

Miracle workers

Two brands with a reputation for doing things their own way combine forces and **Ed Selley** is delighted at the results

Sometimes, the combination of products we assemble for a *Beautiful System* speak for themselves, combining as they do well-known partnering brands or technology that obviously complements each other. You will be forgiven for not immediately seeing the connection between these grey boxes and a pair of diminutive but elegant small floorstanders, but there is a reason for their partnering up.

Both Konus Audio and Boenicke are companies with a philosophy of doing things their own way. This means that in some regards, this system is exactly in keeping with received wisdom and in others completely at loggerheads

with it. With both brands, the idea has never been to be different for the sake of it – there's method to the madness.

In the case of Konus Audio, the inspiration for the Integrale amplifier and Digitale DAC is one of applied simplicity. The core thinking behind the company's products is that adding engineering complexity to the design of the circuit and component often introduces a different set of problems to overcome. By paring back the number of components and the roles the product is asked to perform, you can attain a level of performance that is unmatched by any other method.

This means that the Integrale is an integrated amplifier boasting a

COMPONENTS

KONUS AUDIO DIGITALE DAC £2,299

The Digitale is a two-input, line-level DAC built around the principles of short circuit paths and extremely simple circuitry in order to produce the best possible sound quality.

KONUS AUDIO INTEGRALE AMPLIFIER £2,299

The Integrale is a matching twin input amplifier that offers 33W into 8ohm that is output via a single set of hefty speaker terminals. Different colour casework options are also available. The enclosures are heavily padded for comfortable long-term listening.

BOENICKE AUDIO W8 LOUDSPEAKER £5,500

The W8 is the smallest floorstander in the Boenicke range and manages to pack no less than four separate drivers into its small but distinctive cabinet made from two matching wood sections.



princely 33W into 8ohm. The execution is admirably close in concept to the classic 'straight wire with gain', with only a volume control by way of human interaction. 33W isn't the sort of number that has you imagining a PA system, but it's enough power to drive a wider range of speakers than you might at first assume. Two RCA line inputs are fitted and output is by a hefty single set of speaker terminals.

Glass half full

The matching Digitale DAC is no less purist. This is a line-level only design with a single coaxial and USB input apiece. The internals make simplicity the primary focus of the design, including short signal paths and minimalist implementations, but there are some useful real-world features like the ability to handle hi-res digital via USB. Both units are very roughly equivalent to half-width size and can fit side by side on a conventional equipment rack.

The Boenicke W8 that accompanies the electronics is the more visually striking of the components and that visual impact gives some clues that in design terms, these are in no way conventional speakers. That line down the centre of the cabinet is not some shortcoming of the veneering process.

Instead it marks the division between the two solid halves of the cabinet. Internally, this is divided into chambers and sections with the divisions all forming part of the same single piece.

Into this labyrinth of passages are placed four drivers per speaker. Visible at the front is a combination of 4in paper cone with distinctive wooden dust cap and a 3in-wide band driver that together cover almost the full

This stunning setup is attractive, easy to use and unconcerned about placement

frequency range the speaker is asked to. There is a tweeter, but it lurks on the back of the speaker and acts to fill out the very upper registers. The low end in turn is augmented by a 6.5in driver on the side of the cabinet. You might assume such an arrangement might require an extensive crossover implementation, but instead the W8 crosses over only so far as to prevent the smaller drivers being overwhelmed.

The end result is a tiny but utterly gorgeous loudspeaker. Standing just 770mm high, the W8 is smaller than most entry-level floorstanders, but the

Above left: Quite unlike any other speaker, the W8 is a stunning performer

Above centre: The Konus Audio duo is minimalist, but effortlessly musical

Above right: Simplicity is the order of the day, although lovely details abound

level of fit and finish coupled with the lovely industrial design means you are unlikely to ever feel short changed with it sitting in front of you.

Sat in their grey casework complete with SPDT switches for input selection, the Konus Audio boxes on the other hand feel more like test equipment than home hi-fi – devices you switch on and then rely on for years without ever giving them a second thought.

Just an illusion

The moment, you hear this system for the first time is likely to be something that sticks in the memory, however. The human brain is an adaptable beast and it does a wonderful job of tying together what you see and hear in such a way as to make sense. This system overloads those finely honed processes as effectively as any conjuring trick. 33W into a pair of titchy floorstanders shouldn't sound this big. It shouldn't convey the effortlessness of a system with unlimited headroom or offer the sort of dynamics that bring to mind drivers the size of dinner plates and cabinets you could get changed in.

Give this system, the hefty *London Can Take It* by Public Service Broadcasting and the performance is simply outstanding. The bass is deep,

tight, detailed and perfectly integrated with a midrange that is spellbinding. The Boenicke is a speaker that has no need to embellish material it is given, it simply relies on there being so little of itself in the way of the music that you sit there slack jawed at the immediacy of it. The Konus pairing for its part combines a sense of matter-of-fact accuracy with a tonal sweetness that doesn't alter the overall balance of the music, but instead gives it the merest hint of additional refinement of the sort that makes a poorer recording an order of magnitude more pleasant to listen to.

Size isn't everything

Where the compact dimensions and terrestrial power output of these components does make themselves felt is that they have a speed and effortlessness with complex material that leaves most larger rivals trying to make their extra power and size felt. The lightning-fast guitar work of Bjørn Berge in his live performance of *Trains* is usually something that becomes unavoidably congested as a speaker struggles to differentiate the unstoppable flow of notes. Here, you can discern every single one of them. It's the audio equivalent of watching sport at 120 frames per second – what



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looks like sleight of hand at 'normal' speed becomes self explanatory when experienced this way.

The final aspect of these electronics is perhaps the most compelling of all. The tonal realism of the system is extraordinary. Even after acclimatising myself to the discrepancy in physical size and the scale of the performance,

33W into a pair of titchy floorstanders really shouldn't sound this big

the ability of the Boenickses and Konus to reproduce a voice or instrument is enough to have me stop whatever I'm trying to do at the time and stare in rapt astonishment at them. Given the construction of the speaker, it might not be too surprising to discover that it handles stringed instruments in a way that makes most rivals sound like a bedside radio, but its performance with voices is such that it gets you wondering if Boenicke has also found a way to equip the W8 with lungs.

What ties all of this astonishing ability together is that it is never matter of fact or workmanlike. For all the outstanding accuracy and

transparency, this system never forgets that the purpose of its existence is to bring a little joy to the business of listening to music. It doesn't matter what you throw at it, almost independent of your state of mind, it sets to work improving your mood and providing a little escapism from whatever ails you at that moment. This isn't a rock system, a setup for classical music and neither should it be considered an all-rounder. It is, in all senses of the word a music system.

The price is right

If this ability came at the expense of completely dominating a room and costing as much as a well-equipped sports car, I'd still be enthused, but the most impressive part of this system is that it is neither of these things – in fact barring portable and headphone *Beautiful Systems*, it is one of the smallest and easiest to accommodate setups we've ever featured and the price, while hardly inconsequential is not outlandish either. It's attractive, easy to use and unconcerned about placement. In return, it produces a performance that has me wondering how on earth I spin out the business of giving it back. In this case, good things very definitely come in small packages ●