

Wharfedale D330

With its D series, Wharfedale yet again aims to redefine the art of the possible in budget loudspeaker design
Review: **Andrew Everard** Lab: **Keith Howard**

There's something very special about a bargain hi-fi product able to defy expectations with a surprising level of performance. It stood the original Wharfedale Diamond speakers in good stead in the early 1980s, and continues to be a hallmark of the range to this day, in the Diamond 11 series [HFN Dec '17]. So it's intriguing to see the company launch another budget speaker series to run alongside the Diamond 11s, in the form of the D300 lineup.

Topped by the speakers here, the D330 floorstanders, at just £499 in black, white, rosewood or walnut finishes, it now gives the Wharfedale buyer of modest means a choice of two ranges, and two styles. The Diamond 11s were only launched at the Munich High End Show in 2017, with curved cabinets for greater stiffness and resonance-proofing, and with a lineup running to eight models – three standmounts, the same number of floorstanders and two centre speakers – at prices up to £1000/pr.

With just four models in the D300 range, it offers an alternative to the buyer – you can have the sleek-looking Diamond 11s, with a very classic look, or the rather more industrial-influenced D300s, with their more contemporary styling.

ROUGH DIAMOND

But then the allure of the entry-level for a brand isn't hard to understand. After all, the original Diamond shook up the hi-fi market by offering frankly ridiculous levels of performance from a design standing just 24cm tall, costing £65 a pair and looking a little rudimentary (at least by modern standards, of which more later).

Wharfedale has rolled on with its programme of excellent small speakers for 35 years or so, despite going through various changes of ownership. At which point, enter the Wharfedale D300 lineup, described as its 'latest most advanced series of speakers yet' – just in case you

were wondering. The style one would call radically different from the Diamonds if it wasn't for the fact it's more notable for being reminiscent of the Q Acoustics speakers also crafted by industrial designer Kieron Dunk. He's worked on products for Wharfedale stablemates Mission and Quad in the past, as well as Denon and Marantz, but it's safe to say the D300 is very much using his current design language!

That means cabinets with radiused joints, both where the box panels meet each other and between the baffle and the main enclosure, designed for strength and also to control any diffraction effects from sharp corners. While the driver fixings are exposed for a more 'industrial' look than that of the elegant Diamond 11s, this does allow the use of individual grilles for each drive unit,

which simply push on and then sit just proud of the baffle. It's the kind of thinking more usual in much more expensive speakers, and to these eyes rather more appealing than the ubiquitous full length grille found on many a speaker.

KEEPING KEVLAR

Standing 94cm tall, the D330 is a two-and-a-half-way floorstanding design, using a soft-dome 25mm tweeter and a pair of 13cm woven Kevlar drivers – one for mid/bass, the other for bass. That material is one Wharfedale now seems to be making its own, especially as the most celebrated user, Bowers & Wilkins, is now shifting completely from the iconic yellow cones to its latest silver-grey Continuum construction. In the best basic black used in these speakers the Kevlar weave adds a touch of interest to the look of the drivers, along with its structural advantages.

RIGHT: Available in white, black, walnut and rosewood finishes the D330's slim cabinet hosts two 130mm woven Kevlar woofers (upper unit working into the mid), with downward-firing 'P-EQ' port, and a 25mm fabric dome tweeter

'The D330s reveal the skill in the songwriting and recording'



DON'T CALL THEM DIAMONDS

Although there's a D in the model designation, Wharfedale is at pains to point out that this isn't a new Diamond range, but instead draws on – and re-engineers – the same technology to create a somewhat different speaker offering, with price a paramount consideration. Below the D330s here, the D300 series kicks off with the little two-way D310 speakers, only a smidge taller than the diminutive original Diamonds, using a 10cm woofer and just £159/pr, while the larger D320 standmounts up the mid/bass size to one of the 13cm drivers also used in the D330, and are £199. Completing the range is the D300C centre channel speaker at £179, complete with two 13cm woofers. All speakers share the same 25mm tweeter. And it seems slimmed-down ranges are on trend at the moment: the most recent release from rival Bowers & Wilkins, the new 600 series, saw a similar cull, with just two standmounts, one floorstander [the 603, HFN Dec '18] and a centre speaker making the cut.

Behind the cone, the bass units use a basket ribbed for greater rigidity, with space behind the cone to avoid any distortion-creating reflections, while the long-throw 'motor' has a new one-piece pole-plate with a copper cap, designed to reduce inductance and control the magnetic flux. The magnets are a ceramic formulation used in Wharfedale speakers for over 50 years, while the lightweight cone surround is made from foamed polyether.

The tweeter, as the legend on its surround tells us, is the company's 'Wide Frequency Response' design, vented to the rear to avoid compression effects when working hard. It sits in a dished mount to control dispersion, inside a sub-chamber designed to isolate it from acoustic interference from the woofers. The bass is tuned with a variation on the 'Slot-Loaded Distributed Port' used in the Diamond 11 Series, designated P-EQ (Pressure Equalisation). It uses a downward-firing vent with a port tube shaped at each end to reduce turbulence effects such as 'chuffing'.

In the smaller D300 speakers, this port exits into a gap formed by little feet on the base of the speakers. The D330's plinth serves the same function, as well as stabilising the speaker, and is fitted with conical spikes. Overall, the quality of build and finish is exemplary, as we've come to expect from Wharfedale parent company IAG's massive Shenzhen plant.

REMARKABLE VALUE

Despite that downward-venting port, the D330 proves quite sensitive to room positioning – these are, after all, relatively modest speakers, and a bit of rear/side wall assistance helps fill out a bass that's a little parched when they're used out in free space. Similarly,

some toe-in to the listening position helps tame a slightly over-enthusiastic treble, as well as doing much to firm up the speakers' imaging and enhance soundstage depth. Setting up the speakers with the outer side of the cabinets just visible from the listening position should do the trick.

That done, these are nothing short of remarkable speakers for the money. Yes, one can't escape the fact that they're budget designs, and much pricier rivals will show them a clean pair of heels when it comes to bass weight and definition, along with treble refinement, but they have an honesty and musicality about them that's hard not to like, and perform way beyond what one might reasonably expect at this level.

FRONT AND CENTRE

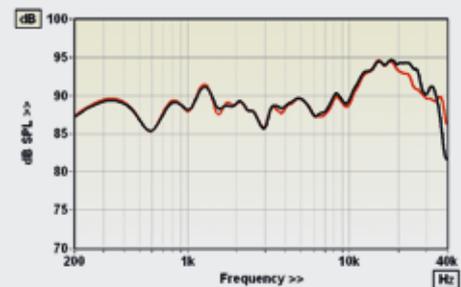
Playing the latest Elvis Costello And The Imposters album, *Look Now* [Concord Records 0088072068223], the D330s make a fine fist of the music, focusing and delineating Costello's voice centre stage, and giving impressive insight into the mixes, from the simplicity of 'Photographs Can Lie' to the punch of 'Mr & Mrs Hush'. This is by far the most impressive Elvis Costello release for many years, and Wharfedale's D330s don't sell it short, instead revealing all the skill in the songwriting, performances and recording.

Even better, they do so with a range of amplification. As well as auditioning them on the end of my usual Naim-based system, I tried the D330s with the affordable Denon PMA-800NE amplifier (£449), and they made a pretty winning combination of the kind that has one totting up how little one could spend to build a very effective system. I reckoned around £1500 would do it, using the

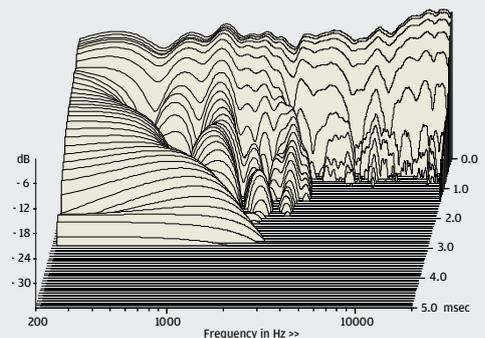
WHARFEDALE D330

It's refreshing to come across examples of what used to be called 'conservative specification'. Wharfedale claims 88dB sensitivity for its D330 but our pink noise figure of 89.8dB and 'music' figure of 89.0dB suggest that at least 89dB is merited. This high figure for what is a compact floorstander isn't bought using low impedance. Our measured minimum modulus of 3.9ohm may be 0.2ohm less than Wharfedale states but is consistent with the 4ohm nominal specification. And because the LF impedance phase angles are well controlled, the EPDR (equivalent peak dissipation resistance) falls no lower than 2.2ohm at 45Hz. Still, the D330 isn't quite as amplifier friendly as this suggests due to further EPDR dips to 2.3ohm at 20Hz, and to 2.5ohm at both 140Hz and 358Hz.

The forward frequency responses, measured at 1m on the tweeter axis, show a trend that's flat up to about 9kHz beyond which there is a hump in extreme treble output [see Graph 1, below]. This increases the response errors to ± 4.6 dB and ± 4.7 dB respectively, but listening a little off-axis should improve this. Pair matching over the same 200Hz-20kHz frequency range is very good at ± 0.6 dB. High sensitivity from a compact enclosure has its corollary in the poor bass extension figure (-6 dB at 87Hz re. 200Hz) but the diffraction-corrected nearfield measurement reveals a more nuanced picture. Output declines gently below 200Hz before becoming fourth-order below 40Hz, so careful placement of the D330 with respect to the wall behind will significantly improve matters in-room. The CSD waterfall [Graph 2, below] is clean in the high treble but shows resonances associated with the 1.3kHz response peak and 2.9kHz dip. KH



ABOVE: Despite its lifted treble, the response trend is generally flat, improving further if listening off-axis



ABOVE: Cabinet resonances are very well controlled and only mild driver modes are visible from 1-3kHz

LEFT: Wharfedale's 'Pressure Equalisation' bass port exits between the base of the cabinet and plinth. The split crossover (and dual 4mm speaker cable binding posts) supports bi-wiring and/or bi-amping

speakers really opening up his mixes throughout. One really does have to keep reminding oneself just how inexpensive these speakers are: their sound is very commercial, of course, but it's impossible not to like them.

A COMMUNICATOR

Even with the demands of classical music they remain relatively unfazed, and while one could achieve greater detail by throwing a lot more money at a system, the D330s play the recent Pittsburgh SO/ Honeck recording of Beethoven's *Eroica* [Fresh! FR-728; DSD128] with real power and conviction, from the exuberant opening to the solemnity of the third movement.

It's a sound to have one overlooking the relative limitations of the speakers, so involving is the music-making in evidence here. This impression is reinforced with the Kronos Quartet's recording of Steve Reich's chilling *WTC 9/11* [Nonesuch 7559-79645-7], its sharply-defined strings intercut with clips of police radio and recollections of the event.

Indeed it's the ability of the D330s to so readily communicate the music at hand that's the most striking aspect of this design. The icing on the cake is that they're also compact enough to fit in almost anywhere and – with a little care in placement – room-friendly, too. ⬇

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

In a bold move by Wharfedale, these new 'not-Diamonds' undercut the brand's existing budget range, feature a strikingly different aesthetic, with revised drive units and construction to maximise performance. It all pays off in a compact, affordable and smart-looking floorstander that offers surprising levels of performance for the money. It's just the thing to make the most of budget-conscious systems.

Sound Quality: 85%



Denon amp and its partnering DNP-800NE network player (also £449) driving the D330s, but it could be done for even less with some judicious secondhand shopping.

Meanwhile the Wharfedale speakers continued to impress, this time with the 2018 remaster of Bowie's *Let's Dance* album from the *Loving The Alien* boxset [Parlophone DBX4], that well-controlled bass working well with the slink of Nile Rodgers' production on the title track, and the clarity of the

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL/1m/2.83Vrms – Mean/IEC/Music)	91.8dB/89.8dB/89.0dB
Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	3.9ohm @ 210Hz 18.2ohm @ 94Hz
Impedance phase min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	-40° @ 118Hz 41° @ 64Hz
Pair matching/Response Error (200Hz–20kHz)	± 0.6 dB/ ± 4.6 dB/ ± 4.7 dB
LF/HF extension (-6 dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	87Hz / 38.8kHz/ >40 kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m)	1.0% / 0.3% / 0.1%
Dimensions (HWD) / Weight (each)	940x200x310mm / 18kg