

iQ testing

KEF iQ50

floorstanding loudspeaker

by Alan Sircom

One of KEF's most popular ranges in recent years, the iQ series showed a true return to form for the Kentish KEF. The range utilised the latest version of its Uni-Q loudspeaker design to good effect and offered great value. The range was changed late last year and the new iQ50 is typical of the new breed.

It's smack bang in the middle of the new range (the range itself is smack bang in the middle of KEF's non-Reference series, with C-Series below and XQ models above), yet a pair will likely see you with change from £500. Below it are two stand-mounts; above it a bigger version of the same and a floorstander festooned with drive units. There's also a centre channel, and several subs that fit the bill too. In other words, KEF doesn't do half-measures.

It's an elegant design, too. An ever-tightening curve at the back and a second curve to the top plate, the lines of the iQ50 are svelte and slim, but absolutely no good for the plant-pot generation (a personal aside; I've never been able to fathom the logic of potentially spending thousands of pounds on a speaker, only to plonk £6.99 worth of Homebase's most rancid spider plant on the top). It benefits from a plinth to widen the footprint and lower the centre of gravity, but this plinth could do with a touch more mass behind it to better anchor the speaker to the floor. Spikes help, of course.

That cabinet is more advanced than it looks, and it looks advanced in its own right. The curved shape is not simply decorative, but there to knock out internal standing waves, and the laminated MDF build helps reduce cabinet colorations. Peel back a driver and the cabinet looks like the inside of one of KEF's Reference series, in microcosm. It sports a number of acoustically inert braces and a labyrinthine damping system. Having already lowered



▶ internal standing waves on the horizontal plane, this is claimed to do the same to the vertical.

The KEF signature piece of the two-and-a-half way, front ported design is the latest version of the Uni-Q speaker, which plants a 19mm tweeter in the acoustic centre of the 130mm mid/bass unit, with a secondary 130mm bass unit bringing up the rear. Both of these 130mm units share the same front port and KEF supplies some room tuning in the shape of foam bungs to stop up the ports should you end up finding them intrusive.

The big change to the Uni-Q concept is the new waveguide atop the aluminium dome tweeter. Called the 'tangerine' for obvious reasons (because it's segmented, not because of its colour or its ability to spit juice in your eye), the new waveguide is claimed to smooth out the high frequencies and improve dispersion. Fortunately, it's pretty resilient, useful because being the shiniest part of the speaker, it's a magnet to junior fingers and their ability to treat tweeters as pushbuttons.

The mid and bass drivers have undergone less profound changes, but KEF hasn't sat still here either. The new woofers feature KEF's new lightweight dual composite cones with tall profile rubber surrounds, designed specifically for longer cone throw. These sit in a rigid die-cast aluminium chassis with what are said to be ultra-low distortion motors,

with Faraday rings to help eliminate harmonic distortion.

Moving away from the high tech, the speaker's lines are uncluttered. The rear panel has nothing other than a pair of 4mm terminals in a panel, designed for bi-wiring. The terminals come with healthy-sized cable jumpers instead of the usual strip 'o gold, which should be a step in the right direction. In truth,

running these speakers single-wired, bi-wired or shot-gunned (bi-wired sets of speaker cables connected as single-wired cables with both ends terminated together) made not a jot of difference to the performance of the KEF iQ50 sonically.

Positioning the KEF designs is an odd experience, but in a wholly good way. Plan A is to plant them down with the minimum care and attention, and in this context they return a perfectly good sound, as long as the Uni-Q centres are at the same height and the speakers are level. Plan B is to take micrometer-level precision in positioning the speakers to get the most benefit out of them. Interestingly, Plan A and Plan B sound remarkably similar until you begin to get the KEFs just right. Then, suddenly, the sound takes on a life of its own. Field notes suggest the

speakers should be more forward and slightly wider apart than is commonly considered a good plan and with no toe-in whatsoever.

A good way to check is using a recording with a strong centre image; move the speakers apart until the centre image begins to break up, then move back a notch. In fairness, some of this might be cable-related; DNM cable seemed to make the most sense with the KEFs and traditionally DNM's distinctive performance makes you move speakers more into the room and farther apart. However, take the first part of this as significant; you don't need to be anally retentive in installing the speakers, unless you really, really want to be.

Running in seems not to be much of a problem here, either. The speakers were good from the get-go and remained pretty constant through their listening life. This might be a function of the Uni-Q (and similar designs), as there seems to be less need to run in Uni-Q and Tannoy Dual Concentrics, than usual at this price point.

KEF is also very amp-chummy, with a claimed 88dB efficiency and eight ohm impedance. Realistically, you could comfortably run the speaker off almost any amplifier currently made without complaint; the sound would get better as soon as you leave alone amps cheaper than the speakers, but there's no need for something powerful enough to jump-start a Boeing sitting at the speaker terminals.

Sonically, the changes to the Uni-Q design do appear to work as advertised; the speaker has a lithe, extended but not harsh treble and ▶



