

Monitor Audio PL200 (£4750)

Designed for modest sized rooms, this metre-high Platinum range model puts some competitors to shame in terms of finish and offers clean sound with plenty of punch

Review: John Bamford Lab: Keith Howard

Study Monitor Audio's portfolio and you'll see a comprehensive range of models designed for the modern age, including in-wall and on-wall designs and soundbars to enhance the audio from flat panel televisions too.

The company's Bronze, Silver and Gold ranges incorporate two-channel and multichannel packages at prices to suit all pockets, Monitor Audio having grown over the decades to become an international brand with its own hi-tech manufacturing facility in China producing loudspeakers that are sold in more than 60 countries around the globe.

In the history of British audio Monitor Audio is something of an unsung hero, perhaps because the majority of its design output has been focused on loudspeakers for the masses that in consequence lack the glamour and prestige of high-end, no-expense-spared marques.

GOING FOR PLATINUM

Boasting luxurious build quality and with commensurately high price tickets, the company's first Platinum Series models appeared a couple of years ago, to represent a flagship range, and have been designed from the ground up to offer wide bandwidth and low distortion to take advantage of the various modern high-resolution sources.

And anyway, even when there's little commercial potential in producing cost-no-object models, every brand needs a flagship to enhance the image of its bread-and-butter models – in whatever industry you care to mention, not just high fidelity component manufacturing.

If the Platinum Series was designed to enhance Monitor Audio's 'street cred' among audio purists in the 21st century, it certainly hit the mark, the compact PL100 standmount and floorstanding PL300

RIGHT: With their front baffles upholstered in high quality leather and sculpted enclosures immaculately finished, Monitor Audio's flagship Platinum Series speakers ooze luxury. All drivers including the ribbon tweeter are made in-house

having garnered numerous awards and accolades around the world.

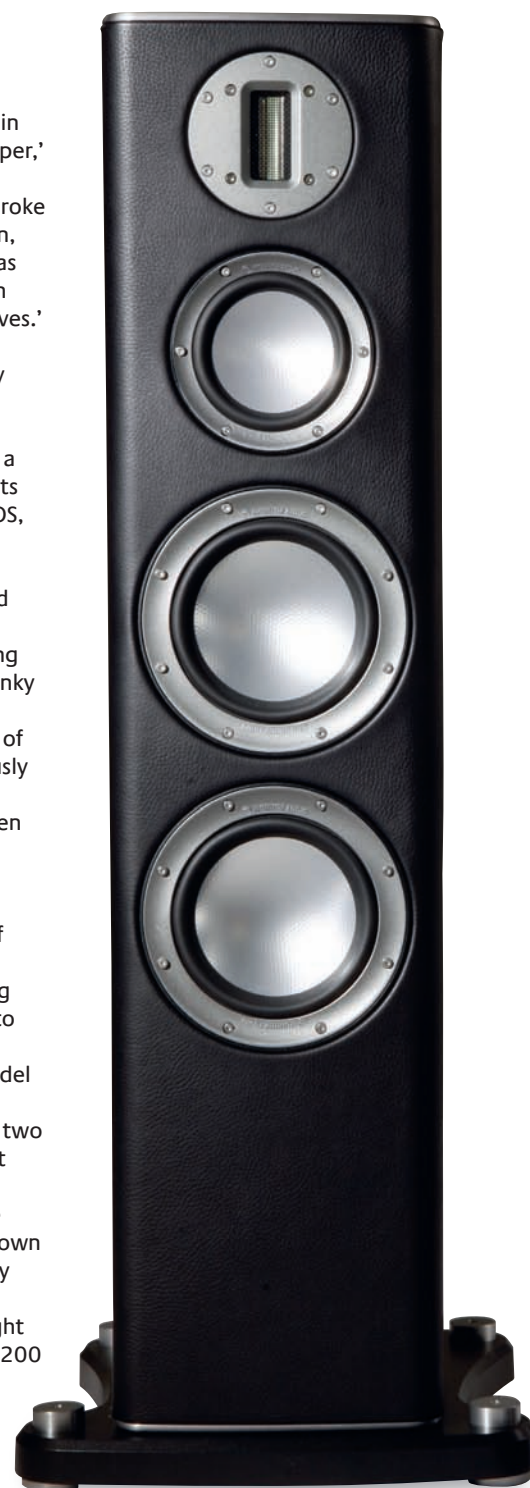
'Work on our Platinum Series began in 2003, starting with a blank sheet of paper,' designer Dean Hartley told *HFN* [see boxout, page 22]. 'While we went for broke with our elaborate cabinet construction, much of the success of these models has been thanks to the design of our ribbon tweeter which we make entirely ourselves.'

We are further informed that the Platinum models have been particularly successful in the highly competitive Japanese market, where Monitor Audio is now enjoying healthy sales thanks to a proactive distributor that also represents such brands as Creek, Alphason and IXOS, to name but three.

Employing a ribbon tweeter was a radical departure for Monitor Audio and there's no denying that it does sound beautifully open and transparent. Having spent several weeks living with the chunky PL300 floorstander earlier this year I found its information retrieval and lack of treble 'zing' revelatory, hearing previously unnoticed details in familiar recordings that one normally only experiences when listening to electrostatic panels.

Although the PL300 was launched at £5000 in 2007, its price has crept up to £6000 today. Like the majority of hi-fi products it has suffered due to the weakness of sterling. So as well as being a little more compact, in order to fit into a larger number of audio enthusiasts' living rooms, this brand new PL200 model also reduces the price of ownership to £4750. And where the PL300 featured two 200mm bass drivers this more compact PL200 employs two 165mm woofers, married to the same 100mm midrange driver and ribbon tweeter in a scaled-down enclosure, with its volume decreased by approximately one third.

In photographs the loudspeaker might look identical to the PL300 but sit the '200 and '300 side by side and immediately you'll notice that it is unquestionably better suited to cramped living spaces, being 155mm slimmer, 85mm



MAINTAINING A HERITAGE

While so many of the UK's famous hi-fi brands such as KEF, Wharfedale, Mission and Quad are today owned by overseas conglomerates, Monitor Audio is still very much a British concern. Monitor Audio's founder was Mo Iqbal, an ebullient character who famously experimented with metal tweeter dome designs throughout the 1980s, launching the first speaker featuring a gold alloy dome tweeter in 1988. It's over a decade ago that Iqbal sold his company and retired, the brand having gone from strength to strength under new ownership headed up by managing director

Andrew Flatt and Sales and Marketing Director Alex Brady. Says Alex, 'It has been a challenge to get to where we are today, as we had so many disparate operations. We had cabinet making in Rayleigh, Essex, administrative offices in Cambridgeshire and drive unit manufacturing in Tottenham, in the old Elac factory that Monitor Audio had acquired. You can imagine how much was wasted on logistics!' The company still makes everything in-house, including tooling for parts. Since 2005 this has been done in a purpose-built factory in China with a workforce of 350 people.



shallower and standing 115mm shorter at 998mm (39in) in height.

The Platinum Series ribbon tweeter is formed of a material that Monitor Audio calls C-CAM: Ceramic-Coated Aluminium/Magnesium. It's the same material employed for the dome tweeters in many of the company's other model ranges, but in the form of this ribbon design Monitor Audio claims an output approaching as high as 100kHz. The ribbon was developed to work in a two-way speaker (the PL100 'bookshelf') as well as in the company's Platinum floorstanders, so it had to be able to operate from 2.5kHz. It's protected to a degree by using an 18dB per octave high pass filter (on all models), while its deliberately short length and horn profile are aimed at ameliorating the issue of the narrow dispersion common to ribbon transducers – especially long ribbons. 'With no voice-coil or suspension mass, the moving mass of its ribbon is just 18mg (0.018gm), compared with 0.5gm moving mass in the C-CAM dome tweeters,' says Hartley.

PISTON ACTION

Meanwhile the bass and midrange drivers throughout all Platinum models are a new in-house development intended to increase cone rigidity while maintaining low mass, so that the cone can work as a piston throughout its operating bandwidth. Similar in design philosophy to Leak's 'sandwich' cone of yesteryear, and not dissimilar to Focal's 'W' cones, it comprises a core of an ultra-light honeycomb fibre material called Nomex (originally developed by Dupont) bonded between two ultra-thin, 40µm, layers of C-CAM alloy. The concave form of the cone with its uninterrupted surface is designed to provide a smooth response and increase rigidity. The cones are driven directly by the voice-coil with no dust cap or joints to cause potential interference to the drivers' response. The drive unit chassis is of diecast

alloy with vented rear sections to reduce reflections, the motor systems employing neodymium magnets, focused magnetic gaps and copper eddy rings, again in an attempt to provide high efficiency with minimal distortion.

Magnetic plates and poles are CNC machined to precise tolerances and dual spiders are used to help maintain stability at high power excursions. The 100mm midrange driver has an underhung voice-coil and is housed in its own sealed chamber, with a tapered profile formed of a proprietary thermo-set polymer loaded with chalk, glass and powdered aluminium mixed with resin. Monitor Audio calls this material 'ARC' and describes it as being like a synthetic concrete that can be moulded before it is cast.

SCULPTED ENCLOSURES

As with other Platinum speakers, the attention to detail and standard of finish of the PL200's enclosure is utterly fabulous.

'Listen to audiophile recordings and the PL200s spring into life'

Our samples were in ebony, with rosewood and piano black variants also available. The enclosures are heavily sculpted to counter internal standing waves, which as any maker of wooden boxes will inform you makes them expensive to manufacture. Constructed by using multiple laminations of wood veneers, the plywood shell uses internal 'pin hole' bracing along with front-to-back tie bolts screwed to the internal brace to minimise cabinet resonances.

The quality of the high gloss lacquer and overall fit and finish, including the quality of the terminals and the design of the adjustable feet (with removable spikes and rubber undersides for rooms with polished wood floors), put many high-end marques to shame.

Right down to the elegant magnetic grille arrangement, and the packaging

LOUDSPEAKER

which comes complete with an owner's tool-kit, the overall presentation is nothing short of exemplary.

PLEASINGLY PUNCHY

Compared with the bigger PL300, the PL200 appears to sacrifice very little in terms of subjective bass extension and 'wallop', sounding as fast and pleasingly punchy in the lower registers as its elder brother. The subterranean bass on David Sylvian's dark and gloomy *Rain Tree Crow* CD [Virgin CDV 2659] rumbled in a most gratifying fashion to deliver the requisite impression of a bleak, cavernous space throughout the recording's sinister electronic meanderings.

Just as I've experienced with the Platinum '300, the new PL200 possesses a sharp clarity that initially can be disarming. It's not that the speaker sounds bright: not at all, rather it sounds uncommonly fast and precise, with so little overhang and smearing of transients that it can give an impression of matter-of-fact coolness and lack of tonal colour. Lovers of electrostatic panels will understand what I'm trying to describe when I say that 'sometimes less is more'. With less than enthralling recordings of only average fidelity, often the sound can be underwhelming – simply because it's so 'clean'.

Listen to audiophile recordings, however, and the PL200s spring into life. Opus 3 Records' beautiful analogue recording of The Omnibus Wind Ensemble's *Music by Frank Zappa* [CD19423, a hybrid SACD] sounded natural and holographic, with the bassoons, clarinets and horns recreated in space in a most delicious fashion. During the hypnotic and enchanting 'Revised Music For a Low Budget Orchestra' the distinctive timbres of flutes and vibraphone, often buried within the dense arrangement of myriad horn and woodwind instruments, were clearly resolved throughout the piece. And in the Ensemble's simple arrangement

of 'Alien Orifice' (Zappa's original release of this composition featured Steve Vai on electric guitar, I recall) the subtle shimmering of vibraphone hovered audibly in the background despite the energetic parping of bass and contrabass clarinets stage left, and overpowering bassoons stage right.

Sadly this 1995 recording has been deleted and is currently hard to find, especially the later SACD release. If you can do so, it's a splendidly natural-sounding recording of instruments playing challenging chamber and jazz pieces, captured using a Blumlein single-point stereo microphone technique. Loudspeakers with exceptional detail-resolving capabilities such as the PL200s allow such recordings to create magical images of the musicians performing in front of your eyes.

GLARE FREE

As with the larger PL300, it's Monitor Audio's Platinum Series ribbon tweeter which makes the PL200 stand out from the crowd. Treble detail is fabulous, the speaker sounding clear, open and brightly lit, while lacking the fizz and harsh 'glare' that is common to most speakers that err towards the brighter side of the tonal spectrum. Consequently this makes listening to familiar recordings an engaging experience, as previously unnoticed details are often spot-lit in a glorious manner. Gentle and cosy-sounding they are not; clean and agile, with fabulous imaging and superb detail retrieval, they certainly are!

Listeners blessed with detached properties and having a penchant for thunderous, cinematic-style bass will probably want to add Monitor Audio's matching Platinum subwoofer (MA also makes two sizes of centre speaker in its Platinum range). But the PL200s will deliver quite sufficient low-end power for most

music listeners; and it's an informative bass with both texture and definition.

You can hear and feel the air moving on the vinyl cut of Grace Jones' epic *Slave To The Rhythm* [ZTT/Island GRACE 1], the PL200 being more than capable in the lower registers – enough to demonstrate that much of the infra-bass information is sadly absent on the equivalent CD issue of this album. The bass has authority and *punch* too: felt in the pit of the stomach with commensurate rock recordings.

Already mentioned is the fact that the PL200s revel in showcasing the delights of high resolution discs. Emerson, Lake & Palmer's grandiose *Brain Salad Surgery*, which was produced more than 35 years ago, sounded as if it had been recorded yesterday on the 24/96 DVD-Audio reissue released in 2000 [Warner/Rhino R9 75980]. From the full-on pomp of

'The subtle shimmering of vibraphone hovered audibly in the background'

'Jerusalem' to the syrupy 'Still... You Turn Me On' – with Greg Lake's vocal *just* in tune – the PL200s proved highly revealing of the recording's innate high quality.

Keith Emerson's solo piano some three minutes into '1st Impression – Part 2' of the 'Karn Evil 9' suite, which made up the second side of the original LP, sounded uncannily lifelike, the PL200's ribbon affording the high notes sparkling clarity and natural resonance with not a hint of compression as Emerson hammers the keys for all he's worth. Elsewhere, sustained bass notes from Emerson's Moog synthesizer and Carl Palmer's rabid assault on his massive drum kit were taken in their stride, the PL200s creating an open sound image that filled my listening room (despite it being considerably larger, at 27ft by 16ft, than those for which the

BRITISH BY DESIGN

Heading up Monitor Audio's design team – based on the site of the company's original woodworking shop in Rayleigh – is technical director Dean Hartley, a Yorkshireman whose career began at Fane Acoustics before joining the engineering department at Wharfedale. He came to Monitor Audio in 1997. 'As we are commercially-driven, designing real world speakers for consumers' homes, it was refreshing to go for broke, to design the most transparent loudspeaker we could make, and – within reason – not worry about the manufacturing cost.' Dean believes that good drive units form the heart of good loudspeakers and decided that the only way to improve on the company's metal-domed tweeters was with a ribbon. 'I'm not sure where we would go next,' he told us. 'A full-range ribbon or an electrostatic, perhaps?'



LOUDSPEAKER

LAB REPORT

MONITOR AUDIO PL200 (£4750)



ABOVE: High quality platinum-plated WBT 'precision series' binding posts with provision for bi-wiring/amping. The sealed enclosure for the midrange driver tapers at the rear and is positioned coaxially with the rear-firing port

PL200s are really intended). It's a pity that I didn't have the PL300s on site to compare directly with the PL200s, side by side in my listening room. Certainly these new '200s possess the speed, clarity and holographic imaging and detail capabilities of the '300s I so admired when I lived with them earlier this year. And, as already described, low bass is far from lacking.

NIMBLE FOOTED

Unless my memory of the PL300s' sound is playing tricks on me, I did get the feeling that these smaller '200s are perhaps a little more nimble and lighter of touch. The 'crack' of the drums on the title track of Barb Jung's *Just Like a Woman* album [Linn Records AKD 309, hybrid SACD] seemed even faster and tighter than I recall. This leads me to conclude that they will indeed be far better suited to the majority of listeners' living rooms, the slight reduction in ultimate bass extension capability, compared with the bigger model, probably benefiting all but those blessed with largest of listening spaces.

But never mind: given the high price of this compact floorstander I've no doubt you're not simply going to take my word for it, as personal auditioning will be a prerequisite. Indeed, as the price approaches that of a small car, which you wouldn't dream of

purchasing without a test drive, you'll probably be requiring a home demonstration too, before parting with the best part of £5K.

If your ancillaries are up to the task, if the components in your system upstream of the PL200s are sufficiently refined and musical, the transparency and detail provided by the PL200s are unlikely to leave you anything but captivated. A substantially better speaker will cost considerably more and would undoubtedly be much larger too. And that entirely misses the point of this particular design.

Like the '100s and '300s, these Platinum PL200s are loudspeakers which Monitor Audio's design team can justifiably be proud of. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

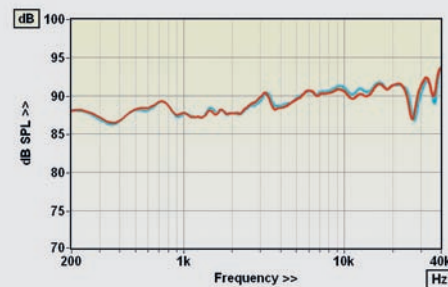
Unashamedly luxurious with a high price to match, the PL200 nevertheless represents fine value given the immaculate finish and attention to detail. While it won't fill a barn of a room with high SPLs, for those smaller than, say, 20ft by 16ft, it's probably as good a monitor as such a room can sensibly accommodate. It delivers explicit, full-range sound in abundance and thus comes heartily commended.

Sound Quality: 88%

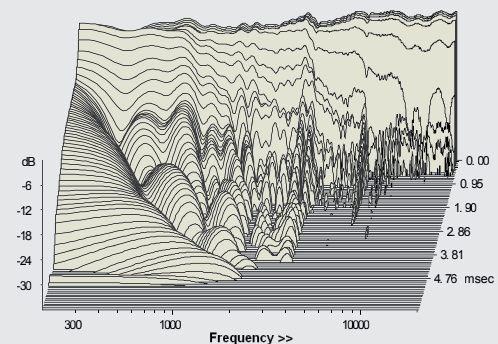


Monitor Audio's claimed 90dB sensitivity for the PL200 was confirmed by taking a simple average of our sensitivity data, which recorded 90.3dB. But the more representative pink noise and music-shaped pink noise results are marginally lower at 89.0dB and 88.9dB respectively. Importantly, this higher-than-average sensitivity is not bought through low impedance as the minimum modulus is 3.8ohm at 138Hz – fully justifying the 4ohm nominal impedance – and the minimum EPDR (equivalent peak dissipation resistance), because of modest impedance phase angles, is 2.3ohm at 96Hz. Looked at together these figures indicate that the PL200 presents quite an easy load to the amplifier.

Frequency response errors for each speaker were lower than average at ± 2.6 dB and ± 2.8 dB (200Hz-20kHz), as befits an upmarket model, and pair matching was in the top drawer with only ± 0.6 dB error over the same frequency range. Despite this, the response trend is certainly not flat [Graph 1, below], being generally uptilted from 400Hz through to 20kHz. Bass extension (-6dB/47Hz re. 200Hz) is pretty typical for a speaker of this size and sensitivity and will be improved as a result of interaction with the room's boundaries. At the opposite end of the spectrum the ribbon tweeter comfortably maintains output to above 40kHz. Although the cumulative spectral decay waterfall [Graph 2, below] indicates the presence of some breakup modes in the concave midrange diaphragm, these are at a fairly low level following a commendably fast decay in output across the 200Hz-20kHz frequency range, which suggests unusually low levels of cabinet resonance. KH



ABOVE: Pair matching is excellent but the speaker shows a gradual increase in output through midrange and treble frequencies



ABOVE: Fast decay of any slight driver and/or cabinet resonances shows the PL200 is solidly constructed

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL/1m/2.83Vrms - Mean/IEC/Music)	90.3dB / 89.0dB / 88.9dB
Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz-20kHz)	3.8ohm @ 138Hz 15.0ohm @ 26Hz
Impedance phase min/max (20Hz-20kHz)	-41° @ 80Hz 35° @ 20Hz
Pair matching (200Hz-20kHz)	± 0.6 dB
LF/HF extension (-6dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	47Hz / >40kHz / >40kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m)	1.0% / 0.2% / 0.2%
Dimensions (HWD)	998x255x285mm