



# A sound solution

Does the relentless march of the wireless speaker spell the end for the floorstander?

**David Vivian** reckons DALI has the answer

**T**he more things change, the more they stay the same. The old French proverb seems particularly apt in the world of consumer audio electronics these days. For all the advances in wireless, streaming and hi-res technologies, all most people buying a music system want is what they've always wanted: maximum satisfaction for a reasonable outlay with minimum messing around. A plug 'n' play solution that sounds great, in other words.

Equally, there's no getting away from the impression that while it's

**Well-articulated, not-quite-neutral but always rhythmic, fun and engaging**

never been easier to buy just such a solution off the shelf – subsequently to be placed unobtrusively on a shelf in the home – there's been a bit of an excursion down the garden path by marketing folk when it comes to the sonic goodies on offer. Solo wireless speakers that use closely coupled drivers and Digital Signal Processing to unpack a stereo image can be good at what they do, but even superstars like the Naim Mu-So (*HFC 391*) and Geneva AeroSphère Large (*HFC 407*) struggle to compete with conventional components for real hi-fi sound quality.

The beauty of progress, however, is that manufacturers can create new niches that meld tradition with cutting-edge tech – in theory, nailing what, to some, will be the best of both worlds. Let's say what you really want is the uncluttered plug 'n' play convenience and wireless/streaming/decoding capabilities of a modern single-box wireless speaker, but with the sonic reach and flexibility of two established classy floorstanders that

you can position precisely where you want for the best performance.

Not such a big ask when you think about it and one already addressed by German brand Raumfeld with its bulky three-way Stereo M standmount speakers (*HFC 399*). Now Denmark's DALI is serving up a similar proposition with the self-powered Zensor 5 AX floorstander. As with the Raumfeld, it isn't a true active design, but one where the crossovers are kept passive and the stereo integrated amplifier and wireless electronics are housed in the left-hand cabinet. This is linked to the other cabinet – essentially a regular Zensor 5 – by a single run of speaker cable, supplied or of your own choice.

## Cool runnings

In common with the standmount Zensor 1 AX that completes the range, power is provided by a lightweight, cool-running Class D amplifier rated at 50W per channel. There are two physical input connections located on the back panel of the left-hand cabinet, plus an output for a subwoofer. The optical input reads signals up to 24-bit/176.4kHz, which gets passed on to the DSP section and finally the amp. A pure digital pathway. The other connection is via a 3.5mm stereo mini-jack. The analogue feeds supplied by this and wirelessly by Bluetooth are changed to a 24-bit/96kHz digital signal by an A/D converter and routed through to the DSP which delivers a PWM signal at 384kHz to the open loop amp. The amplified signal is then received by the passive crossover that splits it up for the drivers.

DALI says that the wide dispersion, 25mm 'ultra lightweight' fabric dome tweeter (no speaker toe-in required) is derived from the design used in its more expensive models. It features a vented voice-coil former and damping material under the dome to minimise reflections from the pole piece. Also

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
DALI Zensor 5 AX

**ORIGIN**  
Denmark

**TYPE**  
2-way floorstanding active loudspeaker

**WEIGHT**  
11kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
212 x 840 x 282mm

**FEATURES**

- 25mm fabric dome tweeter
- 2x 133mm wood fibre mid/bass drivers
- Quoted power output: 2x 50W

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familiar are the distinctive ruddy hues of the 133mm woodfibre-coned mid-bass drivers. DALI contends that the blend of fine grain paper pulp, reinforced with wood fibres, creates a stiff yet lightweight and well-behaved structure that, in combination with a low-loss surround and spider suspension, reproduces the smallest details of the signal fed to it. What you can't see are the four-layer voice coils and the rigid metal baskets – the combined effect of which is claimed to improve bass authority and the reproduction of transients.

The slim, elegant, front-ported cabinets are well constructed from CNC-machined MDF and partially dressed with a glossy laminate plate for the baffle. They look impressive despite their modest dimensions. Confronting resonance is internal bracing and acoustic damping material on all the inside surfaces except the back of the baffle, this is to create a more direct connection between the mid-bass drivers and the reflex port and, claims DALI, achieve better bass precision and increased 'attack' in the midrange. Each speaker enclosure is hoisted an inch into the air on a rather wonderful minimalist integrated aluminium plinth, which has slim foam pad 'treads' to protect solid flooring and machined threads to accommodate spikes or the somewhat more surface-friendly screw-in rubber bobbles supplied. ▶

**They might not be the biggest floorstanders, but they still have the grunt where it counts**



## Q&A

Lars F Jørgensen  
Product Manager, DALI A/S



**DV: What inherent advantages do the self-powered Zensor 5s have over a standard pair driven by a separate amplifier?**

**LJ:** In a word, simplicity. There is a growing demand from the market for speakers that don't need an accompanying stack of electronics. The goal of the Zensor AX models was to create loudspeakers that were easy to set up and convenient to use, but at the same time could provide the same level of audio performance as our traditional passive speakers. The Zensor AX models give you that freedom without losing the ability to deliver great audio experiences.

**Class D amplification is improving all the time. Did you have to wait for it to get 'good enough' before designing the AX range?**

Absolutely. The decision to launch the Zensor AX series was closely tied in to the significant improvements in Class D technology over the last couple of years. We needed an amplifier that had the audio quality to drive the Zensor models, but which was also affordable enough to keep the pricing in line with the Zensor ethos. Finding the right amplifier was a long process. In the end it came down to a LOT of listening. We already knew how good this speaker can sound with a standalone amplifier so we had to make sure that the AX sounded just as good, or even better.

**Are you planning any more self-powered or, indeed, fully active designs?**

DALI is fully committed to the active speaker segment. The success of the Kubik and Zensor AX series shows us that there is a great demand for high-quality amplified speakers in the market and there is no doubt that DALI will launch more speakers into this segment. Expect to see both brand new and more traditional products from us in the near future.

## IN SIGHT



- 1 25mm fabric dome tweeter
- 2 Front-firing reflex port
- 3 Terminals to link passive speaker
- 4 2x 133mm wood fibre mid/bass drivers

## HOW IT COMPARES

For almost exactly the same money, you can have a Naim Mu-so (HFC 391), arguably the best one-box wireless speaker around and an easy win for anyone who wants great sound, design and connectivity. Plenty of power, too, so it will drive a large room with ease. Sonically, the bijou DALI towers batter the nuggety Naim but need quite a lot more space and an acceptance of that 'old school' hi-fi look to do so – albeit without the accompanying clutter. However, a pair of Monitor Audio Bronze 5s (HFC 402) driven by the company's slim yet talented A100 (HFC 388) streaming amp will save you around £50 and deliver a yet more full-blooded and transparent sound.

An LED just below the drivers on the left-hand speaker of thankfully muted brightness with the grilles off (and just visible with them on), signifies the input in use. Green is for the analogue line-in, pale orange for digital optical and blue for Bluetooth. The remote is tiny and plastic, but covers all the bases: power, volume and input selection.

## Sound quality

If it looks like a DALI Zensor 5, walks a bass line like a Zensor 5... well, you get the idea. Assuming a fondness for the Zensor sound – clean, well-articulated, sprightly, not-quite-neutral but always toe-tappingly rhythmic, fun and engaging – the self-powered version isn't going to spring any major surprises.

What's clear, however, is that the matched amplifier and decoding electronics have honed and polished the presentation to the point where the 5 AX sounds classy and cohesive across all inputs. This is no accident, of course, when you consider the 'digital unification' processing protocols used.

Pleasing straight away is the sense of structure and clarity that's often

a hallmark of decent Class D amplification. The sound is very well balanced, with no obvious tonal hot spots or depressions but a ready penchant for resolving detail and ambience. This provides a good impression of space and venue within which performers and instruments are well focused and positioned, affording a dimensionality to the soundstage that works particularly well with live recordings.

The 5 AX sounds deftly dynamic, too, doing the punch and delicacy thing with a sense of proportionality that's usually the preserve of more expensive designs. This is all showcased to good effect with a spot of Larry Carlton live in Tokyo with David T Walker. On the funky jog *The Well's Gone Dry*, the relaxed groove is beautifully carried, the interplay between drums, bass guitar,

## The sound is very well balanced, with no obvious tonal hot spots or depressions

saxophone, keyboards and Carlton's lead sounding effortlessly lucid and empathetic. Musicianship and the atmosphere of the venue are pushed right to the fore, hi-fi histrionics a largely forgotten concern.

## Conclusion

Let's be clear. If you can accommodate a compact and smartly designed pair of floorstanders and you keep your music on your phone, tablet or hi-res personal player, the DALI Zensor 5 AX will be more musically rewarding than any single-box wireless speaker you can buy. And, unless you overspend on the amplifier, the speakers will sound better than a more conventionally driven pair of regular Zensor 5s, too. Best of both worlds? Close enough ●

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY



#### VALUE FOR MONEY



#### BUILD QUALITY



#### FEATURES



#### OVERALL



**LIKE:** Fine sound; elegant floorstander

**DISLIKE:** Remote control is naff

**WE SAY:** A smart solution for people who want to cut the clutter without sacrificing the sound