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Issue No. 388

September 2014

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32

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GROUP TEST

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Playdays

With a new designer and a rather unusual approach, the K2 is an important speaker for Epos **David Price** listens in

One day, people might look back at 2014 and say it was a significant year for loudspeakers. The new K2 series isn't a dramatic change of trajectory for Epos, but it's certainly a clear move in a certain direction. It ushers in a brave new world of active operation for the company; these speakers aren't actually active, but they have the capability to be so built in. In a few months' time, there will be an Active-K module that will transform the K2 into something completely different...

Look at the back and you'll see it's not the prettiest. The lower part of the rear baffle is designed to unbolt, and in its place you can fit the Active-K module. Built into this is

Everything's so subtle and fluid, and not every speaker at this price gets it

a Creek Audio-designed power amplifier, complete with good quality, multi-input DAC with asynchronous USB and Bluetooth receiver. Suddenly, the active K2s have the ability to work as wireless speakers, and be driven from a range of digital sources – or even an analogue input.

As well as offering plenty of convenience, functionality and the ability to bypass large amounts of hi-fi boxes, there are sonic benefits to the Active-K version of the K2, because it replaces the lossy passive crossover with an active version. This makes it much easier to tailor the drive units to one another, and indeed the cabinet. I have never heard an active version of a loudspeaker that sounds worse than the passive, and often the sound quality benefits are profound. So buying into the K2 now means you'll have a clear and powerful upgrade path for the future. Makes you wonder why active isn't a more popular thing, doesn't it?

But where does this leave us before the Active-K pack arrives? We still get

an interesting little floorstander to listen to. Designer Luke Creek says the aim of the passive version is to reduce crossover complexity, "taking Epos back to its purist roots". To wit, unlike the Elan and Epic series before it, all K series models now use first order tweeter crossovers. The speaker itself is a two-and-a-half-way design, where both mid-bass and bass woofers provide bass output; this makes for higher power handling and lower roll-off than a three-way of similar size, Luke says. It also gives correct phase integration through the crossover region.

The K2 is the smaller of the two new floorstanders, and is quite diminutive for its price. In fact it feels quite sturdy, using 15mm MDF cabinet walls with lots of internal bracing. The designer adds that, "by using removable rear panels, it has helped to reduce cabinet coloration by decoupling the area directly behind the drivers." The bass port is quite unusual, being a slotted design as opposed to a flared cylinder port tube that's often seen on rivals. It's said to make for a smoother and less turbulent flow of air.

The drive units comprise one 25mm silk dome tweeter with a "carefully designed" short-horn faceplate that's said to reduce refraction distortion, and provide an even, on-axis response, with high sensitivity. This hands over to a 156mm mid/bass driver using a polypropylene cone and a bullet-shaped dust cap. This drops down to another 156mm driver that handles bass frequencies only. Epos claims a wide frequency response of 41Hz-30kHz, 150W power handling and 90dB sensitivity. The latter figure means it's quite sensitive and should match lower-powered amplifiers better than most.

Sound quality

In essence, the new Epos has a very musical sound. It's not frantic, brightly etched and in your face; rather it's quite laid back, assured and confident sounding. But whereas some speakers that exhibit these sort

of traits end up sounding rather boring, the Epos certainly does not. It offers the enchanting combination of being relaxed in nature, but wonderfully engaging in action.

Even at fairly low levels, it locks into the lovely, lilting groove of Tom Tom Club's *Genius Of Love* and bounces along. There's a sense that the music is unexpectedly propulsive; the K2 really has an innate musicality to it that pop, rock, reggae and jazz fans will love. Still, this bounce doesn't come at the expense of brightness, because it appears a very even-handed performer – something that really comes into its own with classical programme material. B&W's latest 683 has a far more explicit upper midband that makes the track's rhythm guitar work sound a little scratchy, for example. The Epos by contrast tones it down slightly, but the instrument in no way loses impact; instead one seems able to follow it better throughout the song.

It's this counterpoint between rhythm guitar, bass drum, bass guitar, snare and hi-hat that makes *Genius Of Love* so sublime; everything's so subtle and fluid, and not every speaker at this price point gets it. There's also the dynamics to consider, and the K2 tracks these brilliantly; it's not an overly compressed song, so you do really get to hear some light and shade in the way the drums are played, for example, and the Epos carries this very well. Its prowess

DETAILS

PRODUCT

Epos K2

ORIGIN

UK/China

TYPE

2.5-way bass reflex floorstanding loudspeaker

WEIGHT

11kg

DIMENSIONS

(WxHxD)
185 x 875 x 250mm

FEATURES

- 1x 25mm soft dome tweeter
- 1x 156mm polypropylene bass/mid driver
- 1x 156mm polypropylene bass driver
- Claimed power handling 150W

DISTRIBUTOR

Epos Ltd

TELEPHONE

01442 260146

WEBSITE

eposLtd.com

The lower section of the baffle can be undone to fit the Active-K module



Q&A

Luke Creek

Chief designer, Epos



DP: Why offer an active option, and how much does it cost?

LC: For it to be offered as an upgrade path, it had to be planned in the cabinet design from the outset. Once you've heard a well-designed active speaker, you will never willingly want to go back to a conventional passive system again. The huge technical and sonic advantages gained by driving a loudspeaker drive-unit directly from an amplifier, with the filter (crossover) EQ in the low-level signal input path, cannot be matched in a conventional passive system. Epos fortunately has the advantage of its association with electronics brand Creek Audio, to provide active solutions. The Active-K will be competitively priced, but that has not been set, as it's still in development.

Are the benefits cost-effective, when compared with larger passive speakers?

If you want the ultimate performance from a system, running the speakers active is *de rigueur*. It provides sonic benefits unachievable by simply upgrading to larger passive speakers and high-end amplification. Larger speakers generally provide the potential for deeper bass and higher SPL, but can't naturally provide better performance than smaller speakers in the midband or high frequencies.

How will the upgrade work?

Creek Audio is currently developing the Active-K electronics to be 'plug and play', either by consumers or dealers. As is normally the case with mains-powered electronics, it would be prudent to suggest the dealer fit the module, even though it really only needs the ability to use a screwdriver and a willingness to read the manual!

Anything else to declare?

Well, you might like to know this new loudspeaker range is dedicated to my fiancée Kristina, who I met on a night out before CES opened two years ago in a random bar in Las Vegas at 5am! We are getting married this year and are now the proud parents to a beautiful daughter named Poppy. I wonder if you can guess the next series letter I will be using?

IN SIGHT



HOW IT COMPARES

Monitor Audio's Silver 6 is a slightly more edgy and fussy sounding speaker, revealing perhaps a little more in ultimate detail, but losing some of the natural flow of the music. Its bass is slightly tighter and tauter – like a BMW's suspension compared with a Jaguar – but the Epos is 'a lovely ride' in sonic terms and makes prolonged listening fun. It lends a real swing to things and you're never left wanting more. The Monitor Audio is better finished even than the Epos, although of course it doesn't have its rival's superb active upgrade option.

with attack transients – the ability to catch leading edges of notes as they happen – allied to a dislike of sitting on dynamic accenting – is what makes this such a lively speaker, despite not sounding in the least bright.

In the same way you can hear the B&W's Kevlar midrange cone and the Monitor Audio's metal hybrid affair, so you can hear the Epos' polypropylene one. This gives an ever so slightly warm and soft sound compared with these rivals, and it's also rather forgiving too. Put on a bright, bracing song like Madonna's *Holiday* and while many price rivals will ram it down your throat, the Epos steps back a little bit. Instead, the accent is more on the lower midband and bass, rather than further up. It gives the song a little bit more body, and a silkiness that other speakers at the price lack. This blends in with a couth sounding tweeter, that matches the smoothness of the mid/bass and bass drivers. Even the tinselly drum machine hi-hats sound sophisticated.

A slick slice of BlueNote jazz courtesy of Lee Morgan's *The Sidewinder* shows what a lovely smoothie the Epos K2 is, and how it likes to get into any groove. Its skill at

contrasting the respective levels of instruments proves excellent; instead of ramming everything at you, it steps back a pace or two, so you can get a better sense of scale. Unlike some speakers at this price, there's a decent feeling of space; it has a wide soundstage left-to-right and hangs instruments a little behind the plane of the speakers. The effect is immersive, letting you get lost in its wall of sound. Still, this little floorstander doesn't quite have the depth perspective of its Monitor Audio rival in my listening room, tending to be less good at letting things fall back into the distance.

If you're going to criticise the Epos anywhere, it's got to be the bass. By the standards of its price class it's very good – but in absolute terms it doesn't quite have the ability to switch on and off like a square wave. It is a little soft and diffuse when all is said and done. When played at high levels, it loses a bit of weight and articulation, and doesn't quite capture the physicality and punch low down. I'll be intrigued to see if the active version changes this, and I strongly suspect it will. All the same, the speaker's low end never sounds less than well balanced and fluid, and is excellent at the price.

Conclusion

I've sampled numerous new £1,000 floorstanders in the past year, and standards are high. At this price point, you're expecting a combination of serious power handling, wide frequency range with extended bass and treble, lots of detail, delicacy and good soundstaging. The K2 has all of these, and more – indeed it's one of the strongest contenders at its price point, and certainly the most amiable with a smooth, even, spacious sound that makes a direct line for the music. There's nothing not to like, and the active option should be a blast. Watch this space ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Smooth and easy, but highly enjoyable sound; active option

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: Nothing at the price

BUILD QUALITY



WE SAY: Excellent floorstander with an active life ahead of it

EASE OF DRIVE



OVERALL

