



Life begins at thirty

The next-generation Q Acoustics budget floorstanding loudspeaker is here – and it's really rather special, says **David Price**

It is not easy to be a new speaker brand. First, anyone trying to enter the loudspeaker market will find it crowded. Second, designing a competitive speaker requires a team of talented people, and that is not easy to come by. Q Acoustics solved this problem by collaborating with talented engineer Karl-Heinz Fink, but getting around the first problem was more luck than judgement.

Q Acoustics' Steve Reichert admits that at the time the new brand was launched, the big fish that swam in the deep British speaker sea had

A clear step up from the 2050i – one of the best budget floorstanders around

momentarily vacated it. He confides that when the first 1000-series models came out, big names like Mission and Wharfedale weren't quite as strong as they had traditionally been – for various reasons. This opened up a space, he says, for Q Acoustics to move in and start selling decent-sounding but highly affordable boxes, traditionally the province of these bigger, more established brands.

He freely admits that the company has been pushing for market share rather than profit. As (still) a newish name, the aim was to get people to know the brand and trust it, and this involves making a more expensive speaker – he suggests – than some rivals sell at the price – in order to entice customers of established names over. One of the things that makes this possible is the fact that Q Acoustics is part of Armour Home Electronics, and can share office space and resources with the group's other brands, giving useful economies of scale. In short, the brand is a little less expensive to run, more nimble and

partnered up to a really good designer who also does many other projects for other people.

The first 1050 was really impressive at the price. Costing £330 in 2007, few – including me – had heard such a capable-sounding cheap floorstander. It rather shook up the market, offering sound more in keeping with £600 models. The 2050 (HFC 335) followed, which was a big step forward, making its predecessor sound opaque and flabby. It too was remarkable for what it was, and now the new 3050 is tasked to be just the same again, in 2015's loudspeaker market which has evolved a fair way since the earlier incarnations arrived. The price has gone up though; it's now £500 for the stock matt graphite or American walnut finishes, or £650 for the gloss white or black, or grained vinyl 'leather effect' finishes.

Boxing clever

The 3050 is not a small loudspeaker, standing one metre tall, and it weighs almost 18kg apiece. Compared with its predecessor – a sample of which I have to hand – it's a significant advance in styling terms. Its softer, cleaner design gives it a more 'designed' look, as if its creators have put some thought into how it looks in a room. The 2050's bottom-mounted binding posts have gone, thank goodness. It certainly looked good, cleaning up the rear of the speaker, but it was a huge pain to wire up; the 3050 has its terminal board at the rear of the cabinet where it should be. As it happens, Steve says this has allowed the whole box to be substantially more rigid too, which doesn't hurt the sound.

This new design is the same as its predecessor inasmuch as it's a two-way floorstander with a single 25mm soft dome tweeter and twin 165mm mid/bass units, although these now feature paper doped in Aramid fibre. Steve says the designers

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Q Acoustics 3050
ORIGIN
UK/Germany/China
TYPE
Floorstanding loudspeaker
WEIGHT
17.8kg
DIMENSIONS (WxHxD)
298 x 1,000 x 200mm
FEATURES
• 1x 25mm soft dome tweeter
• 2x 165mm mid/bass drivers
• Quoted sensitivity: 92dB/1W/1m
DISTRIBUTOR
Armour Home Electronics
TELEPHONE
01279 501111
WEBSITE
qacoustics.co.uk

moved to this from a paper/mica mix, and it has made the cone slightly stiffer and better controlled. The crossover point is set at 2.6kHz, which is fairly conventional. The company claims a sensitivity of 92dB/1W/1m, which is a good figure that will suit low-powered amplifiers and/or tube designs. The crossover follows the 'less is more' principle, using a fourth order Linkwitz/Riley design, with new 'U' inductors with a more compact magnetic field, helping to reduce crosstalk between the components.

The big cabinets are decently rigid, although nowhere near as quiet as those on the twice-as-expensive Concept 40 (HFC 385), for example. Indeed, I would suggest that this is where much of the money has been saved on the 3050, which is slightly taller yet a little lighter.

Sound quality

For most of my listening I use the speaker in conjunction with the supplied foam bung in its rear-mounted bass reflex port, which tightens up the timing and dials down the bass. Unlike its immediate predecessor, though, it seems a good deal more relaxed about being used

The drivers use a new hybrid paper and Aramid fibre



close to a rear wall without the bung. As before, a slight toe-in benefits stereo imaging, snapping the soundstage into focus.

This new loudspeaker superseded the 2050i (HFC 365) last month. Its predecessor was the best large, budget floorstander on sale, at a price point where you can barely get a listenable standmount, let alone a big floorstander. It sounded warm, open and musical – making it a hard act to follow. To succeed, the 3050 not only has to outperform its rivals, but also be a significant upgrade on the 2050i – and thankfully for both Q Acoustics and budget loudspeakers as a breed, it is.

Coming up trumps

The new design adds focus, grip and insight to the 2050i's combination of smoothness, size and power. Its predecessor had a big, broad-brush stroke sound which was lots of fun, whereas the new one is tighter, tauter and more regimented. It doesn't quite have the former's 'valve amplifier sensibility', where everything was sumptuous and slightly opaque – instead it brings a more sharply focused and detailed character. Part of this manifests itself as more low-level information, another aspect

you notice is the more precise location of instruments in the stereo soundstage. The most profound upgrade, however, is the improved dynamics, making the 3050 a far more engaging and musically articulate design.

For example, Simply Red's *Holding Back The Years* is a gentle, almost balladic song with little in the way of high intensity musical energy, but the 3050's new-found delicacy and detail makes it much more fun to listen to. By comparison, the 2050i seemed bland, compressed and a little leaden – while its replacement is better able to track the gentle dynamic inflections in the playing and also singer Mick Hucknall's phrasing. The music acquires a sense of rhythmic snap that had previously been lost, as well as better location of the instruments within the mix. There is a finer sense of flow, giving a superior sense of the song having a beginning, a middle and an end.

Moving to some higher powered house music, in the shape of K-Klass' *Rhythm Is A Mystery* – a nineties club anthem with pounding bass and thumping drums, along with some rousing high-energy

HOW IT COMPARES

Selling for just pennies less than the 3050 is Monitor Audio's Bronze BX5 (HFC 345). It's a two-and-a-half-way system with twin 140mm mid/bass units mated to a 25mm C-CAM metal dome tweeter. The speaker is a little less attractive than the 3050, and a bit smaller too – bass extension is slightly better but sensitivity is down fractionally, but still very good at a claimed 90dB/1W/1m. Sonically the Bronze BX5 doesn't sound as big or as far reaching; it images a little less well, has a slightly narrower soundstage and seems a more constrained. But it's still a fine-sounding design and its treble is particularly good, with extension and insight that the 3050 cannot quite match.

vocals. It's wonderfully incendiary stuff, but can sound a little hard and brittle on lesser loudspeakers, or all-too-easily losing its dynamic impact. The 3050 copes impressively well, diving into the track with aplomb and punching out lots of clean, tuneful synthesised bass and a tight, gripping snare drum sound. At really high levels it seems to compress this a little, but it is way beyond the realistic listening levels encountered in your average terraced house. You can hear the cabinets introducing a slight slurring and overhang in the bass too – in a way that you don't in the gel-reinforced Concept 40. Yet that's not to say the 3050 is bad in this respect; for example the Cambridge Audio Aeromax 6 (HFC 391) sounded no tauter in the bass than the Q Acoustics at half the price.

Some of this new-found grip comes from the new mid/bass drive unit material, I suspect. It definitely gives the 3050 a crisper and more spry sensibility, which is able to get deeper into the recording without becoming bogged down. The mid/bass units cross over smoothly to the tweeter, which is also an obvious improvement over what came before; it seems

The 3050's new-found delicacy and detail makes it much more fun to listen to

crisper and has better air and space; the hi-hat cymbals on Thomas Dolby's *Airwaves* via CD sound sweeter and more delicate, making the 2050i sound like it was playing a low bitrate MP3 by comparison. The track comes over really convincingly, with the various strands in the mix separated out beautifully. This is a splendidly recorded song that gets better every time you upgrade your sound system, and comes over with considerably more depth and insight than the 2050i ever did. Indeed, that sums up this new floorstander – it's a less superficial performer, digging down deeper into the mix and getting more of the music out than its esteemed predecessor. That's no small feat!

Conclusion

Q Acoustics' new 3050 is a clear step up from the 2050i that preceded it, and that – lest we forget – was already one of the very best budget floorstanding speakers around. First, it's better looking than before; the previous version was attractive, but this is positively stylish and lifts any



MATERIAL WORLD

Since Mission's 752 in the mid-nineties, with its innovative High-Definition Aerogel mid/bass driver, loudspeaker manufacturers have been experimenting with various kinds of clever, high technology cone types. This is not surprising because the material used dramatically affects the sound of the driver; heavy plastic ones sound smooth but slow, light paper ones can be fast but coloured. That's why this is a key point of differentiation; along with the number of drive units and type of cabinet, cone material gives a loudspeaker its distinctive character. The original Q Acoustics 1050 and later 2050 used a special paper/mica mix that sounded fast but controlled. The new 3050 breaks away quite significantly, running a hybrid paper and Aramid fibre formulation; the latter is similar to Kevlar and confers stiffness without adding too much weight. This has given this latest Q Acoustics floorstander a substantially grippier and tauter sound, with more fine detail – yet the fundamentally smooth and agreeable character of the speaker hasn't changed.

room in which it sits. Second, it is extremely well built at its price; frankly there's nothing around that betters it. Then there's its sheer physical size; no rival comes close, and size bestows any speaker a deeper bass and/or better efficiency – the 3050 is very easy to drive and goes low. Last but not least is the sound, which is excellent at the price – only when you spend £1,000 on designs such as its own big brother do you really get an appreciable performance gain. If you're a cash-strapped audiophile, you simply have to hear this loudspeaker ●

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OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Easy musicality; detailed, focused sound; styling

VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Treble lacks air compared with the best in class

BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Class-leading budget floorstander that represents superb value for money

EASE OF DRIVE ★★★★★

OVERALL ★★★★★

Q&A

Steve Reichert
Marketing manager, Q Acoustics



DP: What would you say is the aim of the new 3000 series?
SR: To deliver such a high level of style, finish, value and sonic performance that it becomes the obvious first choice for every consumer considering purchasing 'affordable' loudspeakers! We set out to beat the best in class with the 3050, which was of course the 2050i!

What do you think is biggest improvement you've made?
We've improved everything, but twist my arm and make me pick just one, and it would have to be the new '2 in 1' concentric ring/dome tweeter. Designed by Karl-Heinz Fink, it combines the advantages of both dome and ring radiator HF units and is frankly genius. The result is a wonderfully smooth, detailed and extremely low distortion tweeter, with outstanding dispersion.

Why move the terminal board to the back, from the bottom?
This has been done for purely 'sonic' reasons and is the result of the research we undertook while developing the 'Gelcore' cabinets for the Concept models. Put simply, in order to maintain cabinet strength and integrity, it's important to cut as small a hole as possible for the terminal panel. The panel on the rear of the new 3050 is not only much smaller than the 2050i panel, it also boasts an internal bracing spar to reduce resonance and maintain cabinet strength.

Can we look forward to a Concept version of this?
Not in the short term, for two reasons. Firstly, the advances delivered by the Gelcore cabinets of the Concept models means they continue to offer a superior sonic performance over even the new 3000 Series. Secondly, I'm pleased to report Q Acoustics has enjoyed a spectacular sales growth over the last couple of years; and for that to continue, our international customers tell us they need some more higher-end models, so that's our focus for the time being.



Happily the new smaller terminal board has moved from the bottom to the back