

GROUP TEST



Cabinet approval

All five of these mid-priced standmounter speakers get the thumbs-up from us. But which is the best?

As you move up out of the crowded budget-speaker arena into mid-priced standmounter territory – that is, from around the £500 mark upwards – the air becomes somewhat clearer and the landscape less densely populated. It's here that sound quality takes a significant step forward and the sonic character of each of the products on offer becomes more clearly differentiated from that of its rivals.

Until just a year or two ago, this terrain was dominated by B&W and its 600 series; at the lower end with the 607 S3 standmounters, which you should now be able to pick up for under £500, and – smack in the middle of the mid-price arena – the larger 606 S3 (£649). More recently, though, a flurry of talented rivals have joined the fray and ruffled B&W's feathers with their all-round quality and, in some cases, technological innovation.

So, we thought to ourselves, time to see how those venerable B&W old-timers stand up to the challenge from the best of the newer kids on the block by running a Group Test and declaring a definitive winner.

Arguably the best-known among those new kids is the KEF Q3 Meta, a sizeable standmounter with a fine pedigree and youth on its side (it launched late in 2024), while Focal's Theva No.1 brings an unusual bespoke tweeter design to the contest. Our final two contenders are the smart-looking Ruark Audio Sabre-R – also currently celebrating its first birthday – and the quietly understated Acoustic Energy AE300 Mk2.

Although Focal describes the Theva No.1 as 'bookshelf speakers' we would not advise confining any of these cabinets into a closeted space – all of them will perform far better mounted on dedicated stands and placed a little out into the room, away from corners or back walls. And when it comes to partnering equipment we would advise you spend at least as much on your amplifier as you do on your speakers – all of these contenders are perfectly capable of passing on the extra benefits delivered by more expensive amps.

Finally, if you are looking to buy, don't feel bound to choose our winner; all five of these speakers have impressive credentials and it may be that one of the others will suit you better.

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STEREO SPEAKERS £649-£699



ACOUSTIC ENERGY AE300 MK2



BOWERS & WILKINS 606 S3



KEF Q3 META



RUARK AUDIO SABRE-R



FOCAL THEVA NO.1