



In The Doghouse

By Chris Fitzgerald

Size Matters – A Decidedly Non- technical Review of the MAS Big E 4x5 Bass Cab

I can still remember when my fascination with small drivers for double bass amplification began: I had been playing double bass though a number of bass guitar amps, most of which featured large speakers – 10's 12's, 15's, etc. – and a friend suggested I try plugging into a PA system he had built that ran the mixer through two speakers containing only a single 8" Eminence speaker and a horn, each. Not expecting much, I agreed to try it, mostly to humor him. Once I played the first note, however, I was hooked. Something about the sound seemed to instantly and accurately reflect the sound envelope of the unamplified sound of a plucked double bass better than anything I had ever heard before. I now have a very unscientific theory about why this may be so. But at the time, I just knew that the smaller speakers sounded better than the bigger ones I had been using, so I wanted to try as many cabinets featuring small drivers as I could.

Since then, I've played through dozens of different amplification systems, and usually end up preferring the amplified sound of the bass as it comes through smaller

speakers. Some of the speakers I've owned along these lines include the SWR Baby Blue II (a combo with two 8" drivers) a pair of Falk Audio "Tiny Mite" PA speakers (mentioned above), Euphonic Audio VL108 and VL208 cabinets, and my current amp of choice, the Phil Jones Super Flightcase BG-300 combo (which features six 5" drivers in a ported enclosure, and which I reviewed in this column back in issue #4). So, when I first heard about the MAS (Mike Arnopol Soundworks) Big E 4x5 and 8x5 cabinets built by Mike Arnopol, I was very interested in getting my hands on them and putting them through their paces.

The first thing to strike me about the Big E 4x5 as I unpacked it from the box was that the construction and finish look and feel top notch. While it's a relatively light cabinet for its size, at about 30 lbs, the construction and bracing of the cabinet feel ridiculously solid. Visually, it's also a really attractive cabinet that is slightly exotic-looking, because of the double side ports and the angled mounting of the speakers in the center. The 4x5 features four 5" Faital drivers, each coupled with a soft dome tweeter. According to Mike, the cabinet is 97dB efficient and can handle 480 watt peaks (thermal rating) and real-world continuous of about 350 watts. It is an 8-ohm cabinet, which for me is perfect, because it means I could run two at once, if needed.

My first thought upon plugging in my bass and listening to the amplified sound was that the 4x5

reminded me a lot of my old EA VL208 cabinets, in that the sound was very direct and fast, extremely accurate – accurate "to a fault," only insofar as it will accurately reproduce and shine a sonic spotlight on anything you play into it, good or bad – and yet somehow still thick and "weighty" sounding across the entire range of the instrument. This may or may not sound like high praise, but I consider it some of the highest kind of praise that a cabinet can receive, because any peaks, dips, or valleys in the response force the player to adjust their physical approach to the instrument to compensate for the speaker. Having to compensate in this way usually ends up distracting from the music making. At first, I felt that the cabinet brought out a bit too much information in the low mids, even to the point of making it sound slightly "boxy," but after consulting with a couple of other players whose musical tastes I admire, I was able to tame this range with a little judicious EQ. Once that was accomplished, the sound has been extremely accurate and balanced.

I played several gigs using the 4x5 with an Acoustic Image Focus as the front end, and both the other players and the audience members I asked about the sound liked the presence of the sound in the mix. While admitting up front that trying to describe the sound of a piece of gear is somewhat akin to "dancing about architecture," I'll do my best to give an impression of what I heard and felt while playing through the cab.

The first word that comes to mind is *tight*, but in the sense of positive usage of the word that reflects accuracy, rather than tension. Every nuance you play gets amplified with little or nothing added. For double bass, this can be a mixed blessing, depending on the quality of the input signal. With a mic that's picking up the sound of the bass from a position where the sound has had a chance to open up a bit, this quality is a great thing. With a pickup, it can be a great thing, but it can also accurately amplify qualities of the pickup signal which are not as pleasing; I think this aspect is what I was hearing before I learned how to EQ the cabinet. Once I'd figured out which pickup frequencies were jumping out, the sound was extremely clean and present and useable, with no extra flab on the bottom end.

The second word that comes to mind in describing the sound is *fast*, as in "no lag between what you play and what you hear." It's as though the cabinet is a part of the bass, and the "quickness" of the speaker to speak makes it extremely easy to play in tune, since part of the amplified intonation paradigm is the ability to hear the amplified signal quickly and to make minute adjustments, as needed. While I don't pretend to understand the acoustic principles at work that give this impression of "sonic speed," I do find it to be a very real and desirable quality in any piece of amplification equipment; not surprisingly, I seem to get this impression most often from speakers featuring smaller drivers.

The third word that comes to mind is *solid*. Every note has a certain thickness and weight to it, and where the 4x5 really shines is in the upper register of the bass. Many speakers – for whatever reason – sound great in the lower registers,

but tend to get thin as the double bassist climbs higher on the *G* string and up into thumb position. This was not at all the case with the Big E, where, if anything, the higher notes had a focused kind of thickness, presence and "pop" to them that was incredibly potent and undeniably welcome

The last word that comes to mind when playing through the 4x5 is *dry*. There is nothing extra added to the signal from the speaker, no ambience or color of any kind, and for my purposes, I had some mixed feelings about this. While I loved the speed and accuracy of the sound, a part of me was listening for a sweet sonic signature that identified itself as part of the overall amplified voice as perceived from the position of the player. Out in the room, of course, the amplified signal picked up the sonic signature of the room and opened up accordingly (depending on the room, this can be a good thing or a bad thing, but this is true of every amp ever made). But sitting right next to it (whether on the floor or up on a chair or stand), I had a little bit of challenge to imagine how that sound would open up into the room. It's a minor quibble that probably

speaks more to the amplified sound that I'm used to than it does to this specific cab, but it did give me pause for thought as I had to imagine the opening up and warmth of the sound as it made its way to the audience, rather than hearing a hint of it right behind me from the speaker, itself. It's something I'm pretty sure I could get used to (it was this aspect that reminded me of my old VL208 cabinets), but with the limited time I had, I found it slightly challenging. In spite of this minor quibble – essentially that, if anything, the cab was too accurate (if such a thing is possible) – I was quickly able to dial in the sound and feel and commence to music making. The recordings from the room reflect a great, clean, and present sound of both the bass itself, and of a player who was in that happy place of making music, rather than fussing with their amplification settings.

Overall, the Big E 4x5 gets two hearty thumbs up, especially if you are looking for more accuracy and clarity in your amplified sound. Bass amplification just keeps on getting better year after year. MSRP is \$1,000, with an estimated street price of \$750. **BGM**

