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Hi-Fi Choice
PASSION FOR SOUND

Q Acoustics 3050i

By Hi-Fi Choice

HFC auditions the flagship model from Q Acoustics' new 3000i series, introducing the 3050i floorstander



It's all very well reading about loudspeakers that employ exotic materials and techniques in their construction, with special driver designs and radical ribbon tweeters, but most of us own models that are basically two or three moving-coil drive units in a fibreboard box with some acoustical damping and a shiny external finish. I'm quite fascinated by affordable loudspeakers. After all, if you've got an infinite budget it's surely just a matter of time before you achieve your desired sound. The real challenge is to take cost-limited materials and brew them up into something that sounds really special.

Q Acoustics brand director Alex Munro, who appeared in last month's Insider feature, says that this is now his purpose in life. He argues that, in some ways, there's been a gap in the market for a while and his company is setting out to fill it. The brand's raison d'être is to make cheap, affordable, high-value loudspeakers that sound far better than they have any right to – and the 3050i absolutely personifies this. It's big, has three drive units and goes loud from only a small amount of power – what's not to like?

In truth, a number of Q Acoustics' staff have worked for companies that once dominated the UK loudspeaker world; there's a lot of British speaker DNA in the designers and engineers working on the 3050i. You look at it and wonder just how you can get so much for your money. Yet this isn't telling the whole story, because a lot of design experience has gone into this, accumulated over the decades by various members of the team. It's more than just a pretty face.

The biggest problem with a low-cost loudspeaker, especially a large one like this, is the cabinet. The 3050i sports the company's point-to-point bracing. Cabinet strengthening is nothing new, but Q Acoustics has made a concerted attempt to do it right; the parts of the enclosure that need to be stiffened have received attention to stop flexing. This is said to be a variation on what it has learned with its flagship Concept 500 (HFC 426), done down to a price of course. Interestingly, conventional terminal panel cut-outs have been removed, giving improved structural integrity. The new low-profile binding posts are also a big improvement on what came before, and are able to accept 4mm banana plugs. Finally, there's an internal pipe, providing Helmholtz Pressure Equalisation.

The drive units are headed off by a 22mm soft ring dome tweeter that is decoupled from the baffle via a compliant silicone suspension system. The idea is that this takes much of the vibrations from the mid/bass drivers out of the equation, stopping its sound being sullied. A new trim ring is fitted too, marking it out from its predecessor. The twin 165mm mid/bass drivers have cones made from impregnated and coated paper, working with a newly developed low-hysteresis rubber surround. Alex says this gives the optimum balance between stiffness and self-damping.

The overall look and feel is very good, but one disappointment compared with the older 3050 is that the choice of finishes – graphite grey, English walnut, carbon black or arctic white – no longer includes the lovely lacquered gloss black, white or leather effect options. All come with a choice of rubber feet or spikes, and with rear outrigger plinths for extra stability. Magnetic speaker grilles are supplied, obviating the need for untidy fixing recesses on the front baffle. The reflex port is round the back, with foam bungs provided for use close to a wall. In my listening

room, I sit this speaker about 50cm from the rear wall with the foam bung in place. It's worth experimenting, as the bung gives a tighter but less relaxed sound. Q Acoustics quotes a sensitivity of 91dB/1W/1m at 6ohm, which is good for any conventional loudspeaker and should make it easy to drive for a wide variety of solid-state or valve amplifiers.

Sound quality

Anyone that's familiar with the currently still available original 3050 floorstander (*HFC 398*) will recognise the sound of the new version – it's the same, but different. The first speaker to carry the model number managed to be light, open, bouncy and punchy, especially considering its price. Yet when you listened a little harder it had a certain opacity to its midband – a very subtle sense of it begin nasal and congested. Bass was decently tuneful, but still a little too rounded and the cabinet seemed to be joining in with the party just a touch too much. Treble was cough but a tad rolled off sounding, lacking any real delicacy or extension.

The new 3050i attempts to address all these criticisms, and the result is a loudspeaker that's lighter, tighter, faster and more open than before – with a fractionally cleaner and crisper treble, a more transparent midband and bass that's slightly less weighty but obviously more articulate. In short, it's as if someone has applied first pressure to the shutter of a digital camera, and the auto-focus has snapped everything into sharp relief. Take AC/DC's *Whole Lotta Rosie* for example. This is an adrenaline-fuelled classic rock stonker, and it's a track like this that would have the 3050i's predecessor sounding a bit soft, losing some of the emotional purchase of the song. Not so the new loudspeaker, which is insightful enough to really scythe its way into the dense mix, past all those multi-tracked, fuzz-drenched, cranked-up guitars, right into the studio. It responds faster, has quieter silences and greater spaces between the notes – and the result is a more dynamic and propulsive sound than before. Indeed it really gets into the swing of things, apparently unfazed by that shrill lead guitar riffing, so you can still make out the powerful percussion work. Even at high volume levels, this new speaker takes it all in its stride.

It won't sweeten a sour-sounding piece in the way the original did, however, cue up a really good eighties recording, such as Prefab Sprout's *Appetite* and I'd take the new version any day. There's still a pleasingly smooth and subtly sweet demeanour to the 3050i, but less cabinet coloration makes for more music, and less overhang. The result is a more open, expressive sort of performance that gets deeper into the recording. It's less 'pleasant' sounding, but more musical. The coruscating dynamics of this track hit much harder and the quiet bits are quieter. You find yourself connecting more on an emotional level, and paying less attention to the hi-fi.

This is never more apparent than with electronic music. Uncle Bob's *Burly House* has lots of bass and treble action and yet from the very start the kick drum is solid and hard hitting. As soon as the Roland TB-303 bass synthesiser line kicks in, we're enjoying large tracts of well controlled low frequencies that counterpoint with the looping hi-hat cymbal sound up top. This is silkier and more distinct than the 3050, which seems a little muted and vague by comparison. As the volume climbs, it's clear the new speaker holds things together exceptionally well for a product of this price.

One of the most impressive facets of the original big Q Acoustics box was its imaging, and the 'i' doesn't disappoint. It seems even more expansive than its predecessor, and has slightly better depth perspective. Lou Donaldson's *One Cylinder* boasts a cavernous soundstage through the correct loudspeaker, and the 3050i rises to the occasion. Instruments are located really solidly, with the lovely rolling cymbals far to the right, trumpet closer in, tenor sax stage left and the deliciously fast and lyrical guitar centre stage. The recorded acoustic is genuinely convincing; so much so that I have to keep on reminding myself that I am listening to an inexpensive floorstander.

Conclusion

A substantial improvement on its predecessor, it's almost as if adding a simple 'i' suffix doesn't do justice to how much better the Q Acoustics 3050i really is. If you're looking for a largish, high value for money floorstander then this has to be the first model on your audition list; it may be the last, too. DP

DETAILS

Product: Q Acoustics 3050i
Price: 799, - Euro
Origin: UK/China
Type: 2-way floorstanding loudspeaker
Weight: 17.8kg
Dimensions: (WxHxD) 310 x 1,020 x 310mm

FEATURES

- 1x 22mm soft dome tweeter
- 2x 165mm mid/bass drivers
- Quoted sensitivity 91dB/1W/1m (6ohm)

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