

# Neat Ministra

NEAT ACOUSTICS CONTINUES TO EXPAND ITS RANGE OF SPEAKERS, 'UPCYCLING' SOME OF THE LESSONS LEARNT IN THE DESIGN OF THE COMPACT IOTA RANGE. ED SELLEY CONSIDERS ITS LATEST INTRIGUING CONCOCTION

**The business of speaker design is one that tends to have a degree of ingrained traditionalism to it: come up with a formula that works, and successive models tend to be the result of a process of trying to tweak the recipe to higher performance or adjusting the ingredients to work at different price points. As some companies become synonymous with certain materials and design philosophies, the idea of radically changing them becomes ever riskier.**

That's not an idea holding much sway at Neat Acoustics: over the last few years, it has produced a family of speakers radically departing from their established design thinking. Beginning with the diminutive IOTA, the company has experimented with different drivers, layouts and sizes, frequently to spectacular effect. Key to this was the use of different tweeters, of both ribbon and Air Motion Transformer type.

Now Neat has taken the thinking and lessons learnt and brought them to speakers that look more like the Neat products of old. The Ekstra floorstander combined a ribbon tweeter with a midrange and isobaric bass driver arrangement used in both the Momentum and Ultimatum ranges. and now there is the Ministra – a standmount derivative of the Ekstra.

Neat founder Bob Surgeoner says the Ministra wasn't an inevitable spin-off from the Ekstra, and neither is it a simple case of the cabinet being lopped off just beneath the mid/bass driver to create a standmounter. Instead, the Ministra exchanges the single 134mm mid/bass driver of the Ekstra for a pair of them, in the company's much-used isobaric arrangement, making this the most affordable speaker in the current Neat range so equipped.

Neat's penchant for isobarics is entirely practical, allowing the extension of a driver in a larger enclosure while keeping things compact. The Ministra is just 30cm tall, yet claims a bass response extending down to 35Hz, +/-6dB. This response is tuned for best performance near boundaries, the rear port seemingly unaffected by all but the closest proximity to walls.

This isobaric duo is partnered with the same 50mm ribbon type tweeter used in the Ekstra, crossing over to the mid bass drivers at 4kHz. Both it and the 'outer' mid/bass driver are affixed to a shaped baffle attached to the main enclosure via a polyethylene membrane, a process Neat says drastically reduces cabinet colouration while also

giving the speaker a 'cleaner' look. Like most recent Neat designs, the Ministra supports single wiring only, via small but sturdy three-way posts.

For all the unusual design decisions in the Ministra, the only place where it differs a little from what you might reasonably expect from a speaker of this size and price is that the extra driver does have some effect on the sensitivity. None of the figures involved are particularly extreme – quoted impedance is four ohms and the sensitivity 86dBW/m – but, during its time on test, the Ministra revealed itself to be very much a speaker that wishes to be powered firmly rather than simply driven. The minimum suggested amplifier output may be just 25W, but the Ministra did its best work on the end of amps with rather more grunt.

Conventionally handsome, in some ways this is a better looking speaker than the Ekstra, its relatively narrow baffle looking better proportioned on a stand than in the long slender cabinet of its floorstanding cousin. The 'pinched-in' section adds a little visual interest without coming across as overly fussy, and grilles are supplied, in particular to protect the ribbon from the usual domestic threats.

The black finish isn't the most alluring, but the walnut and white options are all very smart, helped by the way the black front baffle contrasts nicely with them. The speakers also feel carefully assembled: there are more overtly solidly-engineered speakers available for the same price, but the Ministra feels worth the money.

Mind you, give these speakers Ministra 20 minutes with remotely commensurate equipment and any thoughts of 'worth' will be completely forgotten. Neat Acoustics has long adopted a policy that could be – a little simplistically – summarised as 'if it sounds right, it is right', and the Ministra is a particularly adept example of this. Behind this slightly glib statement is some very clever and careful thinking, combined to fine effect. For



example, the claim of being able to work well when close to walls is entirely accurate. Even with the rear of the cabinet just 10cm from a rear wall, there's little evidence of any interaction beyond a fairly benign augmentation of the lower registers.

What's more, the handover between the two – very different – drivers is utterly seamless, the speaker being so tonally even that one soon forgets one is listening to anything other than a single source of sound. This means that *History Repeats*, the punchy opening track of Brittany Howard's *Jaime*, is effortlessly cohesive: the deep percussion and Howard's vocals, which move over and under the crossover threshold throughout, hang together in a deeply impressive manner. This is as much a reflection of the ease with which the mid/bass driver works all the way up to the 4kHz crossover frequency with a tonal consistency with the ribbon working above the crossover.

#### Good old-fashioned slam

The final part of the Ministra's ingredients is the bass response: even allowing for Neat's experience with isobaric designs, this little speaker is still able to raise an eyebrow. It's not so much that there is more bass, although the Neat proved to be almost completely flat to 40Hz in the test room, but rather the fantastic combination of speed and good, old fashioned slam. Neither is this only apparent with percussive bass: the deep guitar slaps of Rodrigo y Gabriella's *Electric Soul* have body and presence that feel wholly beyond a compact standmount.

The Ministra then proceeds to do something it makes seem easy but is, in reality, much more complex. Simply, nothing it plays is just reproduction: instead it's imbued with a spark of genuine realism that creates performance. With Joan Armatrading's *All the way from America*, the Ministra digs into the mix to find the emotional content within the slightly glossy production; change tack completely to *Lonely Soul*, the collaboration between UNKLE and Richard Ashcroft, and it manages to take this very different take on mastering and repeat the trick.

This comes down to the consistent stereo imaging. Some initial testing of the Ministra used the AVID Integra amp reviewed in the last issue of HIFICRITIC, and the little speakers did a fine job with the Avid's ability to create a three-dimensional space from almost any recording. There is a palpable feeling of the venue or at least the creative intent of artists that is wholly and consistently correct.

However, also notable is that even when you remove the helping hand of an excellent £7,000 integrated amp (and a £7,500 digital front end to go with it), the Neat still works to create a tangible and believable space in which music happens.

Substituting the rather more comparatively priced pairing of a Naim Audio Nait XS3 and Auralic Altair G1 reveals that the Ministra is admirably consistent in how it goes about making music. This can potentially be taken as a negative: the Neat probably isn't the best choice should you want to know the effect of every tiny alteration of equipment and ancillary further up the chain. However, it also points to a speaker that, so long as its fairly amenable demands are met, will reveal its considerable merits.

With the Auralic/Naim combination, the greatest merit of the Neat is that it makes music with a palpable joy: the live performance of *He the Colossus* on Wild Beasts' final live album positively fizzles with the energy and chemistry of a band parting ways amicably and wanting to go out with a bang. The slickness that defined the live act is much in evidence and the Ministra opens out this slightly congested recording and makes sense of the band as a whole. The ribbon tweeter really comes into its own here, balancing an energetic and detailed treble with enough refinement to ensure that the fairly hot balance doesn't tip over into aggression.

These attributes make it easy to listen to for extended listening sessions: nothing in a music library, no matter how rough or ready, should be off limits. The Ministra is perfectly capable of grabbing your attention (to the detriment of other tasks), then holding it for hours.

The final plus is that the Ministra proved to be a sublime partner with vinyl as well as digital. Listening via a Rega Planar 10, both into the AVID Integra and a Cyrus Phono Signature phono stage into my resident Chord Electronics CPM3350, the Neat successfully conveyed the qualities of both turntable and the records being played while continuing to offer that wonderful punch, immediacy and top-end space. In a manner not dissimilar to its performance with digital sources, the Neat is at once accurate and able to exert its own benign influence on the presentation – that may sound inherently contradictory, but it works almost perfectly.

Even given Neat's consistently strong track record over the last few years, I was unprepared for quite how good a speaker the Ministra proved to be. If you must have the absolute tonal accuracy of a studio reference, it's probably a little too characterful to qualify, but, by any other yardstick, it succeeds absolutely. There are rivals that can better it in specific areas but, viewed across the full range of its abilities, this is the best speaker I have tested under £2,000. The Ministra shows that Neat's evolutionary processes have yet to reach their conclusion but, when the results are this compelling, few will want them to stop just yet.

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#### Specifications

##### Neat Ministra

Type	Two-way isobaric/regulated reflex standmount speaker
Price	£1795/pr
Drive units	50mm true-ribbon tweeter, 2 x 13.4cm treated paper cone mid/bass drivers
Sensitivity (2.83v/1m)	86dB
Impedance	4ohm
Recommended amplifier power:	25-100W
Dimensions (HxWxD)	30x17x29cm
Finishes available	Black oak, walnut, satin white

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