



Wall of sound

Nick Tate enjoys the widescreen sound of this striking 'retro modern' loudspeaker

Size matters with speakers. Anyone into their sixties – and counting – who paid more than passing attention to audio when they were young, knows this. Loudspeakers of yore usually had wide front baffles that housed large diameter bass drivers. Anything packing a 200mm unit or less was considered a lightweight and 300mm bass drivers were considered common. Nowadays, many high-end floorstanders don't even stretch to this. Those wide baffles fashionable in Seventies'

speakers – and before – meant that any normal-sized standmount design had lots of litres inside the cab. This in turn made them more sensitive than they'd otherwise be and this was important back then because amplifiers weren't so powerful. As a result, loudspeakers that looked like Heco's Direkt Premium were far more commonplace then than they are now. Heco's Chief Acoustics Engineer Martin Gross says that the starting point for the Direkt Premium's design was his perception of the industry's long drift towards smaller, narrower

DETAILS
PRODUCT
Heco Direkt Premium
ORIGIN
Germany/China
TYPE
2-way floorstanding loudspeaker
WEIGHT
25.8kg
DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
440 x 900 x 200mm
FEATURES
● 30mm dome tweeter
● 280mm paper mid/bass driver
● Quoted sensitivity: 94dB/W/m (4ohm)
DISTRIBUTOR
Henley Audio Ltd.
WEBSITE
heco-audio.de
henleyaudio.co.uk

loudspeakers. He says: "These come with real acoustic compromises. Large-diameter drivers operating at high efficiency do things with dynamic contrasts and tonal naturalness that smaller designs find difficult. Our inspiration came from the speakers of the Fifties to the Seventies, domestic and public address."

Return to the old school
He argues that the design priorities of this now near-extinct breed were efficiency and dynamic honesty. "They were paramount and the Direkt range is essentially our attempt to revisit those principles with modern driver technology and manufacturing precision". The result is a tall, wide and slender design that's a simple two-way, using a horn-loaded dome tweeter and a wide paper-coned mid/bass driver. Very old school!
If one was to boil this speaker down to its single defining characteristic,

then it is the quoted 94dB sensitivity figure. That's very important and alludes heavily to the Heco's overall sound. It means that it will make plenty of noise even with low-powered amps – 10W or more – in reasonably sized spaces. That's great for people with valve amps or low-powered Class A solid-state designs like the original Musical Fidelity A1 or any version of Sugden's A21. You can, of course, use it with more gutsy modern amps too – and the results are no less enjoyable. So, the point is that this speaker gives you a wider choice of amplifiers to drive it optimally.

The Premium Direkt doesn't just use its big 78-litre cabinet to deliver all those decibels, it also depends on its pair of highly sensitive drive units. The 30mm silk dome tweeter is designed to handle high power yet also go loud without it. It sports a 'Fluktus' waveguide, designed not just to boost sensitivity but also to circumvent what Gross calls: "the one traditional limitation of dome tweeters". By this he means dispersion control. He argues that this arrangement obviates the impedance-matching complications or off-axis colouration that ribbon and AMT designs can bring.



The 280mm mid/bass unit is special. It has been comprehensively redesigned since it appeared on this speaker's predecessor about 10 years ago. It's said to have a new, refined cone geometry, a new low-loss rubber surround and a voice coil assembly housed in a diecast aluminium basket. The company's Kraft paper cone has been retained, thanks to its desirable combination of low mass, stiffness and natural self damping. It uses Nordic pine mixed with German-produced wool fibres.

Its presentation is grippy, gutsy, fast paced and dynamic, but never aggressive

Gross has paid even closer attention to the crossover on this latest version of the Direkt, which does its job at 2.15kHz. It sports higher tolerated components, oxygen-free copper internal cabling in the bass section and a low-inductance twisted-pair connection dedicated to the tweeter. The trick of the tail is the three-way speaker terminal board towards the bottom of the rear baffle, which offers a choice of linear or +2dB, plus the option of bi-wiring. It gives a wee bit more system matching potential to those who might need it.

The *piece de resistance* is, of course, the cabinet – which is made of 21mm-thick medium density fibreboard (MDF) – the best material you can reasonably ask for in a speaker of this size and price. It's pretty neutral when you do the knuckle wrap test, and looks classier than the original Direkt model, with its real-wood inlay



How It Compares
Bowers & Wilkins' 704 S3 (£3,150) is a largish, mid-price floorstander, which packs a decent punch with its twin 130mm bass drivers and single 130mm midrange driver to do the job of the Heco's lone 280mm mid/bass one. It's slightly taller too, but nowhere near as wide. The B&W sounds bigger than expected, but is still smaller in scale than the Heco and lacks its visceral thump and transient speed – despite being no slouch. However, the 704 S3 pulls back with a smoother and more refined sound, especially up top where its tweeter is silkier. It's arguably a better all-rounder, but less fun.

on the front baffle. There's a choice of Black or White satin lacquer finishes. Out go the last model's polished silver trim rings for a cleaner look, too.

You'll find twin down-firing reflex ports on the base of the cabinet, plus apertures for the three-part stand system, which has to be bolted in before you can use the Direkt Premium in anger, so to speak. Metal or rubber spikes can be added to these if you so wish. When fully assembled, the speaker tilts back slightly, like the original Quad ESL-57 electrostatic. The Direkt works best a little way out from the boundary wall – in the case of my room it's 50cm or so, slightly toed-in. Heco's quoted tech specs are impressive. The company claims a power handling of 200W, a nominal impedance of 4ohm and frequency response of 34Hz to 29kHz, albeit at -6dB. The aforementioned sensitivity figure is stellar, too.

Sound quality

The Direkt Premium makes most of its price rivals seem like they've been shrunk down to half their size. This is a big speaker, which when properly setup as a pair in a larger room gives a Phil Spector-esque 'wall of sound' experience. It's huge, immediate and in-your-face. In the muscle car world they say: "there's no replacement for displacement" and so it goes with speakers too. Its large cabinet and sensitive, light drive units make for a confident and engaging listen. Yet you can't credibly call it shrill or harsh – providing you system-match it sensibly. I employ a Chord Hugo TT2 (HFC 468 DAC and World Audio K5881 valve amp, and get great results. Exposure's latest 3510 transistor amplifier also proves itself to be a fine partner.



Feed it some punchy rock and the Direkt Premium runs with it like a super-sized springer spaniel. The Clash's *Rock The Casbah* sounds wonderfully tight and edgy, with real swagger and impact. The presentation is grippy, gutsy, fast paced and dynamic, but never steps out into being aggressive – despite the rather mediocre recording quality. Diana Krall's latest album release this is not! Through many speakers, this early Eighties track can sound decidedly opaque and muddy, but not so through this pair of Hecos.

With a modern, full-range recording like *Bring The Future* by Manix, more questions are asked of the Heco. The tonal balance is fairly smooth, but with a slight liveliness in the upper midband. It's not harsh, but let's say that the high BPM electronic percussion is conspicuously prominent in the mix. This helps to propel the song along, giving it a visceral feel with firecracker dynamics. Although nowhere near the smooth and sophisticated sound you would expect to get from a big Spondor, for example, this doesn't get as intense as a horn-loaded Klipsch. Instead, to my ears, it has a well-judged, lively tonal balance for fast-paced pop, rock and dance music.

Bass is very good for a speaker of this price, but one is always aware that this is a big two- rather than three-way offering. This quart-sized bruiser gets down deeper than most of its more pint-sized floorstanding rivals, but still doesn't reach really low like a big, multi-driver mauler can. The problem is that its sheer physical size and overall ability make you forget its actual cost, so you start comparing it

with far pricier products. The Direkt makes the electronic bassline of the Manix track loads of fun, not least because of the effortless feel that its size brings. There's no sense of the music being squeezed through a toothpaste tube here. Rather, there's more of a 'blood and guts' feel to the way it metes out low frequencies. And at all times, bass is considerably tauter than you expect from a relatively inexpensive speaker with such a big cabinet. So many large but cheap

Its 94dB sensitivity means it makes lots of noise even with low-powered amps

designs tend to make a dog's breakfast out of the bottom end, but not this one.

The midband is convincing too. Feed the Heco sophisticated pop like *The Rhythm Divine* and it really rises to the occasion. This late-Eighties masterpiece combines Shirley Bassey's epic crooning, Billy Mackenzie's haunting backing vocals and Yello's grandiose synthesiser work to deliver a dreamy and ethereal listening experience. However, it's quite nuanced and slow paced, so can seem plodding via poor hi-fi systems. There are no such problems via the Direkt Premium, though, as it captures things perfectly by communicating Bassey's voice in a highly intimate way. Her velvety vocal performance is engrossing and behind it you can make out all the details of Boris Blank's lavish electronic backing.

Last but certainly not least, the Heco offers superlative soundstaging. There

are some speakers that need power pushed hard into them to start giving that special 'out of the box' experience, but the Premium Direkt does it at the drop of a hat. I momentarily switch to an amplifier with LED power meters, and even at 0.3W the speakers are throwing out strong stereo images into the room, pushing the early Seventies soul strains of Donald Byrd's *Street Lady* high into the sky. At 1W things start to get quite loud and at 10W the peaks are almost deafening in the room. Such are the joys of high-sensitivity speakers!

The Heco has an intrinsic musicality, which applies across all genres – meaning that both classical and jazz benefit from its animated, expressive music-making style just as much as rock and techno. Yet the more acoustic or orchestral music you play, the more you're aware that it's not quite as polished as it could be across the midband and treble. In absolute terms, there are more refined speakers around at this price point, such as Bowers & Wilkins' £3,150 704 S3 floorstander. Yet the latter doesn't come close in terms of drama, scale or punch. So, as ever with loudspeakers, prospective purchasers should always get a demo if they possibly can, using their favourite music.

Conclusion

Heco's lead designer Martin Gross has wholly succeeded with the new Direkt Premium. He talks in terms of revisiting the principles of classic cinema speakers: "but with modern driver technology and manufacturing precision," and he's done precisely that. The result is a highly enjoyable speaker with a character that's as large as its cabinet. All the same, not everyone will appreciate its foibles so an audition is absolutely essential. If you can forgive its quirks, you'll get a great listening experience for remarkably little financial outlay ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★	LIKE: Big, fun, expansive sound; great sensitivity
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★	DISLIKE: Nothing of note at the price
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★	WESAY: A thrilling performer for the asking price
EASE OF DRIVE ★★★★★	

OVERALL

