Modest-looking Epos – sheep tricks hide solid sound

What Hi-Fi?

The £300 ES11 is the baby brother to the venerable Epos ES14, the latter a true audiophile speaker that can give an amazing performance but at a cost – a first class musical source and amplification system is mandatory. The ES11 gives a generous helping of the larger ES14's sound, but is easier on the pocket, saving you £175 into the bargain.

The new speaker is a technological wolf in sheep's clothing. It looks unprepossessing but is sophisticated and employs ultra-modern construction methods. The front and rear panels are plastic mouldings tied together by steel rods, while the bass driver's chassis is an integral part of the front baffle. The four cabinet walls are sandwiched tightly between the front and rear panels, making for a very rigid, non-resonant structure, while the cabinet itself (black ash or walnut veneer) measures a modest 375mmm (H) x 200mm (W) x 250mm (D).

The speaker is reflex-ported to improve bass response and uses two new custom drive units; a 165mm bass driver with a polymer cone, and a silky smooth 25mm metal dome tweeter. The speaker can be bi-wired to improve sound quality if you wish. It requires placing reasonably close to a rear wall; Epos suggests allowing 20cm of space to let the reflex port operate.

Although not so critical as its big brother, the ES11 still demands decent partnering components be used with it. The manufacturer suggested a Naim NAIT integrated amplifier as a minimum requirement, so this was used with an exotic Linn Sondek turntable and an equally nifty combination of Arcam CD170/ Black Box 2. Speaker cable was a single run of Naim NAC A5.

The ES11 has much of the ES14's character. It is delightfully open and revealing, bringing to the fore a good deal of low level information with remarkable clarity. It proved very fast and dynamic, giving strongly rhythmic music great impetus and drive. Its bass performance was surprisingly good for a little box.

But its finest quality is its highly musical nature: it empathises with all musical styles, delivering the performances in just the right manner – with delicacy, forthrightness, aggression, or restraint, whichever is demanded. And the ES11, unlike many small speakers, doesn't get at all muddled when the going gets tough – it stays together.

It's not a speaker for all systems, but if you have high calibre ancillaries then it should be number one on your list of models to audition. No matter what your taste in music the ES11 will please you.

✔ Open and revealing; very musical sound

✘ Not any system; needs fine partners