

A fine image

A speaker with more than looks By Michael Jones

Image 402 loudspeaker. \$1299

A deserved success in the New Zealand hi-fi scene has been Chris Ball's Image range of loudspeakers. Manufactured in Auckland, the Image range has succeeded because of a combination of very good sound with great real wood veneer finishes, all at some very competitive prices.

Here I'm looking at the model 402. It's a slim floorstander which will fit easily into small and medium sized rooms.

The 402 is a wonderful looking loudspeaker. A floorstander at a height of 900mm, the 402 is a mere 180mm wide and 230mm deep. Finished on all sides in beautiful real wood veneers (no plastic veneers here!) my sample came in heart kauri. A grill to cover the drive units is in black.

Technically the Image 402 is a two-way speaker with a rear port for bass loading. As with most of the Image range, the drive units used are from Morel. The tweeter, handling the higher frequencies, is a 28mm soft dome.

The bass/midrange driver is also from Morel and has some very nice characteristics. The 160mm (six inch) cone is a damped polymer cone (basically, a type of plastic) but has a massive three inch voice coil. This is much larger than most other drive units available. Image say that the position of the voice coil allows for a much more rigid cone, while better mechanical integrity is available because the cone and dust cap (the centre piece) are moulded in one piece.

Some speakers come with an option of adding sand or other weighty material to a cavity in the bottom of the speaker. The idea here is to lower the centre of gravity of the speaker (often most of the

weight is at the top, from the drive units), thus making the speaker more stable. According to Image the major benefit though is that the sand helps

damp resonances set up in the cabinet.

The 402 doesn't offer this option; instead the sand is already in the bottom of the speaker. And not loosely packed either. Chris Ball (Image Loudspeaker supremo) places sand in the bottom cavity and compresses the sand for maximum benefit. This is a better way of filling the speaker, but it does increase the Image freight bills!

While it's true to say that part of the initial attraction of an Image speaker is the beautiful wood finishes, it's the sound that clinches the purchase.

The 402 has a sensitivity rating of 88dB and is recommended for use with an amplifier of between 40 and 150 watts. The 402 comes with spikes and is bi-wirable.

Sound of Image

There's always been something about a well-designed six-inch two-way loudspeaker that communicates with me. Sure, such a speaker won't flap your trousers with large levels of low bass, but that's not what music is about anyway.

Most of the music lies in the midrange and it is here that the 402 excels. There's an exquisite sense of detail that emerges from the speakers.

Part of the attraction of the current range of Image Loudspeakers is the way that they can swing dynamics. I'm not talking here of extremes of loudness, but rather the dynamic shadings that help make the music come alive.

The Image 402 makes many speakers sound somewhat compressed, while the 402 opens up with dynamic impact.

Some of the above comments may give the impression that the 402 is a bit of a wimp. Not so! The 402 goes to loud



levels in a typical New Zealand lounge.

The bass is articulate with plenty of power for reproducing the bass guitar. Sure, it won't threaten your foundations, but if that's what you're after then you're looking at the wrong speaker.

Conclusion

Another winner from Image Loudspeakers. The 402 particularly suits small to medium rooms and produces a wonderfully balanced, musically enjoyable sound.

Compared to the 404

Every time I mentioned that I was reviewing the Image 402 to any passing friend or stranger, the first question asked was "how do they compare to the 404?" The Image 404 is one of the best speakers available at its \$2000 price, and there was a lot of interest in the smaller sibling.

While the 404 has two bass drivers, the 402 has one. The midrange and upper frequencies sound very similar (in fact the 402 may have a slight advantage here) and the 402 has the dynamics that make Image speakers so enjoyable.

With its extra bass unit, the 404 can produce higher levels of bass. It also has greater dynamic swings and a more potent feel to the sound.

