



Musical Xplorer

Developing its small horizontal Iota speaker design into a bigger upright one, **Ed Selley** gets to grips with Neat's latest floorstander

Little did I know the first time I saw Neat Acoustics' original Iota (HFC 357), that six years later there would be a third speaker in the series and that it wouldn't have a single component in common with the original desktop design. The floorstanding Xplorer is the latest addition to the Iota family and shares the same design form as the Iota Alpha floorstander (HFC 414), but has been considerably scaled up. In doing so the Xplorer is something of a 'greatest hits' of the company's

The AMT tweeter imparts a real sense of space and three dimensionality

well-regarded design practises, but brings some new ideas to fruition too.

The Xplorer is classed as a 2.5-way floorstanding design, but the manner in which it mounts its drivers is fairly unusual. It uses one of Neat's 170mm P1/R3 mid/bass drivers, which are also fitted to its Momentum and Ultimatum ranges. This is partnered with an Air Motion Transformer (AMT) style tweeter instead of the planar-magnetic tweeter used in the Alpha. This represents the first time that such a device has been used in a Neat speaker and thanks to its large radiating area, should give the Xplorer an even higher frequency dispersion.

Like the Iota Alpha, these two drivers are placed in a sealed chamber at the top of the cabinet, which will naturally limit the bass extension the mid/bass driver can achieve. This is solved by using the lower section of the cabinet to house more drivers. These take the form of a pair of Neat's P1/R2 bass units (a similar construction to the mid/bass driver, but without the metal phase

plug). The two drivers are arranged in tandem firing downwards, acting as an isobaric pair to ensure plenty of low-end ability. The lower section of the cabinet has a rear-mounted circular bass port.

This means that within its relatively compact cabinet – while the Xplorer is larger than the Alpha, it still only stands 740mm tall – there is a lot going on inside it. The cabinet shape follows the same form as its smaller siblings, although the proportions have shifted slightly to better partner the drivers being used. In terms of placement, it doesn't present too many challenges getting it to work happily in my listening room. The downward-firing bass drivers mean the Xplorer works best on a solid floor and I find that placed at least 30cm away from a wall gives optimum performance in my listening room.

As the speakers are 'handed', you can experiment with the tweeters being positioned facing inwards or outwards. Neat confirms the Xplorer is voiced with the tweeters positioned on the outside of the units, but in a situation where they are relatively far apart and your listening position is nearfield, you could position the speakers so the tweeters are inwards to improve the stereo focus a little.

Sound quality

The fit and finish is extremely good with the cabinets feeling solid and very inert, but aesthetically the Xplorer is likely to divide opinion. Unlike the Alpha which is a very compact floorstander, the bulkier Xplorer will be rather more visible. I can't say that I'm terribly fond of the satin white finish of the review sample, but in its oak and walnut wood finish options, I rather like the almost retro feel it gives off and this will be further enhanced when a selection of coloured grille options are introduced shortly – we're told.

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Neat Acoustics Iota Xplorer
ORIGIN
UK
TYPE
2.5-way floorstanding loudspeaker
WEIGHT
18kg
DIMENSIONS (WxHxD)
300 x 740 x 220mm
FEATURES
• AMT tweeter
• 170mm mid/bass driver
• 2x 170mm bass drivers in an isobaric array
• Quoted sensitivity: 88dB/1W/1m (8ohm)
DISTRIBUTOR
Neat Acoustics
TELEPHONE
01833 631021
WEBSITE
neatacoustics.com

If you are on the fence about the appearance of the Xplorer, it is likely that a listening session will quickly bring you around to its charms. In behavioural terms, it has many attributes that I have experienced in other Neat Acoustics speakers over the years, although there are some intriguing differences too. Where business is very much as usual is the rhythmic assurance that the Xplorer brings to music. The shifting soulful *What Color Is Love?* by Terry Callier is not an inherently funky album, but the timing is integral to its presentation and the Xplorer is effortlessly able to convey the flow and beat of *You Goin' Miss Your Candyman* in a way that can seem deceptively easy at times. The more important the tempo is to the piece, the better it gets.

This is allied to superb bass response. The isobaric driver pairing gives the Xplorer the ability to hit harder than anything else of a similar size (see box out), but it is the control and speed it possesses that's really noteworthy. *Telephasic Workshop* by Boards Of Canada is delivered with a sensational combination of weight and agility that pulls you into the track and engages on an emotional level as much as a cerebral one.

Where the Xplorer really begins to build on these traditional Neat

The downward-firing bass drivers act as an isobaric pair



Q&A

Doug Graham

Export sales director, Neat Acoustics



ES: Why did you decide to produce a larger Iota loudspeaker?

DC: Despite the performance qualities of the Iota Alpha (and the original Iota before it) we felt that some customers might not consider such tiny speakers as appropriate partners for a 'serious' system. A larger version of the Alpha form, designed to deliver the spirit of its predecessors, with significantly better LF extension, greater power handling and loudness capability seemed a logical step. Also, the form factor, being so different to what's happening in speaker design elsewhere, is attractive to many who want something more discreet. Clearly, this shouldn't be achieved at the expense of performance, and we considered many options before deciding on the downward-firing isobaric-loaded low-bass section and the use of an Air Motion Transformer HF unit.

How does the Air Motion Transformer HF unit change the speaker's behaviour?

The AMT has an exceptionally fast response time and has also proved easily compatible with our own bass/midrange driver units. This gave us a lot of flexibility over crossover design and system tuning. It has the advantage of presenting a focused stereo image even when listening wide of the sweet spot. The final iteration has exceeded our expectations in delivering an engaging presentation with extended, well-controlled bass and excellent timing across the frequency spectrum. Those who have heard it also comment on how open the Xplorer sounds, which is due in large part to the qualities of the AMT.

What further ambitions do you have for the Iota speaker series?

We are experimenting all the time. The Xplorer completes the Iota range at this point in time, but that's not to say that we will not take the idea further. Sometimes a 'bigger boat' is not the answer so we'll have to keep everyone guessing on our next move.

IN SIGHT



- 1 AMT tweeter
- 2 170mm mid/bass driver
- 3 Rear-mounted bass port
- 4 Single set of binding posts
- 5 Downward-firing 170mm bass driver

HOW IT COMPARES

The Xplorer is an ideal counterpoint to Q Acoustics' Concept 500 floorstander (HFC 426). The Concept 500 takes relatively conventional drivers and uses an immensely sophisticated cabinet to achieve the results it does. The Xplorer by contrast takes a fairly conventional (if unusual looking) cabinet and then uses more sophisticated drivers. Both have excellent bass response mated to well integrated, detailed and refined treble and are easy to drive. The Xplorer can't match the Concept 500's sense of scale, but it is more compact and often more fun. It's a worthy challenger to our Ed's Choice and AVTech Media 2017 awards winner.

virtues is with the upper registers. The Air Motion Transformer is beautifully integrated with the conventional drivers and imparts a real sense of space and three dimensionality to music that is effortless but addictive.

Listening to the 24/96 download of Max Richter's rework of Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*, the Xplorer arranges the orchestra in a manner that is utterly self-explanatory. You are treated to the performance opening out in a full arc in front of you, extending well beyond the physical placement of the speakers themselves.

The treble effortlessly balances detail and energy with a refinement that is hard to provoke even with very poor recordings, making this a phenomenal all-rounder. In fact, the Xplorer's only real vice is that it needs a reasonable listening level to really come alive. At lower levels, it can sound a little constrained and some of the bass impact is lost. Once you have hit the level it likes, though, you can keep pushing it up into the realms of the firmly antisocial without any apparent sense of strain or harshness. Neither does it require a huge amount of power to achieve this – Neat's claim of 88dB sensitivity and a minimum impedance of 5ohm seems to be entirely believable in use.

Conclusion

The Xplorer does everything I expect from a Neat Acoustics design and brings some new abilities to play as well. The result is a loudspeaker that goes about handling pretty much any genre of music with a disarming combination of total rhythmic assurance and superb three dimensionality. While it is undeniably a curious-looking floorstander, spend some time in its company and the thinking behind it begins to make a lot of sense. The Xplorer is more than an evolution of the Iota loudspeaker series, it's a fresh leap in design thinking and it sounds nothing short of sensational ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY**
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Lively, spacious and involving sound; easy to drive; build
- VALUE FOR MONEY**
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Looks a little odd; needs reasonable volume levels
- BUILD QUALITY**
★★★★★ **WE SAY:** An unusual design, but one that delivers a superbly engaging musical performance
- EASE OF DRIVE**
★★★★★

OVERALL

