

Behind Kudos – Meet Derek Gilligan

Derek Gilligan – founder and MD of Kudos Audio – has been designing and building high end loudspeakers for most of his career. In that time, he’s become known for a unique, empirical approach to loudspeaker design – underpinned by masterful simplicity in every aspect of their engineering.

In this piece, we find out more about Derek’s background, what led him into loudspeaker design, and ultimately, how he came to hone the skill set and engineering philosophy that has placed Kudos Audio loudspeakers among the most revered products in HiFi.



A LIFE OF MUSIC

Derek was born into a family of craftsmen, surrounded by musicians, engineers, joiners, and passionate HiFi enthusiasts. The son of a master joiner and cabinet maker and youngest of four children, Derek quickly found himself intimately involved in music. Derek spent many years partnered with his brother and musician, Trevor, providing live sound support to Trevor’s numerous musical projects. Over time, Derek began to deepen what was a longstanding passion for loudspeaker design – assisting in hand-building the speakers that made up their PA.

Even in these embryonic stages of his career, it was clear Derek was thinking differently. The two brothers quickly cultivated a reputation for supplying some of the best-sounding live PA in North East England. Recording studio work and live sound commissions followed, culminating in Derek and Trevor working on INXS’ first ever UK tour. During this time, Derek’s job was to assess the sonic quality of the room, and relay this to his brother at the Front Of House sound desk. Soon, a working practice would emerge that Derek would faithfully adhere to throughout his entire career – trusting his ears above anything else.

“The one thing that always struck me was that you could set a PA system up that measures perfectly using parametric EQ to flatten it all out, but it never sounded quite right. We’d always get better results, and had a reputation for keeping the crowds happy, by ignoring those traditional sets of rules.” – Derek Gilligan.

After the INXS tour, Derek realised touring life wasn’t quite for him, and that he much preferred to remain in his home in North East England. His brother, Trevor, went on to become a hugely respected pro sound engineer, working globally on major touring projects ever since.

NEAT ACOUSTICS

In January 1989, Derek started working at North East Audio Traders – later to become NEAT Acoustics – selling quality second-hand audio equipment. It was a year or so after joining the company that Derek was given what would prove to be a life-altering new project.

“We found we never had enough small black speakers to sell, and I was asked the question, ‘do you think you could make a speaker to sell in the shop?’. So I enlisted the help of my brother’s and father’s business to make the cabinets, and the Neat Petite loudspeaker was born.”

To this day, the classic Neat Petite remains a favourite among HiFi enthusiasts. Throughout the 90s and early 00s, Derek worked with Neat Acoustics, developing a wide range of award-winning loudspeakers. But by 2006, a new challenge was calling, and it was time for Derek to step out on his own.

KUDOS AUDIO BEGINS

“I came away from Neat and thought what am I going to do? I might as well do what I’m good at.”



In 2006, Derek began the pursuit of his own unique design goals, and Kudos Audio began trading. ‘Kudos’ was a brand name that had existed previously – however Derek took the ‘Kudos’ brand from stand manufacturing into the much more familiar waters of loudspeaker design.

“The first thing I do is to ignore the traditional rulebook. My belief is that everything we hear cannot be measured and I like to think I’ve proved this at Kudos. I can make two loudspeakers that measure differently but sound almost the same and vice versa. Not that measurements aren’t valid at all, but it’s not the yardstick to everything that we hear.”

With Kudos, Derek deliberately took a very different view on how to design and assess loudspeakers, using music as the primary tool. Rigorous and extensive critical listening became the main marker of success or failure for a prototype speaker – with rules-based, traditional measurements kept as a useful tool for fault analysis. Derek’s experience in live sound production had taught him to judge the sonic qualities of a speaker design by how it felt and how it sounded, rather than how it performed according to a series of strict technical measurements.

Much like any true craftsmen, Derek quickly identified one guiding principle as absolutely crucial to his loudspeaker designs – careful, curated simplicity. Derek understood implicitly that, in almost every case, a simple design yields greater results than an otherwise complex counterpart. This pursuit of simplicity would become the lodestone of Kudos Audio designs – defining the very fundamentals of every production loudspeaker to leave their factory doors.

CARDEA, SUPER CARDEA, AND X SERIES

“The C10 was one of the first products and got a bit of a cult status. It seemed to strike a chord when we first brought it out in 2006.”



Kudos Audio's first release was the Cardea Series, starting with the C10. The goal? To create the very best sounding loudspeaker at its price point. Masterful simplicity sat at the heart of it all, with the highest quality components utilised for a natural and intuitive sound reproduction. Derek utilised custom-designed SEAS drive units for the C10 – a relationship that would prove long lasting, with SEAS providing bespoke drive units for every future iteration of Kudos Audio loudspeakers.

It was also in the Cardea that Derek implemented some of the design aspects that would come to define Kudos listening. A low order crossover using the fewest possible components kept the signal path simple, clean and clear for a truer sound. As previously mentioned, music and the human ear were the primary tools used for designing the Cardea Series, with traditional technical measurements reserved for when design issues were encountered.

The C10 launched in 2006, winning a string of awards including a HiFi Choice Recommendation, five stars from HiFi Pig, a 'Best Buy' award from AVForums, and many more besides.

The C20 followed in 2007 – a floorstanding version of the bookshelf C10. This model introduced the fixed port boundary gap, giving the reflex port a fixed boundary to work against. This meant the boundary never changed no matter where the loudspeaker was placed, reducing any placement issues in the listening environment and ensuring an easier set-up. The C20 proved equally as popular with the HiFi community, claiming any number of plaudits, including an 'Outstanding Product' award from HiFi News. In their review, they said;

“The simple verdict? For all their compact size, understated engineering and refined styling, these are quite possibly the most sensationally rewarding way to spend under £5000 on a pair of speakers right now.”

The Cardea series firmly established Kudos Audio's position as a new market leader in high end loudspeaker production. In 2010, Kudos Audio followed up with the X2 – a highly popular floorstanding speaker that served as a superb entry-level option for music enthusiasts pursuing truly transcendent audio from their loudspeakers for the first time.

In 2012, Derek revealed the Super Cardea series. Building on the success of the C10 and C20, the Super 10A and Super 20A introduced a number of sonic and engineering refinements – including the ability to bypass the internal passive crossover, allowing fully active operation with the appropriate external electronic crossover. The Super Cardea series racked up an impressive array of awards of its own, including 5-Star reviews in The Ear and What HiFi? Magazine.

In 2014, the X3 made its debut. Similarly priced as an entry-level speaker, the X3 was designed as an upgrade on the popular X2, providing a step up in sound quality whilst building on the loudness capability of its earlier sibling. With the Cardea, Super Cardea, and X Series, Derek and Kudos Audio had set an unmistakably high bar. What could they bring to market that could surpass the performance of speaker ranges that had proved equally popular with critics and customers alike?

MEET THE TITANS

“The Titan Series is my finest achievement to date” – Derek Gilligan

In 2013, Derek created a new kind of floorstanding loudspeaker – The T88. The goal was to further enhance the many unique elements that had come to embody Kudos Audio, in a new, split-cabinet design, fully isolating the low end from the mid/bass unit and tweeter.

In 2017, the revolutionary design of the T88 was introduced to a mainstream audience, in the extensively tweaked and finessed Titan 808. The 808 honed both the performance and the aesthetic of the remarkable T88, providing a significantly sleeker look and even more refined sound to match.



Engineering for the Titan 808 was painstaking in nature and exact in its implementation. The 808 consists of an independent upper and lower cabinet, separated by precision-machined spacers and a port resonance guide. The upper cabinet houses the tweeter and mid/bass drive unit while the lower cabinet houses the two bass drivers. These are positioned in an isobaric arrangement, where the second driver is placed internally back-to-back with the first, delivering a significantly improved bass response and minimising distortion. By separating the cabinet into two parts, the higher and lower frequencies remain unaffected by one another, preserving a remarkable sonic clarity, even at high volumes.

The SEAS drive units present in earlier iterations of Kudos loudspeakers also saw a considerable redesign. Kudos and SEAS worked closely together to further advance SEAS' legendary Crescendo K2 fabric dome tweeter exclusively for Kudos.

And Derek's now-ubiquitous low order crossover design was further elevated, with no expense spared in its reworking for the Titan 808. The flagship Titan featured even higher-spec hand-matched Mundorf componentry, as well as having the ability to completely by-pass the crossover for active configuration. The sonic result of all this refinement is nothing short of astonishing – one of the fastest, clearest, most coherent and musically engaging loudspeakers available on the market today. In their review of the Titan 808, HiFi+ noted...

“It's a testament to Kudos' design that they weren't overpowering, overblown or overwrought, but that they nevertheless brought a sense of scale to the music which was

entirely appropriate in my modest listening space. Most importantly, they communicated the music and its emotional connection in the music.”

Adding to the Titan range, the 707 soon followed, placing much of the 808’s breathtaking musicality into a simpler, one-box design. A speaker that HiFi+ awarded their ‘Highly Recommended accolade, noting...

“There’s a sense of honesty in the warmth of their presentation, a limpid fluency that is both beautiful and entirely reassuring.”



Next to enter the Titan range were two sister speakers – the 606 and 505. The 606 became the most compact floorstanding speaker in the Titan range – with a significantly smaller footprint than the Titan 707 – making it a great fit for domestic settings where an understated presence is preferred. This was shortly followed by the bookshelf Titan 505, offering the same musical performance and sonic clarity as its floorstanding sibling, in a compact, stand-mounted cabinet. Both the 505 and 606 have proved hugely popular, securing a slew of 5 star reviews and awards. In AV Forum’s glowing review – in which the Titan 505 won an ‘Editor’s Choice’ award – they noted...

“This speaker is a masterpiece, a nigh-on perfect blend of engineering and soul that makes everything you play an event”.

Now complete with four models in the range, the Titan series provides a loudspeaker suitable for varying budgets and listening space, without compromising on build quality and performance – no matter which model you choose.

SIGAO DRIVE – THE FUTURE OF KUDOS

In 2024, Kudos Audio released their latest, revolutionary product. The SIGAO DRIVE built on the impressive active credentials of the Kudos loudspeaker range, by simplifying active listening in a wholly new and transformative way.



SIGAO DRIVE is an unpowered external crossover featuring no power supply yet sits in front of the amplifiers in the signal chain – taking the position of a traditionally active crossover. Featuring no power supply means SIGAO DRIVE reaches a whole new level of sonic clarity and definition, whilst making Kudos loudspeakers in active configuration compatible with virtually any amplifier brand you choose to use.

This new and genuinely unique product opens up a whole world of possibilities for Kudos Audio and Derek Gilligan – further cementing their position as genuine HiFi trailblazers. Derek has poured decades of experience and unconventional thinking into his loudspeaker designs and continues to take inspiration from the many advances made by Kudos Audio’s unique approach to listening.

Whatever comes next for Kudos Audio and Derek Gilligan, the future certainly looks bright.