



# The ProAc Response D38 Loudspeaker

by Roy Gregory

Sometimes it's enough just to be big; other times sheer bulk can be an embarrassment. Confronted with a speaker as big and bluff as the ProAc Response D38, one is forced to wonder which will apply in this case, for outwardly at least, there is nothing fancy or special about this large floor-stander. There's no exotic cabinet materials, high-tech drivers or gemstone diaphragms to justify the price-tag – just the imposing dimensions.

So, how big is big? Let's put some numbers on the beast. Standing a full 1244mm high and 235mm wide in its stocking feet (that is, without spikes) the D38's bulk is emphasized by the cabinet's considerable depth. Add in the lack of any softening contours or chamfered edges and this ProAc meets the gaze upright and square-on, the review pair's pale maple veneer doing nothing to diminish the visual impact. Buy a pair of Response D38s and you, your other half and anybody who visits will know that you're seriously committed to your music.

The external dimensions are if anything underlined by the contrast between the sheer size of the cabinet and the relatively small drivers employed, a pair of six-and-a-half-inch bass-mid units flanking a one-inch tweeter. The use of a downward-firing port further reduces the population of the front-panel. But the real surprise comes when picking the speaker up. At 40kg it's no lightweight, but it is lighter than you expect – which is when the alarm bells might start ringing. A box this big comes with a lot of baggage and the designer needs to get things just right if the available volume isn't

going to escape control. Well, breathe a sigh of relief, because Stuart Tyler is on top of his game and the results might appear prosaic, but the performance is anything but.

Of course, ProAc have been building large cabinets for an awfully long time, starting with the original Studio 3 and its larger brother, the EBS. Those were a different kettle of fish to the speaker you see before you, being three-ways with plywood cabinets and built to a price. But the market has evolved and when ProAc launched the Response range back in 1989, it reflected the fact that speakers could finally be designed to hit performance parameters rather than price points. The original Response 3 appeared in 1991, followed by Signature, 3.5 and 3.8 versions before the appearance of the current D38, differentiated by its use of the downward and slotted port arrangement. It sits squarely in the middle of the Response range, the D15 and 25 floorstanders below it and the D80 and monster D100s above, spanning a price range of \$1800 to \$15000. At \$4500 in its standard finishes, the D38 offers the customer an enticing combination of size and price, promising much of the larger models' size and bandwidth without the price-tag that goes with them. Time for a few more numbers.

The manufacturer quotes a bandwidth that stretches from 20Hz to 30kHz and a sensitivity of 90dB (which experience suggests is more realistic than many such claims). This makes the D38 a genuinely full-range performer on what passes for a mini-monitor budget

these days. The drive to greater efficiency rests squarely on the shoulders of new, higher sensitivity drivers, but the bass extension also mandates considerable, well-behaved internal volume. That means a carefully considered balance between dimensions, weight and rigidity if the cabinet and the air it contains are to avoid the pitfalls of standing waves and stored energy that so often mars the bass performance and neutrality of large boxes. To that end, the beautifully veneered MDF cabinets are extensively braced as well as critically damped with bituminous pads. The air volume itself is controlled by the careful application of acoustic foam along with the port arrangement that provides a controlled boundary environment.



The new drivers use a coated polypropylene cone linked to a massively powerful motor, rather than resorting to ultra-lightweight but poorly damped cone materials. This is key to maintaining the company's reputation for studied neutrality. Next comes the simplicity of the crossover, built with minimal components. The end result is a system that, in combination with the unobtrusive cabinet, leaves so little thumb-print on the passing signal that you might need CSI to find it.

On listening to the D38s it soon ►

► became apparent that they are uncannily transparent to the driving electronics. In this regard they approach closer the style and performance of the Avalon speakers, rather than other British designs. It also means that they demand a well-sorted system to give of their best, with attention to what some consider trivial details like supports and a coherent cable loom reaping clearly audible benefits in terms of musical sense and coherence.



To what extent this is down to the basic

precept of a simple approach, carefully executed it's hard to say, but there is no question that the ProAcs deliver a wide open window on the world of your system. More complex systems and crossovers can hide a multitude of sins, robbing the performance of energy, life, immediacy and transparency. The D38s hide little or nothing. That unvarnished truth is not always comfortable, but as much as it reveals the inadequacies of a poorly matched or tuned system, it thrives on the benefits as things get better.

Voicing speakers is often described as a black art. Comparing the way in

which designer Stuart Tyler achieves a satisfying performance from products as varied as the Tablette and Response D38, very different but each equally convincing, it soon becomes clear that bass balance and alignment are, if not the whole story, then the plank on which everything else rests. On the one hand, the Tablette offers astonishing scale and presence from its tiny dimensions. On the other, the D38 offers the effortless dynamic scope and colossal soundstage that comes with real bandwidth, yet doesn't draw attention to itself or its dimensions by letting its box intrude on the music. One is a case of gently overstating the contribution of the bottom-end, the other very much an example of understating and containing it. The evenness and lack of bloom or extends

across the broad mid-band and on up into the treble without a hump or lump in sight. The lack of the familiar mid-bass emphasis, used by so many designers to add a bit of warmth and (clogging) colour to their products can leave the D38s sounding lean and exposed on first acquaintance. Work through it. Once you readjust to tea without sugar it always tastes better and it's the same with non-additive systems: Adjust and it's hard to go back. The Response D38 is like that. It's so unobtrusive, its inherent balance so normal that it withdraws into the musical background. Swap it out and put in a less competent speaker and suddenly the non-linearities and discontinuities, phase shifts and colourations become not just obvious but irritatingly obstructive to musical



enjoyment. The return to ProAc land is always accompanied by a sigh of relief, and suddenly you realise that you've relaxed into the music again.

With amps as varied as the Hovland RADIA and Tom Evans Linear A on hand, it was still the warmer, richer tones of the Jadis DA88S that proved preferable, pointing to the speakers' inherent balance, with its lack of additive colour and body. It's not that it's lean or thin, thus that it errs to the subtractive rather than the fuller figure presented by so much of the competition. Those products fill out the stark, etched and hyper-defined picture provided by a lot of today's high-end electronics (and CD players) creating a situation in which two wrongs don't actually make a right, just another wrong that doesn't actually sound too offensive. By splashing a bit of excess colour and weight around the place they deliver some much needed body, drama and impact. In contrast, the ProAcs allow properly balanced and musically correct electronics to flourish in all their majesty. The end result might not seem too different in overall balance to the "corrected" sound that comes from the more common approach, it's just that crucially, all the musical elements are now in the right place and the right proportion. Instruments have the correct tonal range and energy spectrum, relative weight and position.

Writing a review like this one you have to be careful; so much of what you describe consists of what the product doesn't do that it's easy to create a negative impression from a positive performance. The D38 doesn't add; it doesn't distort or conceal and it

▶ doesn't have a readily discernable character. You get my point. If this speaker was a person they might well be admirable but would you want them as a friend? Well, fortunately for ProAc, loudspeakers and people are rather different. The very fact that it doesn't contribute should be what makes the D38 so appealing to potential buyers. Instead of concentrating on what it doesn't do, let's look instead at what it allows.

Let's start with the Chesky re-issue of the Barbirolli/RPO recording of the Sibelius *2nd Symphony*. A Ken Wilkinson (every bit as good as Johny in his own way) recording for RCA, the Second Movement opens with a soft timpani roll and a protracted, almost muted pizzicato passage on the double bass. Many systems reduce this to a disjointed collection of thuds and thumps with no real musical shape or direction. The ProAc's let you hear the familiar Walthamstow acoustic, the timps placed slightly left and at the rear of the stage. The texture in the rattle of soft sticks on skins is perfect – you can clearly hear the layer of energized air above the drum. The bass is placed precisely across the stage, its tonality unmistakable (it's surprising how many speakers can't differentiate lower register cello from double bass) the notes progressing in a beautifully even walk, the pitch and level of each one picking out the melody and phrases in the convoluted progress, rising, falling almost dying away before coming back again.

That's clever enough, but what really impresses is how, as the movement starts to build, layer on layer, the contribution of the

timps and bass are just as clear, the drum subtly underpinning the woodwind entry, the bass doggedly marching onward into the maelstrom of the opening crescendo. That level of low frequency discrimination is rare indeed and it's a trick that the D38s manage to extend across the entire range of both audible frequencies and musical genres. Just think what that level of separation and textural definition does for the slabs of flanged bass that the likes of Moby or EST enjoy so much.

As a strength, like many strengths, such bare faced honesty can also become a weakness. It places a heavy burden on the accuracy and honesty of the partnering equipment – especially its musical coherence. If I was really picky I could ask for a little more top-end air and detail, definition on cymbals for instance. But I'd not willingly trade the seamless junction of tweeter and mid-bass units to achieve it, and therein lies the rub. All products represent a compromise, and Lord knows, speakers are a bigger compromise than most others, especially if you want to get something approaching full-range performance at this sort of price. The ProAc Response D38 does it right. It prioritizes bandwidth, driver integration and lack of intrusive additives and cobines those qualities into a readily driven package.

Somewhere along the way it discards hi-fi fashion and high-end credibility, domestic brownie points and an impressive showroom persona. It's a tool; a beautifully presented tool to be sure but a tool none the less. Like all good tools it feels just right in your hand and makes you want to use it. Using this one you should be able to build something pretty special, something that's going to last a while. The D38s make wanting more seem almost greedy... ▶+



#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Two-way floor-ported loudspeaker
Drive Units:	25mm soft-dome tweeter 2x 165mm coated polypropylene mid-bass
Bandwidth:	20Hz – 30kHz ±3dB
Sensitivity:	90dB
Impedance:	4 Ohms
Dimensions (WxHxD):	235 x 1244 x 343mm
Weight:	40kg ea.
Finishes:	Maple, black ash, mahogany or cherry as standard. Ebony and bird's eye maple to special order.
Prices:	£4495 (standard) £5370 (special)
Manufacturer:	ProAc Tel. (44)(0)1280 700147 Net. <a href="http://www.proac-loudspeakers.com">www.proac-loudspeakers.com</a>