

Q Acoustics Concept 20

Stylish, well-made, with total attention to detail – how did Q Acoustics pour so much into the Concept 20?

Review: **Ken Kessler** Lab: **Keith Howard**

As of 2014, the 'mini' speaker market is as varied as the genre that is doing its best to supplant it. The limitless flood of iPod docks and other assorted low-rent 'solutions' have made small, conventional two-way hi-fi speakers all but impossible to sell, especially if in a vinyl wrap that looks like wood. Q Acoustics, established in 2006, is very much a new-wave brand that owes no philosophical allegiance to tradition, even if it is by definition a part of the entry-level British speaker scene.

In a sector that includes KEF's amazing LS50, under-£1k speakers from B&W, PMC and a few dozen others, Q Acoustics cleverly alters the recipe just enough to make it stand out in a gem-filled sector. As a young company, Q Acoustics' encompasses home cinema applications and small powered speakers, so it is not by any measure compelled to recall the speakers of yore that even the long-established brands who made them in the first place now seem to be abandoning.

EASY TO DRIVE

Two elements combine to achieve noteworthiness: the cabinet technology, and the optional stands. It goes without saying that the price alone – £350 for the speakers, or £550 for the package including the stands – automatically qualifies this as of exceptional value.

The 655mm stands, to cover them first, are handsome, well-made and clever: they lock to the speaker, hide the cables down the back, feature adjustable spikes, sound terrific even when compared with legendary stands designed for the likes of LS3/5As, and could probably sell by the truck-load on their own at £400 per pair. But they are merely adjuncts

to the speakers themselves – which also sounded fabulous on Foundations and IF Tallis stands. The Concept 20s, offered in lacquered gloss black or white, are two-way reflex designs with rear ports. The box contains foam plugs for tuning the ports, which allow the user to find the right balance of quantity and control. Below the port are bi-wiring terminals. Under the grille you'll find a 125mm composite woofer and 25mm dome tweeter crossing over at 2.9kHz. Q Acoustics matches its coyness about what the drivers are actually made of with, as Keith Howard points out

"It proves cabinet resonances need be a problem no longer"

in his Lab Report, rather conservative specifications. They state a frequency response of 64Hz-22kHz, a nominal impedance of 6ohm and minimum impedance of 4ohm,

with a sensitivity of 88dB according to one of the brochures (although Keith saw a factory spec. of 86dB).

What I can tell you is that regardless of the sub-90dB sensitivity and manufacturer's recommended power of 25-75W, I was able to drive these to more than adequate levels with my current fave budget valve amp, the Coincident Dynamo 34SE. This has a lone EL34 per channel in single-ended mode for a rating of 8W/ch! Thus, whatever the numbers tell you, the Concept 20s are easy to drive.

As for the other 'secret ingredient', the cabinet is made of a construction they call 'Gelcore', employed in Q Acoustics' quest to empower them with the statement that, 'The Concept 20 proves cabinet

RIGHT: Looking perfectly of a whole on the matching stands, this compact two-way offers style and finish not anticipated at the price – avoiding wood helps



ARMOUR HOME

At the time when the UK was ruled by indigenous manufacturers of audio separates, the go-to company for all manner of accessories was QED. After all-but-monopolising the market for switch boxes of every stripe, at a time when, for example, DIN-vs-phono conflicts could stymie even the most resolute of enthusiasts, the company hit critical mass with QED cable.

Armour Home Electronics, parent company of Q Acoustics, has its roots in QED, with employees whose backgrounds were forged with many of this country's most established names. Now, under one roof, they also distribute and/or manufacture a vast selection of products for specialist hi-fi and home theatre applications, sold in more than 60 countries around the world.

Armour's other hi-fi and accessory brands include Alphason Designs, Systemline, Milty, Myryad, PSB and Goldring, along with a plethora of lines for everything from projector screens to wall-mounting hardware.



resonance need be a problem no longer'. This refers to a 'cabinet within a cabinet' design, the separate inner and outer enclosures 'bound together by a bespoke adhesive which never quite sets'. According to Q Acoustics, Gelcore 'allows the kinetic energy generated by the drive units within the cabinet to be dispersed as heat and preventing them colouring and degrading the speaker's musical output.'

COPIOUS BASS

Along with the aforementioned Dynamo 34SE, I also used the Quad 909 amplifier, NAD D 1050 DAC, SME 30/12 and Series V turntable/arm combination with Kiseki Blue MC, Musical Fidelity V-LPS phono stage, V-90 DAC and M1-CDT transport, as well as an iMac with Fidelia software. Cables were from Atlas and Kimber. Nearly all of these components were chosen as being of the same price class and therefore likely to be relevant to what anyone buying a £350-per-pair speaker might consider.

As Keb' Mo's *Peace... Back By Popular Demand* [Okeh/Epic EK 92687] was already in the CDT from a previous session, I figured let's kick off with the stunning 'For What It's Worth'. It leads off with rich bass, solid percussion, slithery guitar work, a tight brass section and thick-as-molasses vocals. Because it's also lean despite the number of players: it is the kind of track you listen *into* in the best 3D fashion.

Once I got over the fact that the wee Coincident punches like a 35-watter, I was drawn to something that usually leaves me ambivalent: the copious amounts of bass from such a small enclosure. In

my circumstances, the foam plugs were not required, as they added congestion and my room certainly doesn't need any devices that tighten up the lower

octaves. Considering that these followed my listening sessions with the £9400

Sonus Faber Olympica IIIs and Wilson Audio Alexias at £48,000, it was almost unfair. Yet they held their ground.

Imagine you've been drinking, say, a serious Brunello, followed by an even more serious Barolo. Then someone hands you a beer. If you have any spirit of generosity, if you appreciate context and relativity, you will consciously adjust your taste buds. You will not expect the same sensual reaction to the beer as is elicited by the Barolo.

By whatever measure we judge excellence, it stands to reason that if two items of a completely different nature are both 'five star' earners within their categories, eg, a Leica M camera and a Berluti briefcase, then they are qualitative equals. Which is not to say that the Concept 20 encourages you to stop dreaming about whatever super-speaker fuels your fantasies.

Instead, imagine that the beer which followed the Barolo is a Westvleteren's 12 or Heady Topper. By adjusting your sensibilities, you can then listen to the Concept 20 after a bout with costlier offerings, and accept that it cannot offer the scale, detail nor refinement of high-end masterpieces. It is, instead, a treasure to be judged like Pioneer's ridiculously competent and musical SP-BS22-LR.

SPACE AND SNAPPINESS

Back to Keb' Mo'. The piano-only 'The Times They Are A-Changin'' was positively chilling: Keb' Mo's voice centred, the piano just to the left, the space convincing, the airiness intact, the chiming nature of the instrument tinkling to beautiful decay. Seconds later, the funky, rhythmic take of 'Get Together', in all its quasi-reggae glory, provides direct contrast.

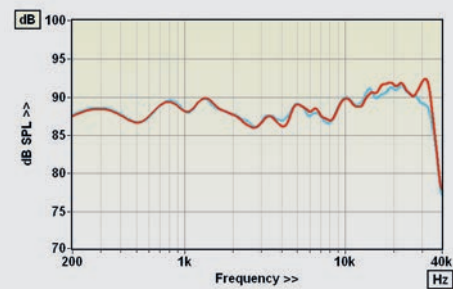
Transient attack? Snappy, tight, no overhang. Massed backing vocals – seamless, harmonious. Lead guitar cutting in from absolute silence. The coherence, from the lowest registers to ↻

LAB REPORT

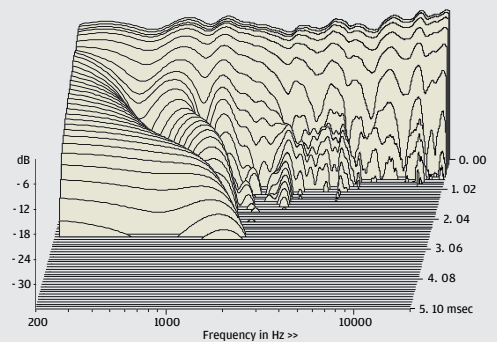
Q ACOUSTICS CONCEPT 20

Q Acoustics claims an 86dB sensitivity for the Concept 20 – entirely believable given its compact dimensions – but our measured pink noise result of 88.5dB suggests that this is actually rather conservative. Low impedance helps achieve this good sensitivity but it's not too low. A nominal figure of 6ohm is specified together with a minimum of 4ohm; we measured a minimum of 3.6ohm, indicating that a 4ohm nominal figure is more appropriate. Moderately high phase angles result in a minimum EPDR (equivalent peak dissipation resistance) of 1.9ohm at 176Hz but in modern speakers that's a typical figure, indicating the Concept 20 is not unduly hard to drive.

The on-axis frequency response – measured on the tweeter axis with the grille removed – shows just a mild presence band depression followed by a gentle rise in output through the upper audible octave [see Graph 1, below]. Response errors were well controlled at $\pm 3.0\text{dB}$ and $\pm 2.6\text{dB}$ respectively for the pair (200Hz–20kHz), and pair matching error is fine at $\pm 1.1\text{dB}$ over the same frequency range. Diffraction-corrected near-field bass measurement showed the low frequency response beginning a very gentle decline from about 200Hz, then becoming steeper below 60Hz, a characteristic that bodes well for good bass transient response and lithe reproduction of fast bass lines. The -6dB point (re. 200Hz) occurs at a respectable 58Hz, and in-room bass extension will be further improved by careful placement relative to the walls. The cumulative spectral decay waterfall [Graph 2, below] is almost textbook, with rapid energy decay across the spectrum and only very low-level resonances visible at treble frequencies. KH



ABOVE: Good bass extension for the size and only a mild presence dip before recovering through the treble



ABOVE: Cabinet modes are well damped while bass / mid and treble drivers are largely free of resonances

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL/1m/2.83Vrms – Mean/IEC/Music)	89.5dB/88.5dB/88.1dB
Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	3.6ohm @ 260Hz 20.5ohm @ 113Hz
Impedance phase min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	-49° @ 134Hz 46° @ 850Hz
Pair matching (200Hz–20kHz)	$\pm 1.1\text{dB}$
LF/HF extension (-6dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	58Hz / 37.2kHz/36.3kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m)	1.2% / 0.2% / 0.1%
Dimensions (HWD)	260x240x386mm

LEFT: Proof that an affordable speaker can meet the Wife Acceptance Factor, the Concept 20's cable dressing considerations make this a winner

(whiskey, smoke, gravel) and Dianne Reeves (clear honey, silk) on *At Last* [Blue Note CDP 7 91937 2].

SIMPLY GORGEOUS

Now, I am not about to tell you that it all fell apart, nor that I was seduced by the glossy white finish, the price just made for these parlous times, nor the gallon of bass from a pint pot. To be blunt, the Concept 20 cannot 'do' refinement with the almost glib flair of speakers costing up to 87 times as much...

It's manifested in small ways, a tiny wisp of sibilance here, a bit of bass compression there. A discernible, if possibly unimportant loss of bass extension or absolute control, particularly the damping. But treat the Concept 20 for what it is, and you can almost excuse the slightly raucous behaviour when excited, the occasional trace of lumpiness with acoustic bass.

Why should I be so generous? Because I'm a grown-up (I think), and this is a review in the 'Budget Esoterica' series, the appearance in which the Concept 20 is most certainly justified. It is affordable, yet a trace exotic thanks to its form, its cleverness, its audiophile-respecting details. And one more thing, in

an age where hi-fi is disrespected by all but the converted, they are simply gorgeous. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

It took ten seconds to realise that here was an 'everyman' speaker: affordable, easy to drive, easier to listen to, and in possession of the wow factor. In other words, no knowledgeable audiophile will believe the Concept 20s *with stands* cost less than £600. They're a bit rock 'n' roll, so don't expect the last word in finesse or subtlety, but that's just fine if string quartets ain't your thing. A genuine bargain.

Sound Quality: 85%



the ear-friendly, sibilant-free top, will provoke the same reaction everyone has to that Pioneer: how can a speaker of this price sound so good?

It is an unfortunate part of a reviewer's remit to find fault, even when he or she is inspired only to praise. The Kodo drumfest, *Warabe* [Sony SRCL 467 1] merely reaffirmed the speakers' competence with mass and bass extension. Nothing stretched them to levels of performance beyond their capability, although of course no small two-way can recreate the sheer mass of a multi-woofered tower like the Olympica III. So I turned to the contrasting vocals of Lou Rawls