

Two-way, reflex-loaded floorstander
Made by: Kudos Audio, County Durham
Supplied by: Kudos Audio
Telephone: 0138 841 7177
Web: www.kudosaudio.com
Price: £4000

AUDIO
FILE

LOUDSPEAKER

Kudos Audio Cardea C20

Arguably the most durable model in the Kudos catalogue, the C20 has witnessed a graceful 12-year evolution
Review: **Andrew Everard** Lab: **Paul Miller**

As is so often the case, last time I was at a hi-fi show – c'mon, you remember shows – I was amused by the reaction of a visitor. Having listened to a fully active system using Naim electronics and a pair of Kudos Titan speakers, 'Hmmm,' he said to no-one in particular, and with deadpan seriousness, 'Not bad for a stand company...'. Well, stands may have been the beginnings of Kudos, but it's come a long way since then.

And in a way, Kudos the speaker company has come full circle with the Cardea C20. After all, Cardea was the first speaker range company founder Derek Gilligan offered back in 2006. The standmount C10 was the launch model, also now available in an updated form at £3500, while the floorstanding C20 we have here sells for £4000, in the same range of finishes: white, walnut, natural oak and black oak.

HOUSE MUSIC

Those with a long memory may be looking at the speakers before us, and wondering why we're revisiting a model that first saw the light of day over a decade ago [*HFN* Nov '09] and returned – albeit in 'Super' form – some four years later [*HFN* May '13]. In practice so much has changed in the intervening years that this is a real 'Trigger's broom' job [see boxout, p63], the celebrated road sweeper philosopher from *Only Fools And Horses* once explaining that he'd used the same brush for his entire career: 'This old broom', he said, 'has had 17 new heads and 14 new handles'.

What's unchanged, however, is the way Kudos Audio designs its loudspeakers – with a background in music, and specifically PA systems, Derek Gilligan is a great believer in voicing his speakers by ear rather than measurement. And there's certainly a house sound here, a typically immediate, vivid presentation, which doesn't so much draw you seductively into the music as

grab you by the lapels and demand that you pay attention to it.

The Cardea C10 and C20 are simpler than the flagship Titan models [*HFN* Feb '20], which sport direct terminals to allow the crossovers to be bypassed, and the drivers powered directly in an active configuration with an electronic crossover upstream of the power amplification. If you want to do that with Cardea speakers, you'll need to look at the £4000 Super 10A standmount or £5000 Super 20A with their 'patch bay' of 4mm sockets to the rear.

PLAIN AND SIMPLE

By contrast, the C20 has just a single pair of combination banana/spade/bare wire terminals down near the base of the rear panel [see p65], but even here the design is unconventional. Whereas some speakers either mount the crossover and terminals to the rear panel itself, or even use a moulded 'tray' for the terminals, Kudos mounts them on an inset panel made from the same high-density fibreboard as the main enclosure, which is then torqued into position to provide as solid a platform for the electronic components.

Wired to the crossover using the company's own KS-1 speaker cable – yours for £30 per mono metre – are drive units developed in co-operation with Norwegian SEAS. These comprise a custom version of the SEAS Crescendo K2 29mm tweeter, and a 180mm mid/bass unit with a coated paper cone, and as open a chassis as possible. Both drivers and crossover are designed in accordance with Gilligan's 'keep it simple' philosophy.

With its rated 88dB sensitivity and 8ohm nominal impedance, the C20

RIGHT: The C20's HDF cabinet is available in white, walnut, natural oak and black oak finishes and supported on a spiked plinth from which the downward-firing 'boundary bass' reflex port exhausts



CARDEA CHRONOLOGY

The origins of Kudos as a speaker brand go back to when Derek Gilligan and Bob Surgeoner, the founders of Neat Acoustics, discovered a stand that worked so well with their Neat Petite speakers, they bought the company. Later, when the two went their separate ways, Gilligan took the Kudos brand with him, and started making his own speakers, launching the original Cardea models in 2006. Ask him what's changed to create these rather similar-looking 2021 versions – actually, they were signed off last year, but demand for Kudos loudspeakers apparently held off the official launch while stocks were built up – and the answer is 'almost everything.'

The latest changes are to the crossover, with the use of improved air-core inductors with tighter windings, and an upgraded polypropylene/foil capacitor in the HF arm, drawing on the catalogue of supplier Mundorf. Along the way the speakers have switched to HDF (high-density fibreboard) for the cabinet, replacing the previous MDF, and there have been improvements to both drivers. The mid/bass has gained a phase-plug, while the company's own KS-1 loudspeaker cable, launched early last year, is used for all internal wiring.

is hardly the trickiest of loads for an amplifier [see PM's Lab Report, p65], and at 20kg apiece the speakers are manageable for most of us. They come with their 'floating' plinth – onto which the downward-facing reflex port vents – ready attached, so it's just a matter of screwing in the high-quality spikes provided, levelling and positioning them, and connecting them up.

ABSOLUTE RIOT

Standing 92.5cm tall, they should be fine for the preferred listening position PM comments on in his Lab Report – unless you have an especially low chair – and I'd concur with his suggestion that the supplied grilles are best avoided if you want to experience the full vitality of the presentation here. A

number of amplifiers were pressed into service during my time with the C20, including my usual Naim Supernait 3, and in every case the speakers proved both revealing of the character of the different amplification while also easy-going enough not to emphasise any quirks of these upstream electronics.

A slight toe-in – very slight – might help fix the stereo image if they must be used way apart, but in general they sound best when used in 'guardsman' mode, with eyes firmly front. Also, while that

LEFT: Both the 180mm doped-paper pulp coned bass/mid unit and the 29mm fabric-dome tweeter are customised versions of SEAS drivers, the latter derived from the popular Crescendo K2 HF unit

downward-venting port makes them less position-sensitive than most, the usual thinking on boundary-proximity should be followed – so avoid corners, or placing them equidistant from side and rear walls and you won't go far wrong. I'd even go so far as to say that setting up these speakers was a pleasure. I wouldn't quite say you can just plonk them down and they'll sound great, but that's not far off the truth.

What is beyond discussion is that the Cardea C20s, while from a brand possibly not appearing on the 'quick, name me five speaker companies' list, are well worth

seeking out, as listening to them is an absolute riot. Just about everything you play through them has more spirit and verve than you'll be expecting, and whether you like listening deep into a recording or just revelling in the boogie

factor to the point of cranking your system louder than is probably sensible, you won't come away disappointed. In fact, you probably won't come away at all, or at least for an extended period, so much will you be enjoying the sound of these C20s.

FUNK IT UP

Playing the latest Crowded House album, *Dreamers Are Waiting* [EMI 3534658], the initial impression of a slow-burning set soon gets to the listener, so well is the innovative songwriting and musicianship, plus of course Tim Finn's glorious voice, conveyed by the C20s. The album has a wonderfully immediate sound, and that's meat and drink to these floorstanders.

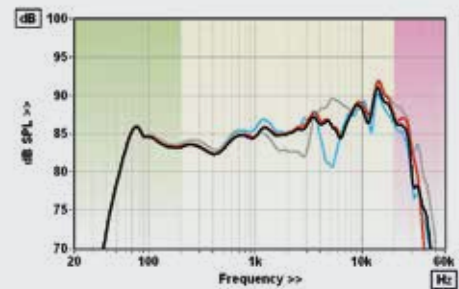
Switch to the southern rock of Blackberry Smoke's current album, *You Hear Georgia* [3 Legged Records 3LG14CD],

'The album flew by, my smile growing ever-wider'

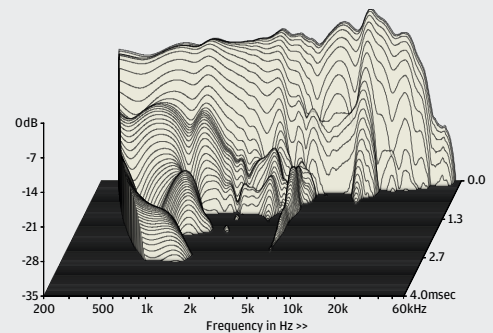
KUDOS AUDIO CARDEA C20

While the evolution of the C20's design is recorded in some detail in our review [see boxout, p63], and on the company's website, the raw specification is limited to nominal impedance (8ohm) and sensitivity (88dB). The former accurately reflects the C20's 'easy-to-drive' status with its benign 7.0ohm/157Hz impedance minimum joined by maximum $\pm 40^\circ$ phase angles, and increase in impedance to 36ohm towards 1.9kHz as the inductance of the 180mm bass/mid takes effect. The 'harshness' load occurs at 330Hz/8ohm/ $+24^\circ$ – this is still relatively 'amplifier friendly' and perhaps predictive of the slightly lower-than-rated 84.7dB/1kHz and 85.5dB (500Hz-8kHz) measured sensitivity.

Measured on the tweeter axis, the response trend shows a marked 'step' in output of +7dB between 3kHz-5.3kHz [grey trace, Graph 1] but this is very successfully ameliorated when tested some 3in above the top of the cabinet – a more appropriate axis for a seated listener [black/red traces, Graph 1]. Here the response errors for the pair reduce to ± 4.4 dB and ± 4.8 dB, respectively, matched to within an impressive 0.7dB up to 10kHz. The trend shows an upward tilt but the grille should be avoided as it carves out a 5.5dB notch at ~ 5 kHz [blue trace]. The top-end rolls away to a respectable ~ 29 kHz [-6dB re. 10kHz; pink shaded area, Graph 1], the soft dome affording a peak at 14.5kHz but no ultrasonic resonance. The 55Hz-2.3kHz bandpass (-6dB, with modes at 185Hz and 940Hz) of the 180mm woofer is lifted by the floor-firing reflex port (22Hz-90Hz, -6dB) to yield a slightly 'peaky' bass alignment and respectable LF extension of 48Hz [-6dB re. 200Hz; green shaded area, Graph 1]. PM



ABOVE: Response inc. nearfield summed driver/port [green], freefield corrected to 1m at 2.83V [yellow], ultrasonic [pink]. Left, black; right, red; w. grille, blue



ABOVE: Cabinet modes are swiftly suppressed leaving very mild driver breakups at 1kHz, 2.5kHz and 6kHz

LEFT: Kudos' 1st-order LF/2nd-order HF crossover is connected via a single set of 4mm terminals and internal Kudos KS-1 cabling. Crossover is not split, so neither bi-wiring nor bi-amping is supported

hangs absolutely stable in space, with the instruments delivered with warmth and precision in equal measure. And the same goes when you up the scale of the musical forces with the recent Malmo Symphony Orchestra/Marc Soustrot 'boxing up' of the complete Saint-Saëns symphonies [Naxos 8503301, and a complete bargain at about £15 for the three-disc set].

GRAND SLAM

Unleash the third symphony through the C20s and I defy you not to be thrilled with the crisp detail of the orchestra and the great crashing weight of the organ from which the work takes its soubriquet. The orchestra has power enough in the opening movement, but when those big bass pipes start energising the air in the concert hall, the sheer slam of these speakers down in the bass, and the tinkling piano above, are equally breathtaking. What's more, they manage all this exuberance and brio with total control, not even hardening up when the devil on your shoulder mutters 'Wonder what that would sound like a bit louder...?'. Common sense tells me that speakers this compact really shouldn't sound so weighty, wide-open and totally compelling, let alone do so across a wide range of musical styles and partnering amplification. Clearly no-one told Kudos about common sense. ☹️

Common sense tells me that speakers this compact really shouldn't sound so weighty, wide-open and totally compelling, let alone do so across a wide range of musical styles and partnering amplification. Clearly no-one told Kudos about common sense. ☹️

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

The simple verdict? For all their compact size, understated engineering and refined styling, these are quite possibly the most sensationally rewarding way to spend under £5000 on a pair of speakers right now. The brand's 'music first' design philosophy is right up there as soon as you start to use them, they'll work with a wide range of amps, and they're room-friendly enough to be used almost anywhere.

Sound Quality: 88%



and the C20s really unleash the boogie factor, with great slabs of thundering rhythm underpinning the driving guitars and powerful vocals of Charlie Starr. Hey, stop analysing what the speakers are doing and just immerse yourself in the music – that's what they'll have you doing just about whatever you choose to play. So here, from the shuffling funk of 'Hey Delilah' to the winsomely downbeat 'Old Enough To Know', the album simply flies by, the smiles of enjoyment growing ever-wider.

So, just a great rock speaker, then? Not in the least. Play soprano Kate Lindsey's recording of Scarlatti's 'Il Nerone', her soaring voice accompanied by a subtle continuo [from *Tiranno*; Alpha Classics ALPHA 736], and it's hard not to be captivated by the way the vocal

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL/1m/2.83V – 1kHz/Mean/IEC)	84.7dB / 85.5dB / 83.6dB
Impedance modulus: minimum & maximum (20Hz–20kHz)	6.96ohm @ 157Hz 35.5ohm @ 1.85kHz
Impedance phase: minimum & maximum (20Hz–20kHz)	-39° @ 3.6kHz +42° @ 900Hz
Pair matching/Resp. error (200Hz–20kHz)	1.4dB / ± 4.4 dB/ ± 4.8 dB
LF/HF extension (-6dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	48Hz / 28.5kHz/29.4kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m)	0.7% / 0.2% / 0.25%
Dimensions (HWD) / Weight (each)	925x200x270mm / 18kg