



Things are looking up

Neat turns its over-achieving Iota into an even more convincing – if unconventional – floorstander. **James Parker** checks it out

The team at Neat Acoustics doesn't believe in doing things the obvious way: from its HQ at Castle Barnard, it seems to have a knack of churning out speaker after speaker able to elicit a 'what the...?' response.

Its core floorstander, the Motive, is distinguished by its combination of diminutive dimensions and slimline cabinets with a decidedly laid-back – no, literally – design, while the big Ultimatum series has hidden charms in the form of extra isobaric drivers behind the units on display. Add in the

extra upward-firing EMIT planar-ribbon supertweeters, and what looks like a five-driver speaker – impressive enough in itself in a column 1.5m tall and weighing 65kg – is revealed to be packing no fewer than nine drivers.

And then, just when you thought Neat had done all it could with over-achieving small loudspeakers since its original Petite, it came up with the little Iota: launched four years ago, it was unlike anything else on offer. Designed as a super-compact speaker with a scale of sound way beyond its dimensions, it was unusual for its

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Neat Iota Alpha
ORIGIN
UK
TYPE
2.5-way floorstanding speaker
WEIGHT
6kg
DIMENSIONS (WxHxD)
200 x 450 x 160mm
FEATURES
• 50mm EMIT tweeter
• 100mm mid/bass driver and 134mm bass unit
• Quoted sensitivity: 86dB/1W/1m (4ohm)
DISTRIBUTOR
Neat Acoustic
TELEPHONE
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WEBSITE
neat.co.uk

'landscape format', its tweeter beside its woofer in a cabinet wider than it was tall, and for the nature of the tweeter itself.

The choice here was an EMIT planar/magnetic tweeter, a design more familiar now than when the speaker was launched, thanks to the use of the technology in a number of headphone models, including those from Audeze and Oppo. Rather than a voice coil in a magnetic gap pushing and pulling a cone or dome, the entire diaphragm is energised, and moves relative to the magnetic field as signal is passed.

Just 200mm wide, 130mm tall and 165mm deep, the little Iota caught on – and not just thanks to the range of bright colours in which it was launched. Perfect for use on a desktop, it could also be used on industry-standard (and thus inexpensive) wall brackets, or Neat's own ultra-slim dedicated stands.

But that thing about surprises? Well, Neat did it again at The Bristol Show earlier this year, showing a 'nearly finished' speaker so new it didn't even have a name, which made things awkward as it was probably the most talked about product there.

Now the Iota Alpha has a name and a price and the details of the design have become clear. Yes, the top section is essentially an Iota, complete with that 50mm EMIT tweeter and a 100mm mid/bass driver, but here those drivers are in a sealed enclosure, with a pronounced upward tilt, built into the top of an enclosure standing 450mm tall while more or less retaining the width and depth of the original. It's actually 5mm shallower front to back, thanks to the geometry of that tilt.

Inside is a 134mm downward-firing bass unit, given space to breathe by the high-quality floor spikes provided with the speaker, and a rear-venting port.

The crossover is a simple 2.5-way design, made with high-quality components with point-to-point wiring, and fed from a single set of cable terminals, and the speaker comes in a choice of finishes: natural oak, American walnut, black oak and satin white are standard, with Neat willing to talk about 'specials' at extra cost.

Sound quality

The Iota Alpha isn't too demanding, thanks to 86dB sensitivity and 4ohm nominal impedance, and just about any competent amp should be able to drive it. I try it with a variety of partners including an entry-level Marantz and Rotel's new RA-1592 powerhouse, as well as my original Naim Uniti, and rapidly come to the conclusion that, while the speaker works well with modest amp output, it really starts to sing when you sneak up on it with a decent dose of oomph.

To that end, I start with my Naim Supernait 2 moving up through the



Q Acoustic's Concept 40 floorstanders (HFC 385), while nowhere near as compact, offer an attractively fast and open sound for just under £1,000, but it's not hard to find them for £700 or less – and with their easy-going nature making them simple to drive, that's a pretty serious bargain. Similar conventional alternatives include the flagship of the Tannoy Revolution XT range, the XT 8F (HFC 404), complete with 200mm dual concentric and bass drivers, and selling for £1,299, while the similarly priced Wharfedale Reva-4 speakers are the bigger brothers of the little Reva-2 model that did so well back in HFC 412.

Salisbury lineage with a pre/power combo using an old 'olive' NAP 250, and ending up with a brand-new NAP 300 DR, and at each stage the speaker reveals the advantages of the added power and quality being unleashed. Drive it properly, and place it so it has a bit of boundary reinforcement, and it can really power out tight, fast, well-extended basslines, beautifully integrated with what the rest of the frequency range is doing.

However, that's not the most magical thing here: that honour goes to the way the speaker sits way below the listener's eye-line – well, unless you're sitting on the floor – yet manages to 'project' a sonic image up seemingly into thin air. The mark of a good pair

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of speakers is the way the sound can be made to break free from the boxes and take on an independent solidity (which, after all, is what the term 'stereo' actually means), but this usually only happens in two dimensions, from side to side and (hopefully) front to back. Here it happens in all three axes.

This 'ball of sound' effect is even impressive with the one-mike recording of Applewood Road's self-titled album, where the effectively mono sound still has air and space in it, and the three female voices – Emily Barker, Amber Rubarth and Amy Speace – are beautifully distinct. But

it's with more conventional two-channel recordings that things open up and spread around, beyond, between and above, in a manner unusual even for very good conventional speakers. Play another female trio, in the form of Neko Case, kd lang, and Laura Veirs on their *case/lang/viers* album, and that free-floating sound, with effortless vocal and instrumental layering, is what captures the attention from the opening bars. The dreamy harmonies and accompanying musicians, plus the tight focus on voices, are rather special.

OK, so the Alpha has its limits, and if you want to play heavyweight EDM or rock music at club or stadium levels in huge rooms it'll show it has limits only able to be overcome with much more bass cone real-estate to shift the air, but at normal – or even ambitious – domestic listening levels, it retains both its composure and that superb imaging and makes for a very involving listen.

Of course, that wide open balance and focus are well suited to small ensemble acoustic music such as Phantasm's latest set of Dowland's *Lachrimae*, where the five instruments are as clearly delineated as is the recorded acoustic, but the Alpha is just as adept when crashing out the stately opening of Schumann's *1st Symphony* played by the Berlin Phil under Simon Rattle. Or indeed anything as diverse as the tight rhythms of *Whiplash* from the Branford Marsalis Quartet's *Four MFs Playing Tunes* set, or a spot of dense, synth-heavy electro-pop in the form of the 12in remix of New Order's *Blue Monday*.

Conclusion

Yes, this speaker will pootle on the end of very modest amplification, but don't let its diminutive dimensions let you overlook that it is a very serious design. Neat's Iota Alpha is worthy of being used with amps and sources fully able to keep it under control and drive it as it should be heard ●

CONNECTIONS



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★
BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★
EASE OF DRIVE
★★★★★

LIKE: Compact dimensions; excellent finish; 'holographic' imaging
DISLIKE: May be a little too odd for some; best with hefty amps
WE SAY: These little speakers combine near invisibility with a fine sound

OVERALL
★★★★★