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220

hi-fi+

World Exclusive! Linn 360!

We look around the new
digital active loudspeaker
and it's stunning to the
nth degree!



The best of
British as
Bentley meets
Naim Audio!



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Linn 360

floorstanding loudspeaker

Alan Sircom

Linn pitches the new Linn 360 floorstanding loudspeaker as ‘audibly invisible; visibly remarkable’, and the company has a point. This is Linn’s girthy flagship – roughly the size of the outgoing Klimax 350, the former head of the clan. It’s available in passive form with ‘Aktiv’ bass or Exakt digital active to slot in a Linn DSM system.

The Linn 360 is a good blend of the conventional and the innovative. It retains several important styling cues of previous high-end Linn speakers. But look closer, and you’ll notice the complexity of the cabinet. Look even closer; you’ll see that new Beryllium tweeter with a Linn logo protection cover. You might even see the trim pieces with concentric arcs cut into them. These remind listeners of Linn’s place in the turntable hierarchy with its eternal LP12. But clever curves and elegant grooves are not enough.

An Exakt Science

Core to the development of the Linn 360 floorstanding loudspeaker, the driver array is a bold departure for Linn. The tweeter is a new 19mm Beryllium dome. The midrange is a thin-ply woven carbon fibre used on NASA’s Mars Rover. And the aluminium-magnesium alloy bass units allow double the excursion of their predecessors. This also marks the beginning of the end of Linn’s 3k driver array, used in the Klimax 350 and still featured in the Akubarik. There are still visual echoes of this long-lived part of Linn’s speaker design, but this is a very different physical design.

The loudspeaker driver array is met by Linn’s new ‘Power DAC’ in the lower bass. This Exakt system keeps the music signal in the digital domain until just before the bass driver cones. It also features ‘Adaptive Bias Control’ in the 360 array of tweeter, midrange and upper bass. This adapts to the speaker’s demands, using real-time correction. Think of it as an engine management system... for loudspeakers.

Used with an appropriate Linn digital front end like the Klimax DSM, 360 takes advantage of a suite of bonuses. The most notable is Space Optimisation+, designed to dial the effects of the room out of the music.





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» Few will get just how significant the changes are to the cabinet design. At face value, the 360 looks like any other boat-backed, slightly back-swept design. A closer examination of the front baffle reveals complex curves, with shaped radii matched to each driver. This lets each drive unit live its best life in dispersion terms, each driver in its ideal baffle.

No biggie

So, Linn only changed the cabinet, the drivers and the electronics in the 360; no big deal! But then there are the finishes. As well as classic Piano Black and Alpine White, there are three 'Glasgow Collection' finishes. The almost pearlescent grey of 'Clyde Built' is reminiscent of Glasgow's shipbuilding heritage. The dark 'Linn Heritage' is a sumptuous, almost candy-apple finish. And 'Single Malt' recalls a heritage in whisky distilling, kept alive by distilleries like Auchentoshan, where I left my liver.

I've known Linn loudspeakers for decades; I even used to sell them in the late 1980s. And they have come a long way since the days of the Kan, Sara, and Isobarik. They retained the sense of fun of those early models. But they became more accurate and detailed with each generation. But there was always one thing missing... imaging. Even the top Klimax 350 was at most 'fairly good' in presenting a good soundstage.

It was as if Linn never considered soundstaging a priority in sonic performance. Each generation of Linn loudspeaker would get successively more detailed, more refined, and more capable in so many ways. But not stereo imaging. The Linn 360 floorstanding loudspeaker changes all that. It has excellent imaging. Better still, it has excellent imaging for more than one listener. The combination of wide dispersion and Space Optimisation+ room cancellation work well together. They create the sort of stereo soundstage more commonly associated with omnidirectional designs.

Harking back to those days sitting in the back and side of a demonstration room, it was clear that the sound the demonstrator was getting and the sound heard in the 'hot seat' were very different. In a way, as it should be; the guy selling the equipment isn't the person buying it! But those days in a demonstration room were more than 30 years ago and things should have moved on... but often didn't. The Linn 360 changes that and even those in the furthest parts of the room get almost all the sonic benefits of those sitting in the sweet spot. That might seem like a relatively obscure benefit until you think what people do with music in real life;

they move around. Maybe they get up and dance, maybe they want to fill the room with high-quality sound while sitting off-axis and doing something important. Or maybe it's because there might be more than just one person in the room hoping to enjoy music.

The importance of this aspect of sound highlights changes in audio appreciation. Back in the Before Time, in the Long, Long Ago, hi-fi was more of a group enjoyment event. People used to go to one another's houses and listen to the latest music on the latest audio gear. Then, audio became a very solitary pursuit, and the system was removed to 'the man cave'.

An unintended benefit of the post-pandemic world is people are less keen to enjoy pursuits that remind them of their months of solitary confinement during 2020 and 2021. People still want to enjoy good music in the home, but are increasingly looking at communal listening sessions with friends. And it's here that the Linn 360 truly excels.

Normally, such designs are either omnidirectional or are loudspeakers with seemingly wide directivity at the expense of the main listener. Here, thanks to that clever cabinet design, the driver array, and the DSP Linn uses so well, the listener in the driving seat gets a fantastic sound with very high-grade imaging and soundstaging (something that sets the 360 way beyond any of its stable-mates and places it in amongst the Great and the Good of audio loudspeaker brands), while those elsewhere in the room get extremely close to the same degree of stereo performance.

This comes over in almost everything you play, but is especially noticeable in recordings of jazz trios. This is probably because those who enjoy a spot of jazz have been to clubs and bars where trios and quartets have been playing and are used to occasionally getting up and moving around during a set, whereas in classical concerts, getting up to get a drink or take a comfort break mid way through a concerto is frowned upon! The fact the trio stay in their physical spaces as you move around makes *Waltz For Debby* by The Bill Evans Trio [Riverside] that bit more 'real'.

Martinis all round!

The loudspeaker still has that classic Linn 'dry' sound, but it's dry like a Martini, not a desert. However, now it also comes with the ability to pick out instruments in a sonic hologram. It can also go loud, deep and dynamic too. I played tracks at the sort of volumes that caused my Apple Watch to worry about my hearing. And my ears and the room folded before the loudspeakers did.





Everyone has to wig out from time to time... and the Linn 360 won't turn a hair while you are doing so.



» We in the audio world sometimes forget that those who buy these products are not necessarily 'dunked' in the social mores of high-end audio. They might want to play music at a wider range of volume levels than most conventional audio loudspeakers can handle, and the Linn 360 is one of those rare devices that can handle both whisper quiet for late-night listening sessions and something disturbingly close to PA levels for the occasional Bacchanalian Saturday night.

In part because every part of the Linn ecosystem is a known entity, there's little risk of finding your beloved loudspeakers as a smoking ruin after your teenage kids got hold of the controls. Of course, they are not a PA system and I don't advocate playing music at ear-splitting levels, but everyone has to wig out from time to time... and the Linn 360 won't turn a hair while you are doing so.

I feel I am painting the 360 in too broad a set of brushstrokes. This is hugely capable loudspeaker, both in extremes and in daily use. It's easy to get carried away by the extremes (its dynamic and volume headroom, the walk-in soundstage, etc.) but where it shines is in its subtlety and grace, the kind of elements that makes you want to play

music for its own sake, not to show off what the system can or can't do. Once you are through the 'bombast' stage when you show the loudspeaker off to yourself and your friends (be it with Mahler and his symphonic hammer or Rammstein's gently graunching drop-D guitars), the Linn 360 is a graceful and deft, low-distortion loudspeaker, with the right amounts of dynamic range and detail to suit any level of output. But, in listening to the 360 you realise that all of those descriptive things I get paid for are secondary concerns to the overall performance of the loudspeaker; you are pulled into the music in a wholly satisfying way, no matter what that music is. Even Miley Cyrus or K-Pop!

Get out of the way!

The loudspeakers are flexible enough to play any kind of music and simply get out of the music's way. And in its Exakt guise, it's an extraordinarily flexible design. Linn's 360 is a large loudspeaker, with each weighing 70kg; that's almost as much as a middleweight boxer. And yet, it's flexible enough to be used in rooms generally considered out of bounds for big loudspeakers. It can work in big rooms too.



EQUIPMENT REVIEW
Linn 360



» In past Linn loudspeakers, the character was the overarching component of the sound. It got very close to the musical intent of the musicians, but always with a Glaswegian accent. With the 360, no such concession needs be made. This is an honest, neutral, dynamic and detailed sounding loudspeaker, but one that single-handedly manages to retain the rhythmic drive that previous Linn flagships were noted for with a sense of high-end clarity and finesse that gives the Linn 360 a place at high-end's top table. That deserves a lot of praise!

It also means the company's pithy 'audibly invisible' tag-line lives up to the hype. The Linn 360 is a big step forward for the company. Linn Klimax 350 owners looking to upgrade might also find that a big step up in price. Linn joins the high-end with the 360; a product that deserves to be taken seriously.

Never happy

Linn's engineers are never happy; they are always improving things. And some audiophiles are never happy too, but for different reasons. There are going to be a lot of detractors. Those who spent decades building up top-end Linn systems will find the uprated price of admission hard to swallow. There will be those who think Linn should be trawling its past rather than building its future, and they will want an Isobarik because they always want an Isobarik. And there will be those with very siloed thinking who can't see past the LP12. Note that none of these 'negatives' relate to the product itself, except maybe that exposed midrange dome is

a magnet for little fingers. But having sat and listened to the 360, there's not much to dislike.

This is Linn shifting up. The company's high-end credentials started with the LP12 turntable 50 years ago. It's grasped the nettle of top-notch streaming. And now, with the 360 when used in the full Exakt Integrated configuration with Space Optimisation+, it's a credible and modern high-end loudspeaker system. You get super-low levels of distortion, unparalleled levels of dispersion and a sonic performance that produces desperation in its rivals. +

Technical specifications

Type Four-way floorstanding fully integrated Aktiv loudspeaker (part active version also available but not tested)

Drivers 19mm Beryllium dome tweeter, 64mm thin-ply woven carbon fibre dome midrange, 190mm aluminium/magnesium upper bass, 2x 220mm long-throw aluminium lower bass

360 Array Class AB amps with Adaptive Bias Control

Bass System Power DAC

Cabinet volume 60l

Finishes Piano Black, Alpine White, Clyde Built, Linn Heritage, Single Malt

Dimensions (HxWxD, with stand) 114.1 x 41.1 x 48.4cm

Weight 70kg

Price £55,000 (360 Passive with Aktiv Bass), £87,500 (360 Exakt Integrated) per pair

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