

Theory of EVolution

The flagship of Wharfedale's new Evolution range looks like a lot of speaker for the money. **Ed Selley** puts it to the test

DETAILS
PRODUCT
Wharfedale EVO 5.4
ORIGIN
UK/China
TYPE
3-way floorstanding loudspeaker
WEIGHT
13.4kg
DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
302 x 1,028 x 350mm
FEATURES
• 35 x 70mm Air Motion Transformer
• 50mm midrange driver
• 2x 165mm Kevlar bass drivers
• Quoted sensitivity: 90dB/m/W (4ohm)
DISTRIBUTOR
IAG
WEBSITE
wharfedale.co.uk



While so many hi-fi manufacturers look to the past for inspiration, Wharfedale's EVO 5.4 bucks the trend by being bang up to date both in the technology it uses and the aesthetic chosen for it. As the flagship of the EVO 5 range and the larger of two floorstanding models, it is a four-driver design offering a three-way configuration. Bass is handled by 165mm woven Kevlar cones used in a variety of Wharfedale designs. As a pair they give the EVO 5.4 a very respectable claimed low-end roll-off of 42Hz at +/- 3dB. The other two are much more interesting. Like the preceding generation of EVO speakers, the tweeter is an Air Motion Transformer that has been designed and built specifically for this role. The unit here is not the same as the one used in the previous range. It is larger – 35 x 70mm compared with 30 x 60mm – and now features a new sound-absorbing material that Wharfedale calls SilentWeave, designed to reduce unwanted energy coming back through the diaphragm.

Closing the gap between the happy operating envelope of these drivers is a 50mm soft dome responsible for

It handles a huge bandwidth without so much as a hint of compression

everything between 1.1 and 4kHz. We've seen a version of this driver before in the Super Denton (HFC 515) and it's an ideal partner for an AMT, which can struggle to hit the sort of crossover point that more conventional domes can manage. Finding one of these drivers on a £1,400 speaker is a fairly notable thing. Finding one equipped with both is fairly remarkable.

These are assisted by a bass reflex system that is built into the base of the cabinet. It uses a system called Slot Loaded Profiled Port (SLPP), which radiates the air in multiple directions to control airflow better and keep everything inaudible, making the bottom of the EVO 5.4 a huge multiway slot port. Contact with the floor is via a set of outrigger feet that allow for levelling adjustment.

Wharfedale has constructed the cabinet from a sandwich of boards of different densities, designed to reduce panel resonance. It features a curved cabinet side that serves the dual purpose of helping both the looks

and overall rigidity and response to standing waves. Given the size of the EVO 5.4 and the drivers it contains, it's very respectably bolted together.

As already noted, the EVO 5.4 doesn't go in for the retro aesthetic of other recent Wharfedale offerings. It takes the preceding EVO 4 range as a starting point but tweaks the proportions for an altogether more pleasing result. This is a big speaker, but one that wears its dimensions very well. Aside from Black, White and Walnut, you'll find the extremely up-to-the-minute Grey Sheen option of the review sample.

Sound quality

The bulk of testing takes place with a Naim Supernait 3 (HFC 456), which is getting on for three times the price of the floorstander. The most potent first impression that the Wharfedale delivers is that the gulf in price never really makes itself felt in terms of what you hear. The 50th Anniversary release of Robin Trower's *For Earth Below* provides a perfect opportunity for that four-driver complement to really show what it can do and the EVO 5.4 delivers in fine style.

The handover between the AMT and dome midrange is seamless



under all conditions and ensures that the magnificence of Trower's vocals and heavyweight guitar work is delivered with a convincing tone and texture. At no stage does the EVO 5.4 tip over into 'stop and listen to this!' style over emphasis, but what you hear is still startlingly vivid at times. Little Barrie and Malcolm Catto's *Quatermass Seven* reveals some lovely incidental detail, but the effect is to augment the performance as a whole rather than draw your attention to it.

As you might expect from a speaker with the dimensions of this one, the bass response is good too. The 42Hz lower roll off at +/-3dB is bettered in the space thanks to a spot of benign room reinforcement and the reality of using the Wharfedale in many UK lounges will be meaningful and usable with output down to 30Hz; something that even floorstanding rivals will struggle to compete with. Like all sizeable speakers, the EVO 5.4 will overdrive small rooms, but the scope to convincingly fill larger ones is hard to ignore.

Listening to the more urgent *Out Of A Dream* by Slow Readers Club shows that the Wharfedale is less energetic than some others at the price. It would be wrong to call it 'slow', but this isn't the sort of speaker that really wants to go ballistic. There are upsides to this approach. For what is a detailed and revealing bit of kit, the Wharfedale is impressively forgiving of less than perfectly mastered material while still being able to show what a good recording is capable of.

More than anything else, though, it's the combination of scale and that driver complement that effortlessly handles a huge bandwidth without so much as a hint of compression that

HOW IT COMPARES
Focal's superbly engineered Theva N°2 (HFC 505) is just about the only speaker anywhere near the price of the EVO 5.4 that can mount a serious challenge to it. The key area where the Focal has an advantage over the Wharfedale is that it is a more dynamic and exciting-sounding speaker pretty much regardless of the partnering equipment. In the deeply subjective area of looks, I also fractionally prefer the Theva. From there, though, the Wharfedale chalks up the wins. It has better tonality and detail, hits harder (and with less thought needed for placement) and produces a more convincing stereo image. The Focal is good – very good – but the Wharfedale is even better still.

wins you over. Listening to Kamasi Washington's *Fists Of Fury* is an experience that's rare at this price. As the scale of the piece increases, most of the EVO 5.4's rivals will ask you to choose between scale and cohesion. Instead, the Wharfedale says: 'why not both?' and proceeds to deliver in a way that makes most other things at the price sound a little bit broken.

Conclusion

The EVO 5.4 arrives to remind us both that Wharfedale is perfectly capable of making a modern-looking speaker when it chooses to and that the result is utterly formidable when it does. I dislike absolutes in reviews; it normally prompts something turning up in the next four to six weeks that contradicts me entirely, but you really cannot buy more speaker than this for £1,400. It delivers a deft combination of scale, detail and engagement that is deeply and consistently impressive and it represents Wharfedale laying down a marker that rivals are going to have to dig deep to get anywhere near ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

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

LIKE: Combination of superb scale, impact, detail and realism
DISLIKE: Not the last word in excitement; it needs a bit of room
WE SAY: As long as you have room for it, the EVO 5.4 is the best remotely affordable floorstander going