



STEREO LOUDSPEAKERS

DYNAUDIO
CONTOUR 20

Dynaudio, the Danish loudspeaker maker, has been around since 1977. We've been listening to them, reviewing them, for close on 20 years. This is a company that makes its own drivers, and has become so well established as a quality loudspeaker maker that the products of its professional division are used as monitors in recording studios across the world.

Here we're looking at a pair of semi-compact speakers from its extremely high-quality Contour range, the Contour 20 speakers.

EQUIPMENT

These are indeed bigger than bookshelf-sized speakers, though nowhere near floorstander size at 440mm tall, not to mention the 360mm depth and the 215mm width. And get this, they each weigh 15.5kg, which is heavier than many floorstanding speakers.

The enclosures curve back gently on the sides to a narrower rear, where the bass reflex port and connecting terminals are sited.

Inside these very solid enclosures are a 180mm bass midrange and a 28mm soft-dome tweeter — both of Dynaudio's own manufacture, electrically separated at 2200Hz by a second-order crossover.

We have noticed over the years that Dynaudio speakers tend to be of lower sensitivity than the average high fidelity loudspeaker. That's no different here, with Dynaudio rating the Contour 20s at 86dB (2.83V input, one metre). Furthermore their nominal impedance is four ohms. Clearly, these are not loudspeakers intended for use with second-rate electronics.

Not as though anyone would anyway. You'd have to be nuts to spend \$7.5k on a pair of speakers without buying amplification of equivalent quality.

Dynaudio rates their frequency response at 39 to 23,000Hz at the -3dB points, and their power handling at an impressive 180W (necessary given their low sensitivity).

We generally have not been enormously impressed with the concept of biwiring loudspeakers. We doubt that running three octaves of frequencies down one wire and seven down the other sounds very different from running all ten octaves down the one wire. Nor have we

been impressed with bi-amping as conventionally practised. Using an active crossover is a different matter, but very few speakers accommodate such arrangements without surgery.

Apparently Dynaudio agrees with us. No biwiring or biamping capability is provided here, just one pair of very sturdy speaker terminals on each loudspeaker.

There are a number of finishes available, and the price depends on which you choose. We reviewed the 'entry-level' Walnut finish model with a satin look (pictured above) and it was immaculately finished.

PERFORMANCE

We carefully unpacked the speakers from the extremely heavy foam of their packaging — foam rubber with a density we've never seen before — and put them on our stands. Grilles are available, but even in this 'cheaper' walnut finish the Contour 20s are handsome indeed without them, in perhaps a masculine way, with the drivers set

against the black baffles, wrapping slightly around the front edges to meet the walnut.

The distributor included high quality stands valued at more than \$800, including the plate to which the speakers may be bolted, though we used our own stands for this review.

We started with the high-resolution version of the Led Zeppelin III remaster from 2014. Occasionally people of poor taste reckon this to be one of the more dispensable Zep efforts. Wrong. Musically it's a wonder, with perhaps the best slow blues number the boys ever delivered — *Since I've Been Loving You* — and with the remaster, sound-wise it's as accurate as you can get. The deficiencies in sound quality are brought out with precision and clarity by the Dynaudio Contour 20 speakers. You can hear the slight buzz of the amplifier, along with its hiss. And the hiss of the master tape. The squeak of John Bonham's pedal.

And all that adds to the experience. Instead of merging into a perceptible but unresolved mush, as can so easily happen with lesser speakers, it is resolved into precisely what it is. The ear can hear it. The brain can interpret it. And then you as a listener can comfortably ignore it, as music lovers have throughout the decades with known recorded deficiencies.

Since I've Been Loving You was in fact the first track we put on, and within 30 seconds it reminded us of something about Dynaudio speakers that we've long known. They have a characteristic 'sound'. It is marked by a wide ranging openness, by a welcoming brightness yet tonally balanced aspect, and especially by an amazing dynamic liveliness. That last is most evident in drums. Dynaudio is one of two brands which we regard as the best there is with respect to drums.

So with that track, the drums took on a special life, sitting out in front of and above the rest of the music, while not in the least obscuring it. We mean "in front of" and "above" literally. Each note strike of the drum appeared in its own particular place above the plane of the speakers. The bass, guitar and voice were arrayed between them, the drums above them. And slightly forward, in front of the plane of the speakers. It was exciting and entrancing.

We went back to LZII and the oft-overlooked *The Lemon Song*. The character of the drums was entirely different here. They were as lively, but remained within the sound-stage. These loudspeakers put the drums where the mix determines. With this track it is Jones' bass which is doing



The Contour family includes floorstanders as well; the 20 here shown next to the Contour 60 (centre) and Contour 30 (right) in the attractively beachy 'white oak' finish.

the rest was, with an astonishing tightness and control. Were we not familiar with this track played on a system extending to below 20Hz, we would have been entirely thrilled by what we heard. Instead we were merely mostly thrilled.

Let us be clear about this. We used these speakers for several days as the front left and right in a home theatre speaker system just to run them in a bit before doing any serious listening, and our impression to that point was that they were fairly unremarkable. But then when we went stereo, sat down, rotated the volume control clockwise, and everything was different.

the musical dancing, challenging Plant's vocals. And every note was reproduced with precision, at the proper level, and with a fullness that made us think: who would want floorstanders? We should note that we were playing this music very, very loud, and through it all the speakers acted as though there was nothing to it. They remained relaxed and clear and coherent. And while this was happening, the sound-stage extended way off to the left beyond the position of the left speaker.

Enough of olden days. Laura Marling's close miked vocals on 'Once I Was an Eagle' are thrilling, but occasionally challenging. A couple of nasty sibilances in the opening track were dutifully conveyed — their absence would have indicated a deficiency in the speaker — and that aside, the presence, the reality, conveyed by these speakers was thrilling. Not just the voice, not just the guitar, but also the fullness of the percussion.

We pulled out the Hugo Audiophile CD and gave the speakers a run on a full orchestra, playing Mussorgsky's *The Great Gate of Kiev* from 'Pictures at an Exhibition'. Confession: we'd been playing some Liszt before, a piano solo encoded at a relatively low level, and we forgot to pull back the volume level. 'Kiev' starts with an unrestrained blast, and while we couldn't take it, the speakers could. They seemed to revel with the full orchestra pouring from their cones and domes at a ridiculous level. This particular track has a mighty bass orchestral drum smashing through the mix and the result here was interesting. The bottom octave of this was clearly missing, the body blow wasn't there. But

CONCLUSION

This kind of pricing is certainly high for any speakers, let alone those that need a stand. Yet we're confident that regardless of size, regardless even of brand, you will not find better sound quality for the price than that available from the Dynaudio Contour 20 speakers. ■

Dynaudio Contour 20 stereo loudspeakers

- Glorious sound
- Reasonably compact dimensions
- Happy with all kinds of music

- Requires suitably high quality amplification

Price: \$7499 (Walnut/White Oak); \$8699 (Black, White, Rosewood, Grey Oak, all high gloss)

Drivers: 1 x 28mm soft-dome tweeter, 1 x 180mm MSP cone bass/midrange

Crossover: 2200Hz, 2nd order

Frequency response: 39-23,000Hz -3dB

Impedance: 4 ohms

Sensitivity: 86dB (2.83V @ 1m)

IEC power handling: 180 watts

Cabinet: Bass reflex (rear port)

Dimensions (hwd): 440 x 215 x 360mm

Weight (each): 15.5kg

Warranty: Five years

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