

## Estelon XC Loudspeaker

by Chris Thomas

**F**or me, trying to capture the essence of any audio component can only be done through musical description. But as I have said in this magazine many times, we listen to systems and not individual components, and the reviewing of anything requires some experience of the various audio alchemies involved. If we are to wring the best possible performance from audio equipment then, this demands paying attention to everything that contributes, including components and system infrastructure, adequate run-in, positioning, and of course patience – sometimes lots of patience.

As if I needed reminding, these demands came home with a resounding crash when Kog Audio arrived in the distant past of November 2013 to deliver a pair of Estelon XC speakers and install them in my living room. Ceramic drivers have intrigued me for a while and this was further fuelled by my time with the small Lindemann BL-10 that incorporated an Accuton ceramic bass/mid unit, designed by Herr Lindemann himself. The early reputation of these drivers as being dynamically brittle or tonally bleached soon went out the window, and I thought that the speed and rather sumptuous nature of the midband made the BL-10 one of the very best small/tiny speakers I have heard. I set my sights on one day securing a pair of high-end ceramic-driven loudspeakers: so the opportunity of a lengthy loan of the Estonian-made Estelons proved hard to resist. Looking at the models in their range and bearing in mind the size of my listening room, the (relatively small) XC seemed to be the only model that I could comfortably accommodate. This three-driver system sits in an exotically shaped cabinet, and comes supplied with a non-removable, integrated stand.

As they emerged, packed in individual flight cases and from the icy cold of the distributor's vehicle, it became clear they were relatively new, so there were few early expectations. They might be the smallest in the Estelon range but, standing a metre away from the back wall, the tall, slender XC still made a considerable visual impact in the room and their black lacquer high-gloss finish emphasised their presence rather than diminished it. If I were to own a pair, I would certainly consider one of the lighter custom colours to minimise their visual impact, though having said that, it is surprising how familiarity has seen their physical presence lessen as I have come to appreciate the way their curves seem to shift in changing light.

Where the first half hour of a test drive in a new car might be informative, it was anything but with the XC. If ever there was a case of the speaker driving the room, this was it. The copious levels of bass I heard at first were quite overwhelming, but the cabinets were still icy cold to the touch. Having observed this sort of thing many times before, I know better than to make any quick judgements. At the end of that first evening's gentle workout it was clear that there was some way to go and that's putting it politely. Fraser from Kog Audio (the UK distributor), who has more experience with Estelon than anybody in the UK, urged patience and I completely agreed. Hour by hour and day by day, things began to change as the XCs and I became better acquainted. They did their work and grew more comfortable driving the airspace that was allotted to them. Like a new puppy they stopped chewing the furniture and (slowly) became part of the system as opposed to its wild, unruly child.

As the days became weeks the Estelons and I began to form a musical alliance and an unspoken agreement. I would supply them with the best I had to offer in terms of the remarkable dCS Vivaldi CD player and my David Berning Pre One and Quadrature Z amplifiers. I would feed them via a pair of Nordost Odin speaker cables and take great care with their positioning, making micro adjustments to their distances from each other and the back wall before moving on to their toe-in angles until they and I were happy. They would tell me musical stories and I would listen. It was a partnership that would take a couple of months to fully develop and even as I write, is becoming more intimate and open.

The curvaceous shape of the cabinet has been developed over years of listening and experimentation with angles, curves, radii, and dimensions. It isn't there just to look pretty or different. You can see the evidence of this by checking out the variations on the theme throughout the Estelon range. If, like me you were wondering if the sculptural external shape is mirrored internally then I can tell you it is not. I am reliably informed that the interiors are quite different, though no less complex. Each driver has its own custom enclosure and the



► construction details are something that Estelon likes to keep in-house, although I understand that both their individual shapes and the laminated material structures are complex. The cabinet is rear vented, formed from a marble-based composite, and is superbly finished. Estelon's founder and designer Alfred Vassilkov spent a full five years in development of both the form and the exact materials before releasing the first series of speakers. At the moment, the XC is the only standmount design in the range. The integrated twin column stand certainly feels as if it is internally filled and the base is usually fitted with the engineered spikes, with or without floor protectors that come in the accompanying spares case. I used these and also managed to attach some Stillpoints Ultra 5's directly to the stand as an interesting alternative.

The drivers are all ceramic and made to Estelon's specification by Accuton in Germany. Two 173mm bass/mid units sit either side of the 30mm inverted dome tweeter. This has an ultra-hard vented ceramic dome driven by a neodymium motor. It is supported by a soft fabric surround with high-viscosity ferrofluid damping, which together keep the dome centred and linear. This is a truly exceptional high frequency unit that musically integrates beautifully with the two larger drivers. The light, ultra-stiff ceramic material seems to offer the ideal qualities for a speaker cone, but as I mentioned there have always been mutterings about their rather cool tonality and the ups and downs of their performance during the break-in period that can be lengthy. Where the XC is concerned, after the lengthy run-in period, I have found neither to be the case.

A well run-in pair of XC's, properly driven by a carefully installed system of excellent components are a musical *tour de force*. Tonal balance is excellent, though I could just about understand the argument for a touch more ultra high frequency 'air'. It took me some time before I adjusted to them after the brighter and sharper Focal Diablo, but now I find them just about perfect. Their bandwidth, especially through the bottom end is more than impressive and it is all totally useable with zero indication that Estelon have tried to wring any more out of them extension-wise than they are comfortable giving. The bass flows from the cabinets with power, control, authority, and quite superb precision and this gives the music an incredibly strong platform and great presence. Pitch stability is exemplary as is the range of tonal colouring they are capable of. I would say this is among the best I have heard. The speed of those ceramic drivers brings really special instrumental and vocal articulation and there is no feeling that this diminishes as the frequency drops.

Up through the midrange, the XC remains completely comfortable regardless of what levels of musical detail it is

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called to deal with. The Vivaldi and Berning set up through the Nordost cable provided quite a challenge in terms of both musical density and dynamic opportunities, but this is a speaker that yells 'bring it on' and just thrives on clean driving power and solving rhythmic puzzles. The XC's cabinet construction must be seen as a complete success as it allows the drivers ample opportunity for sheer musical expression without a hint of compression, be it a delicate background phrase or just a different ambient structure surrounding an instrument. You cannot hear the cabinet. The structural and mechanical design elements give these Estelons a great sense of musical togetherness and integration. The music is as seamless and 'joined-up' as I have heard from three drive units. It is a real music-lover's delight and heaven for detail-spotters. Driver integration is exceptional. That inverted dome ceramic tweeter is the master of everything, from its pure transient attack through to an immaculate view of instrumental sustain and decay. Speed-wise, the Estelon is completely cohesive, but it is the overall musical picture that is so remarkably and intricately balanced.

The uncoloured nature of the speaker's tonality and balance means that you can listen, without fatigue or predictability and is made all the more interesting by the way the XC's open up the musical stage. This is somewhat different from most similar arrangements I have heard, where the voice or main instrument is located with unwavering stability slap bang in the centre, and the supporting cast is layered in neat, detailed tiers back to the cabinets. Close your eyes and you ►

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► would be hard pressed to point to the speakers at all as the XC has enormous projection but forms a very wide and open soundstage way beyond the speakers' outer boundaries.

It has no prescribed formula into which it fits the music. Each disc has its own unique presentation and musical shape. Take Nickel Creek's eponymous album for example. Producer Alison Krauss gave the band a powerful identity on this cut. She loves close-microphone techniques and here she employs them to accentuate the percussive elements of Chris Thile's fantastic mandolin playing. His astonishing plectrum technique is integral to the sound of this album. He is a master of the instrument and throughout the album shows its broad dynamic and tonal versatility. Krauss uses these textures and attack to give the instrument its recorded voice and leading role to drive the songs and builds the album around it placing it to perfection to provide the tempo, closeness, and tension. When the voices come in they are held, solid as a rock, in the air in front of you and as the harmonies swell out of the song the XC shows you a very potent, touchable view of the band. Many speakers would buckle here as the complexities of the musical threads increase (through the Diablo it can be a little relentless), but the way the XC manages the perspectives leaves it entirely accessible, very vigorous, and exciting.

From top to bottom, the XC combines a remarkable sense of tight focus and dynamic stop/start abilities that get a grip on the music and don't let go. They never sound vague, but don't think they sound over analytical or artificial. They stay the right side of the line when it comes to avoiding that. Yes, they are precise and endlessly explicit in the way they deal with dynamics and it is the freedom they allow each instrument or voice that lets them open so many musical possibilities. Their sensitivity to dynamic shifts and contrast is very special but they are just as happy expressing the bowing of a string, as they are a plectrum striking it.

Speed without control and perspective is one sure way to fatigue. Sure, there are many speakers around that are mightily impressive on fairly restricted material. But, give the Estelon XC the tools and it will reward you consistently with that rare blend of extreme subtlety and drama without ignoring the beauty. This is their home turf. Resolution is all very well, but combining it with a really focussed sense of the music through exquisite timing and dynamic intensity while showing you a view of musicianship and playing technique is still quite rare. The XC is no one-trick pony and could work in many locations, but listeners with small rooms who would like to be able to accommodate a speaker design with real bass that doesn't smear the sound or overwhelm the listening space should take a serious listen to this Estelon. Kog Audio

informs me that they have also had success in small rooms with the bigger models.

In so many ways, the Estelon XC is the best speaker that ever came to stay and I am going to be very sorry when it leaves. It is certainly expensive, but given the quality of the build and more importantly, the way it opens the music, I think it still represents very good value. +

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Type:** Three-driver Mid-Tweeter-Mid standmount design

**Driver complement:** 2x173mm Accuton ceramic mid/bass drivers, 1x30mm Accuton ceramic inverted dome tweeter.

**Internal Wiring:** Kubala-Sosna

**Freq. Response:** 45Hz-28kHz

**Nominal Impedance:** 4 ohms

**Sensitivity:** 91dB/W/m

**Dimensions (HxWxD):** 1260 x 332 x 394mm (with stand)

724 x 262 x 367mm (without stand)

**Net Weight:** 49kg with stand per loudspeaker

**Finishes available:** High gloss black as standard, other finishes to order.

**Price:** £15,500 per pair.

**Manufacturer:** Estelon

**URL:** Estelon.com

**UK Distributor:** Kog Audio

**URL:** www.kogaudio.com/

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