

Image 414

Kiwi ingenuity now comes in a box By Brent Burmester

**Image 414 loudspeaker.
\$2200.**

The 414 floorstandings speakers under review this month are made in Auckland's Mt Wellington, by Image Loudspeakers. Reviewing a locally designed and manufactured product is a mixed blessing.

Judge it a good'n, and it's happy smiley people everywhere and three cheers for kiwi can-do. Otherwise, a reviewer must have good locks on his doors and never leave home without his kevlar vest (stitched together from the cones of old B&W mid-bass drivers). After all, disgruntled hi-fi makers could strike at any moment. Actually, Image boss Chris Ball doesn't seem especially murderous, so I can relax, especially since the 414s, like the popular 404 they replace, are excellent speakers.

Handsome devils

First off, these are not for listeners with little rooms and 30W budget amps. While the 414s are not enormous, they are speakers of substance. Carrying them one-by-one up my stairs, I was able to appreciate up-close their solid construction, real-wood veneer, generous height and depth, and the weight of their sand-filled bases.

After recovering, I was impressed by the Morel mid/bass drivers and tweeter, hefty brass spikes for floor coupling, and the thoughtfully positioned twin binding-posts at the base of the speakers.

This last feature allows for bi-wiring without establishing a flying-fox in your living room. The only cosmetic change I would suggest is to the hex-head mounting screws for the drivers – they're not quite right.

Starting positions

Based on my listening I'd put the sensitivity of the 414s in the high 80s, and if they have any odd impedance characteristics they didn't bother my

100W Plinius amp. The 414 is a ported 2-1/2 way speaker, which is to say the lower mid/bass driver is busy only from about 250Hz-down in conjunction with its upper twin.

At the rear of the enclosure is the flared reflex duct, which is surprisingly tolerant of close-to-wall placement. When I say 'close', I mean not less than 45cm, preferably over 60cm. In my room the mid-bass was a little bloated and uneven until the 414s were pulled out to around 75cm from the wall, where they were very well behaved. Rear-ported floorstanders can be a pain to position, so bear this in mind if you are constrained by an inflexible listening environment.

Jack of all trades

While we're discussing bass, I'd like to note the 414's tight, tuneful, and overhang-free bottom end. The sound in general is entirely to my liking in its clarity. The Images exhibited a well-resolved midrange and a smooth, detailed treble. Nothing seemed to phase these handsome boxes: from Neneh Cherry to Joan Sutherland they just got on with things, irrespective of genre or scale.

Headbangers and ravers will appreciate the muscular way the 414s handle indie rock and electronica, and will leave the room in disgust as they reproduce chamber music with equal facility.

Set and forget

As to timing these Images get the toes tapping without making a show of the rhythm. Lateral sound-staging was satisfactory, but depth perspectives were better than I've heard for a while. Still, if you're an absolute nut for a 3D sound-stage with performers you can reach out and molest, well no, not this time. You'll pay a lot more for that, or sacrifice a great deal in scale and extension.

Once unpacked and run-in the 414s give you what they've got without demanding to be suspended from the ceiling by a rare brand of Hungarian stocking. These are not speakers for the mad tweaking fraternity. Experiment with cables if you like, but Audioquest



Type 4 is a good bet – it's what they're wired with internally.

Prospective buyers should note that longer-term listening reveals a benign element of character in the 414. Not so much a colouration, that's too pejorative, rather a tendency to impart a silvering to voices, particularly female, which becomes more prominent at high volumes. While not intrusive, it is a minor departure from strict neutrality. I put this character down to the sonic signature of the plastic mid-driver, but then every cone material has a voice of its own. There is also a hint of 'box' in their sound, but at this price that's being picky.

In many ways the 414 represents the state of the art for a floorstander at its price point. New Zealand buyers can count themselves lucky that performance speakers of this quality can be had without the cost of haulage from the other side of the world.

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