

STEREO SPEAKERS £649-£699



Verdict

WINNER

Acoustic Energy AE300 Mk2

We rarely have to choose a winner from such a high-quality field. There is no weak link here – but the AEs break the tape first. Just

We need to start by acknowledging that the standard of this group is excellent. All these speakers are talented performers that, given an appropriate system, are capable of sonic magic. There is no better example of this than Ruark's immensely likeable Sabre-R.

There are certainly areas where they lag behind the best of the competition; their lows sound a little soft-centred and don't dig as deeply as some, for example. But, given sympathetic electronics, they can also deliver a beautifully fluid and free-flowing performance that can't help but pull us into the music.

Vocals are superbly rendered thanks to a lovely midrange, and there is a balance and sweetness to the treble that exposes the otherwise excellent Bowers & Wilkins 606 S3's lack of refinement in this region. Add classy cosmetics and a fuss-free nature, and there is much to commend these little Ruark standmounts.

The Bowers & Wilkins 606 S3 remain excellent speakers for the money. They sound big, powerful and detailed. We particularly like their midrange clarity and responsive nature. Play a large-scale classical piece and they better most of this group when it comes to conveying the power and scale of the orchestra.



The powerful B&Ws (above) and nicely balanced Focals (below)



The arrival of fresh competition, however, has also revealed chinks in their armour. When compared with the very best in this group, the 606 S3's tweeter isn't as refined or as unobtrusive as it could be. Nothing illustrates the progress made at this price level more than this discovery.

When the S3 model was introduced just a few years ago, it was the company's switch from an aluminium tweeter dome to a new one using titanium that grabbed the headlines. At the time, we praised it for the greater refinement and clarity that it brought to the 606. Standards are clearly rising.

On the safe side

Focal's new Theva No.1 is another hugely capable speaker. It may not have the enthusiasm of the 606 S3, but it does have a more mature and evenly balanced presentation. This is another contender that sounds big and powerful while delivering a level of clarity that would be considered outstanding even a few years ago.

Yet, by the standards of the best here, their presentation could do with a little more drama. We aren't asking for the speaker to spice up

the recording, but rather to preserve the energy that is already there. Ultimately, this Focal plays things a little too safely, and the result is something that never offends but also rarely thrills.

KEF's Q3 Meta treads a broadly similar path to the Focal but avoids falling into the same trap. It could be argued that in many ways these are the most complete performers here. They have the scale and authority to stand toe to toe with the likes of the Bowers & Wilkins and Focal Theva, but also display an ability to communicate that matches the charming Ruarks. They would be top of the list too, if it weren't for the inclusion of the Acoustic Energy AE300 Mk2 in this test.

These aren't speakers that shout for attention. They prefer the understated approach and let the music take the limelight. They have excellent detail resolution and organise the information in a natural and musical way. Dynamic nuances that others in this group would ignore are rendered in an unexaggerated manner, while rhythmic elements are conveyed in a refreshingly sure-footed way. Overall, it is their blend of balanced tonality, midrange naturalness and finesse that no rival here can match. And that's why they are our winners.

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