

Red Rose Music Rosebud MKII Studio Reference Monitor

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The diminutive Rosebud MK II speakers from Red Rose Music (founded by Mark Levinson—yes, *that* Mark Levinson—in December 1998) arrive perfectly packed in a compact carton whose weight belies its size. A plastic envelope contains a letter from Levinson and information sheets that makes bold claims: “State of the art audio products which enhance our love of music; human, natural sound; compact and affordable, but world-class in performance; a combination of natural sound, detail, timbre, imaging, deep bass and punch that seem unlikely to come from such a small speaker.”

Curiously, the manufacturer’s literature utterly overlooks the characteristic that defines one’s first (and perhaps most enduring) impression of the Rosebuds: They are visually stunning, veneered in real wood with a fit so precise and a finish so lustrous that owners may be disinclined to *touch* them. The accompanying Spirit speaker stands share the cosmetics of the enclosures. These are not speakers that disappear into a room—they draw a lot of attention to themselves, even when the audio system is shut down.

Clearly Red Rose has invested a lot of money refining how the Rosebuds *look*. That choice naturally leaves the manufacturer vulnerable to skeptics who, given the deluxe cosmetics, will be predisposed to devalue the Rosebuds as loudspeakers. It is human nature to assume that external flash commonly hides internal mediocrity (“beauty is only skin deep”), and that manufacturers use appearances to dupe unsophisticated customers. If that is the first thing that came to your mind, read on.

The Rosebud design is *tidy*: 7" x 11"

x 14" internally-braced borosilicate-treated MDF enclosures house a Lightning Model 2 aluminum ribbon tweeter, mounted on an acoustically contoured faceplate, and a 5" carbon-fiber-and-Kevlar cone woofer.

Parts are superb—MIT and Solen film capacitors, North/Ohmite resistors, North Crescendo film/foil capacitors, Red Rose Music 336 internal wiring. Owners are told to devote at least 50 hours to break-in. Since I am compliant, I dug out my wife’s old receiver, and drove everyone in our home crazy for ten days by feeding the Rosebuds a steady FM signal.

From the outset, the ribbon tweeters performed magnificently. Early post-break-in notes cite “clear, pristine, riveting” horns in Handel’s *Water Music* [Philips], and “stunningly beautiful” violin playing in the Beethoven Violin Concerto [EMI]. The subtle finger-pressure variations of soloist Yitzhak Perlman were “startlingly clear.” Mahler’s *Resurrection* Symphony [Conifer] was “incredible,” with “detail at *ppp*” that made me lean forward in my seat. Yet for quite some time, the small woofers failed to match the standard set by the tweeters. Repeatedly, I found myself noting that soloists seemed to be performing in a different acoustic from the accompanying orchestra, or that parts of the orchestra (violins, flutes, brass) sounded clear while the basses, celli, tympani sounded dull. Bruckner’s magisterial Seventh with Vonk and the St. Louis [Archmedia] led me to note that “the strings (highs) seem to have a different quality than the lows—lows are muddy and have a different character.” In the Brahms Violin Concerto [EMI] Perlman’s violin was “airy, light,

forward,” but the Berlin Philharmonic sounded “flabby, soft, diffuse.”

And then, in the span of a few weeks, everything seemed to come together. After perhaps 100 hours of use, any discontinuity between the drivers vanished. If you audition the Rosebuds, pay attention to the amount of time the speakers have been used as you form your own impressions of their sound.

My listening notes are filled with words of praise for the fully broken-in Rosebuds. “Full, rich, mellow, velvety” described my reactions to classic EMI recordings like the Barbirolli/Barenboim/New Philharmonia Brahms Piano Concerto No.1 [EMI] which was a remarkable response given that I had heard it live only days before when the Pittsburgh visited Philadelphia. “The big passages,” I noted, “have plenty of stuffing—these do not sound like mini-monitors—the image is that of a full-range, full-size speaker system. Amazing.” Similarly, that disc’s *Haydn Variations* were sonically competitive with what we heard the week before when Sawallisch led our own orchestra in the work. The Rosebud sound was “big, full, rich; big speaker sound.” Auditioning the Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra’s Mozart Horn Concertos [Harmonia Mundi], I jotted, “the Rosebuds were made for this kind of music. The stage is huge, the images are proportional, the sound is full and plump.” Most high-quality small speakers image well if mated to an appropriate amplifier and, if well positioned, have no trouble crafting a large stage with ample space between the performers. What is less common is a virtue the Rosebuds display consistently—they not only make a big soundstage, but they populate it with images that are just the right size—not too small (a common fault), not too large (bloated), but just right. This is not too say that they correct the mistakes of inept recording engineers. But fed a good source, the Rosebuds will startle even sophisticated listeners with their imaging prowess.


One afternoon at the end of a long

listening session I wrote: “There is nothing diminutive about the soundspace or the images in it. In fact, the Rosebuds’ most endearing trait (aside from the sometimes ethereal highs from the ribbon tweeters) may be that they do everything mini-monitors are supposed to do to perfection (precise specific images in a big space) with, other than a lack of deep bass, none of the shortcomings that typically accompany such speakers.”

Occasionally (not consistently) I sensed that the Rosebuds failed to deliver the full weight and impact of an orchestra playing all out. Ozawa’s traversal of the Saint-Saëns Third with the Orchestra National de France [EMI] was “room-filling but not room-shaking.” More often I found their presentation of large orchestral pieces to be not only satisfying, but incredible given their diminutive size. Vonk and the St. Louis in Schubert’s Third [Archmedia] was “fabulous,” for the sound was “clear, dark, deep, detailed, reverberant,” with a presence similar to what one hears with large multi-driver speaker systems. The Marriner ASMF recording of Schumann’s First [Hanssler], which I heard a week after Sawallisch led the piece here in Philadelphia, elevated my appreciation of the Rosebuds’ capabilities to a new level, for the tiny speakers delivered sound with “real bloom, and a bass foundation that was a solid underpinning upon which the strings and winds float.” My audition of the fabled Mercury recording of the *1812 Overture* [Mercury], one of audio’s severest tests, led me to write this listening note: “This defies description. I would have sworn that I was hearing huge speakers. Wall-to-wall, precise definition, real impact, without a hint of gestation or distortion.”

If the Rosebuds have a weakness, it may be with amplified music. Go West’s *Don’t Look Down* [Chrysalis] was “OK, a tad restrained.” The Human League’s “Don’t You Want Me,” [ARK 21] demonstrated “thumping bass that hurts my head,” and “spatial effects that are impressive,” but “would benefit from subwoofers.” This is not to say the Rosebuds cannot make convincing bass.

Huey Lewis and the News in “Power of Love” [Elektra] is “without flaw. Even the bass,” I noted, was “incredible.”

The Red Rose Rosebuds are wonderful speakers. They satisfy with virtually every form of music, and are built to the very highest standard. Though easy to drive, they will reward an owner who chooses to mate them with amplifiers and cables commonly employed with esoteric speaker systems that demand the very best. Though I never came to love the way they look, I would happily live with them for the way they sound. 



SPECIFICATIONS

Driver complement: Ribbon tweeter, 5" woofer
 Frequency response: 100Hz–20kHz
 Sensitivity: 87dB
 Impedance: 8 ohms
 Dimensions: 7" x 11" x 14"
 Weight: 19 lbs. each

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

JVC XL-21050 CD player; Berning TF-12 pre-amplifier; Manley Snapper amplifiers;
 Plinius 8100 integrated amplifier;
 Straightwire Virtuoso interconnects; Siltech speaker cables

MANUFACTURER INFORMATION

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Price: \$3500/pair