



Tall story

Once upon a time, there was a little speaker that grew into a big one. **David Price** tells the tale of Q Acoustics' new Concept 40

The concept is clear – to make a good speaker great. There are several ways of doing this, the obvious one being to spend large amounts of money on the drive units. A fancy ribbon tweeter here or some expensive carbon fibre mid/bass drivers there, perchance? The other way is to work on the cabinet, and if you think about it, this is even more critical than the drivers, which can't do their best if they're spoiled by boomy boxes.

In a way, cabinets can do no right, as all they can do is lower the performance potential of drive units by accentuating standing waves – smudging and blurring the sound from inside. Indeed, no matter how good a drive unit is, as soon as it is screwed into a cabinet, things can take a turn for the worse. Ideally then, you wouldn't have any cabinets at all; that's why Andrew Lloyd Webber's sound designer Martin Levan suspended naked Tannoy drive units over the audience's heads in the West End version of *Starlight Express!*

Q Acoustics has worked long and hard to get around this problem, before seemingly hitting on the solution. Designer Karl Heinz Fink has taken a respected cheap standmounter – the 2020i – and made it extra special by mounting its drivers in a superior, stiffer, better-damped box, and calling it the Concept 20. Suddenly, the limitations of the 2020i – which I had ascribed to the drivers – have disappeared.

And now we have this, the floorstanding version of the Concept 20. Rather than doing a tweaked version of the existing (and excellent) floorstanding 2050i, the Concept 40s are basically stretched 20s with spikes on the end. So they're physically a little smaller (about two inches) than the 2050is, but cost twice as much. And fascinatingly, when you bang the cabinets of the Concept 40s, it feels like you've just hit lead-lined concrete. Actually you haven't, of course, because they are made from Gelcore, first seen on the 20s.

This cabinet is said to be “ultra low resonance”, thanks to its “cabinet within a cabinet” design, as Q Acoustics' Steve Reichert puts it. The inner and outer cabinets are pulled together by a special adhesive (Gelcore) that binds the two cabinets, but which never sets. The idea is that the energy created within the enclosure excites the inner cabinet, but this kinetic energy does not degrade the performance of the drive units as in conventional loudspeakers because the Gelcore layer disperses the energy by converting it into heat. The Concept 40 adds a sturdy three-way spike arrangement too. So the speaker sits securely on whatever surface it is placed on.

Unlike the Concept 20, which uses rehoused 2020i drivers, the Concept 40 uses two new bespoke 125mm bass/midrange drivers set into an aluminium fascia plate. They look visually identical to the single one in the Concept 20, but the motor has been improved and the magnet strengthened. Like all Q Acoustic speakers, the drivers aren't off-the-shelf designs, but bespoke for the exact application. The 25mm soft dome tweeter cuts in at 2.3kHz, and is the same fitted to all Q Acoustics

DETAILS

PRODUCT: Q Acoustics Concept 40
ORIGIN: UK/Germany/China
TYPE: Floorstanding loudspeaker
WEIGHT: 18.5kg
DIMENSIONS: (WxHxD) 170 x 972 x 288mm
FEATURES:
 • 1x 25mm soft dome tweeter
 • 2x 125mm mid/bass drivers
 • Quoted power handling: 25-150W
 • Quoted sensitivity: 90dB/1W/1m
 • Quoted frequency response: 53Hz-22kHz (+/- 3dB)
DISTRIBUTOR: Armour Home Electronics
TELEPHONE: 01279 501111
WEBSITE: qacoustics.co.uk

speakers, using ferro-fluid cooling with advanced multi-layered cone material (rather than treated fabric) with 'super-decoupling' from the loudspeaker's baffle as well as integral damping. This is topped off by an aluminium fascia plate featuring a butyl clamp. Crossover is a fourth-order 'Linkwitz-Riley' design to ensure that there are no phase inversion problems around the crossover frequency, the company tells us.

Available in a choice of high gloss black or high gloss white finishes, the Concept 40 is a nicely presented product at the price, but lacks the stunningly sophisticated finish of Monitor Audio's £1,250 Silver 6, for example. The problem is that Q Acoustics loudspeakers have always been exceptionally well turned out

With the Concept 40s it's not the loud bits that impress, it's the quiet ones

at their respective price points, but never before has the company faced the big boys in the £1,000-plus sector. The 40 doesn't compare badly to most in this section of the market in terms of finish, but it certainly doesn't win hands down as the £500 2050i would, for example. Things toughen up in the speaker world very quickly, and the Concept 40 has a fight on its hands.

Quoted sensitivity is 90dB, and in practice I don't think this is unrealistic; it's not a particularly hard speaker to drive, although a good 50W per side from your

Bi-wiring is possible with these robust binding posts



amplifier is always nice to have. I find it works particularly well with solid-state (Creek Destiny) and tube (World Audio K5881) amplifiers alike. The speakers come with foam bungs, which can be fitted or removed according to taste; as ever they sound more open and expansive with their ports breathing freely, but faster and tighter when they're foam filled. It all comes down to your room and your music tastes, in the end. In my room I find that they work best at around 30cm out from the rear wall, slightly toed-in on their integrated tripod stands, with the bungs in place.

Sound quality

Any £1,000 Q Acoustics speaker is always going to be an interesting proposition, not least because the £500 2050i isn't far off the standards of many speakers of this price. As it transpires, the Concept 40 proves a good deal better than the 2050i, propelling it at a stroke up to the ranks of the best at the price.

If you've heard the 2050i, you'll know it's a very clean and musical device, without too much character of its own; whatever music you play it just gets down to work and lets rip with a warm, open and enjoyable

sound. None of this is lost in the Concept 40, but you get a wealth of extra musical insight, which takes it way beyond the 2050i. Indeed, in terms of transparency, it's like night and day. You can hear immediately what the cabinets in the 2050i are doing wrong, because none of it is present in the Concept 40. The sound seems far faster, more open and yet more subtle too, and the spaces in-between the musical notes seem to drop back to vanishingly low levels.

Cue up Air's *All I Need*, and you can hear the difference from the opening bars. The Concept 40 carries the guitar part on the lead in a delightfully subtle way, showing the delicacy of the finger work on the strings, while the instrumental timbre is more realistic. When the lead vocal line kicks in, it has a wonderfully silken sound – intimate, confessional, emotional. The gentle percussion pushes out more forcefully, the 'quieter' cabinets of this new speaker better able to carry dynamic accenting, and this brings with it a greatly increased sense of rhythmic flow. The song seems to have a real trajectory, to be going somewhere instead of ambling

HOW IT COMPARES
Monitor Audio's Silver 6 (£1,250) is the closest rival. It is an excellent all rounder, with very few obvious weaknesses. It is better presented – it looks a lot more expensive than the £250 price premium suggests; indeed its finish is superlative whereas the Q is merely very good. Sonically, the MA sounds a little bigger and more gutsy, lending greater physicality to the proceedings. It's also very tight and sounds more rhythmically explicit. The Q has a more spacious, tonally sweet and inviting sound meaning that many will believe it to be the nicer one to listen too. As ever, a live audition is recommended.

around lazily. All this comes from the wealth of subtle musical clues that are lost by lesser speakers; it's not the loud bits that impress, it's the quiet ones.

Feed the Concept 40 some punchier rock, and it shows itself in an even better light. Saxon's *Strangers In The Night* is a powerful piece of early eighties soft metal, all power chords, crashing drums and close-miked vocals. Through lesser loudspeakers it can sound congested, but the new Qs are wonderfully clean and open, throwing the sound out as if they have dissolved out of the room, retaining only a ghostly vestigial presence. Bass is surprisingly strong for this modestly sized floorstander, and pleasingly even too – devoid of any false bass peaks. Notes stop and start quickly and are played tunefully. The midband is a joy; those gravelly vocals are carried respectfully; they aren't airbrushed to the point of blandness, but neither are they edgy or forward – again this suggests a nice, flat response. Treble is good too, the crashing cymbal work sounding decently metallic, but not grating. Still, you'd ideally want just a little more space and smoothness; the gold dome tweeter of the Monitor Audio

It doesn't shout out at you or fall over itself trying to impress you

Silver 6 does better here, with a touch more openness and air.

The first movement of Dvorak's *New World Symphony* is wonderfully carried, again the Concept 40s showcasing their excellent sound staging, pin-sharp image location and tonal evenness. This isn't an easy piece of music for any loudspeaker; dramatic, dynamic and full range, it's a veritable assault course and throws up weaknesses fast. Even on crescendos, massed strings stay clean and never get shrill; at the same time the Concept 40 shows excellent spatial accuracy, and impresses with its low-level detail too. String timbre is superb, you can really hear the bite and body of the cellos. The result is an utterly convincing rendition of the great classical music standard. All sins are those of omission; within its performance envelope, the new Q proves excellent. The only criticism is that you'd ultimately want more power, scale and physicality – something you will surely have to shell out more to achieve.



ON TEST
Q Acoustics claims 90dB sensitivity for the Concept 40 and our measured pink noise figure of 89.4dB is not far short. But the forward response of the Concept 40, measured on the tweeter axis, shows a gentle rise in output above 4kHz, confirming the intention that the speakers not be pointed at the listening position. This will flatten out the treble, but also reduce the effective sensitivity to around 88.5dB. Even with the treble rise, frequency response error (200Hz-20kHz) was held to a creditable ± 3.2 dB and ± 3.3 dB for the pair, and matching over the same frequency range was excellent at ± 0.8 dB. Minimum impedance modulus was measured as 3.9ohms at 232Hz – close to the specified 4ohms – and impedance phase is well enough controlled to prevent the minimum EPDR falling below 2ohms. We measured a dip to 2.2ohms at 130Hz, plus two to 2.3ohms at 20Hz and 390Hz, so the Concept 40 presents a not too testing amplifier load. Bass extension is fair at 48Hz for -6dB ref 200Hz, but the roll off below that is fast. Although the CSD waterfall shows only low-level resonances in the treble, kinks in the impedance plot and near-field bass response indicate a marked 'organ pipe' resonance of the enclosed air at about 190Hz. **KH**

Conclusion

The Q Acoustics Concept 40 is an extremely able loudspeaker, and excellent value even at £1,000. It is amazingly well rounded, having practically no obvious weaknesses, and a whole lot of strengths. Right across the range – from detail and dynamics to tonal balance and musicality, it scores very highly indeed. And that's its brilliance, because there is so much to like and so little that disappoints. It's only in its treble performance that it is not one of the best in class; it's certainly not bad by any means, but some similarly priced rivals do a better job here. But that is more than made up for by its superb abilities in almost every other area. Most of all, what I like about this new floorstander is its naturalness;

it doesn't shout out at you or fall over itself trying to impress you. Indeed, it doesn't present much of a character at all, which is just as it should be. And for that reason it's well worth an audition. Highly recommended ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Superlative imaging; easy musicality; intricate, detailed sound

VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Treble is less silky or spacious than some rivals

BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Lovely sounding, brilliantly balanced package

EASE OF DRIVE ★★★★★

OVERALL ★★★★★

Q&A

Steve Reichert
Q Acoustics product designer



DP: Where does the Concept 40 sit in the Q Acoustics range now?
SR: The Concept 20 continues to be an amazing success and, because we wanted to build on this in an incremental way, the Concept 40 seemed the perfect idea. Of course, we don't rule out producing an even bigger Concept model in the future...

How does it differ from the Concept 20, apart from the price?

It remains a two-way design, but gets an additional 125mm mid/bass driver. Both of these are upgraded versions of that fitted to the Concept 20, with larger magnets and superior construction. The tweeter is the same, as is the cabinet's Gelcore construction, although obviously it is a full-size floorstander now. Still, the special Concept series build means it has remarkably low cabinet resonance, which allows optimum performance from the drive units.

What difference does this special cabinet make to the sound?

In our opinion it makes a fine set of drive units into a speaker that is shockingly good considering its retail price. The new Concept 40 delivers a sonic performance that until now has only been enjoyed by audiophiles and music lovers who could afford high-priced, high-end loudspeakers.

Do you have any recommendations about setting it up?

Because the Concept 40 can deliver such an extraordinarily three-dimensional soundstage, we recommend that you sit in an equilateral triangle in relation to the speakers. In this position you'll experience the amazing 'walk in' soundstage that this speaker is capable of delivering.



Bungs come supplied. Whether you'll need them is a matter of choice