



Viva la evolution

Neat has given its Motive range a thorough going over, so **Ed Selley** discovers if the flagship Motive SX1 delivers the goods

British audio companies often adopt a more relaxed pace of evolution to their product ranges compared with some other countries and with speakers in particular, models and ranges can go many years without replacement. Neat Acoustics' loudspeakers are a classic example of the 'if it ain't broke don't fix it' approach – models like the Petite and Elite have been members of the range almost since the company's founding, albeit with continued upgrades.

So, when the company decides to carry out a refresh, the result is always going to be interesting. This time it is the affordable Motive range that has been given a good going over after eight years (with some more subtle updates during that time).

The Motive SX1 is the largest model in the range and incorporates all of the adjustments made to the range as a whole. The most visible change is the tweeter. The titanium unit of old has been replaced with an aluminium design. Although it's heavier than titanium, the resonances are easier to control with aluminium and the process of anodising the tweeter means that any notional loss of stiffness is kept to a minimum. This is mounted in the trademark foam surround that Neat uses on most of its designs.

Helping this tweeter achieve improved performance is a revised crossover. The frequency points that the crossover operates at and the general design have only been fractionally altered, but the components used have been significantly upgraded with Mundorf capacitors. The other significant change is that as standard the SX1 models are only fitted with a single set of terminals in contrast to the older models that were fitted for bi-wiring. You can order any of the SX models with two sets of terminals if

you wish, but the Motive SX1 joins the increasingly large number of speakers reviewed recently that only allow for single wiring. It will be interesting to see what the take up for the twin terminal models is – the review pair is fitted with a single pair of terminals only.

The final significant change is internal. Neat has revised the cabinet bracing to make the SX series stiffer and better damped than before. This is combined with revised arrangements for the chambering. The tweeter is now placed in a separate enclosure in order to reduce crosstalk.

Otherwise, much of the original Motive 1 remains the same. The tweeter is partnered with the same 135mm mid bass drivers as before and the cabinet has the same distinctive rearward lean to aid the time alignment. One distinctive facet that has also been retained is the cabinet porting, which exits through the bass of the speaker. For this

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Neat Acoustics
Motive SX1
ORIGIN
UK
TYPE
Floorstanding
loudspeaker
WEIGHT
14kg
DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
160 x 925 x 200mm
FEATURES
• HF drive unit:
25mm inverted
anodised aluminium
dome
• Bass/mid drive
units: 135mm
polypropylene cone
• Quoted sensitivity:
87dB
• Quoted nominal
impedance: 6 ohms
DISTRIBUTOR
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TELEPHONE
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reason, the plinth and spikes are fixed and there is no option to remove them. The advantage of this is that the SX1 is not too fussed about placement close to a wall (although best results are gained from being at least 30cms out), but I find that on a suspended floor, the Motive can be a little lively. Neat supplies a set of foam bungs to limit the output, but best results are gained on solid floors or isolating platforms. The sensitivity of the Motive is also listed as the same as before at 87dB/W. This is not exceptionally sensitive, although the 6 ohm impedance helps ensure the Neat is not too tricky to drive.

Finished in American Walnut (which is a relatively light wood finish in comparison to some walnut finishes), the Neat is a well

There is a clearly discernible sense of fun to the way the Neat makes music

finished and attractive speaker, if not the most visually spectacular. Some of the competition are larger and more striking, but this is the sort of speaker that should look at home in a variety of environments without attracting unwanted attention. A welcome cosmetic tweak is the fitting of magnetic trim tabs for the grilles, removing the need for those unsightly lugs on the front panel.

Some of the promotional material supplied with the Neat suggests that the tweeter in particular has been



developed with a view to taking advantage of the extra sweetness in the upper registers that well-mastered hi-res material can possess. With this in mind, I use the Motives with a Naim ND5 XS streamer and XP5XS power supply and alternate between a Naim Supernait and Cambridge Audio 851A. After some experimenting, I find that placing them on Aurelex platforms with a reasonable toe-in yields the best results.

Sound quality

In the same way that the design of the SX1 is visibly related to the original Motive 1, the sonic performance retains the basic characteristics that defined the range. The overall balance of the Motive is one that perhaps trades that last tiny percentile of detail in a performance for an even-handed accessibility with a wide variety of music that makes this an appealing partner across a wide variety of genres.

There is a clearly discernible sense of fun to the way that the Neat goes about making music that adds to the involvement it can create. Seasick Steve's cheerfully punchy *Hubcap Music* has a sense of life and drive to it that makes for an engrossing

performance. Picking this overall perception apart is tricky, but it seems to stem from an exceptionally well balanced presentation from top to bottom that avoids over emphasising any part of the frequency response. The handover between midrange and the new tweeter in particular is impressively seamless and this means that anything that happens within the Neat's frequency response does so in happy balance with everything else.

For what is a relatively compact and slender floorstander, the bass response is genuinely impressive. Although the Motive is happiest on a solid surface, the potent low end is apparent on all surfaces. As well as a genuine amount of impact, that is felt as much as heard, there is detail and agility that aids believability. Push the Neat to antisocial levels and the port can become audible, but at more sane volume points it works seamlessly with the drivers.

At the other end of the frequency extremes, the work that Neat has put in with the SXT tweeter has paid dividends as well. The SX1 has a sweetness to the upper registers that is largely responsible for the forgiving way that it performs, even

HOW IT COMPARES
The original Motive 1 was in a group test in 2011 with the Rega RS7 and Proac Studio 140 MkII, which remain strong competitors. The Proac is also lower ported and the larger cabinet can go slightly lower, but the new tweeter gives the Neat a top-end smoothness that helps it with less well recorded material. The larger and more complex Rega also has more bass than the Motive, but the SX1's improvements should ensure the midrange and top-end integration where the Rega won out is now more keenly contested. Where the Neat really scores is that bass response isn't significantly reduced in comparison to the bigger designs and it's a smaller, more elegant cabinet that's less fussy about placement.

fed with less than perfect material. There is a sense that the Motive is not the most forensic performer at the top end – if you want to know how much resin a violinist's bow has on it, you might find the slightly broader strokes of the Motive to be a little vaguer than you are hoping for, but it helps the Neat to produce a wonderfully even and unfailingly musical presentation, which is never less than tonally believable. The handling of voices in particular is unambiguously real. Their placement as part of the wider recording is entirely convincing and it once again emphasises the Neat's ability to focus on the wider performance rather than picking it apart. The soundstage is possessed of a good sense of scale and there is plenty of detail between the speakers. Reducing the toe-in seems to widen things, although it's at the expense of the three dimensionality, so on balance I keep the toe-in as I prefer the performance.

Given that Neat speakers have historically worked very happily with Naim equipment, it isn't too surprising to find that they work well with the Supernait I have to hand and the performance is extremely consistent. Removing the Supernait

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from the system and substituting a Cambridge Audio 851A does not significantly change the presentation, although the slightly richer-sounding Cambridge Audio does fill out the soundstage a little at the expense of some of the drive and excitement that the Supernait can bring to the performance. Removing the ND5 XS streamer and substituting the Avid Ingenium turntable as a source also doesn't alter the basics of the overall performance too significantly, but the wonderful smoothness of the Avid's performance is reflected in the overall presentation of the Motives.

A characteristic that also remains constant is that although the Motive SX1 is not especially difficult to drive, it does benefit from amplifiers that have good current delivery and that exert a sense of control over them. The amount of power needed to reach a decent volume level is not that high, but they thrive on that power delivery being of a high standard. The Motive is probably not going to be the first choice for any



As the grilles are magnetic there are no unsightly lugs visible

IN SIGHT



ON TEST

Neat claims 87dB sensitivity for the SX1 but our pink noise figure of 82.9dB suggests this is about 4dB optimistic. Minimum impedance modulus of 4.2 ohms almost accords with the 6 ohms nominal figure and, along with the minimum EPDR (equivalent peak dissipation resistance) of 2.3 ohms at 50Hz, confirms that the SX1 presents an easier load than many modern floorstanders. Frequency response errors, 200Hz-20kHz, of ± 3.4 dB and

± 3.9 dB respectively for the review pair are about average, with a flat overall trend, but a pair matching error of ± 2.2 dB is on the high side, principally because of narrow-band disparities above 7kHz. Bass extension of 63Hz for -6dB ref 200Hz is fair for the cabinet size and a slow initial roll-off suggests good bass transient behaviour. The CSD waterfall shows fast initial energy decay but some resonances at treble frequencies. **KH**

would-be valve amp owner anyway, but the excellent bass response of the speaker seems to really come alive from solid-state power.

Conclusion

Having spent some time with the Motive SX1, the impression is almost unfailingly positive. Anyone that's looking for night and day differences between the original and this newly revised model might well be disappointed, but what Neat Acoustics has done is very carefully and systematically looked at a very sound design with a fresh viewpoint. None of the changes that have been made on their own have radically altered the speaker, but cumulatively they have improved the performance considerably.

The Neat is a fantastically accomplished all-rounder that will do justice to a wide variety of music and should work well with any

amplification that delivers the required current and drive. Combine this with the rather handsome aesthetics and impressive build quality and you have a speaker that is right in the top performers at the price point, and one that should be added to any shortlist of speakers ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★

EASE OF DRIVE
★★★★★

OVERALL
★★★★★

LIKE: Lively and engaging sound; excellent tonality; solid build

DISLIKE: Works best on a solid floor and needs capable amplification

WE SAY: A superb revision to an already capable speaker

★★★★★

Q&A

Bob Surgeoner

Owner and head of acoustics



ES: How did the discovery about the improvement in performance from anodising the tweeter come about?

BS: We wanted to retain the powerful magnet system and narrow voice coil gap and resulting dynamic capability of the original Motive NMT tweeter, but to give it a more even response than the NMT's titanium dome was capable of. We'd experimented with various dome alternatives such as magnesium alloys, fabric domes and anodised aluminium. The anodised aluminium won out by a substantial margin. It helps the SX models deliver a standard of performance not normally available at this price point.

Have the crossover points for the drivers changed as part of the revisions or are they the same?

There has been a slight adjustment to the crossover point to accommodate differences in the new tweeter's response, but the main focus has been on choosing the most appropriate crossover components to optimise its potential.

Was any thought given to using the ribbon tweeter from the Iota?

Out of interest we had some prototypes running with the Iota tweeter soon after the Iota was launched. They sounded fine, but there is a limit to how low you can run the Iota tweeter's crossover point and, as we expected, it didn't really match well to the Motive's larger bass/midrange drive unit and our crossover options were, therefore, limited.

Having shown us a splendid pink Motive 2 at Munich, have you considered the possibility of gloss finishes or some of the Iota colours in the future?

Those Pink SX2s are starting to haunt me! They're on a world tour at the moment; Amsterdam, Denver, Vienna... The 'Hot Pink' is actually a fluorescent paint with a high-gloss polyester lacquer and are very expensive to produce, but we can do it if requested. In fact, we do offer alternative veneers or high-gloss finishes on any model in our range as a special order, POA.