

Elac Debut B6

With Andrew Jones at the helm, Elac's new Debut B6 brings a boldly different sound
Review: **Nick Tate** Lab: **Keith Howard**

As a certain 1980s car ad used to say, 'it's tough on the streets'. One of the most obvious, literal reasons for this is that there are lots of people to bump into. Mass-market loudspeaker manufacturers know all about this, figuratively speaking. There are umpteen little boxes – most of which are now surprisingly well styled and finished – competing for the attention of a finite number of buyers.

German speaker brand Elac, however, has not traditionally walked these avenues and alleyways but has typically confined itself to a more select and ostensibly discerning upmarket audience.

ELAC FINDS THE RIGHT MAN

Nevertheless, more recently the company took the decision to produce its first true mass-market loudspeaker series, but in an admirably self-aware way realised it didn't have anyone on staff who could design it. The company went hiring and hooked a rather big fish: one Andrew Jones. With some 40 years experience of loudspeaker design, AJ has one of the most illustrious careers in the business [see boxout, adjacent page].

He set to work on the new Debut range in which the £299 B6 here is the second smallest stereo speaker. It shares much with its B5 little brother, the C5 centre channel model and F5 big brother. Smallest in the range is the B5, which looks like a B6 that's shrunk in the wash, sporting a tiny cabinet built to support its 5.5in mid/bass unit. A choice of subwoofers complements the sizeable new range, all of which was designed not in Germany, but sunny Cypress, California.

Many seasoned audiophiles will see the new B6 as a striking contrast to traditional Elac fare. Indeed, if it weren't for the badge, you'd struggle to realise it was a product from this venerable German marque. It doesn't look like any Elac we've

seen before – for starters, there's no beautiful, expensive JET tweeter glinting out at you, nor should you expect this at the price. Instead, this MDF box with its rear-firing port gets a 'metal-look' brushed vinyl finish which is different but won't appeal to every budget buyer – matt black or white paint would probably have more universal appeal.

Into this largish (for a budget standmount) box go two brand-new, Andrew Jones-designed drive units, all made to Elac's specification in China. The 6.5in bass/mid unit employs a woven 'aramid-fibre' cone that boasts a combination of high stiffness, excellent self-damping and low weight while the partnering 1in cloth-dome tweeter is loaded by what Elac describes as a 'deep spheroid' waveguide.

The six-element crossover, operating at 3kHz and with bass compensation, is also pretty unusual at the price, not least for its use of 'audiophile-grade' components. Indeed, Jones confessed to *HFN* that were any of the speaker's kit of parts made in Germany, then the B6 would have needed to be a far less ambitious design to meet its pricing target.

Funnily enough, despite the radical new thinking, the finished article might be construed as a fairly 'old school looking' standmount. I doubt the cheap plastic reflex port assembly, or the lack of magnetic fixings for the grille, will endear itself to the average budget buyer. There's

'There's a large and immersive sound that just fizzes with life'



no sense of 'wow, how did they do that for £299?' because the underlying technology is deliberately understated. Ironically, the B6's sheer minimalism may well appeal more to those 'in the know' than to the roving eye of the mass market purchaser.

IT'S A PUNK ROCKER!

With a claimed sensitivity of 87dB [see KH's Lab Report, p69] the B6 goes decently loud with a modestly powered amplifier but, despite its ease-of-drive, I reckon it's best served by one packing a serious bit of muscle. I found that the 80 relatively 'big-boned' watts of my reference Exposure 3010S2d integrated were able to take this speaker by the scruff of the neck.

There's quite a bit of energy associated with the port, so the speaker likes a little room to breathe. I found it worked best over 30cm (about a foot) from the boundary wall, ideally 50cm, and sitting on frame type standards over 60cm high – I used Atacama SE24s. This done, the Elac



LEFT: Elac's largest standmount Debut speaker employs a 6.5in aramid-fibre bass/mid cone that crosses over to a 1in silk dome tweeter at 3kHz. The MDF cabinet has a black, brushed vinyl wrap

B6 is more like an Anglo-American teenage boy out on the tiles with a bottle of Tequila. Now, although that's very different from what's come before, it's not necessarily a bad thing. Indeed, at this price point the only thing a good speaker can be is *fun* – we'll leave considerations of transparency, lack of coloration, wide bandwidth, dynamic handling and the like to the big boys at ten times the price.

RHYTHMIC 'SNAP'

Cue up ABC's 'Show Me' [*Lexicon Of Love*, Mercury 982 437-3] and you're soon very much aware of what this speaker can and cannot do. After a small orchestral introduction, the song pushes into a big, fat, funky groove courtesy of Trevor Horn's great production work – and the B6 jumps right into the heart and soul of the song.

It's surprisingly fast, well able to signpost the dynamic differences between a lightly plucked guitar string and a strongly struck one, for example, and this allied to a wonderful rhythmic 'snap' gives the music a highly percussive feel. Almost instantaneously you're aware that this speaker is fleet of foot and expressive in a way that you really weren't expecting at the price. This is the B6's trump card and one it plays very well indeed.

Andrew Jones surely realised that the B6 couldn't compete with the various high-end classics he's devised in his stellar career – in practically every way – so didn't try. Instead, it's as if he's gone for the best performance he can possibly get in the single most important respect: the time domain. For me at least, this is what makes music magic, so if you're going to do one thing right it should be this.

That's not to say that by the standards of the £300 loudspeaker fray the B6 is lacking, because it isn't. It's just that the B6's talents are cleverly honed, so you forgive it the relatively dry treble, slightly opaque midband and subtly loose bass. None of these seem to matter when you're gleefully swaying your feet from side to side, and when this little speaker serves up a large and immersive sound that fizzes with life. The listener soon forgets he's down in the cheap seats, as the B6's rousing sound echoes around.

So its bass may, as I say, be a little looser than some rivals, but golly it doesn't half bounce along in a tuneful way! It goes surprisingly low and sounds a little less ➔

Debut B6 began to sing and I decided to pound its moving parts with my IsoTek Test and Burn-In CD for additional running-in.

Properly set up and warmed through, the new Debut B6 proved something of a punk rocker. Indeed, judging by the way it makes music, you may find yourself wondering why there's an Elac badge on it

at all. I'm used to immaculately prim and proper German transducers with plenty of fine detail and a thorough, workmanlike approach to making music – whereas the Debut B6 is more feisty, punchy and pushy.

So if perhaps traditional Elac speakers personify a certain type of refined, cultured, finessed European sound then the

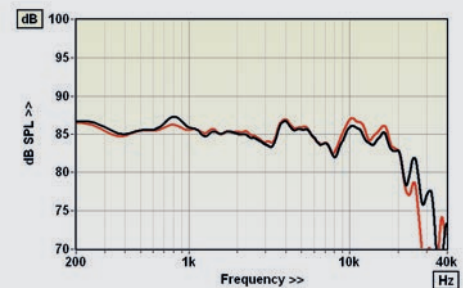
THE JONES EFFECT

Elac's new designer started his illustrious career at KEF where he helped develop its entry-level speakers right up to the Reference series, including the 107/2 and 103/4. He then moved to the USA to join Infinity, where he worked on the Prelude loudspeaker among other designs. In 1997 he joined Pioneer, and started the home division of TAD, designing the now legendary TAD M1, TAD Reference One, the Compact Reference, the Evolution 1 – and the EX series of speakers for Pioneer, based on TAD technologies. Then, in Feb 2015 he joined Elac in the United States, working out of the company's California offices. He's sanguine about his new job, insisting that his Debut series isn't a new direction for Elac. 'I wouldn't consider it a major change of style, but it's a new price point for Elac, and so a new market. The purpose is to offer products at affordable prices. As we go forward, I will be cooperating closely with our engineers in Kiel.'

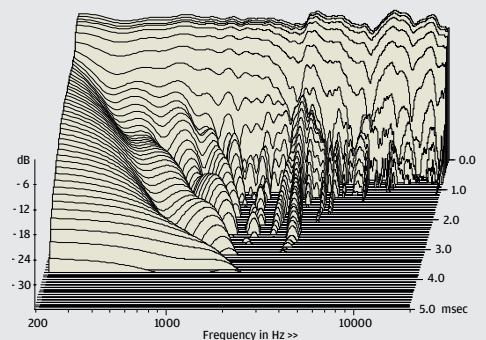
ELAC DEBUT B6

Elac claims an 87dB sensitivity for its B6 standmount but our measured pink noise and 'music' figures, both 85.3dB SPL for 2.83V at 1m, suggest that this is a little optimistic – unsurprisingly given the B6's compact dimensions and fine bass extension. Designer Andrew Jones could have hiked the sensitivity by lowering the B6's impedance but appears to have decided that, particularly at this price point, a speaker should not make difficult demands of its partnering amplifier. Rated at a nominal 6ohm, the B6 could have justifiably had a minimum impedance of 4.8ohm but we recorded a minimum of 5.7ohm. Impedance phase angles aren't notably well controlled but this high modulus alone is sufficient to ensure that the EPDR (equivalent peak dissipation resistance) is much higher than we typically record, dipping to 3.1ohm at both 20Hz and 130Hz. This suggests that the B6 is unusually easy to drive.

Its low price notwithstanding, the B6 also has an unusually flat frequency response, the review pair recording low response errors of just ± 2.7 dB and ± 2.3 dB [see Graph 1, below]. Pair matching wasn't so exceptional at ± 1.2 dB over the same 200Hz to 20kHz but is nonetheless adequate, and ± 0.9 dB up to 8kHz. Bass extension of 43Hz (-6 dB re. 200Hz) is a good performance for so compact a speaker, the diffraction-corrected nearfield response showing a gentle decline of about 4dB from 150Hz to 50Hz before steepening to a fourth-order roll-off. Ultrasonic output is less well maintained, beginning to decline a little before 20kHz. The cumulative spectral decay waterfall [Graph 2] is mostly clean apart from some resonances clustered near the 4kHz peak in the frequency response. KH



ABOVE: The B6 has a flat frequency response with some loss of extreme HF but good bass extension



ABOVE: Cabinet is well damped but the bass/mid driver shows a small cluster of resonances at ~4kHz



LEFT: Fitted with what Elac describes as a 'dual flared' reflex port, the B6 also features a six-element crossover and substantial, gold-plated 4mm binding posts

way in this respect. Bass was balanced, midband even and treble lively but not spiky.

Although a lot of fun with electronic dance music and pop, would this little loudspeaker impress with more traditional acoustic music? I duly deployed my much-loved copy of Herbie Mann's cover of 'Summertime' [At The Village Gate, Atlantic 1380]. It's a

superb live recording made back in 1962, with oodles of atmosphere and a big, immersive soundstage.

It can sound rather anti-climactic through small speakers such as these – but apparently no-one had told the Debut B6, which reproduced the recorded acoustic with commendable scale, hanging instruments wide left and right, and falling back, with consummate ease.

I was struck by the effortlessness with which the B6 served up such a sizeable soundstage, and also the way it took the listener right to heart of the recording. In the strictest 'hi-fi' terms, the B6 comes over as a little coloured, with a slightly plummy upper bass and softish midband that can't quite capture the delicate, low-level detail buried at the back of the recording. Yet still, somehow its obvious rhythmic prowess shines through... ☺

constrained by its brief to pump out serious amounts of low frequency energy than some competitors.

The larger-than-average mid/bass cone surely helps out here but the speaker is generally a very articulate and expressive performer that hides its tracks well. There's no sense that it is struggling to keep up, so though we'd hardly expect to put it to work as a PA speaker, the B6 never falls to pieces at the first clockwise twist of the volume knob.

PULLING YOU IN

'LFO' by LFO [Frequencies, WARP CD3] is a surefire way to blow your bass bins if you're not careful as it carries some very strong low notes courtesy of a Roland TB303 bass synthesiser. Playing this track beyond middling volumes can have speaker cones parting company with their rubber surrounds!

However, I'm pleased to report that the B6 remained intact and made a valiant attempt to convey at least some of that huge bassline. Although obviously limited in bandwidth, the B6 adeptly showcased the rhythms in the song, focusing on the hypnotic interplay between the hi-hat and snare drum, thus pulling the listener right in.

This early '90s recording, mostly likely mastered on DAT, isn't exactly the finest exponent of the music producer's art, and can sound harsh, but the B6 remained tonally smooth throughout. There was no sense of harshness or stridency across the upper midband, for example. Indeed it sounded more like a good three-

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

It's not easy doing a great budget speaker, but the Elac Debut B6 is just this. It succeeds by not trying to be all things to all men, focusing instead on the one universal thing about music that moves us so – rhythm. It has a fair stab at serving up a powerful full-range sound too, but this standmount's charm comes from its sheer listenability and fun. No prizes for styling, but you can't have everything at this price.

Sound Quality: 85%



HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL/1m/2.83Vrms – Mean/IEC/Music)	84.9dB/85.3dB/85.3dB
Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	5.7ohm @ 198Hz 53.3ohm @ 85Hz
Impedance phase min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	-56° @ 99Hz 54° @ 1.0kHz
Pair matching/Response Error (200Hz–20kHz)	± 1.2 dB / ± 2.7 dB / ± 2.3 dB
LF/HF extension (-6dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	43Hz / 26.2kHz/21.1kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m)	0.5% / 0.2% / 0.2%
Dimensions (HWD)	356x216x254mm