the ear
HI-FI MUSIC GEAR

hardware review

Iota Alpha II – a masterclass in slow-burn emotional escalation

October 7, 2026
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Neat Iota Alpha II speakers

Neat, originally an acronym for North East Audio Traders, from the days when founder Bob Surgeoner was in retail, has long had a knack of producing unusual designs. The original Alpha was a variant on the well-received Iota launched some four years earlier: a compact two-way, it was to be placed horizontally in the listening environment, rather than in the conventional upright fashion; although many professional studio installations use speakers in this manner it is a rarer application in the home.

What is so remarkable about the Iota is that its sound belies its size as it produces a soundstage way above its dimensions; also unusual was the use of an EMIT planar/magnetic tweeter. This technology has become more popular of late and is successfully being used in some headphone designs. It relies on the entire diaphragm being energised and moving relative to the magnetic field.

In late 2024 Neat Acoustics ownership transferred to directors who also run the long-established Doug Brady Hi-Fi retailer, although founder Doug has retired. But it is refreshing to know that Bob is still there spreading his magic to create wonderful-sounding loudspeakers for us to enjoy; the Iota Alpha II form being the latest.

The original Iota Alpha became unavailable, removed from catalogues and price lists, and now a new, revised version is born; a situation reminiscent of what happens when a third-party supplier either stops making a key component or changes it to the extent that the speaker designer has to go back to the drawing board.

Petit

I can hardly believe it was ten years ago that I looked at that first iteration of Neat's diminutive

Iota Alpha loudspeaker. At the time I thought it was incredible, so much so that I kept the review sample and have been using them ever since.

The original Iota loudspeaker has been a huge and continuing success since its appeared in 2011, and the idea of a low-down floor standing version has been mooted ever since. All that was necessary for the new model was to retain the exceptional abilities of the Iota and build on these in a floor-standing configuration. This is easier said than done, of course. But the Neat Acoustics Iota Alpha II is right on target.

In its new guise, the crossover is a simple two-and-a-half-way design, employing first and second order slopes. The crossover components are all hard-wired, with point-to-point connections, they are premium audiophile quality and include polypropylene capacitors and low-DCR air-core inductors. They don't use a circuit board for the minimal crossover put wire them point to point for best sound.

The Iota Alpha IIs are technically floorstanders, although that seems a daft label given that they stand just 45cm (18") high. This [lack of] height makes them ideal for discreet placement either side of a large TV screen where they disappear from the eye-line whereas stand-mount or normal-sized floor-standers dominate and can easily distract from the screen.

The basis of the original Iota (the main drive unit and the EMIT type planar magnetic tweeter) is housed in the top section of the cabinet, in a sealed volume, angled upwards. This section is configured as a two-way closed box loudspeaker and comprises the 50mm ribbon tweeter and 100mm mid/bass driver which now has a treated-paper cone as opposed to polypropylene found in the original. A notable, visual improvement is the wider range of finish options now offered, including grey, black and white which benefit from rounded cabinet edges.

The whole of the ported lower section of the Alpha II is dedicated to augmenting the lower frequencies, via a downward-firing 134mm drive unit mounted on the bottom panel, and again this is a new driver. The changes are said to offer improved low-frequency extension and better power handling compared to the original Iota Alpha. We shall see. What hasn't changed is Neat's superb build quality as well as the smaller-than-usual binding posts to the rear (one set per speaker) in keeping with the overall scale of this model.

Setup

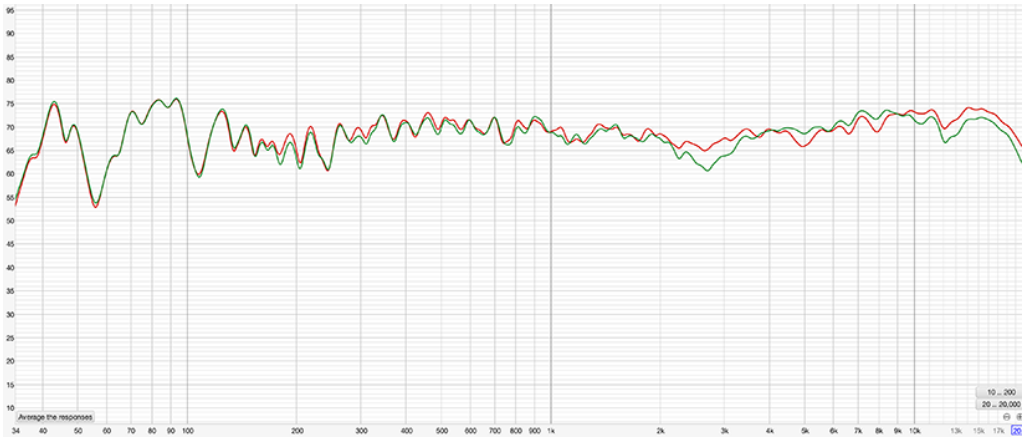
Quite by chance I connected the Iota Alpha IIs to the very same make and model of amplifier that Bob Surgeoner used to voice the new design. I knew that Neat used Atoll electronics for

demonstrations at hi-fi shows but not also for development work. My SDA200 Signature streaming integrated from the French marque had arrived on the same day as the Neat delivery so it made sense to partner the two. I relied on the amp's onboard internet tuner as well as its rendition of Airplay 2 to access my own material from Apple Music.

The speakers are 'handed' (left and right) and better results should be obtained by placing the tweeters outermost, which increasing soundstage width. Because the Alpha IIs were factory-fresh I left them playing for a good week or more before sitting down to evaluate in earnest. It was then several days later that the panel assembled for their assessment. Although the Iota Alpha IIs become more prominent in the room, moving them further apart yields sonic benefits without any hole-in-the middle effect being apparent as can sometimes befall smaller speakers.

The rough in-room nearfield response plot I took reveals the classic 'BBC dip', that is a shallow reduction in acoustic output (around 1.5 to 3 dB) in the upper-midrange (between about 1kHz and 4kHz and centred around 2–3 kHz). It was deliberately engineered to reduce listener fatigue as it tames unpleasant vocal effects and excessive forwardness. For hi-fi designs, the dip is often employed to create a sense of deepening the soundstage, notably to recess vocals either inline or behind the plane of the loudspeaker. My plot also shows how effective that planar tweeter is off-axis and manages to virtually eliminate listening hotspots.

The quoted sensitivity of 86dB, coupled with the four ohm impedance, needs to be noted although shouldn't prove an issue with accomplished amplifiers of modern design, and indeed caused no problem with the 100 watts from Atoll's SDA200 or, for the panel session, the mighty



Hegel H600 (303 watts) which proved just how the Alpha IIs can generate decent volume without break-up in a medium-sized room.

First impressions

Alongside my usual fare of speech-based material from radio stations and BBC drama CDs, I was able to sample the first track from a new band called Kiiings who have released M.O.N.E.Y. and have a debut album in production. The track shows just how well the Iota Alpha IIs cope with dynamic material that's lively, full of energy and pretty pacy. They time okay as well and that's an important aspect for many audiophiles if never high on my list of priorities. Reproduction of the pumping bass is impressive and enough to make me look round and ask – where's the sub?.

Singer Esperanza Mc R's song I Hate My Birthdays was released the day before her 14th birthday last December. Here the low frequency detail is impressive and the vocals retain their slightly ethereal quality where the tweeter might as well be at the standard ear-level rather than just above the floor, such is the soundstage height produced. Overall, the presentation had good imaging with a lovely balance of width and depth to the soundscape.

Bob has a lot of experience of implementing these ribbon tweeters and it rubs off here with bells on. The drive unit integration is exemplary such that no crossover areas are audibly discernible, that's how it should be in a competent design, but isn't always.

The move away from the plastic cone in the mid/bass unit has proved a sensible one such that speech now lacks that veil that somehow bugs polypropylene drive units although the ear manages to filter it out. But it's noticeable on the original Alpha, yet completely gone in the Iota Alpha II.

I concur that bass is improved in the new version: slightly deeper, tighter and better integrated, and must take Neat's word for it that it's down to the design changes rather than my floppy woofer from a decade of near constant use in the original concept.

Group listening

Now connected to the mighty Hegel H600 and streaming Qobuz, we start with Canadian singer Kiesza's Hideaway. Fearful that the modest Iota Alpha IIs might struggle with this high-energy electro-pop and deep house track that blends a 1990s dance rhythm with soaring, soulful vocals, I need have had no worries. Vocals were clear, crisp and delightful while the rhythm is maintained and gets the feet tapping. The track's speed and transients were beautifully executed while imaging is again spot on.

Moving to Rachmaninov's *Prelude in C-sharp minor* (Ashkenazy on Decca), with piano so often an acid test of a loudspeaker's accomplishment, or not. This iconic and dramatic piano miniature opens with a haunting, hymn-like theme set against a crushing, three-note descending motif that mimics the tolling of heavy Russian Orthodox bells. This benchmark recording managed to retain so much of its quality through the Iota Alpha IIs as to impress us no end, sounding so natural as it was clear the little Alphas were reproducing what was recorded without trying to stamp their own mark on the music. The acoustics and atmosphere of the recording venue were brought home in a believable and lifelike manner that many speaker designers seem to find impossible to achieve.

We ended an enjoyable session with 505 from Arctic Monkeys. A masterclass in slow-burn emotional escalation, we were treated to all the joys of its dramatic, climactic precision while the roaming bass line kept the energy moving underneath thanks to the Alpha IIs low end control. The way instruments are slowly layered was unravelled for us before we enjoyed the massive, noisy, and emotionally raw climax featuring wailing guitars and crashing drums that could easy

become something of a cacophony on lesser speakers. The Iota Alpha IIs sound and behave as if they are significantly bigger speakers than they appear.

A panel member queried the price and remarked that the Iota Alpha II looked expensive “for what you get”. I was staggered and revealed the current price of compact bookshelf two-ways of British heritage: namely, LS3/5As (over £3k a pair) or Harbeth’s diminutive P3s which now cost in excess of £2,600. Suddenly the penny dropped: Neat are offering a lot in a small package and value-for-money is a great deal more than mere size.

Conclusion

Over ten years we expect prices to rise, not least with UK energy costs now through the roof, but Neat’s Iota Alpha II is still a cracking bargain and the range of finishes offered is now comprehensive. Thankfully Neat didn’t get swallowed up by foreign ownership and Bob Surgeoner has been able to refine what was already an accomplished design and take it to new levels.

It needs to be said that Neat’s Alpha II should not be considered just because listening room space dictates. It is a truly competent loudspeaker which has immense qualities, notably on speech and classical repertoire. In that regard it even beats, to my mind (ears) other, more expensive members of the Neat line up, although those have their own strong points.

At twice the price the Alpha II would be highly recommended. As it is, it has to be a Best Buy; so much so that I shall be replacing my originals with this new, uprated model. It’s that good.

Pros

Big sound, soundstage and imaging from a 45cm high cabinet
Deeper, tighter, better-integrated bass than the original
Seamless driver integration
Natural, clear sound, especially on speech, piano and classical
Excellent build quality and wide choice of finishes
Compact height suits make them easy to accommodate
Good value against similarly balanced bookshelf speakers

Cons

86dB sensitivity and 4 ohm load need a capable amp
Small binding posts, one set per speaker
Perceived value is low and price may still seem high
Works best well spaced apart

the ear
The ear is all about great music and great sound. It is written by hard bitten audio enthusiasts who strive to find the most engaging, entertaining and great value components and music of the highest calibre. This really is what living is all about.