

# 3 Square Audio Translator

NEW-KIDS-ON-THE-BLOCK, 3 SQUARE AUDIO IS BIG ON BAL TIC BIRCH PLY, 1<sup>ST</sup> ORDER CROSSOVERS ETCETERA. PAUL MESSENGER CHECKS OUT ONE OF ITS LOUDSPEAKERS



Who is 3 Square Audio anyway? That was my immediate question when I first encountered these guys. It turns out that there are indeed three of them, and the operation was founded quite recently, in 2015, which probably explains why the company doesn't currently supply dealers, but instead sells direct to end-users. This seems to be the modern way, and is probably inevitable for a brand new operation such as this. Lacking normal retail outlets, the company's website points out that it does offer a free 'home demonstration' option (presumably only in the UK).

Although the three protagonists (Stuart, Brian and Doug) are based in Derbyshire, one of them, by happy coincidence, happens to have a relative who lives quite near me. All are important, including architect Brian and joiner Doug, but the main man from a hi-fi perspective is undoubtedly Stuart (Dunn), who has had more than thirty years of experience in hi-fi retail, and has become very dissatisfied with most of the speakers that are generally available. That's the basic reason why 3-Square Audio was started up in the first place.

Crucially, the two loudspeakers (somewhat pretentiously named *Translator* and *Liberator*) quite deliberately feature ultra-simple 'first order'

crossover networks, as this approach is claimed to give superior phase response (without specifying the crossover or the acoustic outputs). Such a simple two-component crossover encourages the use of top quality components, such as an air-core Jantzen inductor and a 1% tolerance ClarityCap capacitor used here. Twin terminal socket/binder pairs are also fitted, facilitating bi-wiring or –amping.

The product range actually consists of a number of plinths and racks (which I haven't tried), but the subject of this review is the £2,800/pair *Translator*, the floorstander of two loudspeakers. All are based on Baltic birch-ply, made from a selected slow-growing and hence unusually dense and costly variety of the timber.

One unique aspect of the speaker's styling is that it's deliberately left entirely 'nude', with no attempt to cover the plywood with any form of veneer. The net result is certainly unusual and very distinctive indeed, especially in the plywood edge stripes that surround the front panel, but to these eyes at least it's also by no means unpleasant, thanks in part to the oil- and wax-based finish.

The floor-coupling arrangements are equally unconventional. Five substantial M10 stainless steel bolts are fixed permanently into a 10mm steel plate within the recessed base of each speaker. (Five bolts permits the tripod option, though don't tell Health & Safety!) Each bolt may then be fitted with a hefty and substantial aluminium cone that ends in a relatively sharp point.

Lateral holes are drilled through the bolts to allow height adjustment, and rely on the (considerable, 28kg) weight of the enclosure to hold them in place, rather than any form of lock-nut. Mistrusting the latter arrangement, and already using Townshend platforms to decouple speakers from my suspended wooden floor, I screwed the cones as finger-tightly home as feasible. And extra mass-loading is also supplied by a concrete layer (alongside that steel plate).

It's basically a two-way loudspeaker, reinforced by reflex loading in the bass *via* a rear port tuned to 38Hz. The drivers are good quality units from Norwegian specialist SEAS' Prestige range. They consist of a 165mm (6.5in) bass/midrange driver with a coated paper cone, plus a 27mm tweeter with a soft fabric Sonolex dome.

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Spatially averaged far-field in-room measurements show a decent enough frequency response, albeit one that shows certain departures from neutrality. The most serious problem is arguably the mid-bass excess (+c5dB, 35-60Hz) (probably due to the proximity of the port to our 50Hz room mode). Elsewhere the upper bass is somewhat lacking (-c4dB, 70-220Hz), as is the presence (-c5dB, 2.6-5kHz), plus the treble proper. (Alternatively, one could regard the broad midband, 250Hz-1.8kHz, as somewhat forward.)

We measured the sensitivity at around 89dB through the midband, though the spec. only claims 87dB, perhaps reflecting the typically  $\pm 3$ dB variations in frequency balance detailed above. Impedance is claimed to have a minimum of 7ohms at 150Hz, which couldn't be checked in this case due to test gear problems, but would seem to indicate an easy amplifier load.

### Sound Quality

While the 3 Square guys were here, I swapped a pair of B&W 800D3s that had been *in situ* for a pair of *Translators*. One would expect such a change to favour the B&Ws strongly, and while it did indeed do so, the advantages were largely restricted to the bass end of things, and certainly didn't reflect the 8:1 price difference.

After some weeks of very pleasurable listening to the *Translators*, using both the Kron hybrid amplifier (see page 46) as well as my regular Naim pre-/power combo, I changed the loudspeakers over to the Arcaydis EB2S. Although this sealed-box stand-mount's measured in-room response is comfortably superior, and the frequency balance was correspondingly more even, I found that it sounded significantly less natural overall, which might (or might not) be related to its 3<sup>rd</sup> order + 3<sup>rd</sup> order crossover network.

Even though direct comparison made one immediately aware of the *Translator's* departure from true neutrality, this seemed largely irrelevant compared to its 'natural' inherent character. I also discovered that I could quickly adjust to tonal balance anomalies, but much less so to the loss of the 'natural' dynamic qualities that reminded me of the virtues of full-range driver designs.

I should perhaps add that this experience (along with my recent enthusiasm for full-range driver systems) has made me into something of a convert for simple 6dB/octave crossovers. I recall that B&W simplified the tweeter feed to its top 800-series to 6dB/octave some years ago, based purely on the results of listening tests, and although I perhaps didn't realise it at the time, I now have considerable sympathy with the technique.

(That said, I then brought the PMC IB2 SE references with their 24dB/octave 4<sup>th</sup> order crossovers into the listening room, and was treated to a similarly natural sound quality. It would therefore seem quite clear that either 1<sup>st</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> order networks can be made to work satisfactorily after all!)

Gentle crossover rolloff slopes are so strongly at the core of the *Translator* design that it seems impossible to pin down the contributions of the other constructional details: the birch-ply enclosure, the mass loading, or the hefty and unconventional spike arrangements. However, there's no denying that they all seem to be doing a fine job, as the dynamic expression of these speakers is thoroughly impressive.

Indeed, my only real criticism goes back to the paragraph that preceded the Sound Quality section, pointing out the mid-bass peak that was probably created by a combination of the port tuning and a specific room-mode. Although this prominence wasn't at all audible with speech sources, music program invariably showed it up as a rather 'thickened' character, especially when a bass guitar or kick-drum came into the mix.

### Conclusions

After spending a few weeks enjoying their unquestionably 'natural' sound quality, I've become very fond of the *Translators*. Indeed, in many respects they represent an ideal that offers many of the benefits of a full range driver system without some of the latter's bandwidth disadvantages. They're not perfect, true, and the jury might still be out on 1<sup>st</sup> order crossovers, but there's no avoiding the fact that I reckon the *Translators* rival speakers at several times their price. I'll undoubtedly miss them when the time comes round for their return, and have no hesitation at all in confidently awarding them Recommended status.



### Manufacturer's Specification

Make	3 Square Audio
Model	Translator
Type	2-way ported floorstander
Sensitivity	89dB/2.83V
Load	7ohms minimum (@ 150Hz)
Drivers	SEAS Prestige: 165mm coated paper bass/ midrange 27mm Sonolux tweeter
Port tuning	38Hz
Crossover	1 <sup>st</sup> order, 2.6kHz
Components	Jantzen inductor; ClarityCap capacitor
Terminals	2x4mm socket/ binder pairs
Rec. amp power	30—150W (programme)
Size (HxWxD)	95x20x36cm
Weight	28.5kg
Price (pair)	£2,800

