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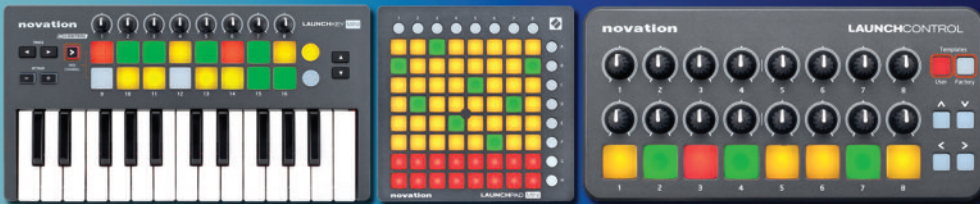
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REVIEW

BY MIKE METLAY

Samson Resolv SE Active Studio Reference Monitors

When did solid, reliable monitoring quality become this affordable?



Listening to the Resolv SE6

I set up a listening position with the larger Resolv SE6 in place of my usual near-fields at one end of a small but well-treated room, on Ultimate Support speaker stands at head height, nicely toed in and symmetrical (thanks to Genelec's awesome SpeakerAngle app for iOS!) in an equilateral triangle roughly 80" on a side.

I lined up many of my usual listening tests from conventional CDs and high-bitrate audio files—lots of reliable rock standards from the 1960s and 1970s, modern releases from bands like Florence+The Machine and Neko Case, some well-recorded jazz, country, and classical tracks, and my beloved electronica, EDM, and ambient as well. As always, I added in some of my own music, both as artist and as engineer or producer... particularly those infamous mid-1980s recordings from my first home studio that were so fraught with, shall we say, "teachable moments."

I also did some listening at heavier MP3 compression levels, as far down as 128 kbps; while well-encoded 320k MP3s can be largely indistinguishable from CD audio when listened to on any but the most discerning speakers or headphones, it's not hard to hear artifacts in lower-bitrate files if your speakers are honest.

Samson quotes the SE6's low-frequency response as 45 Hz–27 kHz, ± 3 dB (the tolerance is given in the owner's manual but not on the website). 3 dB down at 45 Hz is respectable performance for a 6.5" woofer, and listening to bass-critical material through the SE6, I can believe it.

One of my favorite bass tests is Aga Zaryan's jazz album *Pick Up The Pieces*, which has several tracks of nothing but Aga's exquisite voice backed up by solo upright bass. If a speaker gets bass wrong, it will destroy those tracks, but I found them nicely enjoyable with the Resolv SE6. Bass on these speakers is tight and well-defined, with no sloppiness or nasty resonances that make certain notes honky or thumpy. Rolloff at the extreme lows was gentle enough so that when you stop hearing the fundamental of the deepest notes, the harmonics fill in nicely in your head. If you're in a small room where bass buildup is an issue, you'll

Samson's new Resolv SE active speakers aren't the only affordable monitors we've reviewed recently or are about to review, but they're among the more significant arrivals in this Editor's listening room in 2013. Read on... but do me a favor and don't skip ahead to the prices at the end until you've read the review.

The three Resolv SE models are named for their woofer sizes: the Resolv SE5, Resolv SE6, and Resolv SE8. The Resolv 120a, an active 10" subwoofer with 120 Watts of power and nice extras like built-in phase switch, active crossover, and remote mute switch, rounds out the line.

For this review, I received two pairs of Resolv SE monitors, the SE5 and SE6. I burned in both sets of speakers with two days' worth of music playback, and then lived with them for several weeks in *Recording's* Editorial offices.

On paper and out of the box

The Resolv speakers are sold individually, making it easy to build multichannel setups if desired. Each speaker has a 1.25" soft dome tweeter with a neodymium magnet and a woven carbon fiber woofer (5", 6.5", or 8" depending on the model). The Resolv SE is biamplified: 20W+50W (SE5) or 25W+75W (SE6

and SE8) with a multipole active crossover with a crossover frequency of 3.19 kHz. The two drivers are enclosed in a solidly built front-ported MDF enclosure with a front-panel waveguide around the tweeter. A bright white LED indicates power on.

The rear panel of the Resolv SE5 offers unbalanced RCA and balanced 1/4" TRS inputs; the SE6 and SE8 add a balanced XLR input as well. A standard IEC power cable connects to a jack with an easily accessible fuse panel, near the power and voltage-range switches.

Each Resolv monitor sports two rear-panel pots: a center-detented Volume pot and a four-position HF Level switch. The HF Level switch controls a shelving EQ with a 4 kHz corner frequency, with settings of -2 / 0 / +2 / +4 dB. A high-frequency control is handy when you want to use the speakers in an overly reflective or muddy room, or simply tweak their sound to individual taste. What makes this arrangement unusual is that there is no corresponding control to roll off bass excess that might occur if you're forced to place the speakers too close to a rear wall or in a corner. While I was surprised at that omission, I wasn't expecting too much trouble in my listening tests; my room is set up in such a way that bass buildup is rarely if ever an issue.

have to be careful with speaker placement for sure, especially since there's no low-frequency adjustment on board, but in my room, the low end I got was plentiful and listenable with no need for a subwoofer.

Transitioning from the lows to the mids, I found the Resolv SE6 to be blessedly free from the forwardness that plagues some inexpensive "rock-friendly" monitors. Vocals and guitars, those critical litmus tests in rock mixes, spoke clearly and in their own spaces without unpleasant smearing or muddiness. The crossover didn't call attention to itself with any drastic timbral shifts or unevenness; when a mix was congested to begin with, as on "Dog Days Are Over" by Florence+The Machine (from *Lungs*), it came across that way on the Samsons.

The claimed 27 kHz extension of the tweeter is impossible to hear except on high-sample-rate audio (my 24/96 versions of Pink Floyd's *Dark Side Of The Moon* and the Beatles' *Rubber Soul* are special favorites), but highs in general were clear and detailed without a lot of hashiness—except when it was in the source material.



I could hear how this tweeter could be overwhelming in the wrong room, making the ability to turn the highs down by 2 dB a potential lifesaver, but I couldn't imagine turning the highs up on these speakers! (All my serious tests on both speakers were done with the HF Level set flat, after some quick listens determined that was best.)

I found the Resolv SE6 to have a nicely wide and forgiving sweet spot with respect to soundstaging. The stereo remaster of *Revolver* by the Beatles, with its hard-panned sources, is very interesting to listen to in this context, as the "mixing" happens in the phantom center of the stereo range, and it sounded fantastic on the Samsons, even on complex tracks like "Love You To". The Rick Rubin-produced tracks from late in Johnny Cash's recording career had a marvelous sense of intimacy and presence, especially in the lead vocal.

My overall impression was very favorable; this is a speaker that a serious recording musician could easily learn backwards and forwards, creating believable mixes that would translate well to other speakers and rooms. With the usual cautions that the extreme low end should be checked on much larger speakers or with a subwoofer, the Resolv SE6 would be a fantastic first studio monitor that could easily keep up with your growing rig.

Listening to the Resolv SE5

The Resolv SE5 is a small speaker that is well-suited to desktop studio setups. For my listening sessions with the SE5, I installed the speakers on IsoAcoustics ISO-L8R155 monitor stands in a fairly tight arrangement, an equilateral triangle roughly 46" on a side and down-angled slightly for my listening position.

My listening experience with the Resolv SE5 was quite similar to what I heard on the SE6, but naturally with a bit less bass. For these smaller speakers, I had to rely a lot more on the harmonic structure of low piano and bass notes rather than a clear projection of the fundamental; Samson quotes 50 Hz to 27 kHz ± 3 dB, but that number might be a tad generous on the low end.

Even so, the SE5 displayed the same solid and well-imaged soundstage, with a slightly smaller sweet spot (due to the much tighter listening setup), and the same reliable mids and clear highs. With less bass, I found the highs a bit more potent on the SE5 (another artifact of the very close listening environment), and while most of my listening was done with the HF Level set flat, turning it down by 2 dB helped smooth some of my more strident MP3s—which, by the way, were easy to pick out from higher-quality encodings.

I could see the Resolv SE5 doing very well on its own in a small room with tight dimensions and a lot of natural bass buildup countering the smaller woofer's less powerful low end; alternatively, they would pair well with a properly placed subwoofer. With monitors like these around, there's simply no excuse to saddle your desktop audio system with tiny, cheap-sounding speakers.

We hereby Resolv

To say that Samson is onto something here would be a massive understatement. These are solidly made, great-sounding speakers that would be suitable for any small room or desktop DAW rig. They have a smooth frequency response, a very usable sweet spot, lots of detail and very little of what makes "cheap speakers" so unpleasant. The lack of low-frequency adjustment is a small matter that can be addressed through speaker placement in many rooms, and once that's done, the resulting audio will be something any engineer could work with in confidence.

Okay, I'm done. Now you can look at the prices. Just make sure you're sitting down first. ☺

Prices: Resolv SE5, \$124.99 each; Resolv SE6, \$149.99 each; Resolv SE8 (not reviewed), \$199.99 each; Resolv 120a subwoofer (not reviewed), \$229.99

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