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Wharfedale Diamond 12.1 Loudspeaker Review

Posted on 17th December, 2020

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Jay Garrett takes a shine to this dazzling little standmount speaker...

Wharfedale

Diamond 12.1 speakers

£249 RRP



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Cost-conscious British audiophiles have traditionally gravitated to a handful of well-known brands offering lots of sound-per-pound. One of these is Wharfedale, and since 1982 that means its Diamond series of small standmounters in particular. But designing, building and distributing loudspeakers in this particular market sector is no easy task, so the new Diamond 12 range (/news/wharfedale-diamond-12-series-speaker-range-launched) has its work cut out.

The range starts at just £199 for the entry-level 12.0 bookshelf speakers, and it's topped by the 12.4 floorstander at £699. Tested here today is the £249 Diamond 12.1 standmounter. In the grand scheme of hi-fi things, these aren't big sums of money we're talking about; others might spend as much on a pair of cables or a phono cartridge.

Much as I go weak at the knees at the prospect of more esoteric loudspeaker creations, I've never lost the thrill of finding speakers in what's crudely termed budget and mid-market price brackets, that really do the business. What made me especially interested in taking the Diamond 12 series for a spin is that the new range has been designed by **Karl-Heinz Fink** – loudspeaker designer, engineer and consultant extraordinaire. He's been responsible for designing or co-designing a vast range of speakers over the years for a multitude of manufacturers – latterly the Q Acoustics range up to a couple of years ago.



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The humble Diamond 12.1 certainly has no easy road ahead of it. As well as being made to sell to those on a strict budget, it also has to impress whether it's plugged into a PC soundcard, mini Hi-Fi or bargain pre-loved full-sized amplifier. This mid-sized bookshelf/standmounter is just fifty notes more than the 12.0, and so is prime upselling territory. It's still compact enough to sit where the 12.0 would, more-or-less, but offers extra cabinet capacity for beefier bass. Nevertheless, according to Karl-Heinz, the larger 12.2 will be the better seller. Really?

Where I do agree with Mr Fink, however, is his desire to offer young people something affordable to get them started – as he bluntly put it, “high-end is mostly for old people”. With this in mind, his design takes into consideration that small speakers will most likely be placed in bedrooms, dorms or apartments. The result is that the Diamond 12.1 doesn't need a lot of room around it. Naturally, it is best not to set it right up against a wall, but it's fine not far from it.

UP CLOSE

Unboxing this compact, two-way 310x180x280mm (HxWxD) pair of speakers, I was pleased by the overall look and feel. Build appears to be pretty good, and the cabinet feels reassuringly solid. This is no doubt aided by the well-engineered panels constructed from varying thicknesses of MDF bonded together, used to control resonance. Karl-Heinz says that part of his

strategy to get the most out of a loudspeaker is to clean up the cabinet as much as possible. "Sometimes a brace in the right position can make all the difference", so no doubt that he had a hand in the "Intelligent Spot Bracing", then.



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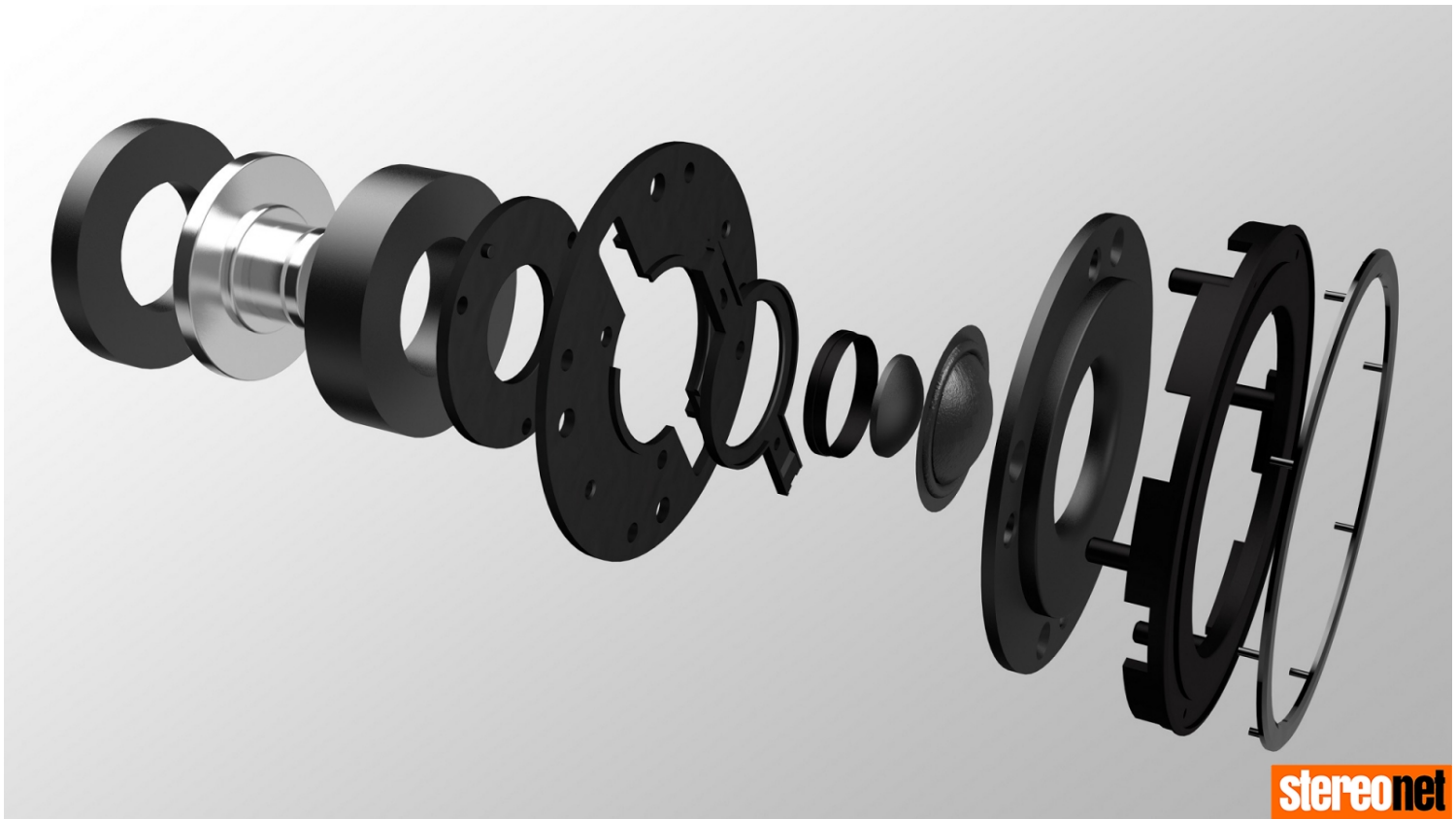
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Wharfedale Klarity driver

The driver unit complement includes a 130mm mid/bass driver that uses a polypropylene/mica composite cone material dubbed Klarity by Wharfedale. Apparently, this has been designed to offer an optimal balance between rigidity and damping. The Klarity driver is further augmented by a rear-firing reflex port. The 25mm woven polyester film dome tweeter sports a high-gloss coating and boasts a magnet system and front plate said to be optimised for wide dispersion and uncompressed behaviour.



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Diamond 12 tweeter exploded

The treble unit and mid/bass driver handover is done via a crossover network using an acoustic LKR 24dB topology; this includes air-core inductors of the type claimed to be more commonly found in high-end designs.

The result is a little loudspeaker with a quoted frequency response of 65Hz-20kHz and 88dB/1w/1m sensitivity. Considering that its nominal impedance is put at a bog-standard 8 ohms, that's a good figure and means the Diamond 12.1 goes a little louder for the same amount of power than many price and/or size rivals. Maximum power handling is put at 100W RMS.

THE LISTENING



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Paired with another beer-money bargain, Onkyo's A-9010 (UK) (</reviews/onkyo-a-9010-uk-integrated-amplifier-review>) integrated amplifier, the Wharfedale Diamond 12.1 really shone. Confident, composed and comely, this bookshelf design proved quite addictive. However, it was the level of musical refinement that the Diamond 12.1 presented that was the cherry on top.

Kicking off with *El Diablo* from the mid-eighties **Duran Duran** arty splinter-group **Arcadia**, and the speed and musical articulation that I was enjoying put a big smile on my face. The fretless bass was vocal and warm, while the snare and cymbals snapped with an icy cutting edge, typical of what I would expect from eighties production values.

Two Tribes by **Frankie Goes To Hollywood** also displayed the Diamond's talent with the low end. Granted, you are never going to get the true subterranean depths hidden on **Erykah Badu's** *Rimshot* from even the most talented of standmounters. However, the driving bass on the Frankie track got the toe-tapping seal of approval.



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Hans Zimmer's *Open Road* from the *Wonderwoman 1984* soundtrack also enjoyed that punch and presence with plenty enough detail to allow the listener to follow even the most subtle lines. Moreover, these talented little boxes are able to present a dynamic musical score much better than their size would suggest, as well as keeping it organised.

Attached to a Naim Uniti Atom (</reviews/review-naim-uniti-atom-with-focal-aria-906>), and the same story continued with *Lazurus* from **David Bowie's** *Blackstar* album. As The Thin White Duke plaintively suggests, "look up here, I'm in heaven. I've got scars that can't be seen", it's a tingles-down-the-spine catalyst. However, it's not just how Bowie's vocals are projected, it's also the seamless balance between the Klarity driver and tweeter that generates such cohesiveness.

This is perhaps this loudspeaker's Joker card, as it manages to produce an even-handed midband that slightly smooths any rough edges that electronics in this price bracket may bring to the party. Personally, I think this is a masterstroke by the designers, as giving the Diamond 12.1 the hard-faced analytical skills of the Ophidian P1 Evolution (</reviews/ophidian-p1-evolution-loudspeaker-review>), for example, could bring the listener a world of pain.



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Moving to more frenetic material, such as *Jerry Was a Racecar Driver* by **Primus** and this little loudspeaker proved not only that it can deliver punch, but that it's also no slouch in the rhythmic stakes. The dinky Diamond had no issue with following **Les Claypool** and **Herb Alexander** as they throw rhythms around with scant regard for anyone listening. At the same time, **Larry LaLonde** lays six-string cadences over the top seemingly disobeying most music theory. Even this wasn't enough to throw the Wharfedale off course. Instead, Claypool's singular bass style comes through dextrously and closely knitted with Herb's drumming. Even with the guitar over the top of all this, Claypool's vocals are still where they should be in the mix and retain his unmistakable character. It would be dismissive to say that the speed of these speakers is purely down to the size of drivers. However, it's also the articulation and clarity of what they produce. That is where the Wharfedale shows its talent.



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Although the 12.1 will let the listener know about poor recordings, it isn't as analytical as some other standmount loudspeakers out there. With *Plastic Dreamer* by **It Bites** – a dreamlike slice of prog-pop – I felt that the slightly more expensive Triangle Borea BR03 (</reviews/triangle-borea-br03-bookshelf-speaker-review>) gave a tad more insight. That said, the Wharfedale also seemed more surefooted than the Q Acoustics 3030i (</reviews/q-acoustics-3030i-standmount-loudspeakers-review>) I had to hand. None of that diminished my enjoyment of the track's precision though. The dynamics and timing were spot-on, and the staging of the four-piece was respectable.

Somewhat unfairly, I also hooked the little Diamond up to my Anthem STR (</reviews/anthem-str-integrated-amplifier-review>) integrated amplifier. Pushing **Killing Joke's** *Pandemonium* through at a hearty volume was the only time when I felt this speaker to be raising the white flag. However, the likelihood that the pairing of Diamond 12.1 and Anthem STR would happen anywhere other than a cruel reviewer's listening room is slim-to-none!

THE VERDICT

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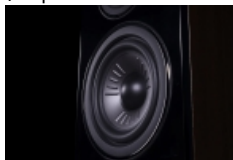
(https://www.stereonet.com/uk/images/uploads/StereoNET_Applause_Award_2020.png) Respect due to **Karl-Heinz Fink** and team Wharfedale, then. Once again, the Diamond series shows just what is possible for minimal outlay. The new 12.1 is an impressive performer and manages to undercut other respected budget boxes by no small margin, yet still delivers excellent overall performance. It's an extremely competitive arena with an almost endless list of possibilities, so in the end, it comes down to personal preference, music taste and partnering electronics. Yet this stands out as a great baby box, so hear it if you possibly can.

[Visit Wharfedale for more information \(/uk/brands/wharfedale\)](/uk/brands/wharfedale)

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