



Floor your pleasure

Elac's Debut F5 floorstander is simply seismic, says **David Price**

The story so far – German loudspeaker manufacturer of many years' standing hires British speaker design wunderkind Andrew Jones. Formerly of KEF, and latterly of TAD, Jones is tasked to provide Elac with serious speakers in a part of the market where the German company has never traditionally been strong.

Designed in Cypress, California and built in China, the Debut range was launched at the end of 2015, to wide critical acclaim. Indeed I really liked the B6 standmount (*HFC 407*), and was impressed by how effectively Elac had entered the most competitive part of the speaker market. It proved

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exceptionally musical and highly skilled at hiding its tracks – there was no sense that you were listening to something that cost less than many people spend on speaker cable. It has a clean and crisp sound with a lively and expressive nature. All well and good then, but what about the bigger beasts in the range?

The F5 is the entry-level floorstander in the Debut lineup. It's a big box for the money, and is not unattractive to look at. It employs the same family of drive units, all bespoke designed and built for Elac, but runs as a true three-way loudspeaker. The two lower drivers work as woofers, wired in parallel, where the upper large driver is the mid/bass unit, and on top of that is the tweeter. Being a three-way confers real benefits over a two-way. The downside is that there's more to go wrong.

Just as with its sister standmounters, the F5 uses a bass-reflex port to provide deeper low frequencies than you would otherwise get, given the

cabinet volume. This tends to make the speaker easier to drive, but this relatively big box offers a rather poor (quoted) sensitivity of 85.5dB. This suggests Andrew Jones has worked to make the speaker an easy load, rather than give it the ability to go loud with just a few watts – you can't do both. Elac says it is 6dB down at 42Hz, which means lower bass than most small floorstanders. The 130mm woven Aramid fibre woofers crossover to the same-sized mid/bass at a low 100Hz, and this hands over to the treble unit at 3kHz, Elac says. The 25mm cone tweeter has a metal front plate for protection. The designer recommends it is used with amps rated between 20W and 120W RMS per channel – I say the more the merrier.

Considering its price, the F5 presents itself reasonably well in its unusual black brushed vinyl finish – but if we're being critical, rivals like

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Elac F5

ORIGIN
USA/China

TYPE
3-way floorstanding loudspeaker

WEIGHT
14.9kg

DIMENSIONS (WxHxD)
200 x 965 x 222mm

FEATURES

- 1x 25mm soft dome tweeter
- 1x 130mm mid/bass driver
- 2x 130mm bass drivers
- Quoted sensitivity: 85.5dB/1W/1m

DISTRIBUTOR
Hi-Fi Network

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The finish is rather utilitarian, but performance is anything but



the Q Acoustics 3050 (*HFC 398*) do better with their sumptuous piano lacquer black or white cabinets. Another minus is the lack of neat magnetic fixings for the grille. In my listening room, I find they work best a good distance from the boundary wall – at least 50cm, toed-in a few degrees.

Sound quality

The sizeable Debut F5 sounds like it looks – which is to say, impactful and large in scale. Animated and dynamic, you wouldn't say it is the most subtle of speakers, and nor is it the most sophisticated, but it stands out sonically from the crowd. Indeed, there are strong family similarities to the sound of the B6 that I reviewed last month. Small but with a big heart, it's a hoot to listen to, as is the F5.

As you would expect, it adds depth and breadth to this basic template, on account of the extra cubic inches its cabinet sports, and the larger volume of air that those extra woofers can shift. Unsurprisingly perhaps, its bass response is deeper and its low-frequency performance sounds more articulate and less compressed. Still, the designer has not gone for quantity over quality; it's not overpowering or boomy in any way, which might limit showroom appeal slightly but makes it more enduring over the long term. There's little sense of an upper bass peak, either – the speaker stays reasonably flat and doesn't unduly exaggerate things low down.

This helps it to integrate nicely with the midband, and here we have a similar feel to the B6. It sounds crisp and decently detailed yet dynamic and punchy too. The F5 doesn't attempt to be the most detailed and forensic sounding in its class, preferring to give a sound with wider appeal. Everything integrates well and there's little sense of listening to more than one speaker at a time. It's very good at throwing wide stereo images, pushing out a wide recorded acoustic inside which the various elements of the mix sit with a good deal of space between them. Indeed it gives a most expansive rendition of Harold Budd and The Cocteau Twins' *The Moon And The Melodies*, filling the room with ease. This is a rather dense recording, and tonally a little cold, yet *Sea, Swallow Me* proves suitably soaring and ethereal. As with the B6, the speaker is more concerned with the timing of the music, and the counterpoint between Budd's melancholic piano work and Robin Guthrie's distinctive processed guitar.

Interestingly, feed it a quite different type of recording, and it proves no

Q&A

Andrew Jones
VP Engineering, Elac



DP: What was your design brief?

AJ: It was the same for all the Debut series, to make affordable, high-performance speakers as a good entry point for new listeners getting interested in better sound quality.

Why do a three-way, at this difficult price point?

I initially considered a two or two-and-a-half way design, but rejected them because of the poor vertical lobing issues that are created even with the latter. You can only roll off the lower driver response at first order, so there is too much interaction at the higher frequencies. I found a clever way to implement a three-way at relatively low complexity and cost, that crosses over quite low (100Hz) and so went with that solution. The downsides of three-ways are normally cost, complexity and size of components but my solution got around this.

Why is it that the quoted sensitivity is so low?

Well, I always give up sensitivity in favour of an easy impedance to drive, and extended bass – you can't have both. As a physicist I am bound by its laws despite the claims of some designers! I want the listener to hear enough of the low bass to feel satisfied with the purchase and not to be left thinking that they need a subwoofer. Also good power is relatively cheap, so low sensitivity is not so much of an issue these days. Minimum impedance is never lower than 80 percent of the rated impedance and even then does not stay at that minimum value for too much of the frequency range.

How would you characterise the sound of the F5?

My goal was a sound that is reasonably full range, full bodied with good impact and clarity, but balanced in such a way that its shortcomings don't take you out of the musical experience and its strengths allow you to relax into the music and be absorbed by it.

IN SIGHT



- 1 25mm soft dome tweeter
- 2 Pair of 130mm bass drivers
- 3 Binding posts
- 4 130mm mid/bass driver



King of the £600 slot is Q Acoustics 3050 (HFC 398); in standard finish it's £500, but you can add £150 for exotic finishes like leather – which puts the Elac's surfacing to shame. The 3050 is a thoroughbred, and has a smooth, open and musical sound that makes you question if you can do better at the price. The F5 obviously thinks so – it's a little more fluid rhythmically than the Q, and has a wider bandwidth. It sounds a little more earthy and organic than the slick, hi-fi sound of the Q, possibly fractionally less refined in the treble, but with a more punchy and dynamic sound, and a fractionally brighter tonal balance. Ultimately both are excellent, so it's wise to try before you buy.

less uplifting. With the Waterboys' *Glastonbury Song*, it is particularly accomplished at capturing the leading edges of notes, sounding hugely powerful and propulsive, well able to communicate the majesty of this great song. Bass is tuneful and usefully deep, the midband is balanced and detailed and the treble gives a decent sense of the power and bite of the crashing ride and hi-hat cymbals. The F5 proves absolutely in its element with driving, energetic programme material such as this, once again throwing out a wide soundstage with decently placed instruments within.

Of course, no £599 loudspeaker is a universal panacea. It's a largish box at a low price and thus not immune to cabinet resonances. So it comes as no surprise to hear a degree of coloration in the upper bass. It's not a completely unpleasant sensation, lending extra weight and body to the proceedings, and bringing a gently euphonic nature to a speaker that's likely to be used with less-than-perfect ancillaries. It's really rather nice with some types of music, and certainly makes jazz a pleasing experience – John Coltrane and Johnny Hartmann's *You're Too Beautiful* comes over in a particularly sumptuous way that flatters to deceive. Hartmann's voice has a wonderfully confessional quality, and is carried with quite arresting

delicacy. This sultry jazz standard pulls me right into the zone.

It's only when you feed the F5 with some superbly recorded classical music that it begins to show signs of mortality. You begin to realise that this is no different to any other budget box in its lack of real transparency; its drivers and cabinet have a certain sound of their very own (not a criticism, the same goes for speakers of all rungs of the evolutionary ladder). My well played copy of Beethoven's *Pastoral Symphony* on Deutsche Grammophon shows some nasal coloration and a lack of low-level detail, as well as a slight reduction in stage depth and less sense of air than I'd ideally like. All the same, the one thing this speaker does is to make the music fun – giving a very jaunty rendition of the first movement. The larger number of drivers and greater cabinet volume compared with the B6 makes for substantially less compression, so it can go a good deal louder without sitting on transients. For all its failings, it never sounds less than confident and assured.

Conclusion

The obvious sales proposition of Elac's Debut F5 is that it's a lot of speaker for relatively little money – but it's more than just this. It is an extremely well crafted budget floorstander in its own right, and well able to let the listener enjoy a wide range of music in the spirit it was intended. Whereas some speakers have an obvious character that flatters some types of music and detracts from others, this is very well rounded for a product of its price, and never less than fun to listen to. That's a big achievement for a pair of sub-£600 speakers, so it comes highly recommended – this is one of the finest designs on sale in an already highly crowded budget floorstander marketplace ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY**
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Punchy, lyrical, wide-bandwidth sound
- VALUE FOR MONEY**
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Cabinet colouration; finish
- BUILD QUALITY**
★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Charming, exciting, musical budget box
- EASE OF DRIVE**
★★★★★

OVERALL

