

TOP HI-FI ENGINEERS REVEAL THEIR TEST TRACKS

# WHAT HI★FI?

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THREE NEW DECKS: a premium Dual,  
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Denon's premium  
AV amp is a five-  
star powerhouse



Sony's new  
mid-range  
over-ears



Flagship  
floorstanders  
from Q Acoustics



ISSUE 488

IT'S GROOVY: HOW THE SOUND GETS ON A RECORD



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*What Hi-Fi?*  
p24



## ALL HANDS ON DECKS

The arrival on the market of one new turntable is something of a turn-up for the books, even in these days when the vinyl revival is relatively old news; so when three turn up in quick succession it feels as though it ought to herald something of a celebration for a magazine that is, when all is said and done, all about the enjoyment of listening to music.

This issue of *What Hi-Fi?*, then, is a vinyl special, with those **three new decks (p30)** taking pride of place. They are joined by our **favourite turntables from £1000-£2000 (p54)** and a round-up of the **phono stages (p42)** that you will need to connect a new record player to the rest of your system.

We also bring you features concentrating on getting the best from your records, including hints and tips on **setting up your turntable (p64)**. And you won't want to miss our fascinating insight into the **test tracks from top engineers (p38)**, where the designers of much of our favourite equipment reveal the music they use to ensure their designs are performing as they should.

*Jonathan*

Jonathan Evans, editor

### MY PRODUCT OF THE MONTH

#### Q Acoustics 5050, p18

The 5040s were Award winners. These, their bigger brothers, scale things up, and then some...



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## HOW WE TEST



### EXPERIENCE. HERITAGE.

We have been helping the world discover the best in hi-fi and home entertainment for more than 45 years, and have more than 100 years of reviewing experience under our collective belts – so you can count on our expert opinion.



### DEDICATED TEST FACILITIES

We test every product against its peers in our extensive, bespoke reviewing facilities in London and Reading. We conduct all our tests as a team – our opinions and conclusions are always the result of collaboration.

## HOW WE SCORE

All review verdicts are agreed upon by the team as a whole – not any individual reviewer. Each product will be listened to and/or viewed by several members of the test team, who will then discuss the final verdict before it appears in the magazine or on the website. This avoids any individual bias creeping in.

### OUR SCORES EXPLAINED

One of the best ★★★★★  
A serious contender ★★★★★☆  
Worth a look ★★★★★☆  
Disappointing ★★★★★☆  
Awful ★★★★★☆

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# Q Acoustics 5050

Grace and power at a really competitive price

**The arrival** of the new 5000 range marks something of a new dawn for Q Acoustics. It signals a determination to make more of an impact at premium price points and, perhaps more surprisingly, a shift in sonic signature.

Until we reviewed the Award-winning Q Acoustics 5040 floorstanders late last year, every stereo speaker we had heard from the company displayed a remarkable consistency of sonic character: refined, insightful and undemanding to match. These were the very qualities that made them so recommendable. Against the very best they could also be accused of playing things a little safe, reining back the drama in the music just a touch in exchange for an easier listen.

The 5040 floorstanders, and subsequent experience with the rest of the 5000 series, shows that things have changed. There has been a notable shift in emphasis, with dynamism, clarity and agility now more prominent, though at the cost of some loss of natural warmth.

But what happens if you take this award-winning recipe and scale it up a bit? The result is the range-topping Q Acoustics 5050 we have on test here. The most significant changes between the two models are as follows: the 5050's twin mid/bass drivers are bigger (15cm vs 12.5cm) as is the cabinet (internal volume of 39.7 vs 27 litres). Visually, the new floorstanders look more dominating and certainly will benefit from being used in larger spaces.

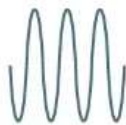
## The best of both worlds

In overall terms, the basic engineering remains the same, the technical highlight being the use of a smooth, seamless profile for the mid/bass diaphragms. The shape of this Continuous Curved Cone, as Q Acoustics calls it, avoids the use of a traditional dustcap, and so allegedly sidesteps its inherent distortions, but is also claimed to incorporate the best characteristics of straight-sided and flared cone designs (namely bass, and control at higher

## KEY FEATURES



15cm Continuous Curved Cone mid/bass driver x2



Sensitivity: 91.8 dB/W/m



Size (including stabiliser feet): 102 x 39 x 34cm (hwd)

The stabilisers at the rear are made of aluminium and are easy to attach

frequencies, respectively). And the cone material? It is the same as in the smaller model: impregnated paper.

The crossover point between the twin mid/bass units and 25mm soft-dome tweeter is set at a fairly conventional 2.7kHz. The tweeter is vented and derived from the design used in the more upmarket Concept series. It is hermetically sealed and decoupled from the front baffle to provide isolation.

The 5050's larger mid/bass drivers necessitate a cabinet that is notably wider than the one used by its junior sibling. This enclosure feels nicely made and well finished. It is rigid too, thanks to carefully considered internal bracing. The front baffle is lined with a layer of butyl rubber (to damp resonances) and glossy black acrylic trim (to look nice). There are four finish options for the cabinet: Satin Black, Satin White, Holme Oak or Santos Rosewood. On first unpacking the speakers you will need to fit a pair of aluminium stabilisers to each one. These are each attached via a pair of Allen bolts and are an easy fit.

Take a look inside the enclosure and you will find four Helmholtz pressure equalising tubes. We first came across this unusual technique to control internal air pressure and reduce standing waves in Q Acoustic's high-end Concept 500 floorstanders. It worked well in that design and there is no reason to think it will not do the same here.

While the 5050s' relatively high sensitivity of 91.8dB/W/m means that they will produce good sound levels with budget amplifiers, they deserve more talented partners. We think Arcam's A5 (£750) integrated or Cambridge Audio's similarly priced CXA81 are good starting points for amplification and should be used with similarly talented sources such as the Arcam CD5 CD player, Rega Planar 3 record player or Cambridge Audio CXN100 music streamer.

To see how far the 5050 floorstanders can be pushed we also use our reference system of Naim ND555/555 PS DR music streamer, Technics SL-1000R/Vertere

Dark Sabre MM record player, Cyrus Phono Signature phono stage and Burmester O88/911 Mk III amplifier. We have a pair of the Q Acoustics 5040 on-site for comparison, as well as PMC's Prodigy 5 floorstanders, KEF's LS50 Meta and our reference ATC SCM50 speakers.

## Spot the difference

The comparison with the smaller 5040 is an interesting one. Their common engineering is readily apparent in the excellent detail resolution, seamless cohesion from top to bottom and generally articulate natures. Take a look at the specifications and the 5050 is claimed to go only 2Hz deeper in the bass (37Hz vs 39Hz); but in use that translates into considerably more low-frequency heft and gives the speakers a calmer, more mature disposition.

Despite that extra dose of bass, they aren't much fussier about room position. The 5050's lows are taut and articulate, displaying a surprising amount of control for a floorstander at this level. It means that they can be pushed closer to a rear wall than most similarly sized alternatives and still sound even. In our 3 x 7 x 5m (hwd) listening room, we can place them as close as 30cm to the rear wall without great issue. There are foam bungs provided in the box to block the rear-firing reflex ports should excessive bass prove a problem in your room, though using them does tend to compromise the sound's overall balance.

Get the positioning right and you will be greeted by some of the most controlled and articulate bass that we have heard from a tower at this level. As we listen to *Time* from Hans Zimmer's *Inception* OST it is hard not to be impressed by the depth and definition of the music's complex and oh-so-powerful lows. The 5050s sound composed and unstressed, even as volume levels rise.

But there is more here than just good bass. Given a little space to breathe and a slight angle towards the listening position, the 5050s generate a generous soundstage that is well-focused and





## WHAT HI-FI?



nically layered. The positions of sounds and instruments are stable and locked into place, even when the music becomes demanding.

Their tonal balance is still a touch forward, so it pays to take care with system matching. Out of the box, we are a little bothered by treble that sounds a bit hard and peaky. Over a few days of use, this trait calms down but can still bite if you partner these speakers with bright or aggressive amplification. Older generations of Q Acoustics are notably less fussy about partnering equipment.

**"Get the positioning right and you will be greeted by some of the most controlled and articulate bass that we have heard from a tower at this level"**

There is no questioning the clarity and insight on offer though. Like their junior siblings, these speakers dig up plenty of detail. They can delve into complex productions such as Steve Reich's *Music For 18 Musicians* and deliver clear insights. They never sound confused, and manage to keep hold of a multitude of instrumental strands without losing track of the musical whole. That is not an easy thing to do.

### Dynamic prowess

We are impressed by the 5050's dynamic abilities too. They can go from a whisper to an orchestra at full bore effortlessly, while still having the skill to convey the nuance and passion in a solo voice - something made clear when we play Nina Simone's *Mississippi Goddam*. In absolute terms, it would be nice to have a little more natural richness through the midrange, but it is hard to argue with the 5050s' articulation and finesse in this region. The speakers make the most of the song's energy and prove surprisingly deft at conveying the irresistible rhythmic drive of the piece. This rhythmic ability is confirmed when we listen to Massive Attack's *Heligoland* set later on in our listening session, as is the speakers' dynamic punch and enviable range of talents at low frequencies.

It would have been easy for Q Acoustics to mess up here. The smaller 5040s are excellent speakers and scaling the ingredients could have fallen flat. As it is, the Q Acoustics 5050 floorstanders do everything their junior siblings can do but add an extra dose of authority and a slightly calmer manner. If you have the space and extra budget, this is where our money would go.

## WHAT HI-FI?

**RATING** ★★★★★

### SOUND



### BUILD



### COMPATIBILITY



### FOR

- Clarity and insight
- Strong dynamics
- Impressive bass
- Pleasing rhythmic drive
- Slick build

### AGAINST

- Needs care in partnering
- Works best in larger rooms

### VERDICT

These are pleasingly mature sounding speakers that deliver impressive clarity and scale