



Tiny dancers

Neat's small speaker with big ambitions has received a refresh. **Ed Selley** sees if it still defies the laws of physics

Some first impressions can stick with you for a very long time and the original Neat IOTA is very much one of those instances. Walking into the Neat room at the 2013 Bristol Show and being confronted with a pair of speakers no larger than some of the home cinema satellites running elsewhere in the hotel before being told: "No, really, there's no sub" has stuck with me for a very long time. The IOTA was a small speaker that believed, despite clear visual evidence to the contrary, that it wasn't small at all. It was quite brilliant and Neat did very well with it.

Twelve years is a long time, though, and Neat has revisited its baby, taking into account lessons learned from the development of other models in the mean time, including the magnificent 'Classic' reworkings of the original trilogy of Neat models – Petite, Elite and Mystique. The basic design of the IOTA II remains the same as before. Because the EMIT ribbon tweeter that the IOTA II uses is larger than a dome, Neat places the drivers side by side to reduce the overall size of the cabinet, which remains at less than three

litres. The tweeter itself is unchanged. Neat's main focus of improvement has been on the mid/bass unit. Where the original used a polypropylene mid/bass, the IOTA II makes use of the considerable amount of information gleaned from the work on the Classic speakers and uses a paper cone – still a mere 100mm across. In the ensuring years since the original IOTA was launched, more and more models

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that the company has released have moved to paper, so this is a logical move that brings it into line with what the company is doing elsewhere. Accompanying the driver change are revisions to the crossover to better implement the material change. Neat crossovers are typically minimalist in their configuration and they place considerable emphasis on the functionality of a small number of high-quality components rather than

DETAILS
PRODUCT
Neat IOTA II
ORIGIN
UK
TYPE
Two-way
standmount
loudspeaker
WEIGHT
3kg each
DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
200 x 130 x 165mm
FEATURES
• EMIT ribbon
tweeter
• 100mm
mid/bass driver
• Quoted sensitivity:
86dB/1W/1m (8ohm)
DISTRIBUTOR
Neat Acoustics
WEBSITE
neatacoustics.com

using more ornate and heavy-duty arrangements favoured by some notional rivals. These revisions have not significantly altered the basic performance of the IOTA II. Helped by a rear port, Neat claims that there is meaningful output in room down to 45Hz and this doesn't seem to be too far outside reality. The claimed sensitivity of 86dB feels fractionally higher than what some basic checks achieve with the review samples and mean that the IOTA II will do its best work with a bit of power behind it.

Visually, the IOTA II is the same as before with all that entails. Were it not for the Neat badge giving some clues that its orientation is correct, it will forever look like it's been shoved on its side. Placed on a normal speaker stand with a top plate designed around more conventional models, it looks unavoidably odd. I have to say I rather like it, but some other observers are not so keen. Grilles are included, but the coloured finishes have been dispensed with, so Black and White is your lot; both of which are applied in a sheen rather than gloss finish. This is a fairly small object to be wearing a £1,100 price tag, but the overall level of build and attention to detail on offer goes a fair way to offsetting any buyer's remorse.

Sound quality

In one important way, of course, it doesn't really matter if the Neat looks a little odd when placed on a stand because that's not where that many of them wind up. If space is genuinely tight, there are few speakers that are as easy to accommodate as the IOTA II is. So long as that rear port isn't physically wedged against a wall, it functions unobtrusively and three blobs of blutack are sufficient to have it work happily on a shelf unit. Neat

also says that aftermarket wall brackets will work too.

None of the changes that Neat has carried out have altered the gentle sense of unreality you experience listening to the IOTA II with material you know well. Running it on a small system comprised of a Bluesound Node ICON and Chord Electronics TToby power amp (HFC 527 and 423 respectively), the manner in which the Neat gets stuck into Hidden Orchestra's *Archipelago* is a genuine conflict between the eye and the ear. Crucially, the IOTA II has enough bass extension to make this potent album sound as convincing as it should and the way it integrates with the lower midrange is seamless and extremely well handled.

This is then combined with a level of out-and-out space and airiness that feels wholly unlikely from a cabinet this small. So long as the tweeters are placed outward, the IOTA II is bigger and more confident-sounding than it has any right to be. The performance extends out well beyond the cabinets without having any effect on the cohesion of the sound in the centre. Regardless of the scale of the music being played, the Neat has the means to give it the air and space it needs. The tonal quality on offer here is very

HOW IT COMPARES
The increase in price over the original IOTA means that the IOTA II is within £150 of the very talented PMC prodigy1 (HFC 513). The larger, transmission line equipped PMC has more low-end shove than the Neat can manage and its ability to create a stereo image with tonally convincing performers in it is as good as the IOTA II. It's also easier to drive. Against this the Neat will keep delivering what it does in spaces that will have the PMC starting to sound a little unhappy. It offers a flexibility in placement that the prodigy1 cannot match. In difficult rooms, the Neat has a considerable overall advantage.



good, too. It's been a while since I heard the original IOTA, but I never felt it was tonally lacking. This revised model is a close parallel to the Petite Classic (HFC 495) that delighted me from the first moment I heard it. Listening to ZZ Top's rough-and-ready *Tres Hombres*, the Neat is able to keep the rawness and vitality of the material being played, but avoids it sounding too rough or hard edged. Push it antisocially hard and it hardens up a little, but there's no need to be brutal.

A small caveat to this positivity is that the Neat does its best work with a little power behind it. Substituting the Chord Electronics power amp for Audiolab's talented and keenly priced 6000A MkII (HFC 528) still delivers a satisfying performance, but one that loses a fraction of the punch and impact it does on the more expensive amp. There are price-equivalent devices that have the scope to get the IOTA II sounding its very best, but not everything will automatically achieve this.

Like everything else I've ever tested from the company, there is an innate joy to the IOTA II that ensures anything with a bit of drive to it like *Pink Cactus Café* by The Courteeners is more than an objective experience. Over and above any measurable aspect of its performance, I know that I want to keep listening to the IOTA II at a point where I would be content to switch off many notional rivals and

go and do something else. It's a subjective viewpoint, but it does seem to be a consistently repeatable one.

Conclusion

It's this last bit of intangible Barnard Castle magic that tips the IOTA II into something greater than the sum of its compact parts. Even though the price rise is actually less than inflation, this increase over the original is fairly significant and I fully appreciate that it won't make sense for people with the space and room arrangements to do justice to more conventional offerings. Other people, with more demanding listening arrangements, will hear the IOTA II and know that nothing else is going to do. Neat Acoustics' diminutive wonderbox is still something that leaves a very lasting impression ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★
BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★
EASE OF DRIVE
★★★★★
OVERALL
★★★★★

LIKE: Huge, vivid sound from a tiny box; fuss-free placement
DISLIKE: Not cheap; needs a fair amount of power to give its best
WE SAY: The IOTA II keeps the magic of the original and remains a speaker that works where rivals don't