

REVIEWS POLK AUDIO SIGNATURE S15E £290



Cultural exchange

This US loudspeaker has been tweaked for European ears. **Ed Selley** judges the results

Different countries having varying expectations when it comes to sound is not as bizarre a concept as you might first imagine. After all, variations in room size, partnering equipment, music being listened to and even different expectations of how it should sound all play their role in ensuring that what delivers the goods in one part of the world won't necessarily be the same in another and has led to 'tuning' products for a particular market. Certain brands have been advocates of the idea and as part of the Sound United group – one of the biggest speaker suppliers in the US – Polk's latest additions to its Signature series have been tweaked to what it calls European ears.

The S15E – 'a far European' – is a new version of the S15 standmount type, but instead of simply venting out the back of the cabinet there's an additional plastic surround structure that's designed to smooth the airflow. Polk calls this a Power Port, with the additional apparatus intended to deliver deeper bass than a traditional bass reflex design while allowing the cabinet to be placed right up against a wall. There's even a keyhole to facilitate direct wall mounting, should you so wish to.

To tweak this basic starting point for tuning to European tastes, a series of changes have been implemented. The cabinet bracing has been subtly revised, the crossover has also seen some alterations and the bass port leading up to the Power Port assembly has been lengthened. There are also some minor changes to the mid/bass driver dust cap. None of this sounds particularly dramatic, but given that renowned speaker consultant Karl-Heinz Frick had a hand in the tuning these are surely all that's needed to affect the sonic adjustments.

There are some minor cosmetic tweaks too – the grille is matt black rather than gloss and it now uses black fixing screws, and there have also been some changes to the finish of the Power Port. It's not an especially pretty or elegant looking speaker design when compared with price rivals, and it comes across as a little fussy and old-fashioned by UK standards. A white finish is also

available, which is slightly better but regardless of colour it is reasonably well made and has some neat touches like magnetic speaker grilles. While it does little for the overall aesthetic of the cabinet, the presence of the Power Port apparatus means it should be easy to accommodate in most rooms. Crucially, the changes have been applied without impinging on the elements of the performance that were so appealing about the original incarnation of the S15.

Sound quality
First connected to my resident Naim Supermail 2 integrated amplifier, costing more than 10 times the price, the S15e is admirably consistent and a very entertaining speaker to listen to. It powers through The Comet Is Coming's *Super Zodiac* with the sort of drive and determination that is unusual in a relatively small speaker. Polk's claim of there being more bass than rivals is debatable, but the bass it does have is well defined, light on its feet and well integrated with the rest of the frequency response.

The upper registers blend seamlessly with the bass and it's here that demonstrable improvements have been made. The presentation has been significantly altered without impinging on the sense of fun that permeates the entire performance. It gains an element of civility that is the difference between it being a model that will delight a specific group of listeners to something that will attract many more admirers.

The peace blankness of *Believe It* by White Lies is a thoroughly modern recording that can be a little congested and hard edged. The Polk balances it neatly, sounding refined and much more spacious than the mastering really should allow, but

without losing the propulsive force needed to make music like this work. Despite the extended frequency response it isn't the most detailed standmount, but it is competitive at the price and the sonic space it creates is a compelling one. The stereo image doesn't extend much beyond the outer edge of the speaker – so a relatively wide placement is required for the best soundstage – but the space between the cabinets is convincingly filled and crucially manages to impart a feeling of front-to-back depth.

Ask the S15e to slow things down and be more delicate, and the scope of the refinements becomes more apparent. The wonderfully sweet, it extracts greater refinement while keeping what made the S15 so appealing.

and flowing *Shadow Queen* by the Alba Gros Ensemble isn't rendered with unnatural scale or force and everything has a sense of proportion that feels entirely in keeping with the material. The unique combination of Celtic and West African influences are left to flow effortlessly together, unhurried, but never sound languid. As before, any little details that I know to be in the recording – like the movement of fingers across the harp strings – aren't so readily apparent here as they are on some more upmarket designs, but the overall handling captures the tone and the intent extremely well.

Swooping to a Rega Brio integrated amplifier (RFC 446) doesn't change the speaker's sense of refinement and rhythmic energy, and when connected to the £180 Tangent Ampster BT II



HOW IT COMPARES

The Polk is the same price as Roonard's \$200 standmount (RFC 445). The \$200 is better looking and has superior detail retrieval, but the Polk on the Polk is more forgiving in terms of placement. More crucially, that sense of rhythmic energy that the Polk brings to music, tempered with the sense of refinement, means that there are plenty of points where it's a more engaging listen. The changes for the European market mean that choosing between the two is now considerably harder than it once was.

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Conclusion

The S15e is a convincing all-round option for entry-level audiophiles. Without sacrificing any of the virtues that were so appealing in the original S15 loudspeaker design, the US brand has been able to extract greater refinement and control that means it's more likely to keep delighting listeners, where the original tended to over say its welcome. The subtle tweaks that have been applied have turned it into a suave European citizen, making this a very attractive option for anyone starting out.

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IN SIGHT



- 1 25mm Terylene dome tweeter
- 2 Bass-reflex Power Port
- 3 Single wire landing points
- 4 133mm/mica/polypropylene mid/bass driver

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY Like impressive sonic performance, build, ease of placement and drive
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★
EASE OF DRIVE ★★★★★
OVERALL ★★★★★

DISLIKE: Looks won't appeal to all
WE SAY: A useful rework of the original that turns it into one of the best standmount speakers at the price

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Hi-Fi Choice

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HI-FI CHOICE
CIRCULATION: 30K

