



Join the Q

This bookshelf speaker provides attractive sound and connectivity at a competitive price. **Cliff Joseph** just wishes it had wi-fi

Q Acoustics recently launched its Q Active range of speakers, packed with wi-fi, voice control and other zeitgeist-surfing digital features. The speakers are pretty expensive, though, starting at £1,500 for the entry-level Active 200, so the company has produced a more affordable alternative in the shape of the M20, which comes in at barely one quarter of the price.

It is designed with a focus on versatility, the company describing it as a general-purpose system for: “music, movies and gaming”. That versatility begins with the compact design of the twin speakers, which are small enough to sit easily on a bookshelf, on either side of a TV or even on a desk alongside a computer. The build quality doesn't reveal any obvious indications of compromise, with smart, matte-black cabinets, smoothly curved corners and sturdy and rigid construction that uses Q Acoustics' proprietary 'point-to-point' bracing in order to reduce vibration and distortion.

Each speaker includes a 22mm decoupled tweeter, 125mm midrange driver and a passive bass radiator, providing a claimed 65W output (per cabinet) and frequency response of 55Hz-22kHz. The entire system is controlled and driven by the primary, powered speaker, which houses the 130W amp and provides pass-through

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power for its matching passive partner. The power cable provided for the primary speaker is 1.8m, while the one that connects to the passive speaker is 4m. One nice touch is the switch on the back of the primary cabinet that lets you assign it to either the left or right stereo channel, so you shouldn't have any problems finding a convenient power socket when setting up. There's

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Q Acoustics M20

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
Bluetooth
standmount
loudspeakers

WEIGHT
Powered
speaker: 5.5kg
Passive
speaker 5.1kg:

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
170 x 279 x 296mm

FEATURES
• 1x 22mm tweeter
• 1x 125mm
mid/bass driver
• Inputs: RCA;
3.5mm aux;
USB-B; optical
• Bluetooth 5.0;
aptX HD/Low
Latency; AAC

DISTRIBUTOR
Armour Home

WEBSITE
qacoustics.co.uk

an EQ switch as well, which lets you adjust the bass output depending on whether placement is close to a wall, in a corner or in a free-standing position on a desk or using the optional stands (£160). And, mindful of that 55Hz low-end, there's additionally a rather handy subwoofer output.

The M20 provides an impressive set of connectivity features for a system at this price, with RCA stereo input and 3.5mm aux-in. Digital connections include USB-B and optical, both of which support 24-bit/192kHz. The use of a USB-B connector is a little odd, though, especially now that most computers and mobile devices have adopted the newer USB-C. Many people may need to buy a suitable adapter if they want to use this input – although Q Acoustics probably assumes that owners of mobile devices will take the easy option with 3.5mm cables or just go completely wireless and use Bluetooth instead.

The M20 works well here too, including aptX HD with support for 24-bit/48kHz audio via Bluetooth, as well as the less well-known aptX Low Latency, designed to enhance audio/video sync for gaming or streaming video. And, for Apple devices, it supports the AAC Bluetooth codec.

The real oddity is that this Wireless Music System doesn't actually support wi-fi. Q Acoustics says that this is to keep the M20 down to a highly affordable price point and to keep it

simple and easy to use. It's true that this would add both cost and complexity, but if I'm listening to the new Abba album on my iPad I'd really prefer the convenience and quality of wi-fi streaming. The sluggish response of the remote control when adjusting volume levels doesn't particularly help here either, leaving me wishing for more direct control via wi-fi.

Sound quality

The M20 starts impressively, as I use the USB connection to play the MQA Master version of Max Richter's *The Waves* from Tidal on my laptop. A dramatic crash of waves immediately sets the scene, panning from speaker to speaker and laying claim to a wide, open soundstage that fills the room. The waves murmur all around, but Gillian Anderson's voice is planted firmly centre stage as she begins reading from the letters of Virginia Woolf. There's an almost crystalline clarity to the electronic chimes that fade in behind Anderson's reading, but there's a sharp edge to them too, creating a sense of unease.

The M20 handles the languid introduction of the strings with great restraint, the sound swelling so gently that it almost merges with the whisper of the waves. But it can also flex its muscles and for the next 15 minutes displays a fine balance of power and restraint as the entire *Deutsches Filmorchester* and the piercing cries of soprano Grace Davidson slowly build to a dramatic climax. The sound quality is excellent, but it's the sense of balance and tension between all the sonic



A pair of Sonos One (HFC 470) smart speakers cost the same price as the M20 and rely entirely on wi-fi while lacking Bluetooth or wired inputs. The Sonos app supports an unrivalled selection of online music services and also allows you to pair two speakers together for stereo sound. However, the M20 wins hands-down on sound quality and its combination of Bluetooth, aptX HD and wired inputs make it a better choice to form part of a wider system.

elements that really makes an impact. Switching from the concert hall to the coffee house, the speaker adopts a more intimate tone as I look to Damien Rice's *Eskimo*. The M20 pours itself a latte and kicks back as Rice begins the gentle acoustic strumming, catching all the little finger scratches and breathy whisper of his vocals. It's a relaxed, warm sound, but when the bittersweet tones of the cello and violin enter on the chorus the M20 is easily able to fill the room and make it feel like a laid-back live performance. And, of course, there's the song's gonzo operatic finale, with soprano Doreen Curren belting away in Finnish. The speaker reveals its power here, unleashing Curren's roof-rattling vibrato in all its glory, and even at 50 percent volume I leap for the mute button – cursing the sluggish volume control again – to avoid disturbing the neighbours. The operatic bombast does get a little fuzzy around the edges when I switch to a wireless Bluetooth connection, but that's more due to the low-fi, home-studio recording of the original album than anything else. And, when I return to Richter's more slickly produced *The Waves* again, I struggle to spot any real loss in quality via the wireless connection.

After all that drama, I decide to head for my comfort zone with the 2001 remaster of *Blondie's Rapture*. That opening cymbal crash and the pace-setting drum beat are delivered with a crisp brevity that immediately draws you in, but the M20 can still relax enough to leave room for the jangling rhythm guitar that chugs away in the background. The detail

is impressive, catching the light hand claps and rattling cowbell that deftly accompany Debbie Harry's proto-rap towards the end of the song.

I'm pleased to find that the M20 handles the pacey bass riff on *Rapture* nicely too, and lands a decent punch with the bouncing electronic bass that opens Billy Eilish's *Bad Guy*. However, the slower, more menacing bass effects that close the song feel a little weak, while the really deep electronic effects of *Prime Evil* by The Orb sound decidedly unthreatening and remind me that the subwoofer output on the back panel is there for a reason.

Conclusion

Even so, the sheer precision and balance of Q Acoustics' M20 are still impressive for such an affordable speaker system, and its versatile Bluetooth and wired inputs mean that it's well equipped to form part of a wider entertainment system that also encompasses film, video and gaming ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★

LIKE: Precise, balanced sound; wide range of inputs

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★

DISLIKE: Bass could be stronger; no wi-fi; slow remote control

BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★

WE SAY: Even without wi-fi, the M20 still provides attractive sound quality and good value for money

EASE OF DRIVE
★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

IN SIGHT



- 1 RCA inputs
- 2 Subwoofer output
- 3 Left/right selector
- 4 3.5mm aux input
- 5 Rear-facing bass port
- 6 USB-B input
- 7 Optical input