes of these speakers in terms of realism which words struggle to convey. Just so long as the rest of the system is up to it.

Value for money: The company, situated at Vétroz in the Valais, not far from Sion in Switzerland, produces its high-quality speakers by hand in small batches. They shun transient trends and are designed to last many years, impervious to changing fashions. Their priciness is justified by the quality of their manufacture, based on expensive processes and high-end components, especially in this SE version, but also in that these Stenheims are part of an exclusive club of the highest quality current speakers in dimensions that can actually be accommodated in the average home.

VERDICT

The Alumine FIVE SEs set the bar for high-fidelity incredibly high, whether than be in terms of definition, inexhaustible dynamics, the extraordinary variety of nuances or the realism of the sound stage, but in a perfect fusion of these elements that has almost never been heard before in this format. Taking a completely classic approach, their qualities do justice to the emotion and the natural energy of the music, creating special moments with an extraordinary talent. These indispensable loudspeakers free the musical energy of the very best recordings with panache: they are true prodigies!