

FOUR LOUDSPEAKERS

FOR ANY BUDGET

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Photography by Cody Hamilton

Neat Acoustics Iota

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NEAT ACOUSTICS IOTA

Tiny But Mighty

Neil Gader

What can five-by-eight inches buy you in the high-end today? A budget USB DAC? A power supply, a line conditioner? A doorstop? How about a loudspeaker? Not just a smidge of a speaker either. More like an *iota*—the Neat Acoustics Iota.

Neat is not new to the industry. For over twenty years it has built an enviable reputation among those in the know. Unfortunately, U.S. distribution has run hot and cold, lowering the company's profile among North American hobbyists. However, a new U.S. distributor, High Fidelity Services, has taken Neat under its wing and its fortunes appear to be on the upswing. Neat Acoustics designs and manufactures in rural Teesdale, located in the north of England. Leading the engineering and design team are Bob Surgeoner and Paul Ryder. Virtually everyone in Neat's employ is a musician, always a good sign in my book. Currently there are five unique series of loudspeakers in the Neat line, extending from the desktop-sized Iota to the medium-scale towers of the Ultimatum Series.

The Iota is a two-way, bass-reflex design with a rear-mounted port. Neat Acoustics calls it a "super-micro," and indeed it is so small you can palm it. Its driver complement includes a four-inch polypropylene cone mid/bass unit with a ferrite magnet assembly. The tweeter is a two-inch planar-magnetic ribbon transducer. The cabinet is heavy MDF. Per Neat tradition, the crossover is simple—a basic, three-element network that employs low-loss air-core inductors and high-grade polypropylene capacitors. The Iota can be had in a wide range of finishes including satin white, satin black, flame red, zinc yellow, and ultramarine blue—all at no additional charge.

In order to accommodate the Iota's pint-size dimensions, Neat flipped the enclosure orientation ninety degrees, snuggling the ribbon tweeter up against the mid/bass driver in a horizontal orientation, an advantageous solution that allows tweeter/inside or tweeter/outside positioning. While the speaker can be placed out into a room, listeners should take Neat's suggestions seriously and position them at, on, or near a wall, thus maximizing bass reinforcement. The added midbass output results in a far more even and

natural tonal balance. Of course, every room will be different and Neat suggests owners experiment freely. I dialed them in to my satisfaction at about a twelve-inch distance from the wall. There I achieved convincing bass extension that descended into the 60Hz range. Even thus situated, the Iota remains slightly lean in the lower-mids, so capturing the full resonant body of Pieter Wispelwey's cello is a bit much to ask of it. On the other hand, there was no mistaking the signature of an instrument that tiny speakers often reduce to eggshell-like fragility.

Unlike their full-sized siblings, small speakers have no place to hide any sonic weaknesses or glaring colorations. But it took only a few spins of some well-known musical favorites to hear that the

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was convincingly reproduced in all its intense, resonant emotion—from transient shadings to delicately shifting tonal colors. Equally important was the excellent inter-driver coherence—not always a given where different transducer technologies are employed. However, the Iota's cone mid/bass joins with the quasi-ribbon tweeter in a single unbroken voice. At least part of the credit is attributable to the small size of the mid/bass cone and a relatively high crossover point above the presence range, where the ear is less sensitive to driver interactions. The added benefit is that the higher crossover point leaves the ribbon plenty of dynamic headroom to perform its sweet magic.

The Neat Acoustics Iota is one serious little loudspeaker and ideal for connoisseurs with seriously limited space.

Iota has most of its sonic ducks in a row. This is a loudspeaker with a complete lack of pretension. Its warm, relaxed midrange represents a total rejection of the culture of souped-up, sonic hype we've all encountered at one time or another. As I listened to Joni Mitchell sing "California" and "A Case of You" the Iota instantly engaged me with a transparent top end and a nicely proportioned midrange, which imparted both dimensionality and inklings of physicality to this legendary performer. Detail and image definition were abundant. There is a mellower, darker accent to the Iota's character—not unlike the complex tones of an aged single-malt. A sound that instantly put this listener at ease. Its top end rolls gently rather than clawing for the last jot of extension, and it mercifully steers *way* clear of the pointed, stick-in-the-eye sting of many micros.

Its solid midrange neutrality and dynamic energy were exemplified in Tom Waits' "Come On Up to the House," which the Iota reproduced with the full, burning, gospel emotion of Waits' vocal and a three-dimensional sense of depth on drums, percussion, and brass. Also on the closely miked "Picture in a Frame" and "Take it With Me," the Iota reproduced the depth of Waits' chest tones with remarkable naturalness.

However, at the heart of the humble Iota is its inspired quasi-ribbon tweeter. It bathes the upper octaves with a silken speed and fluidity that the average soft dome just can't match in this price range. The transients of Joni's dulcimer tingled, and the clatter of her flat-picking was distinct. Arturo Delmonico's violin

Not to kick sand, but I'd be remiss if I didn't touch on the Iota's predictable limits. With so much seemingly effortless music on tap it's tempting to overdrive the Iota. It'll play fairly loudly but don't expect it to generate rib-cracking pressure levels, authentically scaled images, or seismic bass excursions. And some dynamic compression is baked into the cake of every micro, particularly as the music descends below 125Hz or so.

The Neat Acoustics Iota is one serious little loudspeaker and ideal for connoisseurs with seriously limited space. As an aside, I don't know how many times I became so lost in the music that these little marvels produced that I was fooled into thinking I was listening to the much larger set of speakers residing in my listening room. That's just what the Iota does. And that's what I call one Neat trick. Highly recommended. **tas**

SPECS & PRICING

Type: Two-way, bass-reflex stand-mounted loudspeaker
Frequency response: 60Hz-22kHz
Nominal impedance: 6 ohms
Sensitivity: 84 dB/1W/1m
Dimensions: 7.9" x 5.2" x 6.5"
Price: \$995

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