

ALISTAIR MCGHEE argues that the Neumann KH120s offer up such an unremarkable sound, that it is in fact, quite remarkable.

often think to compare the loudspeaker designer's drivers to an alcoholic's drink: one is too many and a million not enough. When faced with this conundrum it seems most designers settle prudently for two drivers, and it seems to me there is much wisdom in that. I hear the arguments made for a minimum of three units to cover the audio spectrum with sufficient output power, and yet the physical size of a three-drive unit speaker combined with the demands on a more complex cross-over probably involve costs a whole magnitude greater. Which is why two is so often the magic number for small speaker drive units.

time now, and this was too good an opportunity to miss. I did a simple frequency response and the top end looks pretty smooth and the curve revealed no nasty surprises. One of the main duties of monitors is to allow you access to different elements of the programme material in isolation from the rest. That could be the ability to separate out instruments in a mix or clearly distinguish the reverb tails or provide imaging detail that allows you to hear exactly the effect of your pans or delays. Good monitors keep you from over doing the EQ and alert you to compression artefacts that might otherwise escape your notice.

In my experience, once you know something is in a mix then you'll probably hear it on most half decent speakers, but the trick is to hear it in the first place, that's where quality monitors come in. And the KH 120s are quality monitors. The top end offers all the detail with a precision that makes it easy to hear what is going on in your mix. The mid-range is free from honk and congestion, and within the confines of a small two-way monitor bass is clean and well articulated.



Revered By A Name

If there's nothing surprising about the configuration of the Neumann KH 120, and two drivers in a small vented active box is not revolutionary, then maybe the very name is something to give us pause. My delivery came sealed with packing

NEUMANN KH 120

Active Studio Monitor

tape that proudly proclaims Neumann as *the* microphone company, and who can argue with that? No one ever got fired for suggesting, 'What about a U87?', and only the other day I came over all nostalgic for an SM69 – but that's another story.

In fact Neumann and speaker manufacturer Klein and Hummel have been part of the same (Sennheiser) group for a few years now, and in a world where brand recognition is a powerful consideration I guess it made sense to make the most of the legendary Neumann moniker. K&H is dead, long live Neumann.

Firing up the 120s the second thing you notice is how unremarkable the sound is. Remarkably unremarkable. There's a great temptation in speaker design to add a little 'sparkle' at the top end. However, what might make your speaker stand out in a short demo often leads to a tiring top end that makes lengthy listening a pain. No such worries with the 120s. The bottom end, too, sounds well under control, and surprisingly extensive for a five and a quarter-inch drive unit in a sub-ten litre cabinet. Of course being active helps, I'm sure, but even so the -3dB point at 52Hz is quite an achievement. Like most of the competition the Neumann is a reflex ported design, but unlike many competing designs the bottom stays tuneful and avoids the waffle that afflicts many a small system trying to sound big.

Listening to familiar material was a joy. It's nice to be surprised when listening to a programme that you've heard a hundred times before. All of a sudden an extra guitar part materialises out of the musical mist, or the reverb round a kit comes sharply into focus.

At the same time, a monitor is a tool you'll be using hour after hour and day after day. To do that job successfully requires a level of neutrality in presentation that is not easily achievable. Whatever a monitor does it has to do without being fatiguing – if you've been mixing for 12 hours the last thing you want is a mid-range peak or top end zip that wears you down. In the KH120s Neumann has delivered neutrality that makes not just a great speaker, but a great monitor.

What's not to like? Well, you have to plug them into the mains and they work best with a proper monitor controller. Like virtually all active speakers the controls are on the back, and even if you could get at them you'd have to adjust each one individually, and where's the fun in that? That's about it really.

There are less expensive monitors, and certainly bigger ones, for your money. But then size isn't everything and as I said, no one ever got sacked for buying a Neumann. **AM**



THE REVIEWER

ALISTAIR MCGHEE began audio life in Hi-Fi before joining the BBC as an audio engineer. After ten years in radio and TV, he moved to production. When BBC Choice started, he pioneered personal digital production in television. Alistair is now Assistant Editor, BBC Radio Wales, but is allowed out occasionally.

The Sparkle's In The Detail

The finish on the aluminium cabinet is, as you would expect from a Neumann product, fantastic. A switched mode power supply keeps the weight down. Round the back you have balanced input on XLR, two gain controls – one input and one output – and some switches to control room EQ and the first thing you notice when you fire up a pair of these. A glorious illuminated Neumann logo that you can switch to dim or off – but why would you do that? The world needs to know you own classy monitors, it's half the point after all.

I don't go much by measurement unless you have the right room and really know what you're doing, but I have been playing with the ARTA software for some

INFORMATION

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