

'With its Atmos module and different speaker sizes, ELAC's Debut series offers plenty of system flexibility'

ELAC's well-priced Debut series mixes traditional speakers with Atmos modules. **Ed Selley** listens in

Keeping up with Mr Jones

As a country, Germany exerts a variable influence on the UK. We're extremely keen on its cars and white goods, can generate a fair bit of enthusiasm for the beer and tend to be rather less enthusiastic about the food. And, historically, we've been less certain in our attitude towards German audio. The country boasts an impressive selection of manufacturers, many of whom have been represented in the UK for years, but British, American and even Danish brands are often more well-known.

ELAC, hailing from Kiel in the country's northernmost state, has been in existence for 90 years, and selling speakers in the UK for quite a while. And it's now unleashed its most affordable full-size range.

The Debut series comprises two floorstanders (the F5 and F6), three standmounts (B4, B5 and B6), a centre (the C5), no less than three subwoofers (the S12EQ, S10EQ and S10) and – most importantly for a surround speaker package in 2016 – an upward-firing Dolby Atmos-enabled surround speaker. As lineups go, it offers plenty of flexibility to the home cinema purveyor.

The set auditioned here contains the £600/pair F5 floorstanders and £250/pair B5 standmounts to handle front and rear channels with the C5 centre speaker (£200) and two of the A4 Atmos modules (£250/pair). This is then underpinned by the hefty S12EQ active subwoofer, which sells for around £650. All told, it's a 5.1.2 speaker array with a total asking price just shy of £2,000.

The speakers boast what could almost be described as a celebrity designer. The Debut range has been engineered and voiced by Andrew Jones, who is based out of the company's US operation. Jones originally made a name for himself with his work for KEF and Pioneer/TAD – at the latter company he was responsible for its massively expensive Reference One models. Jones has designed the Debut range with the stated aim of using technologies, materials and techniques that are normally reserved for more expensive loudspeakers. This means no off-the-shelf parts and a start-from-scratch thinking. 'Every speaker is built from a clean-sheet design,' he says.

The passive speakers in the system are based around a 1in soft dome silk tweeter, which is partnered with an Aramid midbass driver/woofer. Aramid is a heat-resistant

synthetic fibre, related to but subtly different from Kevlar. ELAC says it has selected it due to its very high strength-to-weight ratio, plus improved damping characteristics over more conventional paper or plastic designs. The crossover that mates them is entirely bespoke. This is all then placed in a thick and internally-braced MDF cabinet.

In the case of the F5, B5 and C5, this pairing takes the form of the tweeter being joined with a 5.25in version of the Aramid driver, boding well for a convincing handover between the speakers. There are three of the 5.25in units in the floorstander; two are designated as woofers, roaming frequencies between 42Hz and 100Hz. Two are employed in the C5 centre channel speaker on midbass duty.

Atmos addition

As ELAC has keen ambitions for the Debut speakers in stereo setups, it's taken the logical decision to launch a self-contained upfiring Atmos module, rather than build it into the top of the cabinets in the manner of Pioneer's S73 speakers. The compact A4 can't accommodate drivers of the same size as its brethren, so makes use of a 0.5in tweeter mounted coaxially in a 4in Aramid midbass.

The S12EQ subwoofer is also interesting. This is a sealed cabinet design that uses a 12in forward-firing doped paper driver with a partnering 12in passive radiator. Powering it is a 500W RMS BASH amplifier. The S12EQ promises a low-end response of 25Hz, and benefits from ELAC's proprietary app that I recently saw in the SUB 2070 [HCC #261]. This allows you to tweak volume and EQ settings on the fly and run an auto setup sequence independently of your AV receiver. This is periodically a little unstable – any vibration created by the subwoofer tends to stop it from finishing the job – but it gives the S12EQ an enticing

AV INFO

PRODUCT: Floorstanding speaker pack with Atmos upfiring

POSITION: At the affordable end of ELAC's lineup

PEERS: Pioneer S Series; Monitor Audio Bronze

1. Aramid midbass drivers/woofers are used across the range

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degree of flexibility in use, not to mention making in-movie bass adjustments relatively painless.

The Debuts are finished in what ELAC describes as a 'luxurious textured vinyl finish.' What the company defines as luxurious might be somewhat different to my take on the term. The effect is tidy but still fairly plain and there are prettier rivals available for similar money. This being said, the level of overall build quality seems fine and there are some neat little design touches across the speakers that help them feel solid and well thought-out. Speaker binding posts are robust, spikes enable the F5s to stay sturdy, and grilles (which you may want to remove to reveal the silver driver surrounds) attach to fixed posts.

With a reasonably benign 6 ohm impedance across the set, the Debuts should not prove to be too challenging for most Atmos/DTS:X equipped receivers, although rear-porting of all the standard speakers makes against-the-

'This system is more than on the money, with a keen balance between smooth delivery and attacking flair'

wall placement a no-no. The A4s (which are sealed) are designed to be placed atop either the floorstander or standmount models, and make for a snug aesthetic fit. There is, of course, nothing to stop you mounting them on other surfaces should you want.

ELAC awakens

Initially using the ELACs with regular 'flat' material, the Debuts demonstrate a number of extremely positive traits. With the opening First Order attack on the village in *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, the system proves a dab hand at managing the smallscale and wider effects without losing sight of either. BB8's frantic beeping remains clearly audible over the incoming blaster fire and the score is perfectly worked into the mix.

And spend a little time with the Debuts and it becomes clear they're very accurate but unforced speakers. The top-end is refined but extremely detailed, managing to balance excitement and a sense of energy with the necessary smoothness to allow for long-term listening at high levels. There's a good, even blend between high frequencies and midrange info. Plus, in keeping with a number of full-size speaker packages, each member of the Debut system has enough bass power to give soundtracks welcome heft without being totally dependent on the sub to fill out the performance. The net result is that even with the wick up, they sound slick, detailed and – above all – fun.

As you will expect with speakers sharing the same drivers, the Debuts are effortlessly capable at handing over seamlessly from one to another. The F5 floorstanders, in particular, have an impressively wide dispersion that means that the C5 centre's delivery (which is endowed with appreciable weight courtesy of its twin midbass drivers) is aided considerably by the sheer size of the soundstage that comes from left and right. The presentation of the smaller B5 surround models is not quite so spacious, but these affordable standmounts still do a better job at spreading out effects than many speakers of this ilk. For a five-speaker pack, the Debuts create an immersive, convincingly largescale sonic spread.



The soundscapes of JJ Abrams' blockbuster are therefore easy to lose yourself in.

More over, they are equally at home when you switch from a galaxy far, far away to the terrestrial drama of Steven Soderbergh's virus thriller *Contagion*. Here, the brooding soundtracks and hushed dialogue are dealt with effectively, the ELACs accomplished at setting the scene. Even at lower listening levels, everything remains clear and well presented. So while these speakers can turn on the excitement and deliver explosive home cinema fun when needed, both with a fulsome low-end and sweet high frequencies, they're also capable of real subtlety.

Moving on to Dolby Atmos playback, and making use of the A4 speakers for the first time, proved interesting. I mounted them atop the F5s (deciding to introduce a few pads of Blu-Tack for added security) and re-ran speaker setup on my Yamaha AVR.

Compared to the bling-tastic (and more pricey) KEF R50s, the ELAC A4s look unobtrusive, and the sound they produce might also warrant the same term. Fed the opening chapters of *Mad Max: Fury Road*, at first there was perhaps little that the ELAC system did in Atmos mode to have me shouting 'Ah, that's the Atmos version!'. Yet switch back to the core TrueHD mix and you're immediately aware that the presentation closes in and loses some of the effortless three-dimensionality that the A4s provide. They're effective at blending in with the rest of the array, and in my room succeeded in adding an additional layer of complexity and height. They're not a full-range proposition, though, with a claimed frequency response rolling off around 180Hz.

The Pioneer S Series array that I previously tested is a useful comparison but only to a point. It was, it has to be said, a little more attention-grabbing, with height-layer effects more deliberate and tangible, but it was a 5.1.4 configuration. Note that you could add two more A4s to this setup for just £250.

Bolstering the system is the S12EQ subwoofer, and it's a bit of a star. This is a sizeable (43cm cube) device that appears to have been designed entirely with potency in mind and to hell with aesthetics. It carries bass moments with scale and low-level menace, pulverising you into your cinema chair, although it's not the most fleet of foot. The smart device app ensures that adjusting its



SPECIFICATIONS

Debut F5
DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 1in soft dome tweeter; 1 x 5.25in Aramid midbass driver; 2 x 5.25in Aramid bass drivers **ENCLOSURE:** Triple-ported **FREQUENCY RESPONSE (CLAIMED):** 42Hz-20kHz **SENSITIVITY:** 85.5dB **POWER HANDLING:** 140W **DIMENSIONS:** 200(w) x 965(h) x 222(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 14.9kg

Debut B5
DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 1in soft dome tweeter; 1 x 5.25in Aramid midbass driver **ENCLOSURE:** Single-ported **FREQUENCY RESPONSE (CLAIMED):** 46Hz-20kHz **SENSITIVITY:** 85dB **POWER HANDLING:** 120W **DIMENSIONS:** 200(w) x 324(h) x 222(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 5.2kg

Debut C5
DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 1in soft dome tweeter; 2 x 5.25in Aramid midbass drivers **ENCLOSURE:** Twin-ported **FREQUENCY RESPONSE (CLAIMED):** 48Hz-20kHz **SENSITIVITY:** 87dB **POWER HANDLING:** 120W **DIMENSIONS:** 476(w) x 200(h) x 222(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 8.2kg

Debut A4
DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 0.5in soft dome tweeter; 1 x 4in Aramid midbass driver **ENCLOSURE:** Sealed **FREQUENCY RESPONSE (CLAIMED):** 180Hz-20kHz **SENSITIVITY:** 85dB **POWER HANDLING:** 50W **DIMENSIONS:** 200(w) x 123(h) x 222(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 6.5kg

Debut S12EQ (subwoofer)
DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 12in active and 1 x 12in passive doped paper woofers **ENCLOSURE:** Sealed **FREQUENCY RESPONSE (CLAIMED):** 25Hz-150Hz **ON BOARD POWER:** 500W RMS/1,000W peak **REMOTE CONTROL:** No – app control instead with auto EQ **DIMENSIONS:** 432(w) x 432(h) x 432(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 24.9kg **CONNECTIONS:** LFE in

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DEADPOOL ULTRA HD BLU-RAY: Test the ELAC system's Dolby Atmos mettle with Fox's first Atmos-encoded disc release. This risqué comic book blockbuster sports an ear-pleasing, inventive soundmix, not to mention 4K visuals. See p98 for more.

performance is simple – as is installation, with connectivity running to nothing more exotic than a single LFE input.

Using the ELAC F5s in stereo, the good vibes remain. An impressive ability to generate a big, easy-to-follow soundstage means you can throw your music collection at the speakers and they handle it with assurance. There's enough bass weight to let you give the sub a rest, and while the speakers reward with good-quality sources, their voicing is sufficiently forgiving so that low-bitrate Spotify streams sound more than reasonable.

Balancing act

This array, then, is a blast. In performance terms it's more than on the money, with a keen balance between refined, smooth delivery and attacking flair. The Atmos upfiring make for a seamless add-on. Certainly, the enclosures lack a little visual panache and the subwoofer is a bit of a whopper, but this at this rate the Germans might be adding another category we make a beeline for ■

HCC VERDICT ★★★★★

ELAC Debut 5.1.2
 → £1,950 → www.hifi-network.com

WE SAY: A seriously accomplished speaker package that offers superb performance in stereo and multichannel, and a compact and effective Atmos add-on

2. The A4 upfiring speakers share the same dimensions as both the F5 and B5 speakers

3. The centre speaker (like the floorstanders and surround models) is rear-ported

4. All speakers are dressed in a black vinyl finish