



# Lord of the rings

Featuring a concentric mid/treble driver with a difference, ELAC's Concentro range goes 'compact' with the S 503

**F**or those who feel that ELAC isn't one for adventurous industrial design, the Concentro series is here to prove you wrong. You'll find some very curvy and organic-looking models in this range, which rises even above the finely crafted and attractive Vela series. However, the Concentros still feel more like a disparate collection than a real product family. Virtually every cabinet in the roster has its own design, from the menhir-like Concentro and Concentro M, to the high-heeled S 507 and S 509 floorstanders. Unusual, but then the Concentro line is more about pushing the envelope and deploying the latest technology that ELAC's engineers in the German marine town of Kiel have thought up. Which means, in the case of the sweeping flagship Concentro of 140kg, incorporating some nifty tricks into a truly colossal presence costing an equally mighty £59,000.

Hefty certainly isn't a quality you can ascribe to the S 503, however, as it's a more compact unit – which is much more appropriate for living room use. The beguiling design of this standmount speaker makes it appear far slimmer than it really is. Perhaps more importantly for those that haven't won big on the Euro Millions of late, the price is more accessible too. The S 503 comes in at £6,500 for the glossy black or white versions, while the glorious varnished walnut cabinet pictured here will set you back an additional £500.

There's much about the Concentro S 503 that's intriguing, but the headline feature is its concentric driver, making it a true three-way, ported design. That might not be so unusual for ELAC, considering its erstwhile co-operation with British designer Andrew Jones – a noted advocate of coaxial driver layouts. But in this case the centrepiece of the stepX-JET dual-concentric driver is a new

generation JET 5c tweeter, not a dome unit. Using this in-house derivative of an AMT (Air Motion Transformer) tweeter is very on-brand for the Germans, who have invested heavily in manufacturing – partly by hand – the wafer-thin membrane at the heart of JET.

At first glance, the standmount's looks are relatively traditional, but on closer inspection it's apparent that this speaker is anything but a classic rectangular box. The base shape of virtually every plane of the enclosure is a trapezium, with, for example, a front baffle that's far broader than the rear panel that houses loudspeaker terminals. Looking down, the enclosure nearly presents a triangular form.

## On the tilt

The baffle itself has a broad base and less width on top and tilts gently away from the listener – allowing for better time-alignment between the coaxial driver up top and the bass driver below. The two drivers are mounted straight up, protruding away from the baffle.

Below the stepX-JET dual-concentric driver, the 180mm AS-XR bass driver is no less eye-catching. The aluminium sandwich foil cone is multifaceted and looks striking as light plays over it to highlight certain segments. Aesthetics aside, the idea here is to enhance the cone's stiffness and push any resonant modes out of band. But if you'd rather cover it up, you can't as there are no grilles available for the S 503.

Rings of directivity sounds like a great name for a metal band, not something you expect to find in a cloth bag buried at the bottom of a loudspeaker's packaging. But that's exactly what's on offer here, as ELAC bundles three pairs of alloy 'Directivity Control Rings' (DCRs) along with each S 503. Each ring set claims to offer a different dispersion

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
ELAC Concentro S 503

**ORIGIN**  
Germany

**TYPE**  
3-way concentric-driven standmount loudspeaker

**WEIGHT**  
13kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
225 x 400 x 372mm

**FEATURES**  
• 50mm stepX-JET dual-concentric driver with JET 5c tweeter  
• 180mm AS-XR mid/bass driver  
• Quoted sensitivity: 87dB/1W/1m

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Hi-Fi Network

**WEBSITE**  
elac.com  
hifi-network.com

pattern, going from diffuse to more focused, allowing some tuning of mid and treble off-axis response. The 'Fokus' rings are better suited to use in larger rooms, while 'Spacious' is designed for up-close listening – very close apparently, as the standard 'Neutral' ring (which comes pre-fitted) is designated for 2.5m listening distances.

On ELAC's floorstanding Concentro M you can physically adjust the depth of the JET tweeter – these rings are intended as a more affordable approximation. They affix magnetically around the dual concentric driver, and once in place are flush with the surround of the speaker, meaning that they are not noticeably a separate part. They also require a bit of force to remove. Is it surprising to be nervous tugging on the mounted ring of six-and-a-half grand's worth of speaker? It's probably a good idea to have someone around to hold the cabinet firm while you remove and place a ring – and don't forget to wear the supplied white gloves.

## Sound quality

Swiss band Grauzone is a poster child of Eighties synthpop and of the Neue Deutsche Welle movement in particular. Their reputation largely derives from the 1981 hit *Eisbär*, but a commemorative re-release last year suggested they had much more to offer. Spinning the 180g LP on an

## What's on show plentifully here is both swiftness and acceleration

ELAC Miracord 90 Anniversary turntable, with Primare R15 (HFC 463) phono preamp in tow, we are immediately struck by just how well the S 503 conveys the genre-typical reverberant percussion and droning post-punk beats, overlaid with heavily processed vocal effects.

In particular, there is an enormous sense of space, extending far beyond the boundaries of those slim cabinets. This is especially noticeable with *Hinter Den Bergen*, which sees the S 503 echoing vocals around the soundstage while also lifting one particular synth out of the mix.

Depending on the surroundings and your taste, it's probably worth playing around with toe-in and the DCRs to mellow out the sound. Although the latter have a subtle effect, anything that assists in honing the S 503's



IN SIGHT



JOINING THE JET SET

Where is it written that a loudspeaker driver must 'pump' an acoustical wavefront by moving axially, fore and aft? In actual practice most do, but there are other, more innovative ideas in existence for how a driver might otherwise displace the air around it. Just one such variation is the AMT (Air Motion Transformer), an increasingly popular alternative to the dome tweeter, although the technology could conceivably be expanded into low midrange and bass units.

Patented by German engineer Dr Oskar Heil in 1973, the AMT uses a pleated, accordion-like substrate onto which is bonded an aluminium foil 'voice coil'. The polymer/alloy strip is bathed in a magnetic field so the applied signal current causes it to

compress and expand along its length, squeezing the air out from its folds.

AMT drivers offer a resistive impedance, the potential of lower distortion and better power handling than an 'equivalent' dome tweeter, but the physical mounting and clamping of the AMT strip within its frame is absolutely critical in tackling resonances and otherwise managing the uniformity of its output.

ELAC has long been a proponent of this technology with its JET tweeter, but we've seen quite a few other AMT refinements courtesy of the FinkTeam KIM, GoldenEar BRX, Scansonic M20 (HFC 474), Neat Acoustics Iota Xplorer (HFC 435), Monitor Audio PL500 II, not to mention the MartinLogan Motion 35XT.



Matching the Concentro S 503 for price is Raidho's XT-1 (HFC 433) with its planar/ribbon tweeter. Blessed with an exquisite midrange, it's a little tougher to drive, less sensitive and has less bass impact, unlike the £7,500 KEF Reference 1 Meta, which offers punch and fine detail in equal measure. Then there's Focal's £5,000 Kanta N°1 (HFC 454), which we described as offering a "bouncy, musical and engaging sound" – it comes in a wide variety of colours too! Top of the standmount staircase must surely be the all-alloy Magico A1 (HFC 462) which, though very costly at £11,000, delivers a performance that puts many a slender floorstander to shame. If you are short on space but long on budget, you must hear the baby A series Magico!

ELAC's JET tweeters are typically adept at revealing the twists and turns of slick detail, and all that swiftness and acceleration is even more on show here. It's an exceptionally exhilarating ride to hear Rodrigo y Gabriela's *Mettavolution* on this speaker as it manages to relay the incredible speed and expressiveness of the Mexican duo's guitar playing. Strings twang, guitar bodies are hit, and the transient attack is often breathtaking. Only occasionally there's a note that jumps out from

## The beguiling design makes it appear far slimmer than it actually is in reality

the mix with uncontrolled gusto, but generally there's a sense of integration and 'playing together' that makes for an addictive and fairly natural sound throughout.

This performance all comes together in a standmount speaker that isn't without faults, but that on the whole sounds mighty spectacular considering its size. Playing the iconic theme from *The Book Of Boba Fett*, composed by Ludwig Göransson on Walt Disney Records, it's really all there. The epic scale, eye-opening wavefront when the massive percussion beats down, and the haunting chants resounding away into the distance – it's a magnificent, dynamic result.

## Conclusion

It may be true that ELAC's Concentro S 503 compact standmount requires quite a bit of power – not that it particularly bothers the Hegel Reference H590 (HFC 449) amplifier that we use for the audition. You just have to be prepared to give the volume knob a good twirl to realise a truly rousing performance. Which trust us, you most assuredly will ●

performance is welcome. At a 3m listening distance, we decide to settle on a limited toe-in and keep the Neutral rings in place.

One of the S 503's strengths is undoubtedly its ability to project the finest of details out into the room. Whether it's the subdued snare drum and the intricate acoustic guitar picking on *Ordinary Guy*, the first track on Jacob Dinesen's *Let The Hard Times Come*, or all the intricacies of Thelonious Monk's piano playing on the rare *Live In Rotterdam 1967* recording restored by Fondamenta and Devialet, the ELAC delivers both detail and grand scale.

At the same time, it still manages to maintain an intimate feel. Musicians aren't performing off into the distance, but close by on a wide stage – near enough for the listener to delight in hearing extraneous noises such as the

breathing of musicians or fingers sliding across strings. This element of the S 503's performance is utterly convincing and, as Larry Gales plays his heart out on the contrabass solo midway through *Epistrophy* on the Thelonious Monk album, we realise that, without really being aware of it, we have moved to the edge of our seat to get even more into the experience – always a good sign.

Some of the qualities ELAC's S 503 exhibits will be recognisable to those who have heard earlier JET tweeter designs from the company. But what this new, compact Concentro model does better is blend a level of mid/treble coherence with exceptional low-end performance. We've heard slim-profile floorstanding speakers with far less impactful bass – and here it comes from just a single, reflex-loaded 180mm driver...

## Choice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

#### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

#### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

#### EASE OF DRIVE

★★★★★

#### OVERALL

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Size; ability to tune off-axis response via DCR

**DISLIKE:** Nothing of note at the price

**WE SAY:** So splendid it sounds like a floorstander