High Concept

What happens when a successful entry-level speaker brand goes upmarket? Ed Selley finds out

It is hard to believe that it is now over a decade since Q Acoustics first began selling speakers. As a brand developed under the banner of Armour Home Electronics in 2006, it has successfully managed to swiftly migrate from newcomer to become the new benchmark for entry-level speakers (see our Group Test starting on p24). Even when it pushed its designs slightly upmarket with the arrival of its first Concept models in 2014, it delivered speakers that remain some of the best at their price points today. With barely any speaker markets left to conquer under £1,000, it was inevitable that eventually the brand would move more upmarket.

Instead of moving up just one increment, the Concept 500 pitches into more rarified territory altogether. A long time in development has resulted in an extremely sophisticated loudspeaker that’s still undeniably a Q Acoustics product. This has meant taking technologies and design features recognisable on its lower-cost models and developing them more for the upmarket sector.

Nowhere is this more apparent than the cabinet design. The Concept 500 takes the ‘Gelcore’ (see boxout) system first seen on its Concept 20 and 40 models and runs with it. Whereas the more affordable 20 and 40 limited its application to the vertical sides of the cabinet, the Concept 500 uses it on every surface including the top and bottom. Furthermore, instead of the two layers of MDF and two layers of gel, the result is a speaker that promises a level of rigidity and damping that is way beyond more conventional cabinet construction arrangements. The cabinet boasts extensive internal bracing, calculated in order to ensure the maximum effectiveness. Q Acoustics refers to it as “point-to-point bracing” meaning that stiffening is only applied between the relevant points rather than at locations convenient to the manufacturer. There is also a series of Helmholtz resonators fitted to reduce stray energy emission. This is an exhaustively engineered and immensely solid enclosure.

The drivers are also true to the company’s ethos and outwardly look very similar to those used in its more affordable Concept siblings. Two features in particular help it to carry this off. The decision to blend the front panel and results in all fastenings being invisible. The layout of the drivers looks almost identical to its 3050 sibling almost identical to the much more affordable 3050 floorstander (HFC 398). The mid/bass units boast a significantly beefed up voice coil and considerable attention has been paid to isolating them, while the tweeter is completely decoupled from the cabinet. This extends to all drivers being mounted to the rear of the front panel and results in all fastenings being invisible.

Sound of silence

During development, the drop in noise from the cabinet revealed that notionally silent components in the crossover became audible in the absence of noise from elsewhere. A full re-work of the crossover was the result, with components that drop the noise levels to Q Acoustics’ and design consultant Karl-Heinz Fink’s satisfaction. Even judged by the standards of a £4,000 loudspeaker, the attention to detail that’s on show here is impressively fastidious. It also looks the business, too. The industrial design manages to look about right at the price while keeping a family resemblance to its more affordable Concept siblings. Two features in particular help it to stand out. The decision to blend the lacquered cabinet finish with a real-wood inlay section at the rear is very eye catching indeed. The wooden section lightens what would otherwise be a fairly dark and oppressive-looking floorstander (finished in black gloss) and is a rich, distinctive style twist. The other is the chrome foot section, which adds stability to the speaker and provides a
Q Acoustics CONCEPT 500 £4,000

Even very deep, fast basslines don’t seem to result in any boating or overhang

Q Acoustics quotes a roll-off at 41Hz, and in a normal lounge – even with the bungs in place – I suspect it goes a bit lower than that, and with the same effortless lack of boxiness and colouration as the upper registers.

Perhaps most importantly, the Concept 500’s proficiency doesn’t get in the way of its ability to have fun. Listening to the joyous Simple Blues of RL Burnside’s Too Bad, it’s easy to get lost in just how infectious the rhythm is.

Conclusion

This is an outstanding speaker that shows an all-round depth of talent that would be impressive even if the price were considerably higher. Its ability to remain transparent so that you can simply get on with enjoying the music is something that Q Acoustics can be very proud of, as it redresses expectations at the price. It’s comparatively unfussy about its environment or the electronics that integrate with it as part of a system and should be top of any shortlist if you’re looking to spend £4k on a floorstander.

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