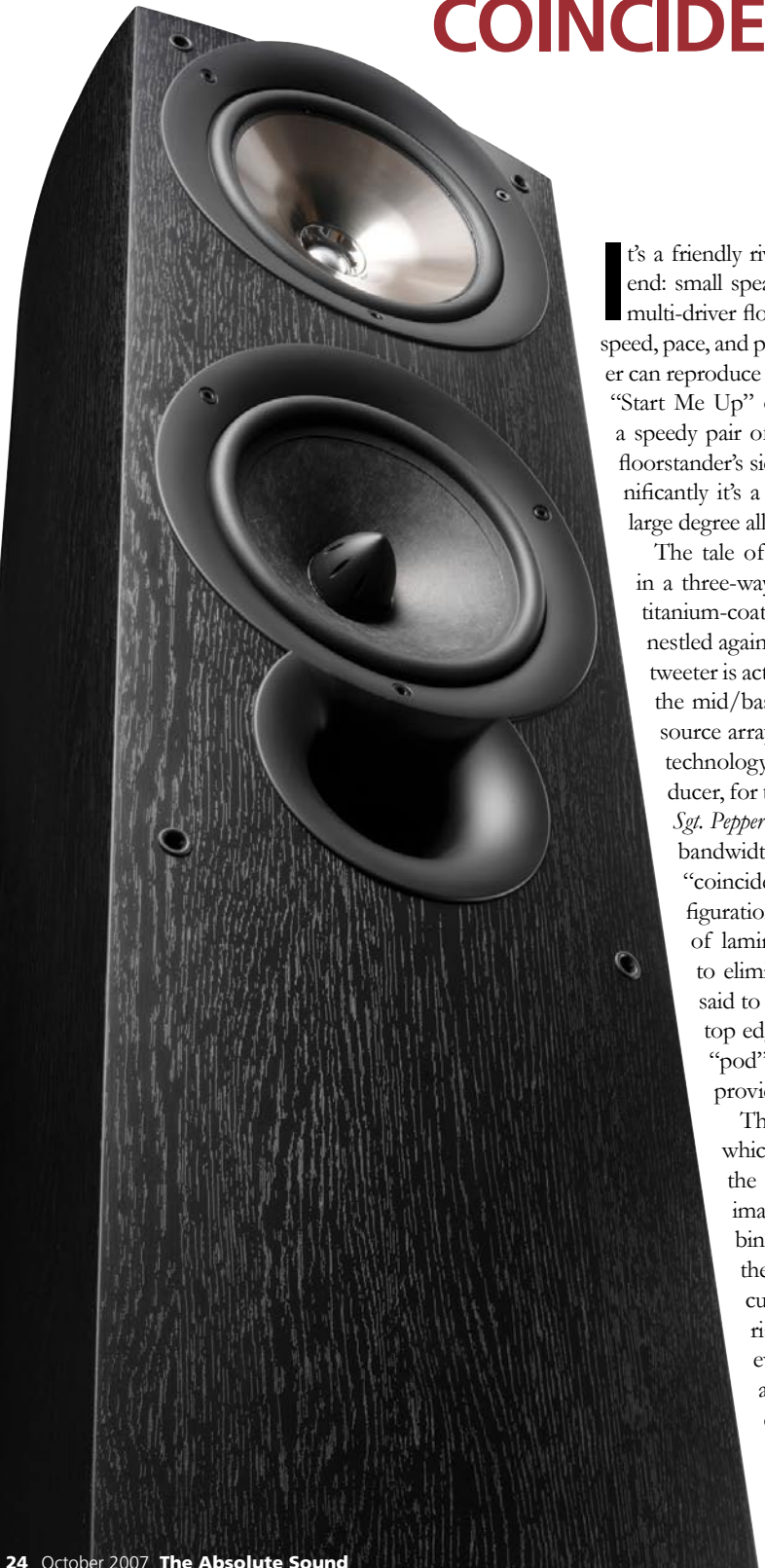


Start Me Up

COINCIDENTALLY YOURS

KEF iQ7

Neil Gader



It's a friendly rivalry that goes back to the very beginnings of the high end: small speaker versus big speaker, stand-mounted two-way versus multi-driver floorstander. The argument goes that nothing captures the speed, pace, and precision of music like a compact, while only a floorstander can reproduce music's scale, extension, and dynamic slam. In last issue's "Start Me Up" column this conundrum played out true to form with a speedy pair of minis from Silverline Audio and Mission. Taking the floorstander's side of the argument this month is the KEF iQ7. But significantly it's a speaker that features a not-so-secret weapon that to a large degree allows it to play both sides of the fence.

The tale of the tape shows the KEF iQ7 is a bass-reflex design in a three-way configuration. There's an aluminum dome tweeter, a titanium-coated 6.5" cone mid/bass transducer, and a 6.5" woofer nestled against the port. Sounds prosaic enough, but not so fast. The tweeter is actually positioned concentrically, at the bulls-eye center of the mid/bass unit. This is KEF's newest-generation Uni-Q point-source array (the aforementioned not-so-secret weapon and a core technology for this British firm). Also known as a "coaxial" transducer, for those old enough to recall what they were smoking when *Sgt. Pepper* was released, Uni-Q was designed to emulate the wide-bandwidth, single-driver, point-source ideal. (KEF uses the term "coincident" driver rather than coaxial to describe the Uni-Q configuration.) The handsome lute-shaped enclosure is constructed of laminated MDF; the gently curved side panels are designed to eliminate internal standing waves. In a clever bit of design said to minimize diffraction effects, KEF actually positions the top edges of the Uni-Q's frame beyond the cabinet itself in a "pod" of die-cast aluminum. Dual pairs of binding posts are provided for bi-wiring or bi-amping.

The iQ7 glories in the *big* picture. Unlike many compacts which can suggest the sonic equivalent of peering through the wrong end of a telescope, the iQ7 scales and weighs images to a realistic size. Much of the credit goes to its combination of warm bass response, low-40Hz extension, and the sheer volume of air it sets in motion. Time and again I'd cue up a track, like Dire Straits' "Telegraph Road," and the rising tide of studio ambience would pressurize my room even before the first note was struck. Dynamic shadings are vivid even with large increases in volume, as when the cascading tom-tom fills during "Private Investigations" [*Love Over Gold*, Warner] try their best to pancake the woofer. The iQ7 makes it all the more difficult to listen to even a great compact with quite the same affection.

But it's the Uni-Q concentric that makes the iQ7 the double-threat that it is. As with the slickest compact speaker, images are superbly focused and stable; transients are whip-quick; and timbres are expressed cleanly and naturally. A good example was the combination of vocal with piano joined by tenor sax and tuba in Norah Jones' "My Dear Country" [*Not Too Late*, Blue Note]. Each instrument could be visualized in its own space—the collective set of images unwavering from the opening bar to the end. The only hitch with the Uni-Q was a hint of etch in the lower treble that can make piano treble transients, like those during the Zneph "re-performance" of Glenn Gould's *Goldberg Variations* [Sony], sound thinly metallic. I should add that the overall voice of the Uni-Q is a forward one, more forward than either the costly state-of-the-art Beryllium coincident models from TAD or its Pioneer EX variants. Listen to either "Late in The Evening" or "American Tune" from *The Essential Paul Simon* [Columbia], and you'll hear Paul Simon's voice shift downstage (closer to the audience) from its more typical pocket a couple feet upstage. For pop music this

works well enough, but classical aficionados may miss some of the layering of orchestral sections they're accustomed to hearing. Also, the iQ7 could use a little more midrange energy to enrich male vocals and add "chest."

The other issue is that the Uni-Q is so responsive that there were occasions when I thought the lower octaves couldn't quite match it for resolving power and speed. Midbass articulation gets somewhat clouded on a succession of drum strikes or heavy trombone passages. To be fair, however, I'm describing aspects of performance that wouldn't be on the table with most compact speakers of similar price. And I'm not embarrassed to admit that there are occasions when it's nice to be able to crank up the Mahler or Metallica without fear of smoking a driver.

Small speaker versus big speaker—the argument continues. But the KEF iQ7 strikes a balance that may just please both camps. By any sonic criteria, it's a superb performer and should be especially valued by audiophiles with wide-ranging musical tastes. If you're looking for the most well-rounded entry-level speaker around, the iQ7 might be the place to start. **TAS**

Specs & Pricing

Drivers: .75" tweeter in 6.5" UniQ mid/bass, 6.5" woofer

Frequency Response: 40Hz–40kHz

Impedance: 8 ohms

Sensitivity: 90dB

Dimensions: 34" x 8.7" x 12.9"

Weight: 32 lbs.

Price: \$899/pr.

KEF AMERICA

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ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Sota Cosmos Series III turntable; SME V pick-up arm; Shure V15VxMR cartridge; MBL 1531, Simaudio Moon Supernova, Sony DVP-9000ES; Plinius 9200, MBL 7008; Tara Labs Omega, Nordost Baldur, Kimber Kable BiFocal XL; Wireworld Silver Electra & Kimber Palladian power cords; Richard Gray line conditioners; Sound Fusion Turntable stand