

ELAC Uni-Fi FS U5 Slim floorstanding loudspeaker

by Jason Kennedy

Not only is white the new black, but speakers are getting skinnier. The pressure to be thin is not limited to us humans, it seems. That appears to be the ethos behind ELAC's Uni-Fi Slim range, which – if the blurb is to be believed – is the same as the existing Uni-Fi range in deeper cabinets with narrower front baffles. The spec for the Uni-Fi UF5 says it's 200mm wide, the FS U5 seen here is 22mm narrower, which is less than an inch so not a lot but every millimetre counts in this image conscious era. A consciousness that is particular to Europeans it seems as the standard Uni-Fi range is not available in this market.

Designer Andrew Jones learned his chops at KEF back in the Laurie Fincham era. He then took his skills to TAD and developed a concentric mid/tweeter for their high end models. He has done the same trick at ELAC, clearly his KEF years convinced him of the efficacy of this approach. This time the drivers are in far more affordable loudspeakers and feature aluminium cones exclusively: the tweeter is the only soft part in this toned beauty.

The Uni-Fi Slim range consists of a bookshelf and a tower/floorstander with two extra bass drivers in the cabinet. As is becoming the norm, you can have it in black or white paint finishes, but veneers are, it seems, right out in the world of affordable loudspeakers. And given the choice between imitation wood and a satin paint finish, I too would be inclined toward the latter. Where IKEA leads the world follows!

The Uni-Fi Slim tower comes with a raft of accessories to keep it standing straight and tall. Machined and anodised aluminium bars fit on the bottom of the cabinet and extend the footprint to give it greater stability and, more compellingly, the ability to pass EU tilt tests. This bar accepts custom spikes with their own separate top caps that come with metal and rubber spike pucks to stop the speaker from impaling the laminate floor. It's quite an impressive array really, albeit somewhat at odds with the discreet inclinations of the box as a whole. So while the hidden driver fixings and magnetic grille mounting minimize the mechanical aspects of the look, the stand goes the other way, but it looks cool so I'll forgive it.

The only slight jarring feature is a clip on the back that is obviously too small to wall mount the speaker. It turns out that this is a safety clip so that you can tie the speaker to the wall and make sure that not even the most determined toddler could tip it over. A sensible idea in theory, but a bit too close to the practices of the aforementioned Scandiwegian furniture outlet for comfort. ▶





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► The drive units are more important of course, and that concentric driver is an impressive piece of work. It couples a 100mm aluminium midrange cone with a 25mm soft dome tweeter at its centre; a technique that Tannoy and (of course) KEF have long favoured, but still remains relatively uncommon. The benefit is uniform directivity for both drivers, as the waveguide of the tweeter acts to match the directivity of the mid/woofer and tweeter, to get better off-axis response at the crossover point. The reason for the lack of such drivers across the market is the cost of developing them: they are prohibitively expensive to make unless you intend to make them by the thousand.

ELAC combines this unit with three 130mm bass drivers with aluminium cones in a cabinet with no fewer than three reflex ports on its back. Andrew Jones explains: “Internally, the cabinet is divided into two chambers: upper and lower. The upper chamber mimics the bookshelf speaker and so has its own port. The division also helps to raise the frequency of the first standing wave in the cabinet to make it easier to deal with. The lower chamber is double the volume with double the number of drivers. To maintain the same tuning frequency I could use one new port or simply use two ports. An advantage of using two ports is that they can be placed more easily to minimize excitation from what remains of the internal standing waves. They also couple to the room better than would a single port.”

The cable terminals look pretty swish and were designed by ELAC rather than being from the usual sources, a nice touch that further enhances the quality feel of this model.

In my system, placed with their backs 40cm from the rear wall, the Slim Towers made a strong first impression. They have a sophistication and authority in the bass that you don't find with many alternatives at the price. It was the bass line on Talking Heads' 'Crosseyed and Painless' [*Remain in Light*, Sire] that first caught my ear, it was deep and taut and fitted in precisely with the drums and guitar in a presentation that was spacious for this less than expansive recording. Conjure's 'Wardrobe Master of Paradise' [*Music For The Texts Of Ishmael Reed*, American Clavé] managed to widen the soundstage out to the sides of the room, revealing a grungier bass line and pretty decent timing for a three-way.

Amandine Beyer's solo violin [JS Bach Sonatas & Partitas BWV 1001 – 1006, Zig-Zag Territoires] revealed a slight edginess, a degree of forwardness that proves you still can't make the perfect loudspeaker for £1,200. It's a tough track and the last speaker I played it on cost more than ten times as much, so it's a tough ask as well. Further listening brought this same edginess up, but only very occasionally. It may be something that extended run in would ameliorate, but that it did reveal this character in a well-damped room with an even-handed source and amplifier suggests that it's a 'try before you buy' design. But that's hardly unusual with speakers at almost any price. ►

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TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: 3-way, five-driver, floorstanding speaker

Driver complement: One concentric driver with 25mm soft dome tweeter and 100mm aluminium midrange driver; three 130mm aluminium bass drivers

Crossover frequencies: 270Hz, 2.7kHz

Frequency response: 42Hz–25kHz

Impedance: 4 Ohms, minimum
3.4 Ohms

Sensitivity: 85dB/W/m

Dimensions (H×W×D):
980 × 178 × 293mm

Weight: 16.85kg/each

Finishes: black or white satin paint

Price: £1,200/pair

Manufacturer: ELAC

URL: www.elac.com

Distributor: Hi-Fi Network

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▶ The speaker is also fairly current hungry. The spec says 85dB for a four Ohm nominal impedance which means you need a reasonably powerful amp to get the best out of it. The ATC P1 had no trouble, but the more price appropriate Rega Brio wasn't always full in control. It delivered plenty of pace and life, but couldn't plumb the depths with Lorde's 'Royals' [*Pure Heroine*, Universal] for instance. Leftfield's 'Inspection Check One' [*Leftism*, Hard Hands] was, however, highly entertaining, the deep bass lines delivered with all their bounce and much of their weight intact. I also got a very engaging result with the Allegretto from Beethoven's 7th Symphony [Barenboim, *Beethoven For All*, 24/96, Decca]. The ELAC delivering the dynamic tension of the piece with ease alongside good scale, gutsy bowed bass lines, and a good deal of the power in the performance. Overall, a good result for the pairing.

Back with the ATC and its 150 Watts the Uni-Fi Tower did a nice job with Handel's *Messiah* (Academy of Ancient Music, Hogwood, L'Oiseau-Lyre), bringing out much of the depth in the recording and delivering Emma Kirkby's voice with impressive clarity. Voices are a distinct strength of this loudspeaker, whether it's Taj Mahal, Laura Marling, or a soprano, you can always hear their lyrics clearly. Indicating that the midrange is very clean and coherent, if perhaps a little bit emphasised. This I suspect is why some recordings can sound a little edgy or grainy, as proved the case with Infected Mushrooms' 'Avratz' [*Converting Vegetarians*, Yo-Yo], which starts with a bright synth sound that on the ELACs gets a tiny bit glassy if the level is turned up. I should temper this by saying that I don't review many speakers at this price point and it's not always easy to calibrate expectations to suit. It's also important to note that the only other speaker I had near this price sounded almost crude by comparison.

Andrew Jones demonstrated his latest floorstander at the Munich High End show in May. The Adante appears to have the same driver configuration, but what you see are three passive bass units that conceal active ones that sit behind them, but not in an isobaric arrangement. It's a rather more expensive design but shows that Jones is a designer who thinks outside of the box. That he can produce something like this floorstander for such a competitive price is further testament to his ingenuity. +