

Lowther 2.5 MK II/PM6C Speakers

Distributor: CommonSense Audio, 120 San Angelo Drive, Chesterfield, MO 63017; www.lowtherspeakers.com

Price: \$1,395/pr

Source: Distributor loan

Reviewer: William C. Heck

Background: Somehow I seem to review the *interesting* speakers. Hey, no complaints: a few years ago I had the good fortune to live with the Legacy Whispers for several months. Huge beasts, quite lovely, the culmination (at the time) of Legacy's design ideas, and physically unlike anything I had seen for ages. Later, the Waveform Mach Solos came along – and became my reference speakers. The egg-shaped midrange/tweeter enclosures were even more unusual than the Whispers. (Grumpy digression: it's a real shame that no one has purchased the rights to the Waveform products.) And now here are the Lowthers. What's this – a standard ported cabinet with *only one driver*? It can't possibly work, right? As I said, I get the *really* interesting stuff.

But of course the Lowthers *do* work. So how is it that one driver per channel does the job? Let's start at the beginning.

One Driver? Suppose you want to design a speaker. Like everyone else, you choose a tweeter to handle the highs, a midrange to handle the middle, and a woofer to do the lows. If you're on a budget or trying for a small speaker, maybe you combine the midrange and woofer. If you're doing a really big speaker, maybe you have a super tweeter on top, and perhaps you double up (or triple or quadruple) the midrange units or the woofers. And you hook up all these separate drivers to a crossover. Speaker design 101, right?

Oh sure, there are some disadvantages to all this. First, your crossover has to be pretty slick to apportion the right frequencies to the right drivers without undue interference, and crossovers involve a whole set of trade offs. Of course, the crossover design and all those parts can get costly. And you have to worry about matching the drivers, and then when you put everything in the cabinet you have to worry about the

geometry. But you *gotta* do it that way, because we all know that no single driver can cover the entire spectrum.

Except that a company in England has been building single drivers to cover the entire spectrum for decades. These units use very light but stiff cone materials along with very large magnets and voice coils, all of which allow the driver to deal with highs, lows, and everything in between.

There are some potential issues with the approach, such as beaming of high frequencies as driver size increases or loss of bass response as it decreases. But if you can pull it off, think of the advantages. First, no crossover, so the cost drops. And with no crossover, the amplifier is connected directly to the speaker, which ought to add clarity to the sound. (See my review of the Linn system in issue 88 for a discussion of the effects of active bi-amping. This approach also does away with speaker crossovers to good effect. It's the same idea.) And since you used that big magnet and voice coil, the speaker is very efficient, which means that you can use a small amplifier, and even run the amp in Class A if you want. You might even use a single-ended triode design if you're into that – remember, you don't need many watts. If you do have a big amp, you'll never push it hard at all, much less encounter clipping.

The above is only a brief overview of the possible advantages. The Lowther Web site has a lengthy discussion of the single driver approach.

The Company: Actually, there are two "Lowther"s in the picture here. The drivers (the speakers themselves, not the cabinets) are made by Lowther-Voigt in England (Web site [http://](http://www.lowtherloudspeakers.co.uk/homeindex.html)

www.lowtherloudspeakers.co.uk/homeindex.html). Lowther-Voigt has been at this for more than 60 years, although relatively few audiophiles in the U.S. are familiar with their products.

So if Lowther-Voigt makes the drivers, who assembles the speakers? As I heard the story (third hand), some members of an audio club in St. Louis, MO, found out about the Lowther drivers some years ago, put together some homemade speakers, and liked what they heard. The club is no more, but David Dicks and friends have gone into the speaker business, offering several models that use Lowther drivers.



Uh oh. So who are the engineers? Do they have state of the art computer facilities and computer controlled assembly? Never fear – this is the beauty of the Lowther approach. Remember, we don't need crossovers, so we don't need high-powered engineers to design the crossovers and state of the art electronics assembly to produce them. We just need to size and port a box correctly. Basically, the Lowther-Voigt folks in England do the hard part (with apologies to the good folks in St. Louis).

You can tell this from the way that Lowther Speakers in St. Louis operates. They will sell you just drivers if you want to design your own enclosures, or sell you drivers and throw in free plans if you just want to do the woodworking, or sell assembled speakers to those of you, like me, who are all thumbs and don't know a band saw from a mitre. Neat, eh?

The Speakers: Lowther Speakers offers lots of models. If you want a preassembled cabinet, you have a choice of five different bass reflex cabinets ranging from micromonitor to floor standing. If you want to build your own, you have a choice of twelve (yes, that's 12) different bass reflex cabinet plans or, for the really adventurous, ten (yes, that's 10) different plans for bass horn cabinets. (All of the plans are free, so far as I know.) Then you can choose the driver that you want: I counted twenty (yes, that's 20) driver models as variations on two different sizes (6 and 8 inch) and three different magnet materials. Of course, not all of the drivers fit in all of the cabinets, but clearly there are lots of choices. If, like me, you are easily confused, you will be happy to know that the Lowther Speakers Web site narrows all this down to a few recommended combinations, and the folks in St. Louis no doubt would be happy to discuss the finer points of cabinet and driver selection.

The units that I received were floorstanding models with one driver each. The particular driver used in this model is the PM6C, which Lowther Speakers describes as delivering the least detailed sound of the series. These speakers are the low end of the large cabinet line; moving up to better (more detailed) drivers costs up to a few hundred dollars more.

Extracting the speakers from the shipping boxes was simplicity itself: the packing was not extravagant but was quite functional. The units measured about 37" tall by 12" wide by 14" deep and are not

particularly heavy for their size, so moving them into position was easy enough. The instructions were minimal, but then who needs long instructions for speakers?

The boxes are plain but with nicely rounded corners; finish on my review units was a light oak veneer covering the top, sides, and lower quarter or so of the front. The rest of the front (behind the grill cloth) is a semi-glossy black finish on particleboard, as is the back of the unit. Overall, the cabinets are attractive, although I would not call them fine furniture. (Of course, as mentioned above, you can get the plans and drivers and make similar speakers that are as fancy as you like.) Gold-plated binding posts were set into a recess on the back of each unit.

Listening: Of course, lots of people say lots of things about their pet designs, so reviewers such as yours truly tend to take it all with a grain (or a bag or a truckload) of salt. The proof, as they say, is in the listening.

And doggone, the listening is pretty good. We have arrived at a level of sophistication these days where it is unusual to hear really *bad* sound. But the Lowther sound is, in some ways, rather special. Not perfect, but special, especially for the price.

The Lowthers exhibited two main strengths at all times. First, the lack of crossovers provides a unique transparency, a real presence of performers in room that is hard to describe but clearly audible. If you're listening from across the room while doing something else you might not notice the difference – but pay attention and you will. Second, the

Lowthers projected a solid image with just about every placement that I tried. They placed performers firmly on a stage and kept them there no matter what. Together, these two effects made for a real sense of having the musical performance right in front of me.

Now let's look at how things worked out with different types of music, starting with small-scale items. Let's start with some fairly simple kinds of music: small groups, lots of single vocalists, mostly acoustic with a smattering of synthesized sounds. No heavy duty rock, no classical at all: think Patricia Barber, James Taylor, Diana Krall, that sort of thing. This music revealed all of the Lowthers' virtues. The clarity and imaging made for lovely renditions of some fine-sounding music through the entire spectrum: both acoustic and electric basses sounded full and punchy,



the mids were clean and natural, and the top end was extended but not overbearing. Not the “biggest,” overwhelming sound around, but among the best that I’ve heard overall.

The results were almost as good with chamber music. For example, the Naxos recordings of the Haydn String Quartets (there are lots of them, so take your pick) again succeeded in placing the performers where they were meant to be. But these recordings also hinted at one of the Lowthers’ relative weaknesses, namely the slightly anemic low end. According to Lowther, response measures down a few dB in the mid-40 Hz area, but a single 8” driver just doesn’t move air like the 10” woofers in my Waveform references. The cello, for instance, wasn’t quite as muscular as it might have been.

When I moved on to the big stuff – full scale orchestral music – the second issue showed up. That single driver can get congested when asked to reproduce an orchestra in full cry. It just wasn’t possible to pick out the instrumental groups, much less individual instruments, with the Lowthers in the same way that I could with the Waveforms.

Put this in perspective, though. For one thing, I’m comparing \$1,400 per pair speakers with \$5,000 per pair ones. It is hardly surprising that units almost four times more expensive do some things better. And for another, we are talking about the bottom of the Lowther line. The more expensive units might show some improvements. Finally, the differences were noticeable, but this does not mean that the Lowthers were bad or even unsatisfying – far from it.

Which brings us to the tradeoffs. When I went back to the Waveforms, I have to admit that I missed that crossoverless transparency. Yes, the Waveforms went deeper and were silky smooth on top and the sound just bloomed far more, especially with complex, dynamic material...but I couldn’t hear into the performance quite as well. So even though the Waveforms are a lot more expensive, they didn’t trounce the Lowthers. (John Otvos, the Waveform designer, was well aware of how to obtain this last iota of transparency: his flagship model, the Mach 17, had three drivers, each driven independently, thus eliminating the crossover in the speaker.)

The Lowthers were sensitive to positioning. Lowther recommends placement near the rear wall; I wasn’t especially enamored of this, as the sound seemed just too colored with the speakers back there. Things improved considerably when I moved them about 16”, a position that provided some low end

reinforcement but removed the lower midrange colorations. I also found that moving the speakers well out into the room to where my reference speakers sit produced a very engaging, detailed result. It might not be everyone’s cup of tea, though, as low end reinforcement was lost.

While I moved them around a good bit, I didn’t find the Lowthers *difficult* to position. Yes, the sound changed rather substantially in different locations, but they never sounded bad. It was simply a matter of finding optimal trade offs, and obviously this will vary by individual listener.

It was possible to make the Lowthers sound slightly aggressive. Again, position was part of the issue. Perhaps more importantly, poor (as in bright) recordings could be painful. If your collection has large numbers of edgy or steely sounding performances, these are not the speakers for you. Then again, you might want to buy some new recordings!

Subwoofing and Other Possibilities: At this point, the astute reader will wonder whether an active subwoofer would be a good addition to a Lowther system. Unfortunately, I don’t have one (or a pair) and so cannot answer that question from experience. However, I suspect that such a combination would work nicely. With a sub handling the low bass, positioning the

Lowthers would be simplified, and the ability to crank out low bass would become a non-issue.

This also leads me to wonder about Lowthers in a multichannel system. Again, I would have to think that they would work out very well, and the ability to use the same driver in different cabinets might be especially helpful in some installations. (Lowther Speakers does offer a center channel model, by the way. It’s really easy to make one when you can just rotate the cabinet symmetrically around a single driver.)

Finally, it would be interesting to hear the Lowther drivers in a no-hold-barred cabinet. The cabinet in the review samples, while functional, was quite simple, with seemingly minimal attention to diffraction or dispersion issues. The thought of putting Lowther drivers in the egg-shaped heads of the Waveforms is truly fascinating!

Value and Recommendation: I would caution that these really aren’t the speakers for everyone. For instance, audiophiles who enjoy lease-breaking or spouse-annoying volumes of heavy duty rock or pipe organ masterpieces definitely would be the wrong audience for these speakers. (Maybe these folks could build cabinets with about four drivers per

The \$ENSIBLE Sound

channel...nah, let's not go there.) Fans of orchestral music would have to consider the tradeoffs, but might find those tradeoffs worthwhile, especially if they move up the Lowther line a bit to obtain more power handling capacity and more extended response. Those whose tastes run to smaller scale or lighter fare could be downright ecstatic with the "in the room" presence.

And let me emphasize again the utter presence (for want of a better word) that the Lowthers displayed. Once you are captivated by that aspect of the sound, other considerations tend to fade into the background. (And yes, I admit that I was captivated: sending back the Lowthers was difficult, even though I love my Waveform Mach Solos.) Those interested in Lowther speakers should think in terms of building around them by carefully selecting drivers and

cabinets and definitely by considering a subwoofer.

Lowther's prices are quite reasonable, and it is encouraging to note that they offer a money-back guarantee (minus shipping and a 10% restocking fee), thus limiting the financial risk. These are intriguing units that will make many audiophiles very happy.

-WCH



Excerpted with permission from The Sensible Sound, Issue 103, Apr./May '05. Subscriptions to TSS can be purchased by calling 1-800-695-8439 or writing to: 403 Darwin Drive, Snyder NY 14226.