

audition

equipment review

Bowers & Wilkins 685 Standmount Loudspeakers

For many building their first hi-fi system, standmount speakers are an obvious choice. Easy to locate and inexpensive to buy, a pair of standmount can be matched with a basic amp and CD player for a great entrée into audio. Today however, it's not only first timers who buy compact speakers. Often the constraints of modern living necessitate smaller audio and video systems, while most surround systems include at least one pair of standmounts. But while floorstanding speakers have the obvious advantage of increased frequency response, smaller speakers do have

their own technical advantages. For one, the reduced number of drivers means simpler crossover networks can be used, which can translate into gains in audio detail. There are simply fewer components for the audio signal to travel through before sound reaches your ears. Secondly, the larger cabinet panels of floorstanding speakers produce larger standing waves, which will distort the sound unless the cabinet is well braced and damped. Inexpensive floorstanders can sound loose and wooly compared to a half-way decent pair of standmounts. Combine all this with a lower price and an ability to be wall mounted if needs be and for many, compact speaker are the way to go.

All the major loudspeaker manufactures today have at least one standmount model in their line-up, and in the case of Bowers & Wilkins (B&W), there are several. While it may have joined other audio companies such as NAD by falling into Canadian hands several years ago, B&W remains an essentially British outfit. Corporate HQ and a large manufacturing facility remain at Worthing in West Sussex, while a dedicated R&D laboratory is located not far away. B&W can kit you out with speakers of just about anything you might aspire to, employing technology such as diamond tweeters at the very top-end. The 600 series to which the 685s belong, has represented B&W's entry-level for several decades. While diamond tweeters may not make an appearance at this level, a surprising

**Get up close
and personal
to your music
with B&W's
intimate 685
standmounter**

Vital Statistics

Dimensions:

340 x 198 x 331mm

Weight:

7kg (each)

Price:

\$999 (pair), \$599 (FS700 stands)

Distributor:

Convoy International Pty Ltd
Unit 7, 1801 Botany Road
Botany, NSW 2019

Telephone:

(02) 9700 0111

Email:

Via website

Website:

www.convoy.com.au

By Michael O'Connor

amount of technology found in more expensive models does trickle down.

The 685 is a compact bookshelf speaker, 34cm high and 20cm deep priced at \$999 a pair. It has a simple, modern appearance, consisting of just one tweeter and one woofer. The tweeter employs the same tube loaded design which first appeared in the iconic B&W Nautilus speaker of the 1980s. Unwanted sonic radiation from behind the dome moves down a tapering tube. The dome is made of aluminum and is bonded to the voice coil around a new surround design which B&W claims to improve both spaciousness and imaging. The ceramic magnets of old are out, in favour of the massively more powerful neodymium units. As a result, power handling is up while overall size is down. The more compact tweeter means it can be placed closer to the woofer, resulting in a tighter, more focused soundstage. This latest incarnation of the 600 series tweeter introduces an all new tweeter crossover that operates with a 1st order filter only. A simplified crossover equals more sonic detail making its way from the front end to you. B&W claim a frequency top-end of 'beyond 50kHz' for its new tweeter, but what with human hearing only extending to 20kHz

Technotalk

Product Type:

Standmount loudspeaker

Driver Complement:

1 x 25mm aluminium dome tweeter
1 x 165mm Kevlar woofer

Cabinet Configuration:

2-way, bass reflex, front ported

Frequency Response:

49-22kHz (± 3 dB, on axis)

Frequency Range:

-6dB @ 42Hz and 50kHz

Amplifier Compatibility:

25-100 watts

Nominal Impedance:

8 ohms (minimum 3.7 ohms)

Crossover Frequencies:

4kHz

Sensitivity:

88dB (2.83v/1m)

Finishes:

Black Ash, Light Oak,
Red Cherry, Wengé

Technotalk specifications and recommended retail prices are supplied by the manufacturer

as it does, it was difficult for me to assess that claim. Still, if such performance is important to you, it's nice to know it's there.

The yellow woofer of the 685 will be well familiar to B&W fans. The cone is made of woven Kevlar fabric which breaks up standing waves. Besides this, Kevlar is light and stiff making it ideal for use in speakers. Behind the cone lies a B&W designed basket, paired down and light so as to reduce echo from inside the speaker. New to this latest incarnation of the 600 series is a fixed centre bullet to smooth the speaker response in upper frequencies.

Also making an appearance for the first time courtesy of the top of the line 800 series is the FST surround. B&W has done away with conventional rubber speaker surrounds, instead developing a proprietary foam ring to connect the cone to the driver chassis. The foam has been developed to have almost exactly the same mechanical properties of the Kevlar cone. As a result, sound is absorbed by the FST ring as it moves across the cone, instead of bouncing off the rubber surround and smudging the sound. B&W describes the system as 'acting like a shock absorber for the driver'. As with the tweeter, the crossover has been redesigned with fewer and higher quality components.

One thing that has always struck me about B&W speakers is how well screwed together they appear to be. I'm pleased to say the 685s continue the tradition. While some manufacturers seemingly put function well ahead of form, at least to look at, the B&Ws are top notch. The tweeter and woofer are



sunken into the cabinet with no visible screws. The tweeter sits around a brushed aluminum fascia that seamlessly blends into the front baffle. Overall the speaker looks understated and modern.

Cabinet finishes extend to Black Ash, Light Oak, Red Cherry and Wengé. I was also supplied with a matching pair of FS700 floorstands, which at \$599 a pair represent fair value. As with the speakers, the finish of the FS700 is high. Arguably floorstanding speakers are more elegant than standmounted speakers, as the finish of the speaker is the same all the way to the floor. Perching a pair of 685s on top of the FS700s is probably the next best thing however; the satin metal finish of the stands nicely matches the speakers.

The 685 was the first aluminum/Kevlar speaker I had listed to in a while,

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and I was interested to hear how it would compare to the more common silk/paper variety. Starting with the treble and I was pleasantly surprised with the tweeter's performance. The use of inexpensive aluminum tweeters by some manufacturers earned them a reputation for sounding thin and 'steely' in the opinion of some. No such problem with the Nautilus units which were natural and precise. Playing a pair of British speakers as I was, I felt the need to use them with British rock and gave the Mark Knopfler CD *Kill To Get Crimson* a go. Cymbals and guitars rang out with a lifelike clarity, seemingly banishing any harshness or metallic ring. Down into the woofer, the sound moved well, with no significant roll off with the tweeter. Playing *Doolittle* by The Pixies, the woofers were punchy and offered a reasonable amount of bass from a small cabinet. The soundstage was coherent and precise, owing no doubt in some part to the positioning of the tweeter and woofer closer together.

Overall, the speakers did a good job of melting away and letting the music shine. Setting them up in a head-to-head comparison with my venerable Legend Joys, I'd say the 685s were probably even more revealing with less of a sonic signature, if not quite the same bass and overall punch. Not that I'd suggest for a moment that the 685s were only suited to jazz and classical music, but I can imagine fans of these genres enjoying the B&Ws. I found them to be particularly revealing and vivid. Sound was susceptible to set-up and I'd recommend you play around with them in this regard. I eventually brought the stands well off the wall into my listening room and positioned them the same distance from each other as where I sat. Forming an equilateral triangle between speakers and chair, there was an even and precise soundstage that at times surprised me with just how clear and detailed the sound was.

Although I auditioned the 685 as a stereo pair, B&W make a matching centre speaker and subwoofer to create a compact and high performance surround system.

One thing worth noting is that the sensitivity of the 685s is rated at 88dB. While this couldn't be considered a difficult load, it's a fair way from super sensitive horn speakers all the same. B&W recommends use of an amplifier of at least 25 watts, but you'd probably

want a bit more than that to get an honest performance from them. The other point I'd make may appear obvious but worthwhile all the same; while bass was respectable for a small cabinet, full frequency speakers these ain't. If you're looking to crank it in a large space, I'd recommend you have a look at the floorstanding models in the 600 range. These cost more, but then you may be saving yourself the cost of a pair of stands.

In the world of loudspeaker manufacturing, B&W (or Bowers & Wilkins as it now prefers to be known) is one of the most successful brands of all time. While it may be the companies halo products which earn B&W a lot of its acclaim, it the company can equally be proud of its budget products. **AVL**

Ancillary Equipment: Naim CD 5 CD player, Naim Flatcap 2 power supply, Legend Joey II loudspeakers, Densen B150 integrated amplifier, Nordost Flatline Gold II speaker cable, Nordost Blue Heaven interconnects.

Opinion

The 'Opinion' expressed here is that of the reviewer, summarised in the form of a 5-star rating system, and should be considered as an integral part of the full contents of this Audition Equipment Review. As such, each category should be judged on its own merits and not necessarily used as a comparison with other equipment reviews in this, or other editions of Audio & Video Lifestyle magazine.

- ★ Shocker
- ★★ Average
- ★★★ Good
- ★★★★ Excellent
- ★★★★★ Perfection

“Easy to locate and inexpensive to buy, a pair of standmounts can be matched with a basic amp and CD player for a great entrée into audio.”

- Performance ★★★★★
- Build Quality ★★★★★
- Compatibility ★★★★★
- Value For Money ★★★★★