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First Tests

PACKED WITH EXCLUSIVE REVIEWS OF HOT NEW KIT

B&W finally back – with a bang

STEREO SPEAKERS B&W 685

★★★★★
 £ 380

FOR

As convincing, engaging and exciting a sound that you'll hear at this price

AGAINST

Slightly humdrum looks; won't appreciate bass-heavy amplification

VERDICT

Don't buy any speakers below £500 without hearing these

FOR A SPEAKER company with such a strong reputation, B&W's been awfully quiet in the sub-£500 arena lately. A quick flick through our *Buyer's Guide* reveals a range of speakers we tested four and five years ago. Rivals like Quad, KEF and Monitor Audio have had free rein to carve up this sector between them in the interim. The new 600 series is a timely arrival, then – and we reckon these tidy 685 standmounts will account for a good portion of the range's sales.

Physical presence to them

They're not the most compact design we've seen at this price, and they're by no means the most luxuriously finished. The tactile soft-touch paint on the front baffle is indulgent, though, and the asymmetrical plate housing the tweeter gives a flash of individuality. Otherwise, the 685s seem pretty-standard B&W fare: aluminium-dome tweeter, Kevlar midrange/bass driver with fixed centre

bullet, and a dimpled reflex port of unsubtle dimension (there are more details in the panel below). Around the back, there are chunky biwirable binding posts and an integrated wall bracket (for those who ignore our constant harping about speaker stands).

That's about it as far as reservations go, though – aesthetic considerations are redundant in light of the 685s' sonic

“They include biwirable binding posts, plus an integrated wall bracket”

performance. Playing a turbulent tester like Fatima Mansions' *Blues for Ceaucescu*, the B&Ws demonstrate solid grip and control. The hectic tempo is managed skilfully, low frequencies treading the fine line between substance and lethargy with poise. Vocals in the midrange are well defined, each



sneering inflection granted maximum bile, and the clattering treble is handled confidently – there's none of the hardness that an aluminium tweeter in relatively budget speaker suggests.

The stage the B&Ws presents is deep, wide and tall, and the 685s effortlessly isolate and integrate instruments upon

“Each Fatima Mansions sneering inflection is granted maximum bile”

it. Fine details are retrieved and described without fuss, testing dynamic shifts dispatched imperiously and the overall presentation is one of smoothly integrated coherence.

Revels in musical complexity

Even the awkward rhythms and processed sounds of *Explosions In The Sky's All of a Sudden I Miss Everyone* can't ruffle the B&Ws' resolve. Breathy and conspiratorial when required, but able to

KNOW HOW DRIVE UNITS



B&W HAS GONE to technology town for the new 600 series. The new tweeter combines neodymium magnets, a copper pole-piece and tube-loading to produce what B&W claims is the most advanced tweeter it has ever offered at this, its entry level. And though the Kevlar midrange/bass driver (pictured, left) looks familiar, it features a new chassis, new phase-plug (to minimise air noise) and copper-clad pole to improve integration with the tweeter. It's appropriate, then, that the cabinets should enjoy a unique feature of their own: soft-touch front panels.



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Onkyo £1000
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Dali £1900
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KEF £400
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PROJECTOR
Optoma £600
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PORTABLE PLAYERS
Goodmans £25
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WIRELESS HI-FI
Sonos £700
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PHONO CARTRIDGE
Ortofon £100
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BLU-RAY PLAYER
Pioneer £1000
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Familiar Kevlar mid/bass drive units, but lots of new technology hidden underneath the surface...



TECH SPECS
TYPE Standmounts
SENSITIVITY 88 dB/w/m
IMPEDANCE 8 ohms
POWER-HANDLING 100w
BIWIRABLE Yes
DIMENSIONS (HWD) 34 x 20 x 33cm
FINISHES 4

drive forward relentlessly too, the 685s are fearsomely difficult to wrong foot.

If we were to nitpick, we'd probably accuse the low-frequency reproduction of carrying just a sliver too much weight for those in a smaller space – but this is a criticism on a sub-atomic level.

Overall, the future's bright

These B&W loudspeakers are endlessly musical and thoroughly enjoyable across a wide range of material – almost incredibly, the 685s have been worth the wait.

NOW ADD THESE



STEREO AMPLIFIER
ROTEL RA-04
★★★★★
£ 250

Ignore the lack of remote and, instead, revel in music-making that belies the modest price tag. The B&Ws will team up with the RA-04 like a house on fire.



CD PLAYER
CAMBRIDGE AUDIO
AZUR 640CV2
★★★★★
£ 250

A dynamic, thrusting player with innate rhythm and agility. This is among the very best pound-for-pound products in these pages.



SPEAKER CABLE
QED SILVER ANNIVERSARY XT
★★★★★
£ 5.50/m

Preserve all the talent of the B&W/Rotel combination with this fine-value cable. Nothing else at the price can match its transparency or drive.

TOTAL SYSTEM £935