Ikea’s first Bluetooth speakers show it’s still figuring out tech

Ikea’s been working its way into the tech space for the past few years. It started with wireless chargers, got into smart lights last year, and now it’s moving into speakers. I’ve been trying out the company’s first two Bluetooth speakers for the past week, and they feel quintessentially Ikea in ways both good and bad.

The first two pairs of Ikea-made Bluetooth speakers went on sale earlier this month: the Eneby 20 and Eneby 30. They’re both big, minimal squares with a single dial on them for controlling the volume and turning the unit on and off. The design is pretty forgettable, though you can remove the speaker grille to get a more stylized, industrial appearance. For the most part, though, they look like they were designed to fit inside one of Ikea’s many square storage units.

The Bluetooth syncing process was easy, but that’s also where the technology problems seem to start. The speakers’ audio quality isn’t great when playing over Bluetooth — there’s a fogginess that makes instruments blur together and really takes away from any complex recordings. For the smaller model, which sells for $49, it’s not an outrageous issue; but at $89 for the larger speaker, you’re entering the territory of much better-sounding Bluetooth speakers. (Portable ones, too.)

Ikea’s Eneby 20 speaker

It really seems to be an issue with Bluetooth, too. Both Eneby speakers also let you connect an audio source using a headphone jack, and that results in much clearer sound than

when it’s coming in wireless and compressed. In theory, you could connect a Chromecast Audio or an Echo Dot to one of these things and turn them into smarter, higher-quality speakers using Wi-Fi (which doesn’t have the same bandwidth issues), but at that point, you probably should have just bought a regular Amazon Echo in the first place.

The thing I keep wondering is who these speakers are designed for and the answer seems to be, well, Ikea shoppers — not all of them, but people who aren’t otherwise shopping for dedicated speakers or smart speakers. If your primary concern is that you don’t already have a speaker (and not getting *the best* speaker, or something particularly hip or portable) and you are physically in an Ikea store, then the Eneby models work. The smaller model isn’t terribly expensive, and they should fit great with your other Ikea furniture.

There are some other extremely Ikea highlights to these speakers, particularly the smaller model. The Eneby 20 comes with a handle that, with the right tool, you can attach yourself. It actually looks way more stylish with the handle on. The handle is also meant to make the smaller speaker portable. Both the smaller and larger model need to be plugged in to power — they don’t have batteries. But the smaller can accept an optional battery pack, sold separately for another $20, that can be added in to let you take it on the go. That makes the price start to add up, but I like the Ikea-ness of it being kind of modular.

Ikea’s Eneby 30 speaker (with the cloth grille removed)
The Eneby speakers are another example of Ikea hitting some, but not quite all, of the right beats when it comes to tech. I haven’t tried its Qi chargers, and by all accounts they work fine, but they haven’t been updated in some time and charge at only 5W — below the faster charging speeds that many modern

phones, including the iPhone, accept. I've also heard that Ikea's inexpensive smart light bulbs work great when paired with Philips' Hue hub; but when I tested them with Ikea's own hub, the hub's software got in the way of them working reliably.

Ikea has a lot more tech coming up. It's working on new speakers with the respected design and audio firm Teenage Engineering. And it's supposed to release products — presumably speakers — with Sonos next year. Maybe it'll take working with a more experienced partner to push its products over the edge. I hope so. I think everyone would be happy to see Ikea strip more smart tech to its basics, bring the price down, and make it more accessible to everyone.

We took a look at the speakers in the latest episode of *Circuit Breaker Live*. You can watch the segment above, or see the whole show below.

https://www.theverge.com/circuitbreaker/2018/4/21/17261474/ikea-bluetooth-speakers-eneby