

RIGHT IN THE BOX

JBL's 4429 Studio Monitors thrilled us with their true studio sound. With recording after recording, they put us right in the box, in the producer's chair.



JBL
Model 4429
Studio Monitor
loudspeakers
Price: \$6900

Most audio designers pursue their task with the often-expressed aim of high fidelity — they hope to reproduce the original experience of sitting in front of the band, orchestra or performer. For a live performance, that might seem a noble goal. But when the band or orchestra was recorded in a studio, there probably never really was any actual experience of sitting there in front of them. Instead, the best fidelity that can be attempted is to reproduce exactly what the producer heard, sitting in front of the big desk in the studio.

Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome the JBL 4429s.

EQUIPMENT

The JBL Model 4429 Studio Monitor, to give its full name, is no insubstantial standmounter. Weighing 32.5kg apiece and housing a 12-inch pure-pulp woofer in each 64 x 40 x 30cm cabinet, the 4429s really do exude studio quality and aesthetics — which

may be seeded in our collective consciousness by the not-entirely dissimilar JBL 4320 studio monitors which were indeed resident in many studios from the 1960s on. This particular design has been around since 1985, when the original 4425 studio monitor was released as the company's first compression driver system with a bi-radial horn and large format woofer.

There have been significant changes since then, with improved crossovers and internal bracing, while that bi-radial horn now combines two pure titanium-diaphragm compression drivers behind the single-piece SonoGlass horn. The horn loading is not for high efficiency, we are told, but rather for balance and linearity — the 50mm HF compression driver handles up to an 8kHz crossover, while the 19mm pure titanium UHF compression heads skyward to 45kHz at -6dB; there are small dials to adjust both of these on the front of the speaker. That excitingly capacious 12-inch paper-pulp cone fronts the same 1200FE-8 cone assembly as was used in the predecessor Model 4428; it is backed by a large-aperture ferrite magnet and edgewound aluminium voice-coil assembly; JBL quotes it down to 40Hz at -6dB.

All this looks, to our eyes, about as desirable as a speaker can get, presented in a classic polyurethane-toughened walnut veneer cabinet which just demands you leave a stack of 45s piled on top while you sit facing the horns, the dual front bass ports and the woofers, which will shortly throw prodigious quantities of air at you from their positions in the tasteful deep blue baffles. Round the back are twin sets of solid binding posts filled with those annoying plastic lugs that we couldn't remove, so we shoved in our substantial bi-wire Audioquest cable through the holes in the shanks.

PERFORMANCE

We had quite a preview of the 4429s at the recent Hi-Fi Show — the gentlemen demonstrating them was called away fortuitously and bravely left us holding the remote control for the Harman Kardon electronics that were powering the JBLs. That Melbourne room had been configured wide and short, so that the distance from the speakers to the listener was about the same as the distance between them — and only a few metres at that. I love this kind of nearfield listening; some people find it too direct, but I like the way it removes

most room effects and makes best use of your available amplifier power. The result can be marvellously clean and high-impact listening.

With no rear ports, the JBLs are relatively immune to positioning and could even be built into 'studio' cabinetry; we tried them first for a week in a fairly conventional 30m² lounge room, but were startled to be disappointed by thinness and lean bass. This was perhaps accentuated by the fact we weren't using their proper stands, but was more likely a need for prolonged running-in, because once shifted up into a wide short attic listening room (on their stands), it was clear the JBLs were getting better every day we sat in front of them.

After perhaps two weeks of warm up, our time with the JBLs proved faultless, and indeed became something of a hi-fi dream, delivering bliss at the press of a button — literally, since we had them in our permanently-on system where a press of the iPad launched an iTunes of choice, or a right-click of the Magic Trackpad would play a 24/96 folder from the Mac Mini. Far too often the missus was left alone with her Xmas box-sets of murder DVDs while the JBLs were enlisted for a few hours of indulgence. The bass, initially so lean as to be worryingly

thin, rounded out daily, until by the time we finished our review we were sitting like the guy in the Maxell tape adverts (who was pictured in front of JBL L100s, coincidentally), being blasted by the Mike Rutherford's bass pedals on the remaster of Genesis' *Afterglow* live — the bass not in-yer-face phat, just strong and real. The JBLs revealed a stellar bassline on Kate Bush's *James & The Cold Gun* — something we haven't noticed in 35 years of playing it, despite it now appearing an obvious song highlight.

The sheer air-power on tap was thrilling — Ringo's repetitive kick drum on the drum solo section of Abbey Road's *The End* (Rockband remix) is tight and powerful in the guts. As for the UHF behind the horn, try the opening seconds of David Sylvian's *Sleepwalkers*. Ow. Watch out for bats.

Tonally there were no flaws to point a stick at, rather a great sense of immediacy and 'being there' — listening to the JBLs, it felt like being behind the desk in the studio, listening to playback; you could almost see the engineer leaning forward to pan this guitar solo back to the right, nudge up the vocal on the second verse. At the end of a big track, you feel like leaning back in the chair, putting your arms behind your head and nodding to the band — 'Yep lads, that's the mix, we nailed it.'

Classical is perhaps the least of their strengths, though delicate piano is beautifully handled; we played the 24-bit download of Keith Jarrett's *Köhn Concert* to its end, every moan and pedal kick revealed. The JBLs do thrilling things with intimate jazz — the 24-bit 'Small World' download reviewed elsewhere in this issue is deliberately dynamic, all driven forth with verve by the 4429s. And despite the horns being about balance rather than sensitivity, the useful 91dB/W/m allows them to work without a surfeit of power — most of the time we ran them off 50W Musical Fidelity monoblocks and only once hearing the amp's power limits after a long evening and a rudely

high-level rendition of Pink Floyd's *Dogs* and Led Zep's *Babe I'm Gonna Leave You*.

CONCLUSION

To me, these are everything a speaker should be — celebrating their purpose visually, and celebrating the music sonically. They look like studio speakers; they *sound* like studio speakers — big, dynamic, tight and real. They don't need a big room; in fact, they excel in a small one. They sound good at moderate volumes, maintaining their balance, but they exist to be played at higher levels, where their very low distortion allows extended sessions with zero fatigue and little notion of how loud you are listening — it's all so real that it just sounds right. And that's hi-fi, folks. Jez Ford +

VERDICT

JBL Model 4429 Studio Monitors

Price: \$6900

- Sounds like you're in the studio
- Stunning looks
- Above average sensitivity
- Might scare those seeking a slimline speaker solution

DRIVERS: 12-inch (300mm) pure-pulp cone woofer; 50mm titanium diaphragm; 19mm titanium diaphragm
QUOTED FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 40Hz-45kHz (+6dB)
NOMINAL IMPEDANCE: 6 ohms
SENSITIVITY: 91dB/W/m
CROSSOVER FREQUENCIES: 800Hz, 7kHz

DIMENSIONS (whd): 400 x 635 x 300mm
WEIGHT: 32.3kg
WARRANTY: Five years

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