

KENTISH MADE

If a speaker is named after the home of the company it really needs to be something extra-special... and the KEF Maidstone is extraordinary in every respect.

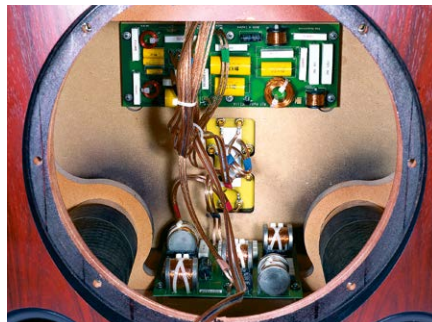


The Reference speakers of a legendary speaker forge like KEF – Kent Engineering Foundry – must of course be able to reproduce the entire bandwidth of music with perfection. For this reason alone, it's unlikely to be small. That's certainly true of KEF's Maidstone, named after the English company's hometown in Kent.

Almost defining the size of the speaker is a mighty 38cm bass unit weighing in at 17.5 kg, and this prestige object is partnered with a brand-typical, although especially exquisite, coaxial Uni-Q chassis for the musically important midband and treble.

From the start, this automatically meant a four-way system since the designers

couldn't simply couple the 16cm Uni-Q directly to the 38cm bass driver, but instead needed to insert a 25cm bass driver working in a closed volume. In



▲ Die mehrteilige und höchstwertige Frequenzweiche sitzt unmittelbar hinter dem Tieftöner.

this no-limits project, whose development took several years, KEF also decided on a completely separated housing for each individually optimized driver, stacked on top of each other like a tower. For the bass alone this meant a bass-reflex cabinet of 145 liters and 60 cm width.

All the drivers were developed in the company's own lab, and manufactured in-house in Kent. The only exception is the optional super-tweeter which is inserted later: Its ceramic dome comes from the German specialist Thiel, and the whole assembly resides on top of the massive speaker, can be pivoted like a bicycle light, and turns the system into a five-way design.

In view of freely positioned tweeter, one could get the idea – as some journalists surmised publicly – that the Maidstone was a reaction to the also technically brilliant and enormously successful Nautilus 801 from competitor Bowers & Wilkins, but any such comparisons hold only for the add-on supertweeter, the offer of which was a concession to the expanded frequency response of DVD video/audio and SACD – formats which were already on the horizon at the time.

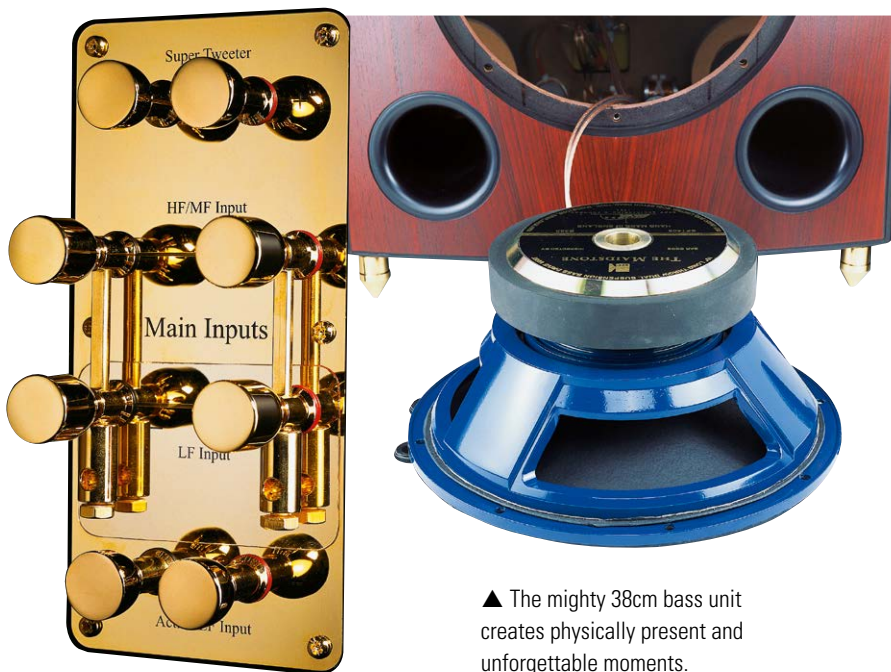
Let's be clear: the Maidstone appeared in 1997, i.e. before the Nautilus 801, and was initially designed and sold without the gold-plated addition which lets it stretch up to 50 kHz. And during its production, which reached into the 2000s, it was exclusively available in black with a rosewood front baffle, implemented in MDF varying from 25mm to 5cm (for example for the front panel). I heard the KEF flagship in 1998 in Japan, well-driven by Luxman electronics, and was absolutely thrilled – at least in terms of acoustics.

A lot of wood for a lot of green

42,000 DM with the supertweeters, or and 36,000 DM without: it was a hefty price, even for a heavyweight (90 kg) speaker. But with the Maidstone you have both something unique in your room – a real character if you compare its uncompromising technical look to its modern sibling “Blade” – and a milestone in Hi-Fi history which sounds as good now as it did then.

It's worth mentioning the unusual, gold-plated, and admittedly confusing terminal panel of the Maidstone, which permitted volume control for the tweeter and the expansion of the super-tweeter and could also be used to control the drivers individually in quad-amping or active operation, bypassing the crossover. A measured 88 dB efficiency is above average, but you should definitely spring for a potent, sturdy amplifier: the R109 has an impedance dip to almost 3 Ohm in the bass and thus is not easy to drive.

Personally, I could have done without



▲ The mighty 38cm bass unit creates physically present and unforgettable moments.

the supertweeter, even in the company's later Reference series. The following generation did just that, instead relying completely on the coherent capabilities of the Uni-Q chassis, in which midband and treble come entirely synchronously from exactly the same acoustic center. The idea is to come closer to the ideal of the point source than most other driver systems.

In the STEREO Test 2001, my colleague Barske was extremely impressed by the rotund British speaker, his only complaint being that the bass was a tad too dry to allow it into the exalted company of STEREO's top references.

I personally like it bass bit rounder and “juicier”, which is why the Maidstone is among my all-time favorites, along with other classics such as the Duntech Sovereign, Dynaudio's Consequence, the Infinity Reference Standard, or Mission's Pilastro – I will skip current models from any brand for obvious reasons. However, in terms of looks I liked just about every other classic alternative better. That's just the way it is. Sorry.

The fact that it a Luxman created such a lasting memory with the Maidstone in Tokyo is also no accident; when visiting the factory in Kent, where the entire Reference series is hand-produced and subjected to painstaking quality tests, a fantastic Blade 2 played in the showroom (which also houses the company's museum) on Luxman Monos. It just fits.

Tom Frantzen

KEF Maidstone

Made-in year: 1997 (-2001)

Manufacturer: KEF (GP)

Price: DM 36,000 (1997)

Price today: starting at € 13,000



▲ A home for each driver. This appears to be the motto for this housing – with all the associated acoustic benefits and (possible) optical drawbacks.

LINKS

www.kef.com

http://www.hifihenkes.de/produkte/archiv/kef/pics/kef_109_entwicklung.pdf