



Zero Hero

Robson's Voltair Zero loudspeaker uses a ribbon tweeter to deliver heroic treble – and Noel Keywood is impressed.

Robson's new Voltair Zero loudspeaker aims to deliver the razor-sharp clarity and speed of a ribbon tweeter, underpinned by the bass left provided by an 8in Volt bass unit. It's an intriguing prospect, a loudspeaker that is conspicuously strong at both ends of the spectrum, in a stand-mounted cabinet that is less visually intrusive than a floorstander. And to make the Voltair Zero accessible to more potential buyers, Robson are offering this model direct at a price of £1350.

I've always enjoyed the civil yet refined nature of Robson loudspeakers. The Regis I reviewed in our June 2011 issue we all thought

was easily worth a full five globe rating; it did things other speakers did not do and at £2500 wasn't a silly price either. The Voltair Zero isn't so slick in its finish and takes a different approach. It sacrifices finish for functionality, the cabinet being a chunky 1in thick MDF affair sprayed-painted with a satin textured black finish. Each speaker is quite heavy, weighing 13kgs, but that means they sit firmly on a stand. The cabinets measure 470mm high, 238mm wide and 260mm deep and are quite rare. The rear panel carries chunky gold-plated WBT screw terminals that accept 4mm banana plugs, spade connectors and bare wires, be wiring not being possible.

The long ribbon tweeter sits close to the bass midrange unit to minimise phase error between them, crossover being quite low at 1.8kHz. Our measurements show this is a lot lower than smaller ribbon units that typically reach down to 40Hz, making crossover difficult. The 234mm doped plastic cone Volt bass/midrange unit is loaded by a rear 50mm port.

SOUND QUALITY

After a weekend running in and a final de-tox from our Monitor Audio detox CD the Voltair Zeros were hooked up to our resident Quad QMP monoblock power amplifiers, fed by an Invicta Mirus DAC receiving high-resolution digital from an

Astell&Kern AK120 portable player. The speakers were pointed down our room and not tooed in, since measurement showed this is how they work best.

The large ribbon tweeters endow this loudspeaker with sublimely sweet yet lightning-fast treble. With Tom Petty's 'Refugee' (24/96) the soundstage stretched in an arc – up and over – between the loudspeakers. The height perspective was surprising because our listening room's ceiling is 13ft above the speakers at a steep slant, so there's no useful ceiling reflection. The Voltair Zeros manage this feat without outside help then (f) so it will – or should – be audible in any room. Their semi-celestial imaging was an attractive feature. And with a recording that sometimes sounds a bit harsh and muddled the Voltair Zeros sounded sweet and easy with that lovely clarity and incisive quality that ribbons have.

I'll mention quickly that ribbon tweeters shame domes by sounding liquid clear, smooth, fast, very concise and brimming with fine detail – and that's broadly what I heard from the ribbon of the Robsons. Strummed guitar strings were razor sharp yet the effect wasn't aurally painful; the speaker sounds very composed.

The big bass unit has plenty of low end weight and a furry, full-bodied sound, making the strong bass line in Diana Krall's 'Narrow Daylight' (24/96) strong and obvious.

There was some bloom from the box, but then the Robsons produce strong bass from a medium-sized cabinet so this is to be expected. Diana Krall's enunciation was utterly concise, perfectly captured, yet gloriously easy on the ear at the same time – a difficult feat. I loved the relaxed demeanour of these loudspeakers, yet the conveyed detail aplenty; ribbons always do.

There is, subjectively, a mild disconnect between the bass/midrange unit and tweeter in character terms but at the same time this gave them their laconic air and made for relaxed listening. Measurement showing nothing is missing.

Their ever-so-smooth nature delivered Nigel Kennedy's violin with a little sense of realism, that made the tortured strings of his *Saravani* a lot more easy for me to appreciate than is possible from dome tweeters. This is why so many German loudspeaker manufacturers

now use ribbon tweeters. I should say, whilst British companies remain reluctant (they're expensive).

The Bruckner Orchestra Linz, playing Tchaikovsky's 'Waltz of the Flowers' came over as large and lush, violins again sounding easy and sweet, yet well separated. Plucked bass was obvious and the box had a small contribution to make, but there are compact loudspeakers with a generously proportioned sound that's velvety smooth on the ear.

CONCLUSION

The Voltair Zero is an interesting proposition. It offers fabulously pure treble, clearly better than that from a dome tweeter – and if you look around, that means most other loudspeakers. Add in a big, bold sound from the

large bass unit and you come up with a unique loudspeaker.

There's a change of character between the drive units and the big Volt, that covers much of the midband, has a mellow quality not commonly encountered these days. It sets the tone, as it were. Bass was full bodied, giving a meaty sound with plenty of low end weight.

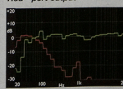
There are precious few loudspeakers around with such gorgeous treble at the low price of the Zeros that – if you'll pardon the alliteration – makes them heroes. Nor are there any that offer such concise rainbow imaging. The Voltair Zero has unique strengths, is great value and is well worth hearing 1 feet.



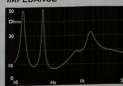
MEASURED PERFORMANCE

Our frequency response analysis shows an even trend across the audio band, with no peaks. The ribbon tweeter is very smooth in its output, as most are – they don't peak like dome tweeters. The crossover dip around 2kHz isn't very pronounced in our analysis, which is taken off-axis by 15 degrees or so. Measured on-axis this dip is more obvious, so the Voltaires work best when pointed straight down a room. They should not be tooed in. The ribbon tweeter doesn't lack output so subjectively it will be obvious, but its output

FREQUENCY RESPONSE
Green - driver output
Red - port output



IMPEDANCE



doesn't peak so there will be no undue sharpness in the sound. Upper midrange detailing should be very good.

The large bass/midrange unit works smoothly down to 40Hz (and the test trace) both camps it well and provides some low bass output around its true frequency of 38Hz. With no bass peaking the Voltair Zero will not sound bass heavy.

Sensitivity was average at 86dB sound pressure level from one nominal Watt of input (2.8V), largely because a 7 Ohm DCR bass unit is used, keeping impedance high, resulting out at 13 Ohms overall. As measure, high power amplifiers are needed for high volume, at least 50 Watts.

A 200ms decay analysis underlines how clean the ribbon tweeter is, with virtually no overhang, and the bass midrange unit puts up a respectable performance too. There is a long cabinet mode at 60Hz that makes bass overhang but box speakers that produce bass always overhang because the energy they produce is never fully absorbed internally.

The Voltair Zero measures well. It is accurate, peak free but will have super clear and incisive treble from the ribbon tweeter. Bass will be in good proportion and well defined. It does need power to go loud however. **NK**

ROBSON VOLTIRE ZERO £1350

EXCELLENT - extremely capable

VALUE - keenly priced

VERDICT
Superb ribbon treble and full bass, at a great price. Superb.

FOR
concise and clear treble
easy midband
full-bass bass

AGAINST
some bass bloom
a little boxy
lacklustre finish

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