

Middle Weight Contender...

The KEF Reference 205/2 loudspeaker

by Roy Gregory



KEF's long-running Reference series has seen many incarnations over the 30 or so years of its existence, some sonically and commercially more successful than others. But experience with both the flagship 207/2 and the smallest model in the range, the three-way standmounted 203/2 suggest that the current incarnation is a (if not the) highpoint in that illustrious history. So impressive and musically fundamental were the improvements in the 207/2 over the original version, that the sub-woofer, which had made such a difference to that earlier iteration, was rendered totally unnecessary. Improvements across the board to all the drive-units, but especially the latest evolution of the Uni-Q mid/treble driver, brought significant benefits in terms of weight, scale, coherence and resolution. They also obviated the need for the hyper-tweeter employed in the previous model, making for greater visual coherence too. Add in a range of flawless lacquered finishes and really well sorted accessories, combined with a more transparent but also more forgiving presentation, and the significant hike in price between the original and /2 versions of the speaker was more than justified.

But there's no escaping the fact that at £12000, the 207/2 is beyond many people's pocket, while its imposing bulk and considerable depth mean that fewer still be able to comfortably accommodate it. Look no further than the success of B&W's 802 and 802D models to appreciate just how critical speaker footprint is to market penetration. Which is what makes KEF's Reference 205/2 such an intriguing prospect. In many respects, it bears exactly the same relationship to the 207/2 that the 802s bear to their larger 800 and 801 cousins. The smaller cabinet contains the same mid and treble technology, mechanical construction, finish options and quality of crossover components as the flagship speaker, but coupled to a pair of smaller diameter bass units without quite the same thunderous reach. ▶

► You can read a detailed description of the technology in the 207/2 review, back in Issue 53, but here are the highlights. The Uni-Q cone has been re-shaped, a shallower profile and flat surround improving dispersion, while developments in the nature and disposition of the cone material itself have also improved its mechanical behavior. Simultaneously, a new dome profile, arched former and more powerful magnet assembly have allowed venting of the co-axial tweeter as well as a considerable increase in high-frequency extension. The result is a more natural balance, lower colouration and increased dynamic range across the output from 350Hz upwards to a claimed -3dB point of 60kHz.

The Uni-Q driver peeps from the top of a slim, boat backed cabinet whose curved walls and extensive bracing create an extremely rigid cabinet without resorting to sheer mass, with all its associated problems. The two, 8" bass drivers are each housed in their own, separate, front ported enclosure, the whole system being tri-wirable. In addition, sockets in the top of the terminal panel allow the listen to trim the treble output level in four discrete steps between $+0.75$ and -1.5dB , and align the bass contour for free-space or near-wall siting. Together these adjustments provide a useful and usable degree of room compensation. Spikes are large M8 types, with even larger locking discs that also serve as visual "feet", but the narrow footprint of the 205/2 does mean that overall stability is compromised somewhat, so bear that in mind if boisterous children or large dogs play a central role in your life.

One of the things that separates the different ranges of KEF Reference speakers, is just how critically revealing

they are. A speaker like the 105/3 was way to critical for its own good, telling you altogether too much about the system feeding it, with the result that it was a seriously underrated performer.



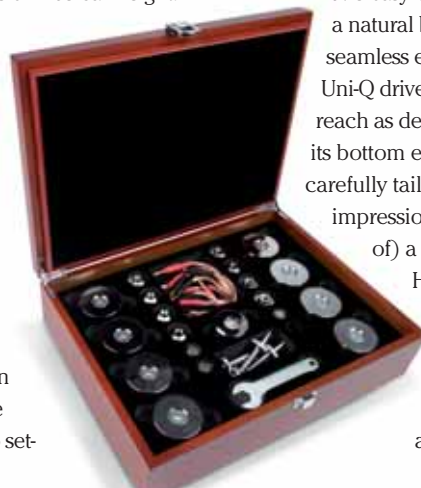
KEF learnt that lesson well, and over the years they've managed to dial back the destructive tendencies whilst retaining still astonishing levels of musical insight. It's a path that's achieved an apex in the 207/2 and a quality that's only slightly diminished in this model. Which means that whilst the 205/2 will rarely sound unpleasant, no matter the system indignities heaped on its back, the requisite care and attention to set-

up and matching will reap rich rewards.

They don't require anything fancy, just good practice done properly, when it comes to placement, leveling and wiring them up. One thing that really needs to go is the tri-wire links provided, which might be better than the average bent metal plate, but are readily improved upon, with obvious sonic benefits. Indeed, rather than tri-wiring the speaker, I'd use the best cable I could afford to single-wire them, and then have two sets of straps made from the same wire. Chord Co. cables do seem to offer a particularly happy match to the KEFs, and they already offer links of this type.

Having said all that, the 205's role as "almost 207s but easier to live with" is perhaps the biggest obstacle to realizing their potential performance in the real world. Paradoxically, the very cost and expense of the 207 makes people give it the space and respect it demands. The more benign and manageable exterior of the 205 might encourage the taking of liberties – which would be a huge mistake, for if anything, the performance of the smaller speaker is even more placement critical than the bigger model. Good practice done properly means exactly what it says – with heavy emphasis on the good and the properly. Why? Just like the 207s, the glory of the 205 is in the continuity and unexaggerated coherence it brings to reproducing music. But whereas the 207's easy extension provides a natural balance to the seamless extension of the Uni-Q driver, the 205 doesn't reach as deep and as a result, its bottom end has been carefully tailored to deliver (the impression if not the reality of) a little extra weight.

Half an inch too far back and the bass goes soft, rounded and disjointed. Half an inch too far ►

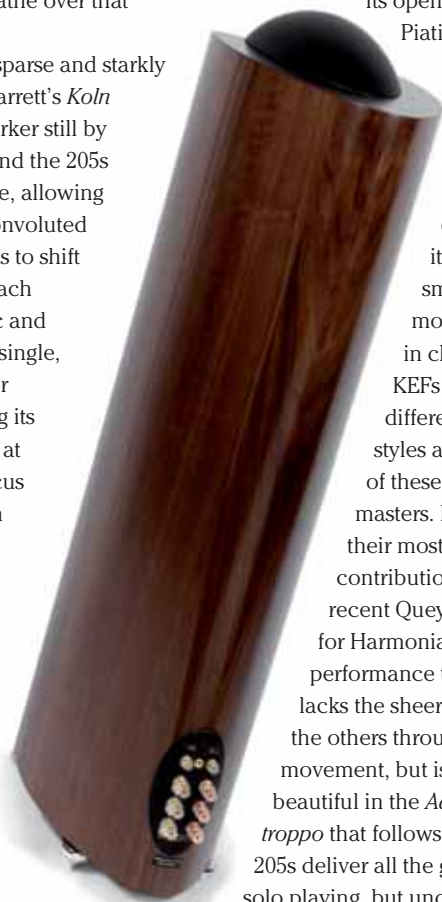


▶ forward and it becomes lean and musically disconnected, robbing the music of drive and purpose, structure and foundation. But get it in the right place... Get it in the right place and the 205 rewards you with a measure of coherence and communication, a rhythmic and structural integrity that anchors the performance and allows the performers to breathe over that secure footing.

Play something as sparse and starkly unadorned as Keith Jarrett's *Koln Concert* (rendered starker still by the ECM recording) and the 205s are utterly unobtrusive, allowing the protracted and convoluted musical developments to shift and evolve through each theme, each rhythmic and melodic pattern, in a single, continuous line, never wavering, never losing its way, never stumbling at the transition. The focus is on the playing, with Jarrett's masterful command of shape and tempo, melody and development holding the music together and conjuring an ever-shifting emotional landscape. It's only when the disc ends that you realise that you never even noticed the system playing it. Yet solo piano, with its range and percussive qualities is one of the hardest instruments to reproduce. The 205s do so without leaving their mark, and that's impressive indeed.

Of course, it would be unreasonable to expect the 205 to match the remarkable performance of the 207. The junior model can't match the effortless scale and sheer dynamic range of the flagship. It doesn't conjure the acoustic space with such natural transparency, or deliver images with

quite the focus or dimensionality – but it gets close; surprisingly close. Close enough that, if you hadn't heard the bigger speaker, you wouldn't feel the lack. So, comparing and contrasting different performances of the Dvorak *Cello Concerto*, the Starker reading on Mercury is satisfyingly, almost bombastically explosive through its opening, the



Piatigorsky on RCA is warmer, more rounded and more lyrical, less purposeful or pointed in its playing, but smoother and more seductive in character. The KEFs effortlessly differentiate the styles and strengths of these two musical masters. But perhaps their most telling contribution is on the recent Queyras reading for Harmonia Mundi, a performance that maybe lacks the sheer authority of the others through the first movement, but is achingly beautiful in the *Adagio ma no troppo* that follows. Here the 205s deliver all the grace in the solo playing, but underpin it with a sweeping orchestral majesty that dials up the romance without adding a layer of schmaltze. It's a stunning performance – from everyone (and everything) involved.

That easy flow and natural tonal warmth is equally evident across the vocal palette, with voices as disparate as Zinka Milanov and Lyle Lovett feeling the benefit. Subtle inflexions and the catch of a breath bring singers to life, again leading your attention into the music and its making – and away from the system reproducing

it. This ability to step away from the performance is what marks the KEFs apart from so many speakers that fall into the trap of desperately trying to impress. Work with them and you'll discover hidden depths when it comes to musical expression and involvement. I loathe the kind of mathematical formulae that try to express performance as a function of price; 90% of the sound for 60% of the cost always struck me as overly simplistic and way too pat, but in the case of the 205 it really is that straightforward. It's not just shared DNA we're talking about. So much of the technology, so many of the parts in this speaker are shared with the 207, that realizing the benefits comes down to the engineering implementation (and a bit of care). KEF have done their part spectacularly well – the rest is down to you... ▶+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Three-way reflex loaded loudspeaker
Driver Complement:	1x 25mm titanium dome Uni-Q tweeter 1x 165mm Uni-Q midrange 2x 200mm pulp cone bass
Bandwidth:	45Hz – 60kHz ±3dB 35Hz –6dB
Sensitivity:	90dB
Impedance:	8 Ohms nominal 3.2 Ohms minimum
Dimensions (WxHxD):	285 x 1105 x 433mm
Weight:	33kg
Finishes:	High gloss black, walnut or cherry. Satin black, walnut, cherry or sycamore
Prices:	High Gloss – £6850 Satin – £5625

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