

CABLE SECRETS

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More than 40 years since the first NAP 250 appeared, Martin takes a long hard look at – and listen to – the current version

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Arcam's network player; Acoustic Energy, Boenicke Neat and Q Acoustics speakers; and Audio Note's CD beast

LINN KLIMAX DSM

Martin Colloms listens to the Scottish company's flagship network player, and finds it's the finest he's yet encountered



Q Acoustics Concept 30

THE CONCEPT 30 ENTERS A KEENLY CONTESTED AREA OF THE MARKET AND MAKES USE OF SOME INTRIGUING 'TRICKLE DOWN' TECHNICAL IDEAS TO DO SO. ED SELLEY GRASPS THE CONCEPT



The road from 'plucky upstart' to 'pillar of the establishment' can be a rocky one, but Q Acoustics has made the journey more smoothly than most. What began as a wholly pragmatic undertaking to contest the affordable speaker market has evolved into a company competing in a variety of categories and price points, with an increasingly well-defined identity. One area that had been left until now is the £1,000 standmount and £2,000 floorstander sector – an increasingly hard-fought one.

Now the Concept 30 has arrived to fill this gap, and as you might expect, it's a combination of ideas from the more expensive Concept 300 and 500, refined to allow for the lower price point to be reached. To that has been added some other thinking that's come to define Q Acoustics at all price points, key being the decision to stick with silk and paper for the drive units. In a category that features some interesting and sophisticated alternatives, this might feel somewhat low tech – but the drivers themselves are newly developed and have some intriguing features.

The 12.5cm mid/bass unit is characterised by a 30.5mm voice coil, larger than previously used in similar Q Acoustics drivers: to offset the increased mass that would traditionally result from this, the coil windings are copper clad aluminium wire rather than solid copper. Also new is a pure Nomex spider and a copper cap on the pole piece, both of which serve to improve the distortion performance and improve the manner in which the coil acts on the diaphragm itself.

The tweeter partnering it is a 25mm silk dome unit that features a relatively large surround, isolated from the front baffle that serves to control resonance and push it below the frequencies at which the dome is expected to operate. Care has been taken to control unwanted reflections coming back through the dome itself, and the crossover point between the two drivers is a fairly standard 2.4kHz.

Both drivers are mounted in a 3mm thick aluminium front baffle separated to the rest of the cabinet by a modified version of the company's P2P (Point to Point) bracing, in which the main internal brace also serves as the mounting point for drivers and baffle assembly. For all that the Concept 30 looks very much 'of a piece', so precisely is it constructed. You can reasonably argue that the painted finish simplifies the way this trick is handled but, even allowing for this, it's a design that's impressively executed.

The main body of the cabinet makes use of the 'Gelcore' construction that has characterised a number of Q Acoustic speakers over the last decade, in which the enclosure is made from two or more layers of MDF combined by a non-setting adhesive. Vibration or resonance is transferred to the adhesive and dissipated as heat.

Unlike the larger Concept speakers's triple-layer cabinet, the Concept 30 makes do with a double layer for its the sides, top and rear sections, while the lower section of the cabinet is made from a double-layer aluminium section with internal rubber isolators. This serves to provide decoupled contact between the speaker and the outside world and also acts as a mechanically isolated 'raft' for the mounting of the crossover.

Fiddly stand

Q Acoustics feels that the best way of having this plate terminate with the outside world is their FS75 stand and a pair were supplied for the review. I'm not a huge fan of this design, which employs a principle that Q Acoustics calls 'tensegrity,' a stiff but low mass style pole and wire affair. Attaching the speaker to the stand is fiddly and once you have done so, the footprint of each Concept 30 is larger than most floorstanders. If the stand was a bargain, it would arguably be worth the irritation but at no less than £350, there's no shortage of competition that avoids both of these pitfalls. Unlike the more expensive Concept 300, which must be used on its (slightly different) stand, no such restriction is placed on the Concept 30 so you are free to use whatever support you wish. In my case that was a pair of very conventional Soundstyle Z60s.

The decision to offer them in painted finishes is a good one: the overall shape of the cabinet, short but relatively deep, suits this approach. The black and white options look pretty good but the silver option of the review samples is the winning

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option for me. It helps to cement the identity of the speaker as a Q Acoustics device by emphasising some design touches: the rounded edges, those aforementioned proportions and the traditional (externally at least) drivers. It's an excellent looking piece of industrial design.

It's a fairly unfussy one too. The bulk of testing has taken place with a combination of Naim Supernait 3 and Chord Electronics Qutest, running in my second system, and so long as it's not wedged against a wall, the Concept 30 has been entirely benign in terms of room reinforcement, the rear mounted port completely inaudible in use. With a modicum of toe-in applied with the speakers a little over two metres apart, the results have been deeply impressive.

Fundamentally right

No one aspect of the Concept 30's performance leaps out to grab your attention. Instead, it just goes about sounding fundamentally right, while listening to the eponymously-titled debut album from The Olympians helps reveal something of what it does, it taking very little time to register that the cabinet of the Concept 30 plays a major part in this speaker's impressive transparency.

Close your eyes when listening to the sublime *Neptune* and the effect is one of drivers in free space. The lack of colouration; be it port noise or half a hundred other variables, leaves the Q Acoustics sounding unembellished and impressively neutral: the handover between the two drivers is seamless and the tonality is absolutely consistent from top to bottom.

The balance the drivers strike between tonal realism and overall refinement is exceptionally well judged. Even used with the Chord and Naim duo, which can show an edge when provoked, the Concept 30 is effortlessly composed. The propulsive and brooding *Hunt* by Martina Topley-Bird is opened up by these speakers as something spacious and detailed, but still utterly immersive. Topley-Bird herself is vivid, emotive and tangible; her delicacy framed against the jarring electronica that forms the rest of the track.

Across many genres and levels of recording quality, the Concept 30 has walked the correct line every time, but there's more: provided some very basic care is taken with set up and toe-in (by which I mean, setting by eye rather than pacing around the room with a tape-measure), this is the first design I have tested at this level able to rival the similarly-priced KEF LS50 Meta for the creation of a convincing stereo image.

Not only is there the necessary perception of width, which expands and shrinks to fit the music being played, but there is also an equally

perceptible depth. It is an effortless part of what the Q Acoustics does and it benefits everything I've played on it.

Comparisons to the KEF don't end there: the two speakers represent different ends of the trade-off inherent in all speakers of this nature. The Concept 30 has no answer to the outright bass extension and scale the KEF delivers, but the effect this has on overall sensitivity is significant, meaning the Q Acoustics design is a much easier speaker to drive. It's also only fair to point out that the Concept 30 might not have the out and out clout of the KEF, but it has an exceptional sense of bass extension for a speaker of this size.

There is always enough bass on offer to be convincing, even if others can go deeper, with no sluggishness or overhang to the low-end. Even under provocation, the control on offer is admirable.

Confident, capable – and fun

Absolutely none of the confidence and capability this speaker demonstrates under scrutiny has impeded its ability to be enormously good fun, and in this regard it's more in keeping with the company's highly-affordable 3000i Series than its flagship models, which can sometimes feel a little straight laced in their delivery.

Listen to the Hidden Orchestra's magnificent *Spoken* and the technical attributes allow this dense, detailed piece of music the space and definition it deserves. – and when things are up and running and the shuffling half-jazz, half-breakbeat time-signature is doing its thing, the Concept 30 is a delight. Its speed and articulation ensures you're drawn into its performance in a manner that makes it a pain to review: the listening notes decay into nothing, such is the sheer, escapist musical pleasure.

Tie all this together and you have a speaker that can play a very wide selection of music without any obvious cracks appearing. Replace the Naim with the more price-comparative Roksan Attesa streaming amp, and the Concept 30 doesn't falter in what it does: in fact, that benign sensitivity and fundamentally unflappable nature means that even when I connected a Rega Io – an amplifier half the price and good for 30W – at full tilt, the Concept 30 still entertains.

This exceptional blend of virtues marks the Concept 30 out as a serious arrival at its price point. It takes the abilities of various rivals, and blends them into something that might have to give ground to each in one specific area, but has a strength in depth that they cannot match. Throw in the ease of positioning and choosing partnering equipment, and the immaculate build, and you have an exceptional speaker that needs to be on any shortlist at this price-point.



Specifications

Q Acoustics Concept 30

Type	Two-way standmount loudspeaker
Price	£899/pr
Drivers	25mm dome tweeter, 12.5cm mid/bass
Sensitivity	87dB/W/m
Impedance	6 ohms
Dimensions (HxWxD)	28.4xx18x31.9cm
qacoustics.co.uk	

