

Turning Silver into Gold

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Monitor Audio Silver RX8



The British loudspeaker maker Monitor Audio enjoys a reputation for being one of the first and most ardent pioneers in the development of drivers whose diaphragms (or cones) are made of metal (in order to exploit the light, stiff, responsive characteristics they afford). But perhaps more importantly, Monitor is also known for its unshakeable commitment to value, its determination to build products that, in terms of look, feel, and sound, leave prospective buyers thinking, “Wow, that’s a *lot* of speaker for the money.” Now more than ever, Monitor’s determination to offer audio products that deliver high-tech engineering at a fair price is especially welcome, and there is no better example of this than the firm’s newly released Silver RX series of loudspeakers, which are our review subjects here.

Monitor has, by tradition, named most of its speaker families after precious metals, starting with the Bronze range and progressing upwards through the Silver, Gold, and Platinum ranges. But of these four families it would be fair to say that the Silver range is Monitor’s “bread and butter” product line—a line sophisticated enough to offer many of the firm’s more advanced technologies, yet affordable enough to be accessible to a broad range of customers. Having reviewed some of the earlier-generation Silver models, I can attest to the fact that they showed real flashes of promise, offering lively dynamics, near full-range frequency response, and a generally clean and expressive sound. But that said, I would also say that they exhibited a certain “so close and yet so far” quality, meaning that despite acknowledged strengths the old Silver models occasionally allowed some unwanted sonic rough edges to mar their overall sound.

Well aware of this problem, Monitor’s engineering team, led by Technical Director Dean Hartley, began work on the Silver RX range with the thought that, this time around, they would raise the Silver line’s performance bar in substantial and not merely incremental ways. To this end, the engineering team spent a full two years refining and reworking its FEA (finite element analysis) design tools in order to develop computer models that could more accurately and precisely predict real-world speaker performance. In a CEDIA conversation, Hartley told me that Monitor’s old FEA tools, though instructive in some respects, were not very useful in terms of creating full-fledged speaker designs that worked as intended. The revised FEA tools, Hartley said, are an entirely different story; they allow Monitor to create speaker prototypes that behave much the way the computer models say they will. But in the case of the Silver RX line the new tools allowed Hartley and team to do something even more radical than that, which is, figuratively speaking, to turn sonic Silver into Gold.

Playback's Monitor Audio review system consists of two Silver RX8 3-way, four-driver floorstanders (\$1750/pair), a Silver RX-Centre 2 ½-way, three-driver center channel speaker (\$675), two Silver RX-FX 2-way, three-driver, bipole/dipole surround speakers (\$750), and a Silver RXW-12 500-watt subwoofer (\$1300). I will describe technical highlights of these models under the “Features” section, below. Is this system capable of sonic alchemy? The short answer is, “yes” as I’ll explain in more detail in this review.

OVERVIEW

Consider this system if: you want a sub-\$4500 speaker system whose sound is competitive with that of far more costly systems (we’re talking serious value here). Look at this system, in particular, if you like the idea of mid-priced speakers that probe the limits of sonic resolution and detail in ways that will remind you of much higher-end speakers. Expect an accurate, lively, dynamic, and well-defined sound and you’ve got the general idea. Finally, consider the Silver RX system for its sensible size and overall build quality; the Silver RX speakers are compact enough not to dominate a room, yet they’ll treat you to lovely woodwork and drivers too beautiful to hide behind grilles (unless you must, to keep children’s fingers from poking at them).

Look further if: you favor a sound that is slightly warmer, richer, or darker than is strictly accurate—the Silver RX system is very neutral in its tonal balance, but some listeners might interpret its sound as being slightly bright and lean. Be aware, too, that the Silver system is *very* revealing (conveying what some might consider “too much information,” so that you’ll need and want to use good associated equipment for best results. Frankly, the system can and does expose the sonic “warts” of good but not great source components, electronics, and program material. In short, this absolutely is *not* one of those warm, cuddly, forgiving British speaker systems you may have read about.

Ratings (relative to comparably-priced surround speaker systems)

- Transparency and Focus: 10
- Imaging and Soundstaging: 10
- Tonal Balance: 9
- Dynamics: 9
- Bass Extension: 9
- Bass Pitch Definition: 8
- Bass Dynamics: 9
- Value: 10

FEATURES

Silver RX speaker system technical highlights:

- All models share 1-inch C-CAM gold metal dome tweeters that are virtually identical to the tweeters used in Monitor's more costly Gold-series speakers. Note: according to Monitor Audio, C-CAM is "an alloy of aluminum and magnesium on which a thin coating of ceramic is deposited."
- All models share 6-inch aluminum RST bass or mid-bass drivers. The RST feature creates a distinctive, computer-modeled, "dimpled" cone surface said to "reduce cone break up and provide purer, more natural mid-range clarity."
- Bass and mid-bass drivers feature vented, rigid, non-magnetic cast chassis said to "keep the driver cool as well as reduce internal pressure, resulting in the ability to play louder and cleaner."
- Ported models feature the turbulence-reducing HiVe II port system, said to reduce port noise and "chuffing" sounds in the presence of high-amplitude bass transients.
- As a means of providing both an extremely stable driver mounting platform and of improving cabinet rigidity, Silver RX drivers are fastened in place by beefy tension rods that pass all the way through to the back sides of the speaker cabinets to reduce "excessive vibration from the driver and cabinet together, giving lower colouration across the entire frequency spectrum."
- Floorstanding models feature strong and handsome floor plinths with beautifully made floor spike/floor pad hardware that makes the speakers a joy to install.
- The Silver RX-FX surround speaker can be wall-mounted and features switch selectable bipole/dipole modes of operation.



Monitor Audio Silver RXW-12

Silver RXW-12 technical highlights:

- Features a 12-inch C-CAM subwoofer driver with “triple suspension and 3-inch long throw voice coil.”
- 1-inch (25mm) thick MDF cabinet walls with heavy internal bracing.
- 500-watt Class D amplifier.
- Offers two pushbutton-selectable EQ curves. The EQ1 curve is optimized for maximally flat frequency response and “the best overall transient response and power output.” With the EQ1 curve selected, frequency rolloff “starts at 27 Hz.” The EQ2 curve provides what many manufacturers would call a “Movie” mode that provides “an additional boost of 4dB ... at 21 Hz to give impact essential for action movies.”

SONIC CHARACTER

More so than most mid-priced speaker systems I've sampled, Monitor Audio's Silver RX system is capable of sounding like a much higher-end (and higher-priced) system than it really is.

Part of the system's inherent goodness revolves around its exceedingly accurate and neutral tonal balance. As is often the case with genuinely neutral transducers, I could see how some listeners might interpret the Silver RX system as sounding slightly bright and lean, but this is an illusion. It's just that the Monitor Audios are among those "what's on the recording is what you get" speakers that refuse to inject any artificial warmth or colorations of their own. Interestingly, should you happen to try an automated room/speaker EQ system with the Silver RX system, you may discover—as I did—that there really isn't much work for the EQ system to do (except way down in the low bass region where most speaker systems' in-room response curves exhibit a few peaks or troughs that judicious touches of EQ can help smooth out).

But accurate tonal balance is only part of the story, because the Silver RX also offers excellent transient speed and astonishingly high levels of resolution and detail. Put these factors together and you've got a system that can really dig down deep into good recordings to retrieve layer upon layer of musical or cinematic detail that most systems at this price would either soften or miss altogether. To be perfectly frank, though, this highly revealing quality can sometimes represent a double-edged sword. When fed great material and driven by high-quality source components and electronics the Silver RX system can sound breathtakingly good. But, when fed so-so program material or driven by mediocre components, the system will dutifully report whatever sonic quirks and foibles it encounters—sometimes to its own detriment. This is a roundabout way of saying that while the Silver RX system is extremely revealing, it is also not terribly forgiving—a point to bear in mind for those of you who, down deep, might not enjoy a speaker system that's capable, in a literal sense, of conveying "too much information."



Monitor Audio Silver RX-Centre

The Silver RX system handles both large and small-scale dynamic contrasts in a very lively and expressive way—something you’ll appreciate when, say, a movie soundtrack presents whispered, low-level dialog and then abruptly transitions to introduce louder sounds (such as explosions or gunfire). While the Silver RX system cannot play at ridiculously loud levels the way certain big-bucks blockbuster surround systems can, it more than holds its own versus competitors within (or near) its own price class. In contrast to systems that have a subdued, comfortable, “polite” sound, the Silver RX system instead comes across as offering high levels of refinement and detail served up with a real spirit of energy and gusto—a complementary combination of virtues indeed.

I identified only three small sonic caveats with this system. First, because even the tallest models in the Silver RX series (the RX8 floorstanders tested here) are comparatively short in stature, the system tends to cast sonic images and soundstages that fall slightly below ear-level. Second, the accuracy and transient speed of Monitor’s metal dome tweeter comes at a price; namely, a tendency for the tweeter to sound just slightly hard-edged or “pingy” on high-energy, high-frequency transients (though this may be a case where the tweeter is simply reporting flaws already present in recordings or upstream electronics). Either way, these occasional (and thankfully, infrequent) treble discontinuities can distract the listener, leading to a momentary disruption in the Silver RX’s ordinarily excellent imaging. Finally, the bass output of the Silver RX system can, at times, sound ever so slightly under-damped. To address this issue, however, Monitor thoughtfully provides sets of foam rubber port plugs (for the RX8s) so that users can fine-tune the speakers’ bass characteristics where necessary.

MOVIE PERFORMANCE

Earlier on, I mentioned how well the Silver RX system could handle sudden dynamic shifts in movie soundtracks and the specific example I had in mind was drawn from Quentin Tarantino’s *Inglourious Basterds*. The film, set in occupied France during WWII, begins when French dairy farmer Perrier LaPadite receives a surprise visit from the notorious SS Col. Hans Landa. In the stillness of LaPadite’s farmhouse kitchen, Landa (known to the French as the “Jew Hunter”) quietly—and with a certain believable and yet snake-like malevolent charm—questions LaPadite about his former Jewish neighbors. Then, at the penultimate moment, when LaPadite thinks he might just get away with the “crime” of hiding Jews beneath his floorboards, Landa springs the question he has come to ask all along: “You are harboring enemies of the state, aren’t you?” Realizing that Landa’s men are about to search his home for the fugitives, LaPadite’s eyes well up with tears as he softly, haltingly replies, “Yes.”

What makes this scene click, and underscores Landa’s deceptive and purely evil nature, is the pristine clarity with which the Silver RX system reproduces the subtlest nuances of the conversation between the two men, while also capturing the innocent quietude of the humble kitchen. The scene seems so peaceful and the conversation so civil (even genteel), yet it is full of latent peril—peril that you can hear and *feel* as Landa weaves a

conversational noose, as it were, and then abruptly pulls it tight around LaPadite's neck. The true nature of the exchange, however, is revealed as Landa asks LaPadite—in English, so that the Jews hiding below the floor won't understand what is happening—to point out exactly where his neighbors are hiding beneath the kitchen. As soon as Landa has his answer, a loud, angular, and distressed string passage unfolds in the soundtrack. Then, the peace of the kitchen is shattered as Landa guides his men to unleash an ear-splittingly loud volley of machine gun fire through the indicated locations on the floorboards. As the massacre proceeds, a huge, menacing orchestral theme swells in the background.

The scene is incredibly disturbing, and shocking to both our minds and emotions. And part of its power is made possible by the prowess of the Silver RX system—driven by the system's remarkable ability to shift gears from subtlety and nuance to explosive dynamic power in the blink of an eye. We *want* to believe the oily charm in Landa's voice—as does LaPadite—but we cannot, and perhaps for this reason are even more scandalized and offended when the true sound of his cold, destructive power erupts and assaults our ears. A fine speaker system can take the inherent emotional power of such a scene and amplify it, which is precisely what the Silver RX system did in this case.



Monitor Audio Silver RX-FX

MUSIC PERFORMANCE

When you get right down to it, musical realism (the kind where you temporarily suspend disbelief and allow yourself to imagine that you are in the presence of real instruments) is what we all want from good speaker systems, though it is perhaps a “holy grail” we can rarely if ever achieve. But one recording in particular, the Silver RX system came about as close as any mid-priced rig I have ever heard to achieving true, you-are-there-grade realism. The recording is Christopher Roberts' hauntingly beautiful and stunningly well-recorded *Last Cicada Singing* [Cold Blue], which features Roberts performing his own

compositions for a fretless Chinese string instrument called the Qin. I've only heard a real Qin in live performances a handful of times, but after each performance I found the instrument's harmonically complex, evocative sound—which can entail both soaring treble lines and plunging bass lines of almost ethereal delicacy—really stuck with me.

Imagine my surprise, then, when I put on the Roberts' recording and heard through the Silver RX system what sounded very much like a real live, no jive Qin performing right there in the midst of the *Playback* listening room. What made the experience feel very nearly real was not just the system's ability to get the sound of the Qin itself right, but *also* its ability to capture the sense of the acoustics of the room in which the recording was made, while recreating the often elusive feel of the "air" surrounding the instrument. Granted, the sonic presentation might have had a subtly larger-than-life quality, but even so I found the overall level of realism the Silver RX system achieved to be pretty mind blowing. Let's put it this way: I've heard of more costly systems that could not do as well as this one did.

Another great example of the Silver RX system's musical capabilities came through listening the DTS-HD Master Audio soundtrack of the Blu-ray version of *Return to Forever Returns—Live at Montreux 2008*. Featuring the all-star lineup of Chick Corea on keyboards, Stanley Clarke on bass, Al DiMeola on guitars, and Lenny White on drums, this concert film represents a tour de force effort in the realm of fusion-oriented jazz.

Over the course of the concert, Al DiMeola switches from a black Gibson Les Paul electric guitar (an instrument often heard on DiMeola's earlier recordings) to a set of gorgeous Paul Reed Smith electrics—instruments whose sounds might at first seem similar, yet that each have subtle and distinct sonic personalities. What impressed me was the way the Silver RX system faithfully captured (and delineated) the characteristic timbres and voicings of the guitars, doing an especially realistic job with the unmistakably warm, round, "fat" tone of the Gibson.

Stanley Clarke, in turn, performs much of the concert on his signature Alembic 4-string electric bass—an instrument whose unusually fine onboard electronics give it a particularly deep, clear, penetrating *basso profundo* voice. Having played a few Alembics in my day, I'm sensitive to (and appreciative of) the voicing of the instrument, and sure enough, the Silver RX system did a fine job of reproducing the characteristic Alembic sound—including the over-the-top dynamics that result from Clarke's sure-handed slap'n'pop playing techniques.

But maybe the biggest surprise of all came in listening to Lenny White play a swooping and elaborate fill on his drum kit, punctuating the fill with hard, sharp shot to his snare drum and a big floor-mounted tom-tom. The Silver RX system simply *nailed* the sound tight "skin" sounds of the snare drum head and the deep "pop" and bounce of the floor tom. I don't think I've ever heard a mid-priced surround system do a more realistic rendition of the sound of live drums in action.

What my comments are meant to convey is the fact that the Silver RX system is really an exceptional performer at its price—a system that, above all, gives a surprisingly honest and accurate rendition of the timbres and dynamic qualities of real instruments.

BOTTOM LINE:

Monitor Audio's Silver RX system is one of finest mid-priced surround speaker systems I've heard, offering neutral tonal balance, potent dynamics, and more detail and resolution than one would expect for the price. I would say that it is not just a little but rather a lot better than the Silver RS system it replaces—a system that really turns sonic silver into gold.

SPECS & PRICING

Monitor Audio Silver RX8 3-way, four-driver, bass reflex floorstanding speaker

Driver complement: One 1-inch C-CAM gold dome tweeter, one 6-inch RST mid/bass driver, two 6-inch RST bass drivers

Frequency response: 32Hz – 35 kHz

Sensitivity: 90 dB

Impedance: 4 ohms

Dimensions (HxWxD): 35.44" x 7.31" x 13" (main speaker), 1" x 10.44" x 15.25" (plinth)

Weight: 47.88 lbs. each

Warranty: 5 years, parts and labor

Price: \$1750/pair

Monitor Audio Silver RX-Centre 2 1/2-way, three-driver, center-channel speaker

Driver complement: One 1-inch C-CAM gold dome tweeter, one 6-inch RST mid/bass driver, one 6-inch RST bass driver

Frequency response: 45Hz – 35 kHz

Sensitivity: 90 dB

Impedance: 6 ohms

Dimensions (HxWxD): 7.31" x 19.69" x 7.87"

Weight: 21.13 lbs. each

Warranty: 5 years, parts and labor

Price: \$675 each

Monitor Audio Silver RX-FX 2-way, three-driver, bipole/dipole surround speaker

Driver complement: Two 1-inch C-CAM gold dome tweeters, one 6-inch RST mid/bass driver

Frequency response: 60Hz – 35 kHz

Sensitivity: 89 dB

Impedance: 6 ohms

Dimensions (HxWxD): 11.81" x 9.81" x 4.75"

Weight: 10.38 lbs. each

Warranty: 5 years, parts and labor

Price: \$750/pair

Monitor Audio Silver RXW-12 powered subwoofer

Driver complement: One 12-inch C-CAM woofer with 3-inch long-throw voice coil

Integrated amplifier power: 500W RMS (1000W peak), Class D

Dimensions (HxWxD): 13.37" x 13.37" x 16.12"

Weight: Not specified

Warranty: 5 years (on main woofer, 2 years on subwoofer amplifier), parts and labor

Price: \$1300/each

System Price: \$4475 as tested

U.S. Distributor

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