

FinkTeam Kim stand-mount loudspeaker

by Steve Dickinson

So, there I was, squirming, while Charlie Haden and John Taylor played 'Song for the Whales' from *Nightfall* [Naim]. Not squirming for the reasons you might expect, perhaps: this was not a squirm of embarrassment or awkwardness, this was a squirm of discomfort caused by the fact that my last cups of coffee had recently hit my bladder and were intent on escape. But the music was so utterly compelling, the event so captivating, that mere corporeal considerations had to wait, and this moment just couldn't be interrupted.

So the FinkTeam Kims got off to a promising start despite their somewhat unconventional looks, and quirky name (it's a Star Trek genre thing). The thing is, there *have* been systems which *can* make me squirm with awkwardness on this track, because as a piece of music it can be a bit challenging and some systems just fail to communicate, collapsing into a mess of what can easily come across as self-indulgence. But there I was, transfixed, as Charlie Haden coaxed the most extraordinarily evocative sounds from his double bass; I don't think I have ever heard his attempts to conjure whale song, and the unfamiliar world it arises from, portrayed with such sensitivity. As a piece of music, it's not difficult to dismiss this as a simple piano melody, bookending some vaguely whale-y and rather pretentious noodling from the bass. Quite a lot of loudspeakers permit you to do just that; and even those that give you all the tonal depth and colour so you appreciate the attempt, rarely show you the sensitivity and musicianship that gripped me in this moment. It's not just the evocation of the sound of whalesong, somehow Haden evokes a wistful empathy for these magnificent creatures from his bass, too, and that realisation was what kept me in my seat despite a pressing need to be somewhere else.

I've heard this track rendered convincingly by other loudspeakers, notably the Kudos Titan 707s I reviewed recently, but usually it's the tonal colour, the shading and the realism of the instrument that gets all the attention. Here, ▶



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► all those things were ably served, but with added layers of sensitivity, musicianship, and sheer awe-inspiring technique. And that's what's so remarkable about the FinkTeam Kims, the way they not only give you the wideband tonal experience, but they get right into the heart of the music, and the performance. At almost £9,000 for a pair they're operating in rarified territory for what are, conceptually, standmounting loudspeakers; but actually they perform in many ways more like floorstanding designs, so comparison with other standmounters is perhaps a little specious anyway. What we have here doesn't seem to fit many of the conventional niches we've become accustomed to.

The FinkTeam seems to have got into making a range of loudspeakers almost by accident. As a business, Karl-Heinz Fink heads up a team of specialists who act as technical consultants to other loudspeaker makers. They didn't set out to design a range of speakers so much as explore the art of the possible. One thing led to another, which led to the flagship WM-4 model, then the (£25,900) Borg floorstander, and now the Kim, a sort of halfway house between a stand-mount and a floorstander in that the stand is integral, and there's no way this model was ever going to fit on a bookshelf anyway. The cabinet size and proportions calls to mind the classic large BBC monitors of the '60s and '70s, and is rather different to the slimline designs we mostly see nowadays. The backwards-leaning stance reminds me more of a certain Star Wars droid than a Star Trek character, though. The external dimensions suggest a cabinet volume of around 45 litres. In reality it's smaller because some interior space is given over to Helmholtz resonators and other technology, the better to control cabinet resonance and associated unwanted output, but the overall cabinet volume is still broadly comparable to many a respectable floorstanding design.

Large scale works are handled as well as you'd expect from a good sized driver in a decent sized enclosure. Tchaikovsky, 'Capriccio Italien', the LSO's account under Kenneth Alwyn [Decca] is a firm favourite *chez* Dickinson as he takes it at a rattling pace. And here today the substantial forces are well balanced, laid out before us with excellent tonal shading and it's easy to see how the composer is playing with the spatial and tonal differences between strings, woodwind and brass. There's real scale and weight, too, and

the rather exuberant ending doesn't disappoint by getting all overexcited, the Kims hold it together for the full front row centre experience. When things get louder, you sense the increase in energy and effort, not just the change in volume. Orchestras can be big, bold and brash without getting out of shape, so Leonard Bernstein's wonderfully jazzy phrasing on 'Rhapsody in Blue' [DG] contrasts beautifully with the energy and scale of the LA Philharmonic, the Kims balancing the forces as skilfully as Bernstein did; fast, with very little overhang things feel free from constraint, but not loose, so you can enjoy the ride without worrying that it's all about to trip over its own feet.

There's a lot here that rests on the technical choices the FinkTeam has made. The decision to use an 8" bass/mid driver dictates a wider cabinet than is usual nowadays for a speaker of this size, but it provides extension and scale that isn't easy to achieve with the more common 5" or 6" units. It's a little harder to integrate with the Air Motion Transformer tweeter but the results speak for themselves. FinkTeam maintain that damping materials can slow the loudspeaker down and slug the sound, and the Kims make a strong case for the more intelligent technical solutions they advocate to ensure the cabinet does its job without singing along. Similarly, close attention to the design of the rearward-firing reflex port avoids the more common pitfalls heard in ported designs while retaining the essential benefits in terms of bass extension and power handling. Amplifier and room-matching are also catered for by two adjustable selectors on the rear panel, one for damping factor, the other for a small amount of treble output adjustment. Clearly the designers don't intend quirky amps or difficult rooms to be a barrier to purchase. I'm generally a fan of simple crossover designs, but here we have a 4th order unit which somehow exemplifies transparency, while also doing a very decent job of preserving the phase relationships that I have come to think are crucial to a properly involving musical experience.

And involving it is. The Kims seem to specialise in preserving the spatial and temporal relationships within the music. Everything happens when, and where it should, so as a listener you have less work to do and can just get on with the business of enjoying the performance. And, interestingly, you don't need to drive them hard to get satisfaction. Some ►

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► Loudspeakers impress most when delivering realistic concert-style levels; the Kims can do that, too, and will go very loud indeed without getting hard, shouty or overblown. Just for old times' sake I dug out some of the old warhorses, 'Telegraph Road' from *Love Over Gold* [Vertigo] kept its composure even in the loudest, busiest bits, retaining the structure sufficiently intact that you could easily appreciate the phrasing and technique behind all the bombast. But they'll also deliver the goods at modest volume settings, giving a coherent, dynamic and engaging performance even at late-night levels: Agnes Obel 'Familiar' from *Citizen of Glass* [PIAS] was revealing. Played at, ahem, robust levels around these parts, this now has all the multi-layered complexity, dynamics and tonal colour I could wish for, even when played quietly. Other aspects of the music come to the fore, too; there's a coherence, a 'rightness' to the performance that just engages the musical brain with little obvious effort. Roberto Fonseca, 'Llegó Cachaíto' from *Zamazu* [Enja] was subtle, delicate and affecting, the

connection between Fonseca's piano and Cachaito Lopez' bass all the better for being rendered at a gentler volume. Who knew? In contrast 'Ishmael' from the same album drives relentlessly on and, turned up loud, the Kims will rock with the best of them, while still digging deep into the fast, tactile, complex percussion. There's an ability to portray the layers within a performance, to retain the structure of the music and the way the parts blend, collide and interact, regardless of volume setting. The Kims were totally unfazed by the energy and complexity in Gogo Penguin's 'Raven' from *A Humdrum Star* [Blue Note], keeping all the polyrhythms intact while also giving me all the shading of tones, and the sheer energy of the performance.

It's clearly a very accomplished design. The unconventional approaches must present a myriad of ways to royally screw things up, so the fact that I haven't found the slightest evidence of up-screwing, royal or otherwise, tells me that the FinkTeam clearly know their business. The crossover ►

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► is largely undetectable, partly perhaps because the passband is lower than usual, at 2200Hz; bass is deep, tuneful and agile, the better to underpin one of the most natural-sounding treble units I’ve heard. I’ve used a few loudspeakers with ribbon tweeters over the years, notably from Elac and Raidho, and there’s usually a moment when you hear a discontinuity between treble and bass/midrange units and, once heard, you can’t un-hear it. The AMT operates differently to a ribbon design despite looking superficially similar and I have to say, that moment hasn’t yet happened with the Kims. I’ve been trying to catch them out so I’m reasonably confident in saying that this is the best-integrated pairing of two dissimilar driver technologies I’ve yet had the pleasure of using.

The tweeter seems to have quite wide horizontal dispersion, too, as there’s some latitude in the sweet spot, and off-axis listening doesn’t destroy the imaging. And imaging is one of the strengths here; it goes to that overall coherence thing, but staging, ambience and positioning of performers and instruments is solid, stable and not tidally-locked to one crucial listening position. Vertically, though, a bit of experimentation with the adjustment of the angle the cabinets lean back will pay dividends. The integral open frame stand sets the speaker at a slightly disconcerting, laid-back angle, the better to project the sound up and into the room based on typical listening heights and distances; fiddling with the height of the spikes front to back gives a degree of fine adjustment if you listen outside that notional range. The canted-back arrangement reminds me of those cheap and cheerful IKEA speaker stands all my friends had in the 1980s, but rather more effective in its implementation here; it also, happily, prevents the cabinets becoming resting places for teacups, plant pots, and cats.

I could go on, but suffice to say the Kims seem pretty agnostic as to genre. Classical, jazz, rock, country, electronica, girl and guitar; whatever I’ve thrown at them has always been delivered in a fundamentally lucid way, all the relevant elements of the music interlocked securely and tightly, but not in a buttoned-down sense. Everything is free and expressive, but cohesive. It’s like every musician in my collection got sober and upped their game. Anitra’s Dance from Grieg’s *Peer Gynt Suite* [Decca] was definitely a dance, rhythmically fine-boned, with accents and punctuation points *just so*, little musical

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Two way, reflex ported, stand-mounting loudspeaker with integral stand

Driver complement: 1 × 8" mid/bass driver, paper cone with rubber surround; 1 × 110mm Air Motion Transformer high frequency unit, pleated Kapton diaphragm with 50µm aluminium strips

Distortion: 0.2% THD @ 1W

Crossover frequency: 2.2kHz

Crossover type: 4th order acoustic Linkwitz-Riley; all-pass delay for the HF unit; LF impedance compensation. Air core inductors, Mundorf polypropylene film capacitors and Mundorf low inductance and Bifilar resistors. Additional controls for HF extension and damping

Frequency response: (in room, typical) 35Hz–25kHz, adjustable to 45Hz–23kHz, -10dB

Impedance: Average 8 Ohms, 5.9 Ohm minimum

Sensitivity: 86dB @ 2.83V / 1 metre

Dimensions (H×W×D): cabinet: 500 × 300 × 310mm (height & depth 854 × 412mm with stand)

Weight: 25.1Kg each

Finishes: Choice of veneer finishes and front panel shades

Price: £8,900/pair (standard finishes)

Manufacturer: FinkTeam

URL: finkteam.com

UK distributor: Kog Audio

Tel: +44 (0)24 7722 0650

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fragments passed around the orchestra like tiny gifts. Utterly delightful. As was Solveig Slettahjell and her incomparable version of Tom Waits’ ‘Take it with me’ on *Silver* [ACT]. Never less than laid-back, this was positively languid, she has all the time in the world to perform, and all you need to do is give yourself the space to luxuriate in it.

The Kim is that rare and beautiful creature: an entry-level product that needs no excuses. This is no corner-cutting and cost-shaved bare-bones model, the Kim competes on its own terms and has the balls, and the finesse to challenge anything at or near its price. Or a fair few costing a good deal more, for that matter. +