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KEF Q11 Meta

Now in its ninth iteration over nearly 35 years in production, the Q series gets a 'MAT makeover' headed by the Q11 tower
 Review: Mark Craven Lab: Paul Miller

KEF launched its Q series Meta loudspeakers toward the end of 2024 with plenty of fanfare, but to any hi-fi enthusiast with half an eye on this brand, the announcement came as no surprise. We'd already seen how the introduction of the 'revolutionary' Meta Absorption Material Technology (MAT) on KEF's LS50 Meta [HFN Jun '21] was followed by Meta updates of its Blade [HFN May '22], Reference [HFN Jun '23] and then R series [HFN Jan '24]. At the same time, KEF's bottom-of-the-rung Q range was last updated in 2017. So, with hindsight, the Q series Meta, topped by the £1999 Q11 Meta floorstander seen here, is about as expected as anything gets in hi-fi.

That Meta suffix, by way of a recap, refers to a development of the company's Uni-Q driver array, specifically the MAT disc that's now placed behind the tweeter. Via a maze-like surface of quarterwave resonators, each tuned to a specific frequency, this acts to absorb rear radiation – '99% of the unwanted sound' says KEF – and thus clean up the speaker's HF behaviour [see PM's Lab Report, p79].

INTO THE SHADOW

The Uni-Q array has been part of the KEF playbook since the late 1980s and features a dome tweeter placed at the acoustic centre of a midrange unit – two units behaving as a single point source. Key developments over time have been marked as 'generations', up to the current 12th-gen-with-MAT design. Yet this does not mean, perhaps obviously, that the version on the Q11 Meta is the same as that on, for example, KEF's Blade One Meta or R11 Meta [HFN May '22 and Jan '24].

For one thing, the vented aluminium dome tweeter here is 19mm rather than 25mm across, and the surrounding aluminium cone midrange is a 100mm, not 125mm, design. Additionally, the MAT disc is a new single-layer type, consisting of 20 tuned channels, while the two-way speakers in the Q series Meta [see boxout, p77] use a 15-channel MAT disc.

Surrounding the Q11 Meta's Uni-Q array is KEF's 'Shadow Flare', a waveguide that

extends the profile of the midrange cone to 'direct' the output of the tweeter away from the cabinet edges, and reduce diffraction effects. This is a new feature for the series, leveraged from KEF's higher-end designs, as is the 'Flexible Decoupling Chassis' that aims to limit vibrations from the midrange motor system reaching the speaker's cabinet walls.

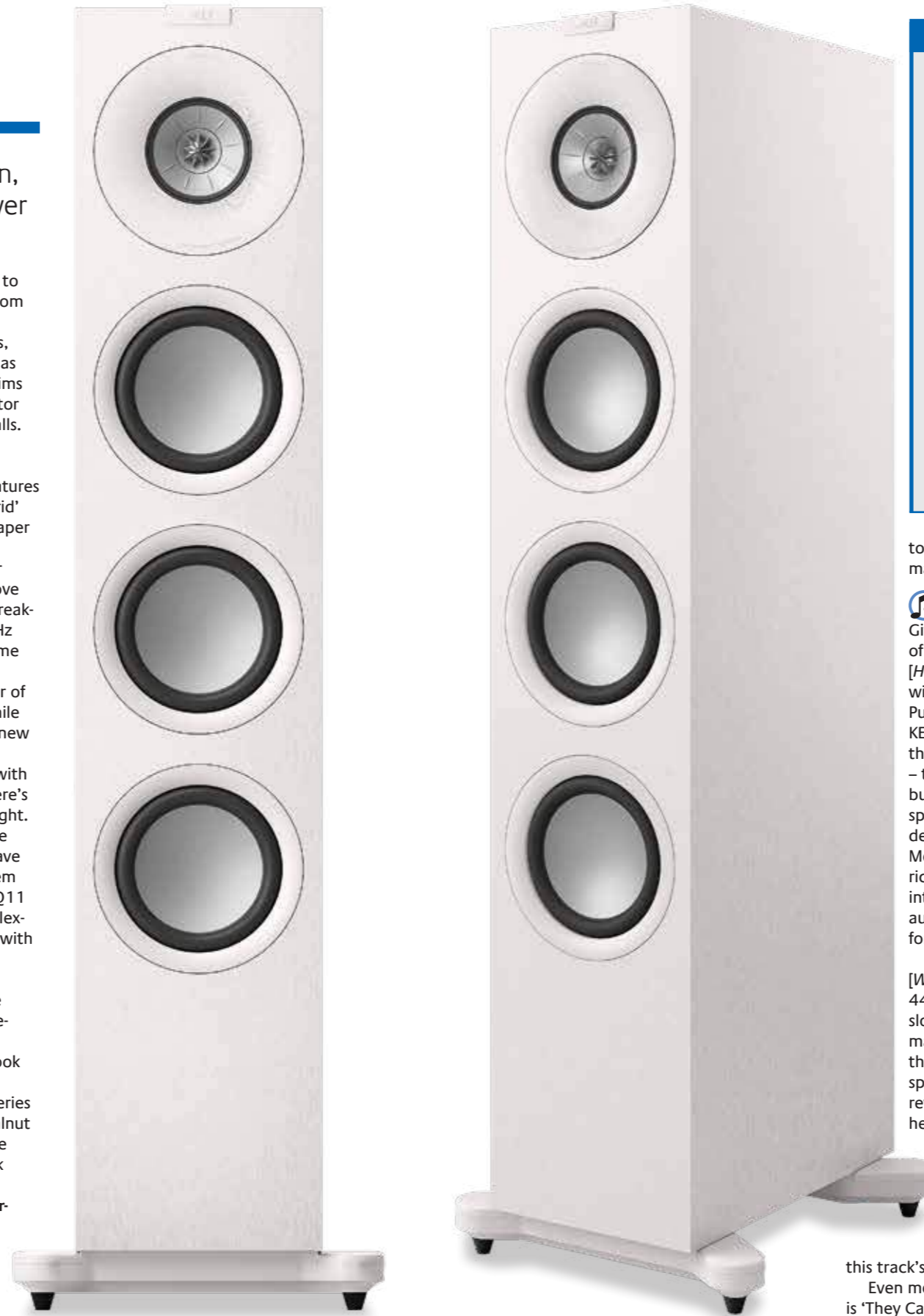
RAISING THE WOOF

Below its Uni-Q system, the Q11 Meta features a trio of 165mm woofers. These are 'hybrid' types, with a layer of aluminium atop a paper cone, and for this new lineup feature an upgraded motor system promising higher efficiency, and revised geometry to improve structural rigidity. The bass driver's first break-up mode is cited at 2.6kHz [see Graph 2, p79], or some two octaves beyond the 480Hz bass/mid crossover of this three-way model. While these changes make the new flagship Q series speaker more easily comparable with KEF's step-up R series, there's another upgrade almost hiding in plain sight.

The previous Q series range-topper, the two-and-a-half-way Q950, appeared to have a trio of (200mm) woofers but two of them were auxiliary bass radiators (ABRs). The Q11 Meta has three complete bass drivers, reflex-loaded via a rear-firing port and supplied with two-part foam bungs for user tuning.

Measuring 1112x317x380mm (hwd), once installed on their outrigger feet, the Q11 Metas are reasonably svelte for triple-woofer floorstanders, and although the cabinet design is somewhat 'boxy' they look slick and modern. There are none of the flashy colourways of the Reference or R series here, just Satin Black, Satin White and Walnut finishes, the second of those changing the colour of the drivers/surrounds from black

RIGHT: Three 165mm alloy diaphragm/paper-coned bass units join a 12th-generation, MAT-equipped Uni-Q mid/treble driver. The tall, slim cabinet is stabilised by spiked outriggers and is available in three colourways – Satin Black, Satin White (pictured) and Walnut



QUEUE FOR Q

For buyers unable to stretch to the Q11 Meta's asking price, or in search of more compact solutions, KEF's new series includes not only additional floorstander and standmount options (plus home cinema-centric Dolby Atmos and centre channel enclosures) – it also introduces two designs not seen before in any Q range. The Q Concerto Meta (£1099), a three-way standmount akin to KEF's R3 Meta and Reference 1 Meta models, partners its Uni-Q array with a single 165mm bass driver and takes its name from the manufacturer's first ever three-way standmount, the Concerto model of 1969. Meanwhile, the Q4 Meta (£349 each, inset picture) is a radical departure from the KEF norm, being a slim (142mm deep) on-wall two-way speaker, with side-facing bass reflex port, and designed for both discreet music listening and surround sound applications.

Rounding out the lineup are the Q7 Meta (£1350), another three-way floorstander but with only two of the Q11 Meta's three bass drivers; the Q3 Meta (£649) and Q1 Meta (£499) standmounts; the Q6 Meta centre channel/LCR speaker; and the Q8a Dolby Atmos surround unit, which can be either wall-mounted or positioned on top of its Q Meta siblings. There's no dedicated subwoofer in the range, with KEF instead recommending its KC and Kube models.



to white. Fabric grilles, that affix magnetically, are supplied.

SPACE INVADER

Given the tried-and-trusted power of Primare's PRE35/A35.2 duo [HFN Dec '19], in conjunction with Matrix Audio's Element X2 Pure streamer/DAC [HFN Dec '23], KEF's Q11 Metas impressed with the size and heft of their sound – these may have modest pricing but they still can handle a big space. The overall 'voicing', to a degree akin to that of the R series Meta models, favours warmth and richness over outright analytical introspection, but still sounds authentically 'audiophile'. Value for money is assured.

'My Soul I', by Anna Leone [Wandered Away; AllPoints 44.1kHz/24-bit download], is a slow but grand-sized track that makes the sweet-but-raspy voice of the singer its main attraction. KEF's speakers threw a spotlight on her, revealing the crack of a syllable here or a pause for breath there, while fingers plucked and picked at an acoustic guitar. Well-balanced against all this fine detail were the weighty, dreamy synths and buoyant bass, the Q11 Metas nailing

this track's contrasted nature.

Even more about vocal performances is 'They Can't Take That Away From Me'

from *Ella And Louis* [Verve Recordings, 96kHz/24-bit download], where Ella Fitzgerald's singing comes across as effortless with a hint of sassiness, Armstrong's a gorgeous baritone with playful vibrato. Through the Q11 Metas, this set – laid down in 1956 – sounded both fresh as a daisy but still of its time, with quietly mixed backing and mono presentation. It was only Armstrong's trademark trumpet licks, which pop up here and on the equally delightful follow-up 'Under A Blanket Of Blue', that hinted at the Q11 Meta's 'entry-level' stature, sounding a little strident on occasion.

BLUES TO BRAWN

At other times, these new floorstanders were completely at ease with the task at hand, delivering Gary Moore's 'Still Got The Blues', from the album of the same name [Virgin CDV 2612], with excellent extension and focus on the bassline and an alluring central presence to his vocal and guitar melodies. The strings during the pre-chorus were fluid and clear, and when Moore switches pick-ups to send his solo flying, the shift in tone was explicitly revealed, instantly turning what had been almost easy listening into air-guitar excitement.

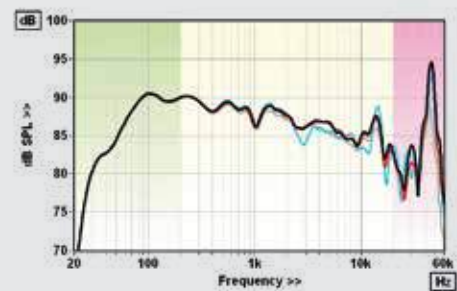
This feeling of involvement and vigour was also in evidence with Chase and Status's 'Hocus Pocus' [No More Idols; ↗

LAB REPORT

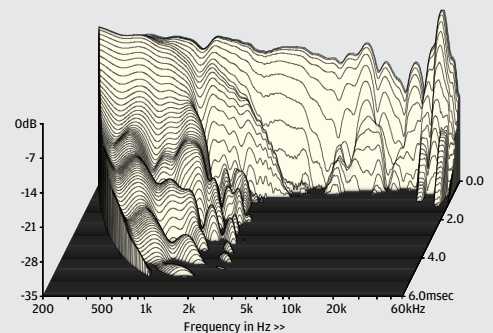
KEF Q11 META

Measured on its Uni-Q axis the Q11's three 165mm 'hybrid alloy' bass units make their presence felt in what is a generally down-tilted, bass-rich response [see Graph 1], albeit with a peak at 14kHz and strong main dome resonance at 45.7kHz (+7dB re. 1kHz). The latter is also seen on the CSD waterfall [Graph 2], as is the impact of the MAT disc in removing any treble modes. Otherwise, response errors are a moderate ± 4.1 dB and ± 4.5 dB (200Hz-20kHz), respectively, but with pair matching a superbly tight 0.35dB (200Hz-15kHz), relaxing to 0.9dB up to 20kHz.

KEF recommends toeing the speakers in by 10-15° and this certainly delivers an even smoother response [grey trace] with reduced ± 3.4 dB errors, but the overall trend is still 'warm' with a steady (5.5dB) decline from 200Hz-10kHz. KEF's integration of its speaker grilles into the overall design is usually spot-on and while this tall Q model shows a 2dB null near the 2.8kHz crossover [blue trace] the grille's impact is otherwise benign. Its sensitivity specs are also usually on the money but, in this case, a dip in response at 1kHz takes its rated 89dB down to 86.3dB, although the mean 500Hz-8kHz figure is a slightly healthier 87.3dB. Meanwhile that trio of drivers shares the same 55-400Hz (-6dB) bandwidth, augmented by a clean 29Hz port tuning to deliver a diffraction-corrected 45Hz (-6dB re. 200Hz). Deeper extension is possible in-room with boundary reinforcement. The amplifier load is also a little tougher than the 3.16ohm/147Hz minimum suggests, as the impedance modulus tucks below 4ohm from 96-900Hz while a negative swing in phase angle (-64°/77Hz) contributes to a low EPDR of 1.2ohm/99Hz. PM



ABOVE: Response inc. nearfield summed drivers/port [green], freefield corrected to 1m at 2.83V [yellow], ultrasonic [pink]. L, blk; R, red; grille, blue; $\pm 15^\circ$, grey



ABOVE: Minor breakup modes associated with the alloy bass drivers but MAT scrubs the treble clean

LEFT: Q11 replaces the old Q series' ABR with an optimised 64mm diameter port. Three-way crossover does not support bi-wiring or bi-amping so a single set of 4mm binding posts are fitted

percussion, brass and woodwind were well-delineated and danced across a soundstage with good depth. Even more light and shade was on show with Williams' 'Imperial March' from *Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back*, where the orchestra's force drives the main motif, followed by delicate instrumental flourishes.

GOLD STANDARD

It's a well-balanced sound and there's no fear of listening 'fatigue' – the Q11 Meta's treble is smooth and grain-free, and the midrange well-resolved. Indeed, these speakers conjure an inviting performance from any genre. Fleetwood Mac's 'Gold Dust Woman' [Rumours 2001 remaster, Rhino Records; 96kHz/24-bit] was superbly staged, with real presence to the twangy guitar strings and drum beats in the outro. Meanwhile, Max Richter's 'On The Nature Of Daylight' [The Blue Notebooks, Deutsche Grammophon 483 5668] sounded poised and precise, the appeal all about the integration of low and high strings.

This instrumental builds from a lone cello to a wealth of tones, its minor-key harmonies pulling on the heartstrings. The Q11 Metas – which earlier sounded in their element with full-throttle electronica – here demonstrated their musical, measured side. There's more to KEF's latest affordable speakers than meets the eye... ⤴

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Not for KEF a modest revamp – the new Q11 Meta represents a complete overhaul of its biggest entry-level floorstander. Now a three-way, ported design boasting various trickle-down technologies, this speaker comfortably outperforms its price point by blending musical detail with plenty of weight and scale. Tremendous fun to listen to, it should be considered nothing less than a hi-fi bargain.

Sound Quality: 88%



Mercury/Vertigo 2745135], where the duo splice a drum 'n' bass style breakbeat with atmospheric samples and deep, growling bass. Through the Q11 Metas these lows were given their due prominence, and steered clear of bloat, helping the piece as a whole sound attacking and rhythmically spot-on.

Switching to John Williams' theme for Oliver Stone's *JFK*, performed by the Dallas Winds [John Williams At The Movies, Reference Recordings RR-142SACD], found the speakers constructing a cohesive musical portrait, revelling in acoustic instruments. The military-style

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL/1m/2.83V – 1kHz/Mean/IEC)	86.3dB / 87.3dB / 85.4dB
Impedance modulus: minimum & maximum (20Hz–20kHz)	3.16ohm @ 147Hz 18.0ohm @ 62Hz
Impedance phase: minimum & maximum (20Hz–20kHz)	-64° @ 77Hz +42° @ 1.23kHz
Pair matching/Resp. error (200Hz–20kHz)	0.9dB/ ± 4.1 dB/ ± 4.5 dB
LF/HF extension (-6dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	45Hz / 24.4kHz/24.1kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m)	0.1% / 0.25% / 0.4%
Dimensions (HWD) / Weight (each)	1112x317x380mm / 22kg