



KEF's revamped R Series is just the ticket for a serious AV system. **Ed Selley** gets stuck in

R-rated entertainment

Many speaker brands are in the habit of releasing new model ranges as an entirely new entity – new name, new driver configurations, even new price points – in the pursuit of 'going with the market.' At the other end of the scale, you have companies like KEF, which has had a Q Series, R Series and Reference Series for a very long time.

This new R Series replaces the 2012 iteration, but the system basics should be familiar to people with knowledge of its predecessor. Once again the R Series takes many of the features of KEF's Reference line, but makes them available at a more affordable price.

This familiarity is a little deceptive though. This is a completely new range, just one that has been created with a similar aesthetic and intention to before. The six-strong series – three floorstanders, one standmount, one centre channel and a Dolby Atmos-certified reflective speaker – are all built around the Uni-Q driver, itself a piece of ever-changing engineering. Now in its twelfth generation, the premise of this driver remains the same; placing the tweeter in the 'throat' of the midrange unit with the intention of creating a very even dispersion and harmony between the two.

This Uni-Q includes all the previous KEF refinements and now features a 'Shadow Flare', designed to extend the waveguide of the tweeter and further improve the dispersion. Uni-Q is the same size (5in) in all the R Series speakers, but the hybrid aluminium bass drivers that accompany it come in two different flavours, 6.5in and 5.25in. The R5 floorstander (£2,000 per pair), R2c centre (£850) and the R8a Atmos speaker (£800 per pair) tested here all use the 5.25in version.

R you ready to rumble?

The R5, then, is the baby of three floorstanders in the range, similar to the step-up R7 but constructed on a smaller scale to the same proportions. Its Uni-Q driver is sandwiched between a pair of bass drivers in a configuration that's the same as the R2c centre, suggesting a good backbone for a uniform LCR soundstage.

Given that it has as much interest in selling R5s to stereo customers as AV fans, KEF has decided to make the R Series Dolby Atmos speaker an add-on device rather than building it into the top of the floorstander cabinet.

The R8a features a single Uni-Q driver, angled upwards for the transmission/reflection of height channel information. KEF also intends the R8a to act as a rear/surround speaker in a wall-mounted configuration (there's keyhole fixing on its base), but the system auditioned here uses R5 floorstanders front and back, because nothing succeeds quite like excess.

The final part of this package is from KEF's Kube subwoofer stable, the three-model series launched in 2017, to partner the brand's various speakers. Previously, R Series buyers would have looked to the R400b subwoofer (reviewed *HCC* #217), but this is now an 'out-going model', we're told.

The Kube 12b used here is the largest of Kubes, and generates its low-end via a single 12in driver, 300W Class D amplifier and iBX (Intelligent Bass Extension) DSP. It's a relatively large box (roughly 40cm in each dimension) but, thanks to a sealed cabinet and adjustable EQ settings, one that should 'dial in' to most spaces without too many headaches.

Immaculate finish

The speakers themselves are room-friendly in all senses of the term. The R5 floorstander is fairly slender and is supplied with foam bungs for its twin bass ports, for installation closer to a wall. The nature of the Uni-Q driver allows a degree of placement flexibility that rivals don't always offer. The R2c and R8a, meanwhile, are sealed cabinets.

The speakers should also slip easily into most spaces because they're immaculately finished. As with many products, the devil is in the detail. KEF offers three colours for the R Series but, unusually, this applies to the whole speaker rather than the cabinet. This means the black R Series models have black bass and Uni-Q drivers, while the white and wood finish options have ones that better match those – and there are, of course, magnetically

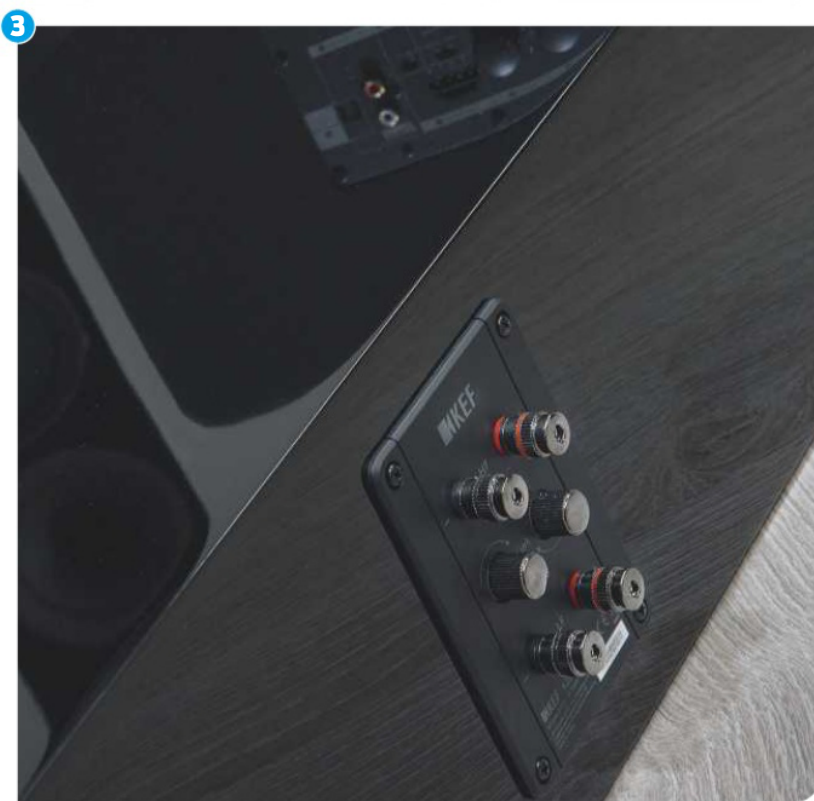
AV INFO

PRODUCT:
Premium 5.1.2
Dolby Atmos
speaker system

POSITION:
The middle of
KEF's three
floorstander ranges

PEERS:
Bowers & Wilkins
700 Series;
Monitor Audio Gold

1. KEF's R8a Dolby Atmos speakers are a fit for the R5 floorstanders



affixed grilles if you don't want any of this on display. The result is genuinely handsome bits of kit.

Note that if you plump for the R5, as we have, the R8a will align perfectly on the cabinet – something it won't do on the wider floorstanders.

The only real catch for the range is that there is no small standmount option. KEF's R3 standmount features the larger 6.5in woofers. Much as using a socking great pair of floorstanders front and rear offers the potential for great performance, it is rather bulky. I'd love to see an R1 design fill in that small gap in the series as it stands.

Embodiment of effortless

If you can accommodate the R5 for both front and surround channel duties, the results are seriously impressive. Set up as a 5.1.2 package in KEF's own well-treated but not over-damped AV demo room, on the end of an Arcam AVR850 receiver, the R Series is the physical embodiment of effortless.

In the destruction of the swarm fleet in *Star Trek: Beyond* (Blu-ray) – still one of my favourite examples of a Dolby Atmos track utilising the height layer – this R Series system deals with the demolition of thousands of spaceships in an unruffled manner. The explosions have a suitably cosmic

'The R Series speakers take everything that KEF is known and regarded for and makes it better'

scale, but it's the fine detail found within them that impresses the most. As the wave of detonations starts, you can actually hear the individual ships exploding.

The system's sense of three-dimensionality is also outstanding. Those Uni-Q drivers are almost untouchable when it comes to generating a soundfield that is even from left to right, and with a front-to-back depth that is utterly immersive, and it is able to convey this from almost total silence, with only the barest of material.

This immersive quality is absolutely key to the suspension of disbelief. It's a stretch to describe the final showdown in *Bumblebee* (Ultra HD Blu-ray) as 'realistic', but the way the R Series blends the sounds that we have points of reference to with the ones we don't is convincing.

The R8a is also the best implementation of an upward-firing speaker I've yet experienced from KEF. The pairing here manages to effectively extend the soundstage above the listening position, and had me wishing for two more to cap off the surrounds. In the apartment block fight in *Atomic Blonde* (Ultra HD Blu-ray), the Russian baddies come down the stairway from above, integrated with the effects from the 'regular' surround channels.

The only real fault I can level at this package is that it really comes alive at higher volume. Run at lower levels, the detail and general space doesn't suffer but once you go beyond a certain point, there's an extra energy and heft that means you tend to drive the R Series harder than you might otherwise.

The good news is that nothing feels like it is under any strain when you do. The Kube 12b is cost-effective in the context of the system (£700) but it can extend the depth of the pricier R5s. When giant robot fist meets giant robot

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head, the effect is visceral and dynamic. There's also no sluggishness either.

The outstanding *Kraftwerk 3-D: The Catalogue* Blu-ray affords the KEFs a chance to show their musicality. The Atmos-equipped mix of *Radio Activity*, which the R8a speakers help propel high and wide, is outstanding. Of course, the nature of Kraftwerk's material makes it well suited to a multichannel arrangement, and the quality of the mix is peerless, but you don't sit there judging the quality of the mix, you sit there thinking 'this is awesome.'

The guiltiest pleasure comes from those full-size surround channels. Leaving the delights of Atmos behind and reaching for the 1080p Blu-ray of *Flight of the Phoenix* shows just what the benefits of having an identical speaker in each corner really are. The plane crash sequence in the sandstorm remains a reference-grade

SPECIFICATIONS

KEF R5

DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 5in Uni-Q driver with 5in aluminium midbass cone and 1in aluminium dome tweeter; 2 x 5.25in hybrid aluminium bass drivers **ENCLOSURE:** Twin rear-ported **FREQUENCY RESPONSE (CLAIMED):** 52Hz-28kHz **SENSITIVITY (CLAIMED):** 87dB **POWER HANDLING (CLAIMED):** 200W **DIMENSIONS:** 271.6 (w) x 1071.4(h) x 343.5(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 27.3kg

KEF R2c

DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 5in Uni-Q driver with 5in aluminium midbass cone and 1in aluminium dome tweeter; 2 x 5.25in hybrid aluminium bass drivers **ENCLOSURE:** Sealed **FREQUENCY RESPONSE:** 74Hz-28kHz **SENSITIVITY (CLAIMED):** 87dB **POWER HANDLING (CLAIMED):** 200W **DIMENSIONS:** 550(w) x 175(h) x 285(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 16.9kg

KEF R8a

DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 5in Uni-Q driver with 5in aluminium midbass cone and 1in aluminium dome tweeter **ENCLOSURE:** Sealed **FREQUENCY RESPONSE (CLAIMED):** 96Hz-19.5kHz **SENSITIVITY (CLAIMED):** 86dB **POWER HANDLING (CLAIMED):** 150W **DIMENSIONS:** 174.6(w) x 173.8(h) x 255(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 4.45kg

KEF Kube 12b (subwoofer)

DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 12in forward-firing woofer **ENCLOSURE:** Sealed **FREQUENCY RESPONSE (CLAIMED):** 22Hz-140Hz (+/-3dB) **ONBOARD POWER (CLAIMED):** 300W **REMOTE CONTROL:** No **DIMENSIONS:** 393(w) x 410(h) x 410(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 20.6kg **FEATURES:** Stereo phono/LFE input; speaker-level input; volume, crossover and phase control; three-position EQ

PARTNER WITH



FLIGHT OF THE PHOENIX:

This 2004 remake of the 1965 James Stewart movie is a bit hit-and-miss, but the airplane crash sequence alone (presented in DTS-HD MA 5.1 on Fox's Blu-ray) makes it worth snapping up.

surround experience, and the snarl of the failing engine tearing itself to pieces gains from this system's ability to extract small details and work them into the wider mix. In the film itself, the location of the engine changes relative to the position of the shot, and with smaller surrounds this can lead to a degree of unevenness. Here this is not an issue; the full fury of both engine and sandstorm is superbly presented.

Multichannel maestro

The R Series isn't KEF's entry-level, but it's easy to see why it's the brand's best-selling range of speakers. Their balance of technical wizardry, attention to detail and aesthetic charm means you won't find yourself making excuses for in any surroundings, and by covering off these basics, you're ready to enjoy the superb level of performance on offer. These speakers take everything that KEF is known and regarded for and makes those things better. The result is an absolutely outstanding multichannel performer and one that deserves to be at the top of anyone's shortlist at the price ■

HCC VERDICT



KEF R Series 5.1.2

→ £6,250 → uk.kef.com

WE SAY: A supremely accomplished set of speakers that blends excellent design and aesthetics with a barnstorming performance. What's not to love?

2. For the R8a effects speaker, a single Uni-Q driver is used

3. The R5 and R2c can be bi-amped

4. Opt for the black finish and KEF styles the drivers to match

5. The R5's dual ports are supplied with foam bungs to tame bass response