

## Q Acoustics Concept 20

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loudspeaker

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I got a remarkable result with the Q Acoustics 2010i last year, at £120 it was the least expensive speaker I had reviewed in a long while but far from the least entertaining, almost the opposite. Q Acoustics has done well by using a top notch freelance designer, Karl Heinz Fink (the man behind Naim Ovators and numerous other successful speakers), and Chinese manufacture. By making speakers in quantity they can spread the design cost sufficiently to keep pricing down across the range. This year they have decided to up the ante by introducing cabinet technology that wouldn't look out of place on a speaker costing several thousand (pounds, euros, dollars you name it). The thinking is that because so many highly talented individuals have made so much effort to produce ever better drive units, there is only limited room for improvement in this area if costs have to be kept to a minimum. So the way to make a better budget box is to improve the box instead.

The cabinet is the limiting factor in a great many loudspeakers because wood is naturally inclined to vibrate at certain frequencies, that's why musical instruments are made of the stuff. But wood is the most practical material for the job and so has been used in budget and more expensive speakers since time immemorial.

Q Acoustics has come up with a way of using wood (in MDF form) in such a way as to significantly reduce cabinet vibration. It has done this by putting one box inside another with a layer of Gelcore adhesive in between. Gelcore is a non hardening glue that can turn much of the cabinet vibration into heat and thus minimise the amount of ringing that the box produces after a signal has been emitted by the drivers. It is remarkable that this can be done in a £350 loudspeaker, you rarely see an attempt to seriously

combat this issue in speakers at twice the price because the usual technique is to add mass which equates to cost and even then merely lowers the resonant frequency of the cabinet.

### **Wings**

The front of the Concept 20 has an aluminium plate which covers a butyl rubber layer that has the same aim as the double layer around the box. The tweeter is the same as that in the Q Acoustics 2020i but the mid/bass unit has a cone with a carbon fibre and paper mix that is specific to this model. So the drive units are proven but hardly exotic, it's the two layers of 10mm MDF and the Gelcore that make the difference. The terminals have a chrome like finish that makes a pleasant change from cheap gold plating and the holes in the terminal plate are as small as possible for maximum rigidity, that's the holes for the terminals, there are no visible ones. The reflex port is on the back which discourages close to wall siting but as you will see this speaker is too good to be shoved against the wall.

Q Acoustics has made dedicated stands for the Concept 20 as well, this is made from a solid lump of MDF with glass wings and provides a wide, three point base. The glass was chosen for minimal visual intrusion and does almost give the impression of a single column under the speaker. There are three shiny spikes and cable routing up the back but the most significant feature is a double layer top plate with two steel sheets that are separated by Gelcore again. The top layer has three holes in for three metal studs that stick onto the speaker base so that it locates precisely and avoids any wood to metal contact. This metal on metal approach strikes me as a potential source of ringing but presumably the Gelcore stops that issue and you end up with a rigid three point support. The stands cost £200 which is high relative to the speaker's £350 price point but not very high for a superbly finished and carefully thought out stand. The finish on speaker is likewise very impressive and beyond the standard usually encountered below £500.



### **Triangulation**

Q Acoustics' Steve Reichert recommends that the Concept 20 be set up as two points of an equilateral triangle with the listener at the third point. This 'giant headphones' approach puts them a lot closer than I

would normally place any speaker let alone one of this compact nature but I have to say that when it came to imaging the results were pretty spectacular. They deliver a walk in soundstage with reach out and grab it realism that is rare at any price. I tried John Lurie's Doggy (from The Legendary Marvin Pontiac's Greatest Hits) which put his gravely voice right in the room, seriously, it's like he was sitting just beyond the speakers. The result was not quite as convincing with Samuel Yirga (Guzo) which is a higher res recording (24/48) but this is partly because there is no central voice but a larger ensemble. The soundstage was nonetheless remarkably full scale and the bass extension more than adequate given the near two metres between speakers and rear wall, they were relatively close to the side walls however. The Be Good Tanya's jolly ditty Waiting Around to Die let the Concept 20 reveal its ability to dig out quiet, low level detail which is far in advance of the norm at the price. The cabinet construction clearly helps here because you are not hearing an echo of what has gone before overlaid on the signal. It means in this case that you could hear the extent to which the vocals have been treated by comparison with the instruments which seem relatively clean – a trick that a floorstander at nearly three times the price could not emulate.

The other benefit of reducing cabinet coloration is that time smear is also lowered and the speaker can deliver the transients, the attack and decay of each note, with greater clarity. A quality that is crucial if the music is to engage you, and this it does with everything from Antonio Forcione's Take Five (Meet Me in London) to Samuel Yirga's Tiwista Habasha (the Habasha Sessions). The latter contrasted with the Yirga track played earlier by delivering particularly vivid imaging, the reason being that this time around it was a solo piano rather than a whole band which made for an easier point of focus. What is equally pleasant is that the bass has adequate body to convince you that he is playing a grand piano. It may not have the same weight as you get with a bigger speaker but it's precisely defined and delivers the resonant character of that instrument. The next piece featured a full ensemble and proved that the Concept 20 can produce vivid, high energy results when provoked. The sax soars while a trumpet stabs over a drum workout, all of which is delivered in remarkably unflappable, clearcut fashion. By this point the amps had been upgraded beyond the price point that most would use with a £350 speaker and this clearly helped on the smoothness front but also showed what this design is ultimately capable of.

A Beethoven string quartet piece worked equally well (The Late String Quartets - Alban Berg Quartet (Live)), delivering excellent presence and richly textured instruments. This piece could also be played at a level that approached realistic without the speakers complaining, in fact the Concept 20s just disappeared to leave virtual musicians in the room. An experience that made a great case for live acoustic recordings when it comes to delivering a convincing end result.

### **The reveal**

Another session involved putting the Q Acoustics in a more conventional position in the room, about two foot from rear and side walls and on regular stands (Custom Design FS104 Signature) with a Blu-tack interface. This delivered plenty of scale and presence in the context of a more relaxed presentation, it's not as keenly paced as that delivered by the Q Acoustics stand but its more forgiving of less sophisticated ancillaries. It doesn't have as much life but will deliver plenty of level without distress and remains extremely coherent for a budget speaker. Going back to the Q Acoustics stand you get more power in the bass and better timing, it's also a bit more revealing which means you need smoother electronics, which usually means more expensive than is usually found at the speaker's price. That is the nub of the Concept 20, it performs beyond its price point to the extent that it deserves amps and sources that are rather higher priced too. But if you want a speaker that can literally disappear in a three dimensional soundstage that is worthy of a panel you will not find a better one than this at anywhere near the price.

**SPECIFICATIONS:**

Enclosure type: 2-way reflex

Bass Unit: 125mm

Treble Unit: 25mm

Frequency Response: 64Hz - 22kHz

Nominal Impedance: 6ohms

Minimum Impedance: 4ohms

Sensitivity: 88dB

Recommended Power: 25 - 75w

Crossover Frequency: 2.9kHz

Dimensions H/D/W mm: 260 x 280 x 170

Weight: 5.6kg

**PRICE:**

£350

stand £200

**MANUFACTURER DETAILS:**

Q Acoustics

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