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Sphinx Element 5
A brand reborn with a
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Sphinx Element 5

floorstanding loudspeaker

Alan Sircom

Those of us with curiously thorough audio memories might recall a brand called Sphinx. From the 1980s and into the early 2000s, Sphinx was a Netherlands-based audio electronics company. In fact, Sphinx was part of the same company as the popular Netherlands-based cable brand, Siltech. Fast forward a couple of decades, and Sphinx reappears (as part of the same company that makes Siltech and Crystal Cable), producing, you guessed it, high-end loudspeakers, such as the Element 5 floorstander.

This reborn Sphinx is unlikely to remain a loudspeaker brand. Just as there's good precedent within Siltech and Crystal Cable for making great loudspeakers, both brands have also produced audio amplifiers of note. The Element 3 and Element 5 are more than 'proof of concept' loudspeaker designs and are not merely a way to reintroduce an audio electronics brand. Like Siltech and Crystal Cable's loudspeakers, they are extremely good products in their own right.

Not another!

There's an easy knee-jerk reaction to a new loudspeaker brand because we need more high-end loudspeaker makers like we need a hole in the head. However, it's not that the high-end loudspeaker market is flooded with brands that is the problem; it's that high-end audio is flooded with loudspeaker brands making 'me too' designs with almost no differentiating factors. That's not the case here, and a genuinely innovative loudspeaker design is always welcome. In fact, we need those disruptive technologies to shake a few brands out of their reveries. And, in fairness, that factory in Elst has delivered more than its fair share of disruptive technologies. The Element project is the latest.

It's easy to view the distinctive lines of the Element models and think that's the sum of the Sphinx distinctiveness. And yes, that cabinet shape is radical in a world full of veneer-wrapped rectangular boxes. The Element 5 has been likened variously to an Art Deco perfume bottle, a harp, an ear, and an elongated nautilus shell. In fact, the shape is one of 'form follows function'; it's the most efficient use of cabinet design, wrapped in leather

and high-density polyurethane, in part because unfinished wood is not a good décor match. Closer examination (and especially a view of the internal architecture of the enclosure) shows just how much excess there is here. That CNC-cut cabinet is a modified transmission line ('Zero Gravity Bass' in Sphinx-speak), whose shape and size define the cabinet's dimensions.

This is no trivial undertaking. Sphinx essentially revisited the entire history of transmission-line design, replicating classic experiments and critically reassessing much of the contradictory information found in the literature. Using computer-aided acoustic modelling, the company derived its own proportional relationships governing chamber volume, line length, tapering, and cross-section.

Ported and curved

The Element 5 is a three-way, five-driver design, with two back-to-back 150mm underhung woofers firing to the sides in a tapered transmission line, a dual-channel system ending in a front-firing port, which effectively makes bass radiation omnidirectional. The two 120mm midrange units flank the tweeter in a vertical M-T-M layout. Each of these midrange units sits in its own ported, curved chamber, with the ports positioned to either side of the loudspeaker to ensure a diffuse sound field. Between the two midranges is a 29mm beryllium dome tweeter also in its own enclosure with a contoured baffle for controlled diffraction.

A ported midrange; while not entirely unheard of, is rare: the majority of ported speakers use the port to tune bass reinforcement. Here, it acts as a controlled breathing mechanism. This works because the midrange chamber is only very lightly damped; the rear radiation of the midrange drivers is diffused in the chamber and released through the port; as the alternative is 'absorption.' That absorbed energy is normally an audible coloration, and often results in 'boxiness'. By way of contrast, this 'controlled breathing' reduces the cabinet's sonic intrusion.

The Element 5 uses a hybrid network combining first- and second-order acoustic filters. The crossover points are set at 150Hz between the bass and midrange sections, and at 1.9kHz between the midrange and tweeter. The bass section uses a second-order low-pass filter, coupled with

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a first-order high-pass subsonic filter to constrain woofer excursion at infrasonic frequencies and to integrate cleanly with the transmission-line loading. Meanwhile, the midrange section operates through a band-pass network: a second-order high-pass filter paired with a second-order low-pass filter, ensuring controlled overlap with both bass section and tweeter.

The tweeter is driven through a second-order high-pass, providing adequate protection and smooth integration with the midrange driver's directivity. But here's where it gets interesting; rather than enforcing purely textbook electrical alignments, the target is acoustic: phase-coherent summation through both crossover regions with controlled directivity and stable imaging.

Then there's the passive-active architecture of the Sphinx Element 5. A plug socket on the rear of a loudspeaker and a built-in Class D amplifier usually means 'bass amplifier'. Not here. The electrical architecture of Element 5 is neither a conventional passive network nor a classic active speaker. It is a passive-interface, buffered and amplifier-assisted system designed to solve specific, well-known limitations of passive crossovers while maintaining the familiar preamp-power amplifier – loudspeaker signal chain.

Power steering

The best way to think of this amplifier is as power steering for the drivers. The active stage lets your amplifier 'see' and almost perfectly an extremely benign 16Ω load. Any potential dips in an impedance plot of the speaker over its frequency response are held in check by the onboard 'power steering' amplifier. Your choice of amp remains unchanged, and in a very real way, its own transfer function is more audible when the quirks of the speakers' impedance get out of the way like this. There's no DSP involved and no internal volume control or adjustment. It's just a helper monkey. There is a +3dB bass boost switch, but this is entirely independent of the internal amplifier.

Of course, that does mean further and fundamental change to the crossover. While the crossover network remains in the analogue domain, by its very nature there's no need for high-power capacitors or inductors, and as a result the crossover is a balanced, low-impedance resistor-capacitor network. Which is why the crossover's board looks more like a huge passive RIAA circuit than a conventional network.

This speaker does call for some protection circuitry, though. As well as the first-order high-pass filter in the crossover, there's dedicated woofer protection circuit that uses a Hall-effect sensor. When it detects very low (sub-20Hz) frequencies have exceeded a set limit, additional resistance is introduced (temporarily), causing a drop in bass output and clarity. This is non-invasive at times when you aren't trying to kill your woofers.





Crucially, the design process treated the loudspeaker as a complete system, with all components developed in parallel.

» The science bit

There's a set pattern to 'the science bit' loudspeaker reviews that's hard to avoid. You have a cabinet, drivers and a crossover and while one might be a little more 'tech' than another in any given loudspeaker, the formula doesn't drastically change. Maybe you describe the drivers first if there's more to talk about there. Perhaps you spend time discussing the spikes or the speaker terminals if there's a point of interest. But typically each of these component parts gets its own paragraph before things are tied up and the sound quality gets discussed. I'm being a little 'meta' here because that's how this review has been constructed. But in this case, it doesn't do the Element 5 justice. These loudspeaker components should be discussed as a whole. This is a Gestalt design that demands the same approach to its discussion, even though that's all but impossible in reality.

Crucially, the design process treated the loudspeaker as a complete system, with all components developed in parallel while continuously monitoring acoustic response, phase, group delay, driver excursion, and related parameters. For example, the crossover network is designed concurrently with the internal acoustic structure of the cabinet. Any change in physical geometry affects phase and response and therefore requires crossover readjustment—and conversely, crossover changes alter how the various acoustic sources sum in the room.

The final design integrates more than 50 simultaneously optimised parameters, spanning transmission line geometry,

crossover interaction, buffering stages, and driver Thiele–Small characteristics. This optimisation-driven approach is time-intensive, but it yields accurate bass extension, controlled group delay, and coherent phase behaviour.

Why is the approach so important? It's because the product design is the result of one large algorithm. It's conceptualised as a complete loudspeaker from the outset, rather than as a collection of sub-assemblies that join to form one. The distinction is subtle, but vital. Most loudspeaker design is micromanaging the building blocks of a loudspeaker; Element 5 works from the concept back.

The manual goes into great detail about listening position and speaker placement, but as this is mostly about avoiding room modes and null points, it's positioning is not the stuff of unicorns.

Sit and listen

The technology behind the Sphinx Element 5 is an abstract concept to discuss, but becomes far easier to understand when you sit in front of the loudspeakers. I played a lot of music, both 'test-disc' ready and more off-beat, and in each case, the Element 5 exposed hidden insights into the music.

Take, for example, Bjork's 'Hollow (8-Bit Remix)' [*Bastards*, One Little Indian]. This is some bad crunked-up weirdness, but here the precision of the bass is never lost or separated from the rest of the music. The bass lines have shape, texture and definition, even when dealt with the onslaught of the rest of the music. Those leading edges are incredible, such precision and energy. This is like a rodeo piece; you can't stay on for long. This lasted longer than most. »



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» Moving over to 'Blackbird' by Lady Blackbird [*Black Acid Soul*, BMG]. Again, that sense of a rhythm unconstrained by the speakers, with a sense of 'thereness' to the piano and voice. The Element 5 has an almost electrostatic-like fidelity, and highlights the interplay between upright bass, cello, and percussion. That sense of texture and intelligibility, articulate and lithe sound is magnificent!

Music was more of an occasion (sensing a theme here) than simply a collection of sound. For example, 'You know I'm No Good' from the Amy Winehouse BBC Sessions: The interplay between guitar and electric piano, bass and congas is great. It's like a master-class, a lesson in guitar and piano playing, all offset by Amy Winehouse front and centre. I know a lot of naysayers, they'd love her after this.

'Albo Gator' by Michael Brook [*Albino Alligator*, 4AD] was a true revelation: Real sense of space and instrument solidity, the hang drums, the atmospherics, the blues harp opening. The slightly recessed vocals, and the watch-tick percussion. All of this was presented in a soundstage that was about as real as it gets, and standing extremely wide of the boxes.

I did manage to hit the bass shut-out, twice. Once with Trentemøller's 'Chameleon' [*The Last Resort*, Poker Flat] and once with Chase & Status' 'Massive & Crew' [*2Ruff Vol1*, EMI]. But, in the loudspeaker's defence, I was caning it! Dirty, dirty Drum 'n' Bass is under-represented in high-end audio. There might be a reason. Possibly because those super-fast beats and bleepy farty sounds are a little difficult to portray accurately. Systems can either play this with plenty of volume and no gusto, or all the energy at a lower level (as here). I kind of prefer this arrangement.

Ultimately though, it didn't matter what I played on the Sphinx Element 5, it unlocked new insights every time.

Unless you play at levels that threaten your hearing on a daily basis, the Sphinx Element 5 is a true revelation. You'll hear deeper into your music than you thought possible, and the process is at once cerebral and musically satisfying. In a world of very similar loudspeakers, this one offers something genuinely new and exciting. And if your musical 'thing' is all about the detail, you'll be in your Element when you hear these loudspeakers! +

Technical specifications

Type: Three-way, five-driver transmission line floorstanding loudspeaker

Drive units: 1x 29mm beryllium dome tweeter, 2x 120mm underhung paper sandwich midrange cones with aerodynamic neodymium motor, 2x 150mm underhung paper sandwich bass cones with aerodynamic neodymium motor

Frequency response: 19Hz-39kHz

Impedance: 16Ω

Sensitivity: 95dB (2.83V) @ 16Ω

Dimensions (WxHxD): 28.2x135.6x42.5cm

Weight: 66.2kg per speaker

Price: £70,000, €80,000 per pair

Manufacturer Sphinx

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