

# SUPER SIZED

An award-winner has been fuel injected to create these do-it-all network-streaming iPod-docking boxes.



## AktiMate Maxi networking iPod speakers Price \$995

Regular readers will recall the AktiMate Minis, which won our 2009 iPod Dock of the Year Award. Produced by Epöz (the Australian company linked with the UK's Epos and Creek), these were active iPod speakers so substantial and well-tuned that their sonic output was anything but mini. Heaven forbid the company should make a Maxi, we joked then. Well, one year on, here it is.

### EQUIPMENT

The Aktimate Maxi is, as you'd hope, larger than the Mini. At 310mm high, 205 wide and 250 deep, it gains some 40% additional internal volume. The main driver is up from 12cm to 13cm (though we had to measure that twice, so much larger does it look) and the internal amplification has risen from 40W to 60W. They come in a choice of black and red, and we gather a walnut veneer model is in the offing.

Just bigger then? No, they're smarter as well. The original Minis had only a few tricks, docking an iPod up top and offering two

additional inputs, plus a charging USB socket. In contrast, Epöz has installed a Reciva media module in the Maxis, which brings the wonders of direct access to internet radio, plus the ability to stream from any Windows or UPnP-shared music on your network. To access the network you can either give it a hard RJ45 Ethernet connection (e.g. from your router), or connect to Wi-Fi (if you have it) using the AktiMate's internal Wi-Fi 802.11b/g.

There's FM radio now as well, so there's an aerial input for that (string antenna supplied), and there are now three auxiliary inputs round the enlarged rear-end — two pairs of RCA phonos and a minijack, plus audio outputs. The iPod video output has been dropped, but the USB host socket now allows replay of music files from USB sticks or MP3 players other than the Apple fare that will inhabit the top dock. That dock has gained a nice cover flap (also now on the Mini version, we gather).

### PERFORMANCE

That's a big barrel of enhanced functionality and fun to be delivered inside a pair of active speakers. One of the great merits of the Minis was their simplicity — iPod docked on top, cable to link the speakers, plug them in, off you go. Of course, the Maxis can work that way too. But to help you along with the complex stuff, there is now an illuminated LCD screen on the left speaker, embedded in the front of the cabinet with a raised surround.

We confess to thinking this looked remarkably odd when we first encountered it, but by review's end, while receiving some full-blast Beatles at our receptive lugholes, we find ourselves objecting rather less. Besides, it is a necessary evil, since without the screen and the new expanded remote control, you wouldn't know what was going on.

Anyone who has used a Reciva-powered internet radio will be familiar with the menu structure used on the AktiMate Maxis, and thankfully it's one we've always considered clear and easy to navigate. We griped about the legibility of the remote to Epöz (small black writing on grey keys ain't good in low light) and we gather changes may be made there; in any case a certain sponginess in remote operation meant in general we far preferred twiddling the push-to-select rotary dial on the left speaker itself, which provides full access to nearly all activities.

At first press-and-hold you can shuttle through and select the different inputs and sources. We started with the most complex application — the Media Player. This searched our network for UPnP shares and found five; we chose our WD NAS drive. Our 11,000-song collection there seemed to freak out the ability to browse by artist, but the Reciva is smart enough to allow browsing via file structure, and the long artist list loaded fine via that path.

As is so common, navigating large artists lists is not easy; using the rotary dial it took

33 seconds to scroll down to M; holding the remote control's 'down' key took still longer. And when you back out of an artist, you're returned to the top of the list. Grrr. Nor can you go up from A straight to Z, which would save time. On the plus side, the current song keeps playing while you search for another; indeed tracks are added to a playback queue, so playback continues seamlessly. (You can play immediately using the remote's play key.)

Quality from the media player was very good, speaking well for the internal DAC, and format support was excellent — MP3, WMA, AAC and even lossless FLACs played just fine, though larger FLACs were rebuffering occasionally via Wi-Fi. No DRM-ed tracks allowed, of course (more fool you for buying them).

If you're using the AktiMates anywhere near your computer, the far easier implementation is to control your music playback using iTunes or whatever on your computer, and simply plug the audio (via an offboard DAC ideally) into an auxiliary input on the AktiMates. This is how we did the vast majority of our listening, and most enjoyable it proved.

For internet radio, a perfect score. Reciva browses swiftly and clearly by region or genre; you can store up to 39 favourites easily, and if you register with Reciva (free) you can set up unlimited 'My Stuff' links for still more rapid access. Sonically the AktiMates are either extremely good at presenting the relatively lowly bitrates of web radio stations — or else those bitrates have been creeping up along with all things Moore's Lawian. Whichever, we've never heard internet radio sound so good. A bonus is RealAudio support, which means you can enjoy all the BBC's Listen Again content (many internet radios exclude this treasure

trove of on-demand radio). Watch your data download limits here, though radio consumes far less data than, say, streaming video.

With FM radio, our review situation proved too electronically-packed to get much through the string antenna, though enough to see that the AktiMates sensibly switch to mono when signals are low. There's no digital DAB+ here, though of course all those stations can be received via the internet radio.

Which leaves the AktiMate's original *raison d'être*, the iPod. Dock up and play — it sounds great, and it's such a simple way to get big bold music. Epöz has used an interesting variation on iPod control — holding 'Select' takes you to 'Menu Mode', in which you have full menu control via remote or the iPod itself.

Sonically, the iPod dock is using the analogue signal from your iPod, but iPod DACs aren't half bad; indeed we A-B switched between iPod and the same tracks from computer (via a \$2000 Lehmannaudio DAC and auxiliary input), and there was very little in it bar some more solid imaging and separation. Set up your party playlist and the Maxis will dance till dawn.

On the quality of the speakers (and internal amps) themselves, it took rather longer for us to warm to the sound here than it did with the Minis (which we had to hand for direct comparison). Perhaps because of the extra bass, the top-end seems a little less shimmering and expansive, and when driving hard there was some evidence of midrange confusion in busy arrangements, whether a limitation of the drivers or the power on tap was hard to tell. The trick, we found, was to turn the Maxis up to at least moderate listening levels, preferably somewhere in the loud zone. There they love

to hold forth, whether etching the subtleties of kd lang's *The Air That I Breathe*, or kicking *Elephant* arse with Them Crooked Vultures. Their moment of epiphany came a couple of days after we finished this review, when we were just relaxing and playing the Beatles remasters through them. We queued up the last three of *Abbey Road*, and Starr's drum solo before *The End* slammed out with spectacular impact; then *Pepper*, with astounding solidity for McCartney's bass overdubs on *Lovely Rita*. We also tried McCartney's latest live 2CD (+DVD) set — the break from banjo to lead guitar in *Something* (the same arrangement as used for the Concert for George) was a spine-shuddering moment.

### CONCLUSION

It was this ability to achieve emotional impact for solid sonics that originally endeared us to the Maxis' smaller stablemate, while here you also get a healthy supplement of weight, scale and bass that will suit larger rooms and bigger parties. Indeed these speakers are really too big for office applications — you need to sit back from the Maxis, whereas the Minis were happy also in lean-in near-field situations.

That aside, if you liked the Minis, you should love the Maxis too. They take the original AktiMates' wow factor and make it large, while adding today's technology to open the doors to network streaming and internet radio. Recommended. *Jez Ford* +

### VERDICT

#### AktiMate Maxi active networking iPod speakers

Price: \$995

- Big emotive performance
- More weight than the Minis
- Net radio and network streaming
- Tech overload?
- Spongy remote operation

INPUTS: iPod dock, RCA phono x 2, minijack x 2, USB  
DRIVERS: 25mm tweeter, 13cm mid/bass  
POWER: internal, 60W  
NETWORKING: Ethernet, Wi-Fi 802.11b/g.  
FEATURES: internet radio, UPnP/Windows share streaming, FM radio

DIMENSIONS (whd): 205 x 310 x 250mm  
WARRANTY: One year

CONTACT: Epöz  
TEL: 02 9450 0789  
WEB: [www.aktimate.com](http://www.aktimate.com)

