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Fluid Audio FX80 Coaxial Monitors

Consistent, focused sound from this latest generation of coaxial monitor speakers

REVIEW BY GILES REAVES

I must admit, I'm a longtime fan of coaxial monitors (also referred to as 'point source' or 'dual concentric'). Some of the earliest monitors I used back in the 1980s were coaxial designs, including those from Tannoy, Altec/URIE, KEF, and Fostex. Naturally, I was excited to get a chance to spend some time with the latest offering from Fluid Audio, an update to their popular FX8 coaxial monitors (reviewed November 2016).

To coax, or not to coax?

The advantages of coaxial speakers include improved off-axis response, a more compact enclosure, and flexible placement options—they can be used vertically, horizontally, or even upside down! This allows for more flexibility when placing monitors in cramped or tricky setups.

Disadvantages of coaxial speakers include interactions and reflections between the physical drivers, which can cause problems around the crossover frequencies. Coaxials can also be more expensive because they use custom-designed drivers, but this is certainly not the case with the FX80 studio monitor.

Fluid Audio FX80

Fluid Audio offers two coaxial models: the 5" FX50 and the 8" FX80. I'm reviewing the 8" model here. The FX80 centers around a dual concentric coaxial driver comprising a 30mm silk dome tweeter centered in an 8" woofer. I'm particularly interested in whether it would make a good secondary monitor in my setup.

Changes

The FX80 is an update of the FX8. Changes include new Class D amplification (FX8 was class A/B), a new complex radius baffle design offering improved cabinet refraction, added EQ controls, a protective cover for the dome tweeter, and volume control relocation to the back of the cabinet.

Back Panel

On the back you'll find all connections (XLR, TRS 1/4" and RCA audio inputs, and power switch) as well as a 20-step rotary volume control and DIP switches for the built-in EQ.

DIP Switches

There are four parameters accessed by the rear panel DIP switches. The first is for a high shelf, which provides control for +1, -1, and -2 dB adjustments. The next control is for mid-EQ, with the same setting options; tweakable mid EQ is not a typical feature and is much appreciated here! The third parameter is for acoustic space and compensates for the bass boost you get when placing speakers close to a wall. Settings here include -1, -2, and -4dB positions, which compensate for different distances from the wall. These monitors are ported in the front, which makes them ideal for smaller rooms where you have no choice but to place your monitors close to a wall.

The final EQ adjustment option is a low frequency cutoff control, useful when using these monitors with a subwoofer. If you have the option, you'll want to use the built-in crossover in your sub, but not all subwoofers allow that, so it's good to have the option built into the monitor. The low cut frequency settings are flat, 60 Hz, 80 Hz, and 100 Hz.

A practical observation: since my current setup is quite cramped, and I have to rotate and peer around the monitors to access these controls, having a larger, less confusing printout of the DIP switch settings would make things easier.

Frequency Response:	35Hz-22kHz (+/- 3dB)
Crossover Frequency:	2.4kHz
LF Amplifier Power:	60 watts
HF Amplifier Power:	50 watts
S/N:	100dB (typical A-weighted)
Enclosure:	vinyl-laminated MDF
Size (single monitor):	13.4 x 10 x 11.6"
Weight (each):	17.2 lbs.

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Left or right, sit or stand

A large draw of coaxial monitors like the FX80 is that their sound remains consistent as you move around the room. This could be shifting from one end of the console to the other, sliding your chair around in the room, or the current practice of working while standing—thank you, Fitbit. The FX80 provides a wide sweet spot that allows you to hear virtually the same mix in all positions. When working with a collaborator, you can both hear a similar mix even when only one of you is sitting in the sweet spot.

Listening

When I installed the FX80 system in my room, my first impression was that they sounded a little scooped in the mids, and the highs were a tad exaggerated. I explored the various settings on the built in EQ and found the best results for my tastes and to better match my existing monitors to be as follows: HF shelf: -2 dB, Mid EQ: +1, Acoustic Space: 0dB, Low Freq Cutoff: Flat. Once I adjusted the rear panel EQ to my liking, I found the FX80 easy to incorporate into my mixing workflow.

Switching between the FX80 monitors, my JBL LSR6328P monitors and a pair of vintage Yamaha NS-10 monitors allowed me to gain additional perspective when placing elements in the mix which was helpful while not being so different as to be confusing. The FX80 monitors stood up well to the far more expensive JBL system—impressive!

The FX80 provides balanced, full-range response across a variety of music genres, plenty of power to get loud enough for most listening situations, and hearty competition for other monitors in its class. Music that contains heavy bass will benefit from the addition of a subwoofer for an excellent, full-range listening experience.

Please Standby

A last feature of the FX80, and quite common in new monitor designs is 'standby' power mode, which switches the speakers off after 45 minutes of inactivity. The front LED is red when in standby and blue when active. I do wish this feature could be user disabled as they may not be powered up when you switch to them initially if you have not been using them for a while. You may miss a few initial seconds of your music or in my case, my frequency response tests, which required me to repeat the test. A minor annoyance, but worth mentioning.

Coaxial conclusions

The FX 80 is equally suited as a main or secondary set of monitors, and they work great when paired with a good subwoofer in a 2.1 system. At $249 each, the FX80 is priced very competitively and offers excellent value for anyone looking to explore coaxial monitors. If you're a coaxial fan, or even if you've never given coaxial monitors a listen, it's worth checking out the Fluid Audio FX80.

Giles Reaves (reaves@recordingmag.com) is a recording engineer and musician who divides his time between his studio in New York and session work in Nashville.

Price: $249 each
More from: fluidaudio.com/products/fader-series/fx80.html

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