



B&W SIGNATURE DIAMOND

Bowers & Wilkins delivers the ultimate two-way designer speaker, sweet sounding and gloriously appointed

PRICE £11,000 per stereo pair CONTACT B&W Group, Dale Road, Worthing, West Sussex BN11 2BH ☎ 01903 221500 🌐 www.bowers-wilkins.com

The world's leading specialist hi-fi speaker brand, Bowers & Wilkins – more commonly known as B&W, but now reverting to its original name to avoid confusion with motor manufacturer BMW – has a history of creating occasional limited edition luxury designer models.

The Signature Diamond model is one such, where the emphasis is as much on the radical presentation and luxury finish as on the performance and engineering. It is being produced in a limited edition of 1,000 numbered pairs, a good number of which have already been sold.

The substantial £11,000 per pair price reflects the use of costly, exotic materials and painstaking construction, in what must surely have a strong claim to being the ultimate two-way hi-fi loudspeaker. While it certainly looks expensive when compared to the much larger and more massive £13,000 800D, size is not everything in loudspeakerland, and the Signature Diamond has some clever tricks up its sleeve to rival its bigger brother.

While a big three-way like the 800D will always have more muscle at the bass end of things, as well as greater power handling and loudness potential, a two-way will have innate simplicity on its side, with superior coherence through the broad bass and midrange, as well as being an easier load for the amplifier to drive.

Surprisingly, the most costly item here from a manufacturing point of view is not the 25mm diamond dome tweeter – though that itself is far from cheap – but rather the elegantly shaped, carved-from-the-solid nacelle in which it is mounted, made from Italian Grigio Carmica or Belgian black marble. The tweeter is fed through a simple first-order network using a top-quality Mundorf Gold capacitor. The decoupled tweeter housing sits elegantly on top of a metre-tall bass/mid enclosure, made from curved plywood, fully Matrix-reinforced internally and finished in either white or Wakame veneer. Its oval section looks attractive, promotes good dispersion and inhibits internal reflections and standing waves.

The 180mm main driver has a 140mm Kevlar cone, with a new acoustically inert metal bullet phase plug, and is mounted on a short section of aluminium tube, which is swaged into the wood enclosure. Port-loading is achieved through the base, into a mouth formed between the enclosure and an alloy plinth. Twin terminal pairs are hidden underneath,

within the plinth, and side-entry plug adaptors are supplied. In-room measurement, using our normal far-field averaged technique, shows a good overall balance, albeit with some minor variations from genuine neutrality. The port is tuned to a low 33Hz, and this gives generous output from 35Hz to 60Hz. Output is just a little shy through the two octaves from 60Hz

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up to 250Hz, and peaks up slightly around 1.3kHz before dropping away to a presence dip at around 2.2kHz, prior to a mild recovery through the treble proper.

Sensitivity comes out to 89dB/W, a decibel higher than that claimed, and the amplifier load looks very easy too, only dipping marginally below 6 ohms above 10kHz. However, the impedance does reveal an obvious resonance around 170Hz, and a much smaller one at 700Hz. On an entirely positive note, the pair matching between the two samples is exceptionally close.

As if to prove that measurements can only provide clues, not definitive answers, the Signature Diamond delivered definitively superb sound quality. It took the place of a pair of 800Ds in the listening room, and while the SD obviously lacked the weight, muscularity and bottom end of its larger brother, it compensated very effectively through coherence, sweetness, delicacy and sheer charm. Male voices have a delightful continuity, free from chestiness, though bass guitars do lack a little punch, and the low bass could be tauter and tighter.

It was, in short, a delight to listen to, and a fine musical communicator, while the top end detail supplied by the tweeter seemed marginally superior to that delivered by its bigger brother – perhaps that chunk of marble has a beneficial mass-loading effect.

‘Sweet’ is the single adjective that perhaps most appropriately sums up the Signature Diamond. But it's highly revealing, too: few other speakers can highlight as clearly or as obviously the sound quality differences between the smooth Magnum Dynalab MD-109 FM tuner (see p64) and the slightly coarser sound of the less costly MD-106T.

Imaging is first class, with fine lateral positioning and good depth perspectives, the

more so because there's no audible boxiness, and no tendency for the sound to cluster close to the enclosures. The very effective enclosure stiffening provided by the curved sides and B&W's Matrix reinforcement ensures that very little is added to the contributions of the drivers and ports, delivering a fine dynamic range with excellent recovery of subtle

low-level detail. As ever with a wide-dispersion design such as this, the speaker's focus is slightly diluted by contributions from listening room reflections. This might reduce the monitoring precision slightly, but at the same time it creates a more convincing illusion of bringing the musicians into the listening room, a trade-off and a matter of taste, which many listeners will undoubtedly favour. ■■

Paul Messenger

