



The ProAc Studio 140 Loudspeaker

by Alan Sircom

ProAc has a formula and it sticks to it like a very sticky thing, covered in honey and superglue. In fact, it has three formulae – the Tablette formula, the Studio formula and the Response formula (there's also the Hexa formula, but this is limited to small home cinema systems thus far). The 140 is just the latest top of the range Studio speaker so, you might think, "No big deal."

Except it's a very big deal. ProAc's big Response series has routinely taken the top slot in reviews the world over and the little Tablette speakers are giant-killers that have graced this reviewer's system off and on for many a season. The Studio range fits snugly in-between these two poles. It's the near budget range from the company and offers staggering value for money. These are the ProAc's for people who want high-end hi-fi names without the high-end hi-fi prices.

And it's not exactly dull speaker design. It may have three drive units, but this is a straight two-way speaker, featuring what ProAc class as a 'HQ' crossover network and oxygen-free copper internal cabling. Those two 165mm coated cone drive units, with a raised spider assembly are working as one mid-bass unit, while the coated silk-dome 25mm tweeter acts on its own. The speaker is ported, but ProAc uses a downward-firing port to eliminate obvious chuffing. It also means the plinth and spikes are mandatory, but this is only a good thing, all round.

This design has one of the highest sensitivities from any ProAc to date, a

claimed 91dB. Add in a nominal impedance of eight ohms and a minimum of four ohms and it is an ideal match for the Arcam and Marantz amplifiers it's likely to be partnered with (it can cope with anything from 15 to 250 watts, according to the blurb). The speakers can be bi-wired or bi-amped, with extremely high quality rhodium-plated terminals at the rear.

There's a small trade-off to be had between these speakers and similarly-sized, like Response speakers like the D25. These are not as substantially built or as beautifully finished as many ProAc designs. Well, sort of... ProAc's build quality is sans pareil at all times, and this is Jaguar to the Response's Aston-Martin. Rap your knuckles on the side of the 140 and it's satisfyingly dead, but you don't get that so-dead-your-knuckles-hurt kind of damping. This is why the Response D25 weighs in at 26kg per cabinet and the Studio 140 is 'only' 20kg apiece. Also, the range of finishes is slightly curtailed on the Studio 140. It comes in maple, cherry, black ash and mahogany veneers, but the stunning burr finishes found elsewhere in the ProAc line aren't an option. But, compared to

many other brands, this is top-line build quality. Finally, unlike most ProAc designs, they aren't 'handed' in the tweeter, so there's no distinct left or right speaker.

The Studio 140s are not best up against the wall. They need a small amount of breathing space between them and the side and rear walls, ideally half a metre or so.

Otherwise, that two-for-one bass driver gets a bit overstated and thumpy.

Also, the speakers require a moderate amount of toe-in to get good imagery. In fact, the level of toe-in is greater than used for other ProAc speakers,

if the soundstage is to come alive.

The soundstage is never going to be as holographic as Response models (aside from the more advanced driver tech and crossover network, the lack of tweeter 'handedness' will always spell a less sublime image)

but the speaker does make a decent three-dimensional stage if the axes cross over slightly in front of the listener. I also found that they worked slightly further apart than is common with ProAc designs, for the same reason. There's always a happy medium between good, wide and deep imagery and a stereo sound with a dirty ▶



▶ great hole in the middle – I felt the Studio 140's imaging properties were at their best when that happy medium was pushed to the limit. This isn't in the manual, though, and other listeners in other rooms may come to different conclusions.

The speaker needs a substantial run in, it seems. Of course, 'substantial' to a £1,400 speaker design is almost an eye-blink compared to the months-long run-in required for some stratospherically high-end designs. That bass driver, stretched across two units, takes a lot of energy to get up to speed and the first few hours might just send you slightly crazy. First, the bass comes on strong, filling the room with comparatively ill-defined, boomy bass. Then it goes away almost entirely, leaving a sound not dissimilar to a compact bookshelf design. Only then does the bass start to come back as it should. Here's a trick, then. Position the speakers almost randomly at first, let them do the running in thing, then position them with great care – you'll find the optimum position changes as the speakers run in.

One thing this speaker has is oodles of bass, for so small and relatively cheap a speaker. That one/two bass driver combination is claimed to reach down to 25Hz and that seems wholly likely in listening. The 140's move a lot of air down there, and the bass impact is almost reminiscent of TDL's organ-loosening low-frequencies. It doesn't have that foghorn intensity of TDL, but neither does it have the foghorn one-note properties of the late, quasi-lamented bass-meister. Instead, what we have is

deep, controlled and wholly natural sounding bass that perfectly matches the insightful midrange and exciting, extended treble. In the wrong room with the wrong system and the wrong disc, this could deteriorate into all-bass, all-treble, not much in-between sound. But, you'd have to commit some quite serious crimes against hi-fi to find the Studio 140's Achilles Heel.



You see, actually the midrange is subtle and vibrant and isn't one to be over-

awed by the upper and lower registers. It's a deft, articulate midrange that brings out vocals (especially female vocals) extremely well. It's good enough to make you think one half of that, er, split bass driver was actually a secret midrange unit. This has always been a ProAc strong point and it looks as if there's no change here. It may not

be as electrostatic-like as the little Tablette or small Response stand-mount, but the speakers do their level best to sonically disappear across the midrange. *Lundático* by Gotan Project is a fine test of this mid-band; the combination of traditional Argentine instruments and electronics, coupled with a sexy Parisian feel and

a sultry voice or three make this a recording that stands or falls by its midrange. Through the Studio 140s, it made you want to smoke Gauloise and dance the night away like a wet BBC One Ident. There's a very definite lift to the top end of the speaker, but one that's mostly benign. Again, ProAc cites a 30kHz upper limit to the Studio 140 and – from listening – I'm not going to quibble. The soft dome tweeter is refined and enticing-sounding and neatly extended, but sometimes that extension can become strident, especially with early CD recordings. I have a secret

torture disc that I use. It was from a partwork, the cover and booklet of which is long gone, but it's soundbyte Handel seemingly played on bits of broken glass and out-of-tune bagpipes, recorded in a dentist's office. It has two uses – most of the shiny stuff has fallen out of the polycarbonate, so it's great to test the error correction of any CD player and it's good to test just how grating a treble lift can be – if you can make one minute, the speaker passes muster. And the ProAc passed the minute test. It was still high in the treble, emphasising the chainsaw and nails-down-chalkboard sections of this particular (and sadly – but wholly understandably - unnamed) 'orchestra'. But, even under such shocking duress (the Geneva Convention forbids me ▶

▶ from mistreating loudspeakers more than this), the Studio 140 stayed just short of aggressive.

One of the big aspects that ProAc has improved upon immensely in the last few years is that nebulous thing called timing. In the past, those who judged every product exclusively by how well or ill it kept a beat would dismiss all ProAc speakers for being unable to 'time' properly. And, they had a point; ProAc's of old sounded beautiful, but never quite kept up with the sort of speakers that would have you tapping your foot to a sine wave. But that was old-school ProAc – the Studio 140s demonstrate just how well ProAc has addressed that issue. These speakers are very ordered rhythmically. They 'time', perhaps not so well to keep the Noddy Brigade happy, but well enough for the rest of us to enjoy our music. To my mind, if they are rhythmically tight enough to cope with 'Backyard Betty' by Spank Rock without sounding sallow or tired, then they are good enough for most music.

I guess part of this rhythmic improvement is due to that rock-solid bass underpinning. But solidity alone doesn't cut the musical mustard. In fact, the Studio 140 could easily tip from solidity into stodginess. Fortunately, it has an ace up its port – dynamic range. This is a dynamically free speaker, not quite to horn loaded levels of dynamic freedom, but one of those speakers that can deliver the dynamic swings of an orchestra ripping into Rachmaninov's *Symphonic Dances*. At the price, this is rare and heady stuff, as most rival speakers would take the wag out of Wagner, from a dynamic

standpoint. Perhaps some of this dynamic range is bass heft, but the speaker breathes just as convincingly with less overtly percussive music. Play through the sublime Old-School Country of Van Morrison's 'Pay The Devil' and the delicate changes and nuances are reproduced with finesse.

Naturally, there is a limit to this dynamic range. The very subtle dynamic shades are painted with a broad brush. Micro-dynamics – those tiny changes within the sound of a particular instrument, the little cues we strive for to make the sound seem more like the real thing and the very stuff of high-end speakers – are not as naturally presented as they are in even the Tablette Reference Eight Signature stand-mount. There is still more than a modicum of micro-dynamic information on tap – the fingerpicking of Nick Drake's guitar does not lose those subtle nuances of tone and resonance, swamped by the notes and the finger noise – but the really deft sonic touch isn't quite 'there'. But this much is clear; the Studio 140s are hardly lacking finesse, and I can't think of a speaker that manages to deliver the same combination of sheer balls-out energy and subtle touch at anywhere near the price.

That's the big bonus of the Studio 140 – it's a compromise in all the right ways. It makes a good sound for the

money. It looks good for the money. It's easy to drive for the money and it is easy to install for the money. You could get a speaker that will improve on one of these aspects at the same price, but one of the others has to give. You want a prettier speaker – no problems, but don't expect it to sound good. How about a speaker that sounds a million dollars? No worries, apart from it looking like a bag of spanners.

If this is compromise, then I'm happy to compromise. I'd happily and heartily recommend these speakers to anyone after a pair of decent floorstanders, who wants good sound and decent – but not stunning – looks. OK, I'd hesitate to recommend them to Timing Nazis, who would doubtless find them unable to play a rhythm exactly to their specifications, but some of us have moved on from there. The Studio 140s show that ProAc have too.



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Two-way, floorstanding reflex loudspeaker
Drive Unit Complement:	2x 165mm proprietary mid/bass units with coated cone, raised spider and shielded magnet 25mm coated silk dome tweeter
Bandwidth:	25hz to 30Khz \pm 3dB
Nominal Impedance:	8 Ohms, 4 Ohms minimum
Sensitivity:	91db
Recommended Amplifiers:	15 to 250 watts
Dimensions (WxHxD):	190 x 1040 x 280mm
Weight:	20kg ea.
Finishes:	Black Ash, Mahogany, Cherry, Maple real wood veneers
Price:	£1,400

Manufacturer:

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