

Simply Red

This floorstander is compact and bijou, but at what cost? **David Vivian** reckons this could be the zero-compromise option

Russell Kauffman is the most 'hands-on' speaker designer I know. When he drops off the Red 120Se for review he also brings in a dog-eared cardboard box and we spend half an hour listening to a motley collection of drive units simply held in his hand. Kauffman is keen to show me his *modus operandi* for auditioning drivers sans crossover and the attendant colourations introduced by a baffle and enclosure.

It's laughably easy to hear the qualitative differences. My guess is when you're as intimately 'plugged in' to your product as that, iterative improvement becomes a matter of personal growth.

In any event, Kauffman is far from a conventional operator when it comes to speaker design. Despite its neatly orthodox appearance, the Red 120Se goes its own way under the skin. For example, as with the regular Red 120 (HFC 461), all the drive units are

DETAILS
PRODUCT
Russell K Red 120Se
ORIGIN
UK
TYPE
2.5-way
floorstanding
loudspeaker
WEIGHT
18kg
DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
200 x 910 x 190mm
FEATURES
● 25mm soft
dome tweeter
● 2x 127mm paper
mid/bass drivers
● Quoted sensitivity:
86dB/1W/1m
DISTRIBUTOR
Russell K Ltd.
WEBSITE
russell-k.com



wired in positive phase, all diaphragms moving in unison in the same direction. This rather than having the tweeter connected in minus phase, as it is with most textbook designs, to smooth the transition from mid/bass driver to tweeter. Also key to the Kauffman method, phase must be optimised through the crossover region. His approach is to dispense crossover, response tuning, phase and impedance from one circuit.

Done right the perceived pay-off is claimed to be more rhythmically astute timing and musicality, aka the 'foot-tapping' thing. The intended upshot is that integration and focus improve to the extent you believe the sound is being delivered by a single driver and, moreover, remains stable as you move about the room. Speakers with the tweeter wired in minus phase invite the listener to focus more on hi-fi's technical aspects such as soundstage and tonality says Kauffman.

And then there's what he calls 'cabinet agility'. All Russell K enclosures are deliberately undamped. Traditionally damped cabinets seek to absorb energy radiated from the rear of the drivers and thus reduce what would otherwise be the cabinet's unwanted contributions of resonance and colouration.

In short, the uptick in fullness of the Red 120 is delivered with a new finesse

According to Kauffman, damping stores energy, slows down the sound and makes it out of synch with the forward output of the driver. So fluffy wadding, thick-walled construction and anti-resonance internal cladding aren't just unnecessary but harmful. The Russell K way sees the box completing the sonic profile of the speaker, synergistically singing along in sympathy with the drivers, starting and stopping precisely when they do. In the case of the Red 120 and Red 120Se, strategically sited bracing shelves with holes in – one beneath each of the drivers – do the job. Each shelf has a different number of 'acoustically tuned' holes to confine the midrange to a dedicated section of the cabinet – forming a damping brake at around 100Hz – while allowing the rest of the system to breathe and relax when delivering the lower bass notes. Helping facilitate this is a vertical tube that passes through a fourth bracing shelf just above the reflex port that vents into a

small chamber containing a second reflex port tuned as a system to an impressively deep 21Hz (24Hz for the regular Red 120).

What else distinguishes the SE from its older sibling? First, a superior tweeter. It remains a 25mm soft dome option with a ferrite magnet system and a copper clad aluminium voice coil wire on a fibreglass former and Faraday distortion-cancelling copper ring. But for the SE, a second magnet and a metal rather than plastic one is said to liberate more information and reinforce poise when the music gets dense and busy.

Crossover provision for the lower bass unit features two enclosed field iron core inductors instead of the regular 120's one – the first in the positive signal path and a second in the negative return path. This creates a balanced circuit with a coil before as well as after the voice coil of the lower bass unit. There are no measured benefits, but a perceived improvement in bass tunefulness.

Finally, a polymer insert has been added to the double plinth system, which is claimed to significantly improve isolation from the floor. Revised top-adjusting spikes seek to further enhance bass performance, soundstage, coherence and dynamics.

Sound quality

One of the pitfalls/joys of hi-fi reviewing – depends how open you are to learning on the job, no matter how long you've been doing it – is proclaiming a product to have nailed its brief so securely it's hard to imagine how it could be improved only for its maker to go and improve it, not by a little but by a lot.

It's the prospect I face here. When I reviewed Russell K's Red 120 mid-sized floorstander a few years back, I concluded, perhaps somewhat naively, that if you were willing to give bombastic, show-off speakers the swerve and more interested in having your neck tingled by the passion, emotion and musicianship on a recording, I was struggling to think of anything at the price that was as convincing as the Red 120.

I have a feeling I'm about to struggle no more, but we'll see. Here to restate the qualities that led to my original judgement, the regular Red 120 is back to face off against the new, more expensive Special Edition. Happily, it doesn't take long to realise that it remains a terrific compact floorstander and it's all to do with the potency of its core assets. As before, playing jazz bass legend Marcus Miller's *Trip-Trap* his Fender Jazz Bass has palpable



If you're going to spend £6k on a pair of floorstanders, you can certainly buy more imposing towers than the Red 120Se. Take Bowers & Wilkins £5,000 702 Signature (HFC 480). This tweeter-on-top design has no fewer than five drivers and looks simply stunning. It sounds big too, ensuring rousing renditions of music overflowing with copious space and impressive soundstaging. Another serious contender, Spendor's £4,500 D7.2 (also HFC 480) competes with the 120Se for realism and the ability to remain smooth and sophisticated.



body and depth but, more than that, appreciable character and quality. Low-frequency ambient energy within the live venue is just as tellingly rendered. Beyond the act of giving the 120's bass drivers a proper workout, it's easy to hear what makes Miller's technique a cut above, every giddy fretboard lick and run tracked with immaculate precision and timing.

Playing the same track via the 120Se, the musically virtuosic vibe is just as effortlessly captured but with a better sense of air and ambience. The midband's gains in clarity, timbral texture and openness are incremental but hard to mistake, while the very lowest notes have greater resolve and body. Overall tonality is subtly smoother, richer and warmer. In short, the uptick in fullness is delivered with a new finesse.

Next up a reprise of John Mayer's *Stitched Up*, the kind of supple, tautly tempo-ed track that bowls along with attitude and funk and is a sure-fire way to check out a speaker's capacity to master natural flow, tonal accuracy, top-to-bottom unity and rhythmic grip. With the Red 120, there's satisfying bass agility and weight, dynamic expression, midrange presence, vocal intelligibility, speed, grip and transparency. It reminds me why I felt I couldn't reasonably ask for more. And yet the Se easily shows where the track has more to give. Mayer's vocal delivery exhibits cleaner cut and nuance, the band

heightened drive and 'juice'. No difference here is night and day, but things move along with a still greater sense of immediacy, verve and tonal colour and, perhaps most remarkably of all, a still more fluent and natural musical gait.

Conclusion

We should talk about price. When I reviewed the Red 120 it cost £3,000. That has since swelled to £4,700 and the Se is £5,950. Pretty steep inflation. Russell K is far from alone here, but is in a more fortunate position than most in being able to balance performance against price. Terrific as the Red 120 remains, the Se is the better speaker and for a floorstander of its size delivers the musical message with a veracity that's simply outstanding ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★
EASE OF DRIVE ★★★★★

LIKE: Musical believability; bass; svelte form factor
DISLIKE: Price hike
WESAY: The competition around £6k is hot, but the Red 120Se has size and a unique skillset on its side – it's a true gem of a floorstander

OVERALL
★★★★★

