

hardware review

Wharfedale Diamond 12.1i punching up, hitting home

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Wharfedale Diamond 12.1i speakers

Wharfedale! For those of who came into contact with audio kit in the 1970s and even the 1980s that name will ring many bells and perhaps fond memories too. I was a very impecunious law student (don't ask!) but my flat-mate had one of the classic set ups of the era – a Garrard record player, a Japanese receiver (amplifier/radio tuner) and a pair of Wharfedale loudspeakers. Every evening we listened to music on vinyl or to late night Radio One, where people like John Peel and Bob Harris introduced us to all sorts of artists, some of whom became firm favourites.

Fast forward to the late 1990s, when some formerly great British audio brands were not flourishing, and a Chinese owned company called the International Audio Group, widely known as IAG, appeared and started to buy up brands like Quad and Leak. In 1997, Wharfedale joined the IAG portfolio. Some of us were a bit sniffy about 'Made in China' labels appearing on kit bearing venerable British brand names in those early days. Nearly 30 years on I for one am quite content to see that now ubiquitous statement of origin on so many things that I purchase, such as my Primaluna EVO300 integrated amplifier. I have heard modern Wharfedales such as the Super Lintons and been very impressed by them. Thus, when our esteemed editor asked me to review the Diamond 12.1i standmount models from the brand I was happy to agree.

The Wharfedale Diamond series has been around for many decades now, with each iteration being a refinement on its predecessor, both in terms of internal technology and overall build quality. Unboxing the 12.1i the first thing I noticed was the weight. Each enclosure weighs nearly seven kilos (15 lbs). This pair were finished in a semi-gloss black with a magnetically attached grille that fits over the whole front baffle. There is a one-inch fabric dome tweeter above a five inch main drive unit made with Wharfedale's proprietary Klarity compound, a

composite of polypropylene and mica. According to Wharfedale, the mica adds stiffness thus allowing the cone to be lighter yet more rigid, with lower colouration and faster response.

Much of the focus into improvement to this version of the Diamond was undertaken on the internal damping and bracing of the cabinet, to reduce box vibration and provide more accurate bass. The 12.1i has a rear reflex port, which has been redesigned for the new model. Frequency response is quoted as 60Hz to 20kHz (+/-3dB). There is a pair of good quality multi-way binding posts arrayed vertically towards the bottom of the cabinet. These add an additional 28mm to the depth. I am a great admirer of IAG's chief designer, the renowned Peter J Comeau, who was in overall charge of the design of the whole Diamond 12.1i product family.



Overall my first impression of the 12.1i was very positive. It looks very well made indeed. The next question of course, was whether it sounds as good as it looks?

I carefully positioned each loudspeaker on the HiFi Racks stands which I use for all the smaller loudspeakers that visit and for my own pair of Harbeth P3ESRs. The 12.1is were toed in towards the listening position as recommended and I connected Tellurium Q Silver III speaker cables with the Wharfedale sockets. Amplification duties were handled by my aforementioned Primaluna EVO 300 Hybrid integrated with my venerable Yamaha CD-S3000 handling both DAC and silver disc replay duties, my Vertere DGX turntable with the Mystic 2 MC cartridge played vinyl with the help of my Gold Note PH10/PSU phono stage.

The Diamond 12.1i in action

Just to let our guest loudspeakers warm up and settle in after their trip from IAG's Huntingdon base, I opted to watch some Youtube on television, which is connected using an optical cable to the Yamaha. The presenter's voice had just the right weight and inflection and commanded my complete attention. About half an hour later I called up the live recording of Sultans of Swing from Dire Straits' *Alchemy* album. Recorded in the summer of 1983 at the Hammersmith Odeon this track is a personal favourite, with Mark Knopfler on top form with his finger-style playing and the rest of the band supporting him brilliantly.

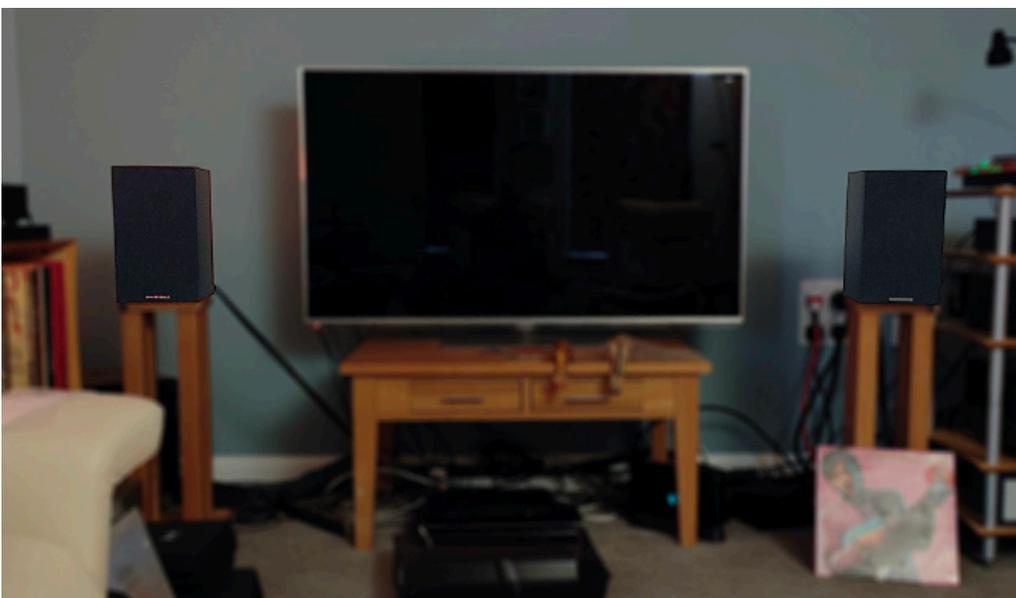
I was frankly astonished at how well the Diamonds conveyed the energy and dynamic ebb and flow of the music, the muscular power of the drummer and the sheer musicality of the performance. Even more surprising was what terrific bass the Diamond 12.1is were able to



produce – it was really tuneful too, not at all ponderous. The soundstage was expansive with a width across the whole room and with good height and depth too. Tempting as it was, I did not turn up the volume too much at this stage but even at moderate levels the Diamonds did a great job in taking me to the heart of the performance.

In the following days I played a range of music through the Diamond 12.1is and they seemed to get better with more hours in my system. A relatively recent addition to my music library was a box set issued by Rhino of the albums made by Love for the Elektra label between 1966 and 1970. This quintessentially Californian band were led by a mercurial figure called Arthur Lee, and the group's third album *Forever Changes* has been a regular in lists of all time bests for year after year. I have more copies of this recording in my collection than of almost any other and this remastered version in the box set is really good. The music is an amalgam, of acoustic and electric rock, with snatches of mariachi trumpets and orchestral strings thrown into the mix. The lead guitar of John Echols is by turns a stabbing, slashing aural assault at one moment and a thing of lyrical beauty at the next. The Diamond 12.1is did a terrific job of recreating the recording, with weight and drive when required but also great subtlety too. The voices of Lee and his bandmate Bryan MacLean came through beautifully.

I put together a pile of albums to play while I had the Diamonds here, from the Allman Brothers Band *At the Fillmore East* through To ZZ top's *Eliminator*. Along the way I also exposed them to the late Gary Karr's double bass, YoYo Ma's cello and some exquisite female



Wharfedale Diamond 12.1i

vocals from Emma Kirkby – they delivered everything with same grace, musicality, emotion and precision. When called upon to reproduce the soundtrack of Denzel Washington's sometimes explosive Equaliser films they did not flinch.

The only area where the Diamond 12.1is were unable to quite match the far more expensive loudspeakers with which I live was in the volume to which they could be driven. There are times when I am home alone when I like to advance the volume to levels, understandably, these little boxes could not cope with that level of irresponsible exuberance, and their sounds definitely hardened and deteriorated when I subjected them to those stress



tests, but that is not a criticism. More importantly, not once while they were in play did I feel the need to bring my REL subwoofer into play. At normal listening levels these Wharfedales sound poised and very musical.

Conclusion

You might have noticed that at no point so far have I made any reference to price. These loudspeakers cost £249 a pair. That's right - under £250! In a smallish room, paired with a suitable amplifier and your source of choice (or a streaming amplifier), these make an irresistible case for themselves. For somebody looking for a pair of desktop loudspeakers to enliven working-from-home time, they make an irresistible case for themselves. I installed them into a system that is in theory far above them in the hi-fi hierarchy, and they more than held their own.

The Diamond 12.1is are really enjoyable loudspeakers – no 'for the money' qualification required. Yes, they are inexpensive but they never sound cheap. I would love to hear their bigger, floor standing brothers because if this sound quality scales up (as I would fully expect) I bet they are absolute crowd-pleasers. I also think that in a multi-channel AV set up the Diamonds would be highly appropriate. Indeed, the fact that in addition to five stereo loudspeakers in the family there are also a centre speaker and surround speakers available confirms that Wharfedale think so too.

The audio industry needs to attract a new generation of music enthusiasts to the joys of hearing music through a proper system. Components such as the Wharfedale Diamond series can play a vital role in appealing to those people. I wish them every success.

Pros

Excellent sound quality – musical, engaging and emotionally convincing.

Surprisingly strong bass for a small standmount speaker; tuneful and well controlled.

Wide, deep soundstage with good height and imaging.

Handles many genres well – rock, classical, vocals, film soundtracks.

Good dynamics and sense of energy, even at moderate listening levels.

Build quality feels solid and premium heavy cabinets, good finish, magnetic grilles.

No need for a subwoofer at normal listening levels.

Outstanding value for money at £249 per pair.

Versatile – suitable for small rooms, desktop systems, stereo or AV setups.

Never sounds ‘cheap’ despite low price.



Cons

Limited maximum volume – sound hardens and deteriorates when pushed very loud.

Not comparable to high-end speakers in outright scale or loudness.

Small speaker limitations remain if you want “party level” volume.

Bass extension limited to 60Hz (not explicitly criticised, but implied by size and design).

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Specifications

Type: reflex loaded 2-way loudspeaker

Crossover frequency: 2.6kHz

Drive units:

Bass/mid: 130mm PP cone

Tweeter: 25mm textile dome

Frequency range: 65Hz – 20 kHz (+/-3dB)

Nominal/minimum impedance: 8/4 Ohms

Sensitivity: 88dB @ 2.83v/1m

Connectors: single-wire binding posts

Dimensions HxWxD: 312 x 180 x 250mm

Weight: 6.8kg each

Finishes: Black Oak, Stone, Walnut Pearl, Light Oak