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Hi-Fi Choice

PASSION FOR SOUND

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RUARK ROCKS

Retro R610 music system & Sabre-R speakers are a rave

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Hi-Fi Choice RECOMMENDED

The style console

Some say Ruark has spent too long making radios. ***David Vivian*** reckons the R610 and Sabre-R represent a return to former glories

Long story short, Essex-based Ruark – a family business founded in 1985 by father and son Brian and Alan O'Rourke – started off making some of the best-looking and sounding British speakers to grace a music lover's lounge. With cabinets exquisitely crafted from real wood, model names to raise the blood like Sabre, Crusader and Excalibur, and a warm, scalable sound with an unerring ability to nail the sweet spot, few rivals could get close when it came to melding a gorgeous aesthetic with seriously good sonics. A trained cabinet maker, O'Rourke senior knew how to weigh the contribution of materials and construction in matters of sound quality, and it's been a touchstone of the company's 'process' ever since.

Yet, as the millennium and retirement for Brian approached, Ruark's centre of gravity started to shift away from stereo and towards surround sound, cute DAB radios and a range of all-in-one systems of various sizes that shared a high-end furniture aesthetic.

What brings us here today, however, is something more akin to full-circle completion 40 years on, and a union of new and old in the best sense. In the spirit of reinventing the music centres of the Seventies and Eighties, Ruark recently introduced the latest member of its 'Seventies vibe' 100 Series range, a lineup it claims is its most advanced and desirable to date.

The £1,200 R610 Music Console has every streaming capability and digital and analogue connection one could wish for. But instead of it all being shoehorned into a pair of powered active speakers (*à la* KEF's LSX) or even a single box with DSP sound expanding effects (Naim Muso QB), the configuration is determinedly cosy retro, a handsome wood-clad central unit into which you can plug Ruark's dinky matching R-CD100 CD transport via USB-C or a turntable via the gain-adjustable built-in MM phono stage, but most importantly given Ruark's roots, a pair of speakers. They could be any speakers, of course, but I can't imagine many electing not to take advantage of the momentous re-imagining of Ruark's very first speaker, the Sabre two-way standmount, now called the Sabre-R (£700) and, naturally, the perfect aesthetic partner.

The main unit handles Apple AirPlay and Google Cast, Apple Music, BBC Sounds, Deezer, Qobuz and so on. Spotify Connect and Tidal Connect are built in. File support extends to 32-bit/384kHz and, for rapid hook-ups, there's Bluetooth HD. Radio options are an obvious strength, covering Internet/DAB/DAB+ and even FM with RDS. Round the back there's an Ethernet port and subwoofer output as well as an optical in. Connectivity also encompasses HDMI ARC/eARC should you want to buddy-up the TV. And you can add multi-room configurability into the mix.

High frequencies are subtly rendered with finesse and good tonal colour

The R610 uses a switch mode power supply and Class D amplification delivering a claimed 75W per channel. Burr-Brown DACs take care of digital business and audiophile-grade components are said to be used throughout. Ergonomics are exceptional, as you might expect, thanks mostly to the brilliant RotoDial controller – which has been a feature of Ruark kit since 2006. Further refined for the R610 with soft-touch buttons and a more precisely weighted control dial, it's utterly intuitive and a joy to use. Actually, there are two RotoDials, one set into the top of the console, the other a rechargeable Bluetooth remote, which makes most button-based remotes look and feel positively antediluvian.

The crisp, dimmable 5in TFT display to the left of the front panel shows menu layers as well as album and station artwork (generating its own for CD) and reverts to time and date when in standby. Two finishes are available: Fused Walnut veneer with Walnut slat trim or Satin Charcoal lacquer with Walnut slat trim.

Same goes for the Sabre-R speakers. Like the originals, these are two-way tuned bass reflex designs, but 40 years of evolution have naturally changed-up the internals more than a little. The damped and braced wood composite cabinet has a double flared port tuned to 55Hz, while the driver array consists of a 26mm silk dome tweeter with a neodymium motor system and aluminium heatsink, and a 150mm treated natural fibre cone mid/bass driver with a 30mm four-layer voice coil, long-throw motor and precision cast chassis. The crossover frequency is 2.2kHz, overall response 50Hz – 20kHz (+/-3dB). The nominal impedance of 6ohm and quoted sensitivity of 86dB shouldn't present problems for any decent amp and certainly not the R610's. On the back panel are two sets of 4mm gold-plated binding posts. Mirroring the style and finish of the R610, right down to the walnut slat trims, the combined look is rather lovely.

Sound quality

What did you expect? Bright and feisty? Bass-fuelled bombast? A patchwork of competing sonic styles across the numerous inputs? Not a chance. It's been apparent for years that Ruark has its house sound down and chromium plated treble, revved-up rhythms, pimped detail and pumped lower frequencies don't play any part in it. The balance is smooth and even, quite rich and warm. Nothing to scare the horses for sure, but while the razzle-dazzle factor may have gone fishing there's a slow burning realisation that the mildly romantic presentation is a much better fit with what sounds natural, lucid and effortlessly musical.

In short, a particular voicing and the strong harmony and coherence between the electronics and speakers clearly reflects an agenda to make the best of everything played from whichever source. Whether it's FM radio or a love-worn LP of Joni Mitchell's *The Hissing Of Summer Lawns* feeding the built-in phono stage via a Technics SL-1200 Mk 7 turntable and Jico Clipper MM cartridge, team R610 and Sabre-Rs puts listenability ahead of cold-eyed scrutiny, exactly as a modern-day 'Music Centre' – most likely placed on a designer sideboard – should.

This isn't to be confused with casual homogenisation best suited to some background music. In fact, the Ruark's talent for tonal and temporal discrimination is key to its appeal. Whether it's Joni or Lemmy, vocals exhibit fine intelligibility and presence. High frequencies are subtly rendered with finesse and good tonal colour. Mitchell's exquisite *Edith And The Kingpin* is almost achingly expressive and nuanced as a result. Firing up Qobuz's 24-bit/192kHz stream of Steely Dan's *Time Out Of Mind*, the Ruark console and speakers find another gear, mustering just the right amount of low-frequency weight and extension to anchor the loping rhythmic gait, but dispensing it with fine agility and articulation.

Conclusion

All-in-one hi-fi is continuing to gain traction. The once compromised lifestyle option has shaped up to the degree where sound quality is no longer a major issue. Ruark has been one of the prime movers in making this happen and the R610 and Sabre-R combo is a triumph of evocative retro style with modern smarts and sonic reach, albeit gifted an invitingly rosy glow ●

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Ruark R610/Sabre-R

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
All-in-one music system/two-way loudspeakers

WEIGHT
R610: 4.1kg
Sabre-R: 5kg (each)

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
R610:
300 x 95 x 280mm
Sabre-R:
175 x 290 x 215mm

FEATURES
- Quoted power output: 2x 75W (8ohm)
- MM phono input
- 26mm silk dome tweeter
- 150mm natural fibre cone mid/bass driver
- Quoted sensitivity: 86dB/1W/1M (6ohm)

DISTRIBUTOR
Ruark

WEBSITE
ruarkaudio.com

HOW IT COMPARES

We mustn't forget the not quite all-in-one, just-add-speakers hubs. Arguably the most desirable of these is Cambridge Audio's Evo 150 (*HFC* 477) which is quite a bit pricier but, with 150W per channel, has twice the firepower. NAD's M10 (*HFC* 451) should also be on the shortlist. It doesn't have the luxurious build of the Ruark or Evo, but it does have a similarly wide range of streaming options and a pokey 100W of Class D power. Spend a bit more and Naim's excellent Uniti Star (*HFC* 433) enters the reckoning. None of these, however, offer quite the charm and value of the Ruark package.





A handsome wood-clad central unit, the R610 has every streaming capability and connection one could ever need

Hi-Fi Choice OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★½
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★
EASE OF DRIVE ★★★★★
OVERALL ★★★★★

LIKE: A brilliant fusion of cool retro style and rich, more-ish sonics; features; build quality

DISLIKE: Some might crave more excitement

WE SAY: There are more space-efficient 'active' systems, but few with the charm and ability of the Ruark