

Scansonic MB-2.5 floorstanding loudspeaker

by Alan Sircom



There's a lot to like about the Raidho loudspeaker system, but there's one big stumbling block that keeps on cropping up from time to time – the price. A pair of Raidho's entry-level baby X-1 standmounts will set you back nearly four and a half grand with the stands, and Raidho's floorstanders start at a shade under £15k for the C 2.1 and go up into six figures for the mighty D-5. Aside from needing to make up its mind whether to use a hyphen across all its ranges, what would be really good is something like a 'diffusion line'; an Emporio Armani to Raidho's Georgio, if you like.

What would really be good is a pair of Scansonic MB-2.5 floorstanding loudspeakers.

The full name of the loudspeaker is something of a giveaway, if you know Raidho's history. Raidho is part of the Dantax Radio A/S group, in Pandrup on the north-west of Denmark's Jutland peninsular. Dantax has been around for a long time, and in 1977 bought a group of then-recently liquidated companies called Scan-Speak, Scan-Sonic, and Scan-Sound. Although it later sold on Scan-Speak, Dantax retained the Scan-Sonic brand for a range of lower-end audio products: the company still turns out DAB radios, iDevice docking stations, and Bluetooth loudspeakers in significant numbers. Fast forward to today and Scansonic (once more with the on-again, off-again relationship with the hyphen) is the perfect vehicle to create a high value, volume brand, leveraging much of what is distinctive about Raidho in the process.

The rest of the name is significant, too. 'MB' are the initials of one Michael Børresen, who has been designing Raidho loudspeakers (and then some) for the last 12 years or more. It's also a two-and-a-half way design, although that '2.5' just happens to be Scansonic's particular nomenclature for this range, rather than a statement of intent. The MB-1 standmount, for example, is a two-way design, so the spell is broken.

This is kind of a perfect storm in loudspeakers. Parent company Dantax has the resources needed to fund and develop a project like the MB-2.5, and a designer like Børresen doesn't have it in his character to put his initials to a half-baked product, even at a more value-driven level than he's hitherto worked on. Børresen is one of audio's mad professors, although more in a 'left-field stroke of genius' way than 'feet are just leg-hands' craziness.

The MB-2.5 is the middle of three speakers in the range, with a two-way MB-1 standmount below and a three-way with side-firing bass units and a D'Appolito mid-treble-mid called MB-3.5 above. All three models share the same sealed kapton/aluminium sandwich membrane ribbon tweeter, and the same 115mm carbon-coned mid-bass unit (the MB-2.5 uses two of these, one as a mid-woofer and one purely as a below-250Hz woofer in traditional two-and-a-half way designs). These mid-bass cones have an overhung magnet system similar to Raidho's own. All three are extremely slim, and yet surprisingly

heavy, thanks to a lot of bracing and the carbon-loaded front baffle. The rest of the enclosure rests on elegant aluminium outriggers (with a sort of 'lite' version of the decoupling feet seen on Raidho's designs), and the cabinet itself comes in a choice of white or black silk semi-gloss finish.

There's an important point here that needs saying. These loudspeakers do look good. They are slim and elegant in that kind of effortless, minimalist Scandinavian style that we've all grown to love. I can't help be broadly reminded of the look of the Sonus faber Venere 2.5, but in both models, it's the design touches that are all important to both and ultimately separate the two. I don't think this is 'imitation', however, but rather 'design convergence': broadly similar specification sheets ultimately begat broadly similar end products.

With reasonably benign four-ohm nominal impedance, the MB-2.5 is not a difficult load for an amplifier, although Scansonic recommends more than 50W power output in its partnering electronics. Scansonic nuances this somewhat with the term 'high quality amplifiers', and this is important. You need to make some consideration as to the 'stiffness' of the amplifier's power supply when partnering the MB-2.5. No, you don't need to hook it up to some doubling-down beast power amplifier that costs 20x as much as the loudspeakers, but neither can you use it with an amplifier that does not have good control over the bottom end. Something like a Hegel H80, Naim SuperNAIT or SuperUniti is completely ideal here, where as some loose, flappy bottom end from an inexpensive amplifier with not enough iron in its transformer (and that's not a euphemism) will leave you cold. That being said, the Scansonic speakers are not as fussy as Raidho's models, so moving the right speaker three ångström to the left, or using not quite the ideal choice of interconnect cable will not shout at you the way it can through the D-1. The MB-2.5 is more forgiving, and more approachable as a result. However, you can seriously push the envelope, too, and the speakers will shine.

In addition, set-up is an important consideration. In fairness, it's an important consideration in any audio system, but the Scansonic MB-2.5 shares the Raidho trait of needing very careful care and feeding. And, in most cases, that necessitates a room re-think. Imagine a room with a floor 4.5m wide and 6m long; typically the loudspeakers would be about a metre or so away from the side and back walls, with a 2.5m gap between them, and the listener sitting at the other end of that 6m length, probably about 2m or so from the rear wall. This gives the best sound for most loudspeakers. Scansonic joins a select list (including, of course, Raidho, but also designs like Audio Physic) that demand the listener sit across the width of the room (about a metre from the rear wall) and have the loudspeakers set wide into the room. Although the down-firing port notionally means these loudspeakers are perfectly comfortable close to walls, that isn't the case in reality, and they need some air around them, at least to the rear. They need at least a metre from the rear wall, but can work





▶ surprisingly close to the sides, and they love to be further apart than most loudspeakers.

In fact, here's how I think you get them to sound good. Move them further and further out, playing a piece of music with a strong central image to test. Eventually, that central image will begin to sound diffuse and insubstantial, and you end up with that nasty 'hole in the middle' effect. Now, move them back from the brink, in about 3cm steps until the 'hole in the middle' effect goes away, and fine tune from there.

The other aspect they seem to have inherited from Raidho is a significantly long run-in period. The sound out of the box bears some relationship to the end result, but the reality is we're talking hundreds of hours for them to achieve full 'on song' form. Especially in the bass, which seems to slowly tighten up (and paradoxically, fill out) over time. My advice; if you are getting a demonstration in store or at home, make sure the demo pair have been extremely well run in, and if you decide to buy a pair, put them baffle-to-baffle, wire the speakers out of phase to one another, throw a blanket over them, and play something varied and monophonic through them*. On repeat. For a month. Our pair arrived with some miles on the clock, but nothing compared to how we've heard them in shows or demonstrations or at the factory, and the difference is not 'hot-rodged' samples: it's sheer weight of hours played that counts. Many, many hours later, the loudspeakers sprung to life.

And what sprung to life could best be described as a 'lean, clean, detail machine'. It's not the thickest, richest sound you will have ever heard, but after listening to the MB-2.5, going back to thicker, richer sounding loudspeakers at the price may very well seem like wading through sludge. Instead, you have a sense of air and of air and detail – detail that, especially in those upper registers, gives no sense whatsoever of overhang or excess fat. I put on John ▶

** This is a tried and trusted method of running in a pair of loudspeakers without causing too much disruption. Wiring the loudspeakers out of phase to one another and placing them 'nose-to-nose' effectively acts in a similar manner to noise cancellation, and cuts out a lot of stray noise from the loudspeakers while running them in.*

► Pickard's 'The Flight of Icarus' [Norrköping S.O., Brabbins conducting, BIS], and the dynamic shading and energy of the recording highlighted instruments in the upper registers with ease. You could really pick out the subtlety and drive of Christian Lindberg's trombone playing, despite being set in a difficult modern classical setting. Those strings are not as lush as they might be played through BBC-style loudspeakers, but they aren't meant to be lush, they are meant to be hard-edged and powerful. The MB-2.5s are clearly resolving a lot of detail, especially in the upper registers.

Then there's the soundstage, which is extremely deep and – as you might expect, given the speaker placement – very wide. There's a great precision to this staging though, with instruments taking on a sense of three-dimensional layering that is usually the preserve of the likes of Quad Electrostatics (in fairness, the Raidho C and D models do this too). The live off the desk sound of *King Curtis Live at Fillmore West* [ATCO] expresses this perfectly. 'Memphis Soul Stew' builds slowly and steadily as more instruments are added to the mix and it can all get very confused and confusing when the full band is at full tilt; the MB-2.5 decodes this and lays it all out with great precision. This is why the choice of amplifier is important, though, because it needs something that can do this without making it sound drab or flat – the Scansonic is too good a transducer to lose out to poor amplification.

The Raidho element is clear when you get to that midrange; liquid, transparent, beguiling. Put on anything with a woman's voice – 'Lucky' by Kat Edmonson [*Way Down Low*, Okeh] is a perfect example – and it sounds like the gamine Ms E. is in the room with you, being a bit coy and breathy. No artifice, no barriers between you and her, just the musical connection.

While you can play loud by audiophile standards quite comfortably, if the MB-2.5 is intended to fill a large room with gut-crunching heavy rock at concert levels, choose another loudspeaker. Fortunately, the over-specified magnet and coil former in the bass drivers means they will bottom out long before anything catastrophic happens, but push too far into the 100dB+ zone in room and the 'wub wub wub' break in 'Limit To Your Love' from James Blake's eponymous post-dubstep album [ATLAS] can lose its way and go staccato.

You can't help trying to compare the Scansonic MB-2.5 to something Raidho, despite the fact you could buy nearly five pairs of MB-2.5s for the cost of a pair of the cheapest Raidho floorstanders. It's an unfair comparison; set against the Raidho D-1, for example, the MB-2.5 lacks some top-end refinement and overall coherence, which is like criticising a Mini for not being a BMW 5-Series. For the money, that 'lean, clean, detail machine' crown is unassailable. You won't find anything close to doing what the MB-2.5 do for the money. They have enough of the Raidho genetic code to sound like Raidho, but not enough to stop a prospective Raidho owner from changing their mind.

That's the big thing about the Scansonic MB-2.5, and it harks back to the opening of this tale. There are those who've heard what Raidho do and love it, but hate the price. They simply cannot or will not make that kind of financial commitment on a pair of loudspeakers, no matter how good. Those people will see the Scansonic range as a golden opportunity. It brings them much of what the Raidho speakers offer in a more affordable, more approachable package. Very highly recommended! +

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TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Drive units: One sealed ribbon tweeter with kapton/aluminum sandwich membrane. Two carbon coned 115mm bass/mid drivers with overhung magnet system

Enclosure: Curved, heavily braced, ventilated box design with front loaded port and adjustable aluminum feet

Freq. response: 40 Hz–40 kHz

Sensitivity: not specified

Impedance: >4 ohm

Crossover points: 3.5 kHz second-order acoustic slope, 250 Hz first-order slope

Dimensions (W×H×D):

178 × 998 × 286 mm

Weight: 15.6 kg

Finish: Black-silk or White-silk, with carbon-fibre front baffle

Price: £2,250 per pair

Manufactured by: Scansonic

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