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OCTOBER 2008



9 PAGES OF YOUR QUESTIONS ANSWERED

Grandier Designs



Budget loudspeakers are all well and good, but spending more really opens up your musical experience - as Adam Smith finds when he compares six £2,000 floorstanders...

As our group test of £1,000 loudspeakers in the June 2008 issue of *Hi-Fi World* showed, you can buy some highly impressive transducers for this nice, round number. By the time the budget has hit four figures, manufacturers have started to pour their engineering expertise into such designs, thanks to the loosening of the cost constraints that afflict budget items. The trouble is, we're a naturally curious lot here, and no sooner had the ink dried on the review, we started wondering how

things would change if you were to double the budget...

Naturally, it would be reasonable to assume that everything would get better again but we wondered by how much, and in what way? A further doubling of budget allows manufacturers to get really serious - cabinets become larger and sturdier still, drive units become more advanced, crossover components and internal wiring improve and connectors become chunkier and more expensive.

Some makers also take the opportunity to add more drive units

and make true three-way designs, such as seen by the Dynaudio and Dali models in this test; others, such as PMC and Totem, stick resolutely with two way and divert their expenditure elsewhere.

Whichever route is taken, the results give a notable step up in quality over the £1,000 mark, as this supertest shows...

THE CONTENDERS

Monitor Audio GS20	£1,700	p16
PMC FB1i	£1,850	p17
Dynaudio Excite X36	£2,000	p18
KEF XQ40	£2,000	p19
Totem Hawk	£2,200	p21
Dali Mentor 6	£2,200	p22

REFERENCE SYSTEM

Scheu Analog Black Diamond/Cantus turntable
 Ortofon Rondo Bronze cartridge
 Emille Labs KPE-2AS phono stage
 Yamaha CD-S2000 CD player
 Anatek A50R amplifier

Smaller brothers to the *Hi-Fi World* favourites, and runners up for our loudspeaker of the year in 2006, the GS60s, Monitor Audio's GS20s have heritage. As part of the 'Gold' series, which were MA's flagships until the unveiling of the Platinums, the GS models benefit from the ultimate evolution of Monitor Audio's gold dome C-CAM tweeter, plus the use of the 'HiVe II' port design, which uses a "straight rifled construction to aid air flow".

The GS20s are a two and a half way design, in which the bottom driver covers the bass frequencies up to 250Hz, and the upper driver the bass and midrange up to the 2.7kHz crossover point with the tweeter. The bass/midrange driver is not actually rolled off at the low end, like a three way design would be, hence the 'two and a half way' description.

In the case of the GS20s, driver lineup comprises two 6.5in (165mm) C-CAM (Ceramic-Coated Aluminium/Magnesium) drivers featuring RST (Rigid Surface Technology) cones. Above these is a gold dome 1in (25mm) tweeter. The two bass drivers work into separate enclosures, tuned to different frequencies which Monitor Audio claim "provides improved power handling and delivers faster, more dynamic bass and greater transparency through the midrange".

The GS20s measure 924x206x280mm (HxWxD), weigh 20.6kg each and are available in Lacquered Silver or Black, plus Walnut, Rosewood, Oak and Cherry real wood veneers. Finish is superb, and frankly, several other loudspeaker manufacturers could do with a visit



MONITOR AUDIO GS20 £1,700

to Monitor Audio for a masterclass in stylish, solidly made and easily adjustable spikes and accessories!

SOUND QUALITY

Most notable on unpacking the GS20s was the vile smell emanating from them - presumably the veneer! However, with a widow opened and a CD cued up, my olfactory concerns were soon forgotten, as the GS20s are mightily impressive. Most interesting is that nothing initially appears to stand out in particular because they seem to do everything so well. At the low end bass is solid, detailed, well controlled and clean thanks to those carefully designed ports, and at the top MA's gold dome tweeter continues to be one of the finest metal domes designs I have heard. As a result,

the treble is sweet, mellifluous and insightful, but with a perfectly judged sense of crispness without ever sounding splashy.

Even better is the way in which the two ends of the spectrum are joined. Across the mid, the GS20s project the image well out into the listening room, but back it up with a spread of sound across their width that makes placing instruments' positions a breeze. Add in stunning vocal rendition that positively caresses the earlobes with the right artist (yes, I'm thinking Diana Krall here!) and you have the recipe for the sort of loudspeaker that you just do not want to stop listening to.

As if this wasn't enough, the GS20s have one final trick up their sleeve. They are, like many Monitor Audio designs, impressively fleet of foot, rhythmical and dynamic, but so many designs like this tend to be somewhat lacking when the pace is turned down and it's time to be more considered and detailed. Not so the GS20s - they can switch from fast and furious to smooth and cossetting in the blink of an eye and never miss the slightest hint of anything lurking in the background.

VERDICT ●●●●●
First class loudspeakers that successfully combine detail, emotion and atmosphere with pace and dynamics. Brilliant.

MONITOR AUDIO
GS20 £1,700
Monitor Audio
+44(0)1268 740580
www.monitoraudio.co.uk

FOR

- dynamic alacrity
- fabulous treble
- overall even-handedness
- detail and insight
- build quality

AGAINST

- smelly!

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

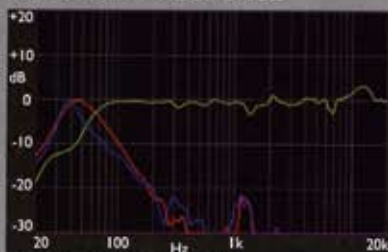
It is not uncommon to engineer a peak into a loudspeaker's output these days, but that of the GS20s is fairly subtle, so it should add top end presence and detail but without making things spitty or hissy. Across the rest of the band, the Monitor Audios have a well balanced and flat response with no large undulations of concern.

At the low end, the main drivers run down to 70Hz and the front and rear ports augment this down to around 40Hz. Also noteworthy is the cleanness of the port output traces - Monitor Audio's HiVe II profiled ports are clearly effective in this area, as they will add no unwanted artefacts.

Electrically, the GS20s offer a well balanced impedance response and turn in a good average measured impedance of 6.6 Ohms, dropping down to a minimum of around 5 Ohms, so they are not a challenging load. Sensitivity was fine at 88dB, so the GS20s should be quite content on the receiving end of

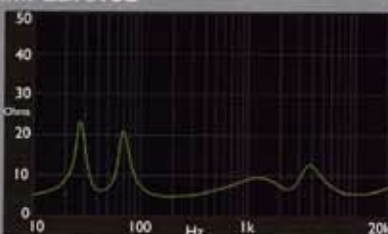
around 45 Watts and upwards. AS

FREQUENCY RESPONSE



Green - driver output
Red - front port output
Blue - rear port output

IMPEDANCE





PMC FB1i £1,850

Some companies have a particular technology that they have developed and honed and PMC are just such a company. Their particular 'thing' is the transmission line and they make use of it in all their models, from the mighty BBS/XBD professional monitors, right down to the DB1i standmounters. The FB1is come in two down from the top of the recently revised 'i' range, below the OB1i and EB1i.

The original FB1 was actually the first loudspeaker developed by PMC for the domestic market and has become a well known model designation, and a popular product since. The latest 'i' upgrades fitted to all models in the range bring it firmly up to date and show that PMC are in no way resting on their laurels.

The FB1i is a two-way design, featuring a 27mm SOLONEX soft dome tweeter, developed in partnership with SEAS, crossing over at 2kHz to a 6.5in (170mm) doped paper bass driver. This sits at the end

of PMC's 3m Advanced Transmission Line, the other end of which vents at the bottom of the front panel. High quality components are used in the crossover, including Solen capacitors.

Vital statistics are 1000x200x300mm (HxWxD), excluding the plinth, and each unit weighs 18kg. The cabinets are available in Black Ash, Cherry, Oak and Walnut real wood veneers and the finish of our review samples was immaculate. I personally found them the best looking here.

SOUND QUALITY

Many people think transmission lines are all about soggy, wallowy bass, but a good design

like the PMCs is far from it. Initially, one might even consider them bass-light until you realise that you are not listening to a struggling drive unit, or a chuffing port, but a loudspeaker with a proper sense of control and ease across the low end. Bass detail was impeccable and really low notes came across as unforced and solid.

Further up the frequency range, I did note a hint of chestiness, I suspect as a result of the driver/line disparity measured at around 150Hz. This did seem to boost some instruments in a slightly artificial manner; for example, the low end of the piano keyboard was a little indistinct sounding. Moving further up the scale, however, the piano was very vivid, and vocals were absolutely superb. The FB1i captured the innate nuances of each singer with the sort of precision that usually commands a much higher price tag. Lead vocals held the attention perfectly, sat right between the cabinets, allowing the backing instruments to fill the outer edges in a most capable manner.

Additionally, the new tweeter fitted to the PMCs removes any vestiges of spit that occasionally lurked in the older models, to offer a fine ambience to the treble. Hi-hats sounded crisp, cymbals rang out beautifully and the FB1is came across as lively yet smooth.

Finally, after the nasal assault that was the Monitor Audios, I have to just mention that the PMCs' veneer had an equally noticeable odour, but this time it was fantastic.

VERDICT ●●●●£

Stylish loudspeakers that show the benefits of a well designed transmission line. Fine value for money.

PMC FB1i £1,850

PMC Loudspeakers

☎ +44(0)870 4441044

www.pmc-speakers.com

FOR

- superb vocal performance
- subtle, yet deep bass
- good midband/treble clarity
- styling and finish

AGAINST

- upper mid chestiness

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

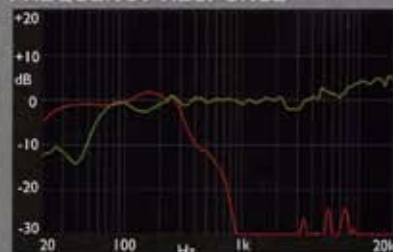
PMC's FB1i loudspeakers exhibit a gently upward rising trend in their response, above 4kHz. This is likely to give them a bright top end, but the actual curve is smooth so they should not be unduly hard, although a modicum of care with partnering equipment might be a wise move. Other than this, their response is very smooth and flat across the bass and midrange, which should bode well for a well balanced performance.

Bass-wise, the main drive unit takes care of things down to around 70Hz, being augmented by the transmission line that takes over and keeps everything pretty much flat down to 30Hz. As a result, the PMCs should have a very healthy low end for such a slim cabinet design.

Electrically the FB1is have something of an inductive rise at 2kHz but this is not unduly large and should not worry the sort of amplifier that are likely to be used to power the PMCs. Average measured impedance was high at 8.8 Ohms, barely dropping to a minimum of 7 Ohms, so the FB1is are unusual in being a genuine, friendly 8

Ohm load. Sensitivity suffers a little as a result, but 87dB is still an acceptable figure and just means that an amplifier of 50W or more would be needed for good sound levels. AS

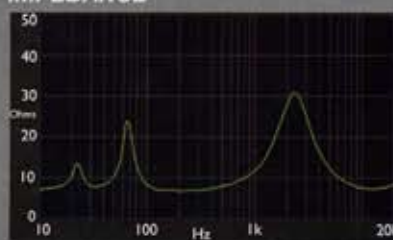
FREQUENCY RESPONSE



Green - driver output

Red - port output

IMPEDANCE



Dynaudio are another company with their fingers in more than a few transducer pies, with an impressive range of professional, domestic and in-car items to their name. The Excite range is the next up from the entry level Audience items and promises "high end audio performance and pure musical fun"!

The X36 floorstanders sit at the top of the range and are a full three-way design utilising four drive units. From the top, these comprise a 27mm tweeter with coated soft dome and, below this, a dedicated 4in (110mm) midrange unit comes in below 2kHz. This unit uses Dynaudio's Magnesium Silicate Polymer (MSP) cone material, allied to a lightweight rubber surround.

Below these are a pair of 7in (180mm) MSP-coned bass drivers, working in a tandem below 500Hz and loaded by a suitably large rear-firing bass port. This should bode well for good extension, when allied to the large cabinet, which tips the tape measure at 1040x205x310mm (HxWxD).

The Excite X36s are sturdy items, weighing in at a solid 23.5kg each, and are available in four real wood veneers; Maple, Cherry, Rosewood and Black Ash. Only a single pair of terminals are fitted for connection duties, as Dynaudio remain unconvinced of the benefits, or otherwise, of bi-wiring or bi-amping their loudspeakers.

SOUND QUALITY

The first bars of the opening track that I chose had me pricking up my

VERDICT

A proper 'big loudspeaker' sound comes from these well built enclosures, but the forward upper mid will not be to all tastes.

DYNAUDIO EXCITE

X36 £2,000

Dynaudio

☎ +44(0)1908 237936

www.dynaudio.com/uk

FOR

- good bass
- fine spatiality
- crisp top end

AGAINST

- strident vocals
- grating midband

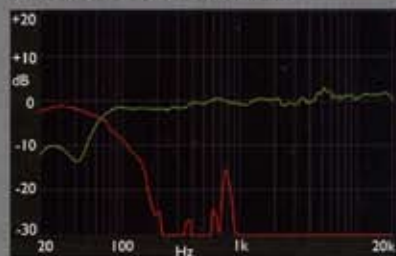
MEASURED PERFORMANCE

The Dynaudio Excite X36s serve up a very flat measurement across their full bandwidth, showing good driver integration through careful design. There is a gentle lift in output of around 1-2dB with increasing frequency, so the X36s are likely to have a bright balance, and the slight lift at around 5kHz may well be audible.

At the low end, the twin main drivers roll off at around 70Hz, before handing over to the port which extends this down to around 30Hz, so the Dynaudios offer good extension and should have a solid and effective low end.

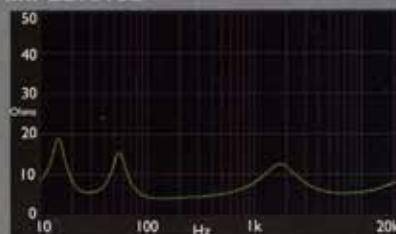
Electrically the X36s turn in an even and undemanding result, with a measured average impedance of 5.8 Ohms, dropping to a minimum of around 4 Ohms. As a consequence, they are a genuine 4 Ohm load but have a good sensitivity of 89dB, so should be happy with amplifiers from 40W upwards. AS

FREQUENCY RESPONSE



Green - driver output
Red - port output

IMPEDANCE



DYNAUDIO EXCITE X36 £2,000

ears, as things got off to a highly promising start. Having an impressively large-scale performance, the soundstage spread itself out very well in front of me and offered the sort of authority that only comes from some

good-sized drivers in a sturdy cabinet. Instruments and performers were lined up in a highly cohesive whole across and well beyond the width of the loudspeakers and the main focus of the music was easy to follow. The Dynaudio's top end rang out well with confidence, but without any hardness, adding a pleasing crispness to proceedings and making sure that all finer details were well revealed.

Next, the bass line kicked in and the surprise turned into a firm grin, as the Dynaudios pulled every last detail from

the depths of the frequency range, resulting in impressive extension and pace. Bass guitars were tuneful and vivid, and acoustic basses were blessed with a fine sense of body and precision.

Finally, the vocals then came into play and everything went a little awry. On the positive side, the main performance projected very well into the listening area, still offering a fine sense of scale and spread of action across the width of the enclosures. Unfortunately the vocals themselves were decidedly forward in nature, rather too much so in fact. The dulcet tones of Norah Jones were strident, making the lady herself sound rather cross, and the studio atmosphere around Diana Krall was overblown to such an extent that she sounded like she was singing in a village hall.

Instrumentally, things were a little better, with the Excite X36s adding good tonality to both electric and acoustic instruments. However, when these all came together, such as in an orchestral crescendo, the overall effect was too overblown for my tastes and, when combined with the bright balance of the loudspeaker, made things rather grating to listen to.



KEF XQ40 £2,000

KEF's XQ40 loudspeakers sit at the top of their recently revised XQ range, which slots in between the affordable Q series and the high end Reference models. The revisions involved increasing the number of models in the range, making improvements to the cabinets and optimising the drivers.

In terms of the XQ40, the result is a three-way loudspeaker that utilises KEF's Uni-Q driver; in this case a 6.5in (165mm) design, with a 0.75in (19mm) aluminium dome at its centre. This operates above 2.5kHz and is loaded by KEF's new 'tangerine' waveguide to optimise the tweeter's output and reduce adverse effects of the natural horn loading provided by the bass/mid cone.

The twin bass drivers are also 6.5in (165mm) designs, paper-coned and sited in their own dedicated, port-loaded enclosures, augmenting the Uni-Q driver below 400Hz. All units are linked by a new crossover that uses high quality components

from the Reference series, and two pairs of terminals permit bi-wiring or bi-amping.

Cabinet finish is superb and available in high gloss Piano Black, Birdseye Maple and Khaya Mahogany, although I personally find the styling a little dumpy. Vital statistics are 1020x231x302mm (HxWxD) and 24.3kg. Both stylish rounded feet and basic spikes are provided for the rounded-bottom cabinet but, to level the speaker using the spikes, the front pair had to be screwed fully in and the rears barely engaged in the thread which did not make for a secure support.

SOUND QUALITY

The KEFs offer a

pleasingly even handed performance across the board. Most notable is that they image in a stunning manner, and maintain this solidity as you move around over a surprisingly wide area. It may have taken time to perfect, but KEF really do have their Uni-Q drive unit superbly sorted in this respect.

Instrumental and vocal detail was highly impressive, and the XQ40s' top end is a tidy yet spry affair, making high frequencies ring out into the listening area with alacrity. Far less patchy than some older KEFs I can recall, the XQ40s maintain their even-handed nature across a wide range of music, and only start to become a little flustered when the music becomes densely recorded. In this situation, they never sound distorted or muddled, but just give a slight sense that everything is crowding out of the drive units at once; in these situations it becomes a little hard to pick each individual item out.

At the low end, which has been something of an area for reservation for me with some other KEF designs such as the iQ9, the XQ40s performed with flying colours. Bass lines were weighty, solid, tuneful and blessed of fine timbre and pace. The only small gripe I had was that a little more grunt wouldn't have gone amiss with certain dance tracks, but the XQ40s are not lightweight and never sounded boomy or uncomfortable. All in all, their low end is very well judged and blends well with the rest of the frequency range.

VERDICT

The obvious choice for imagery fans, the XQ40s are a well balanced and enjoyable pair of loudspeakers.

KEF XQ40 £2,000

KEF
+44(0)1622 672261
www.kef.com

FOR

- fabulous imagery
- overall integration
- fine bass detail and pace

AGAINST

- can become jumbled
- poor spike arrangement

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

KEF's new XQ40 loudspeakers show just how much development the company has put into its Uni-Q drive unit and turn in a fine measured performance as a result. The overall frequency response trend is flat and even with only a couple of undulations towards the top end as a result of the horn-loading effect of the main drive cone on the tweeter at its centre. These drops are very narrow however, and much smaller than older Uni-Q designs, so the resulting sound should be good.

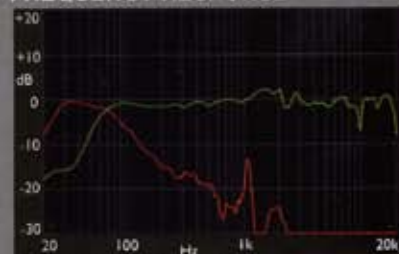
It was also noticeable during measurement that the microphone could be moved quite a distance vertically and horizontally away from the main axis with little effect - the XQ40s thus have excellent off-axis performance, making positioning easier.

At the bottom, bass rolls off below 70Hz and is augmented by the ports to around 35Hz, so the XQ40s will have a solid low end.

Impedance-wise, the XQ40s have a flat electrical response and an average measured impedance of 5 Ohms, dropping to 4 Ohms in places. Their

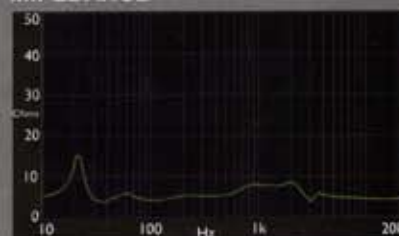
sensitivity was good however, at 90dB meaning that they should be happy with 40 Watts or more from a matching amplifier. AS

FREQUENCY RESPONSE



Green - driver output
Red - port output

IMPEDANCE





TOTEM HAWK £2,200

Another two way design like the PMCs, Totem's Hawks are a little different to the other candidates, and definitely none the worse for it! Totem was founded in 1989 and specialises in developing loudspeakers that are "capable of reproducing a truly musical and involving performance"

The Hawks are the third model up in Totem's floorstanding range, above the Arro and Sttaf, and below the Forest, Wind and highly impressive flagship Shamans. They make use of a 5.5in (140mm) "extreme long throw" bass driver, allied to a 1in (25mm) alloy dome tweeter, and these two items are united by a first order crossover operating at 2.5kHz.

The Hawks are surprisingly light, but their cabinet is cross-braced and veneered both internally and externally, and a layer of borosilicate damping is sprayed on the internal surfaces to eliminate the storage of unwanted internal energy. An empty chamber at the cabinet's base allows

for mass loading if required.

The Hawks do not come with spikes but rather, Totem's 'Claw' support system. For this, three metal brackets screw to the underside of the loudspeakers and a ball bearing sits in a recess on the underside of these that then sits on the floor.

The Hawks are the smallest models in the test, measuring a compact 910x170x245mm (HxWxD), and they are available in Maple, Cherry, Mahogany or Black finishes.

SOUND QUALITY

Totem's blatant disregard for the laws of physics are well in place with these

loudspeakers as, like most of their other models, they sound far bigger, more solid and bassier than they look! This means an astonishingly weighty low end but coupled with the sort of speed and pace that is generally only found with a small driver. The Hawks' bass driver can be clearly seen to be working hard but, unlike one or two of the even smaller models, they never sound strained or compressed as the volume rises, just fast, taut and astoundingly rhythmical.

Combined with the crisp but well judged treble, this means that the Totems remain utterly musical at all times and really do offer a surprisingly 'out of the box' performance, particularly with the addition of some mass loading to the rear chamber, as this adds the last missing hint of focus to the upper bass.

Across the board, I feel the Totems are the best of the group in one key respect. They may not have the widest soundstage around, although they are certainly not narrow in lateral image terms, but the way in which they can layer and position items in the mix in depth terms, is quite astounding. Backing instruments and singers hang back as they should whilst lead vocals project superbly into the room.

They very occasionally turn strident and project a little too far at times, for which I personally blame the port peak at 850Hz, but the Hawks never stray anywhere near becoming harsh, and remain a joyously upbeat musical companion no matter what you feed them with.

VERDICT

Small of stature but big of sound, the Totem Hawks are dizzyingly spry, detailed and dynamic performers.

TOTEM HAWK £2,200

Joenit Distribution

+32 15 285 585

www.totemacoustic.eu

FOR

- surprising bass
- superb depth perspective
- taut rhythmicality
- diminutive stature

AGAINST

- occasional vocal stridency

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

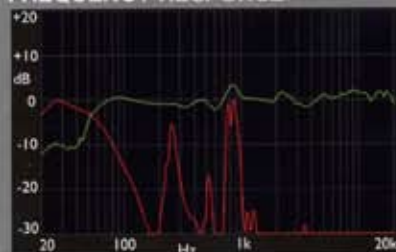
The Totem Hawks have a good, flat trend to their response, with the exception of a ripple around 850Hz which appears to be due to the port. This is a very simple tube with no flaring or attempt at air noise minimisation, and the lack of these aspects can be clearly seen by its huge output peak at this frequency. The port is on the rear panel, so any extraneous noises should not be obvious, but it may have an effect on vocals; this is a little disappointing.

At the low end, the 5.5in driver operates down to a useful 60Hz, with the port adding wanted reinforcement down to 30Hz. This is mightily impressive for such small units and the Hawks are highly likely to belie their dimensions with a properly 'grown up' bass performance.

In impedance terms, the Hawks are once again a mixed bag. On the plus side, they are a very easy load, averaging 10.8 Ohms and not dropping below 7 Ohms. Sadly this does impact sensitivity, which measured a low 83dB, and they are not as well damped

as other designs, so an amplifier with a high damping factor and around 60W will be required. Partner carefully, however, and they should turn in a highly capable performance. AS

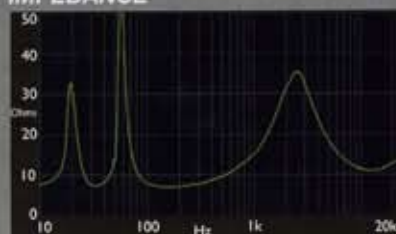
FREQUENCY RESPONSE



Green - driver output

Red - port output

IMPEDANCE



Dali's Mentor range of loudspeakers sit in the middle of the company's lineup, above the Concept and Ikon ranges, and below the Helicon and Euphonia items, and incorporates design and technological aspects taken from the more expensive ranges. The main model lineup is five-strong, with two standmounting designs and three floorstanders, the Mentor 6s coming in one from the top, below the 8s.

The Mentor 6s are described by Dali as a "two and a half plus a half-way" design! This means both low end drivers cover the full bass range, with the lower unit rolled off at 800Hz, and the upper continuing up to the tweeters at 3.4kHz. Unusually though, the dome tweeter rolls off naturally at the top end, with the ribbon coming in at 12kHz to augment it (hence the extra half way). The bass drivers are a pair of 6.5in (160mm) paper/wood fibre cones loaded by twin rear-firing ports, and the top end is covered by Dali's Hybrid tweeter module, comprising a 28mm soft dome and a 17x45mm ribbon.

Connection is via two pairs of Dali's chunky 'Vice Grip' terminals and the crossovers are mounted directly to these to minimise the signal path length. The Mentor 6s are at the other end of the size spectrum from the Totems, measuring 1030x200x390mm (HxWxD) and weigh 22kg each. The cabinets are available in Cherry and Black Ash real wood veneers, plus Satin White and Satin Black painted finishes

VERDICT

The Mentor 6s have a detailed and commanding sonic presence that fills a room with sound in an effortless fashion.

DALI MENTOR 6 £2,200

Dali UK

+44(0)845 644 3537

www.dali.eu/uk

FOR

- fine top end detail
- well integrated midrange
- solid, commanding bass
- good sonic presence

AGAINST

- rather 'hissy' treble

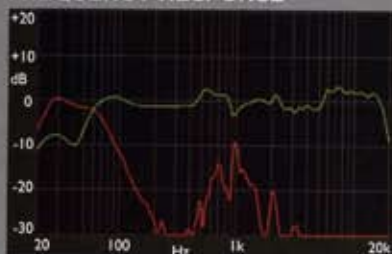
MEASURED PERFORMANCE

The Dali Mentor 6 loudspeakers have a frequency response that is a little less even than some, but not disastrously so. The lift in the response in the 500-800Hz region will add presence and scale to vocals, and the lift in response above 6kHz will add plenty of top end detail and sparkle. Note that these measurements were taken at 15 degrees off axis, as this is how Dali design their speakers to be used. The response was a little more uneven directly on-axis, which suggests that the Mentor 6's will indeed perform best when not toed-in.

At the low end, there is slight lift around 100Hz, before the main drivers drop off in output at around 60Hz. The rear ports are tuned to around 35Hz, so the Dalis should have a healthy low end.

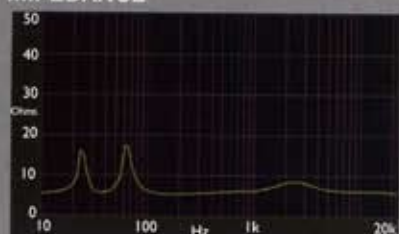
Electrically, the Mentor 6s measure well, with an even electrical response and an average measured impedance of 5.8 Ohms, dropping to around 5 Ohms as a minimum so they will not place

undue demands on a 4 Ohm amplifier tap. Sensitivity was fine at 89dB. AS

FREQUENCY RESPONSE

Green - driver output

Red - port output

IMPEDANCE**DALI MENTOR 6** £2,200**SOUND QUALITY**

One could quite rightly be concerned that a loudspeaker with two bass/mid drivers and two tweeters might well

be all boom 'n' tizz but fortunately this is not the case when they are set up as advised, slightly off-axis and not pointing directly at the listener.

The step in response at 6kHz does mean that the treble is quite dominant, and has a certain hissy quality at times. This gives superb levels of clarity and real attack to cymbal strikes, but does mean that gently brushed cymbals, for example, tend to blur into one sound rather than being easily distinguishable strokes.

Lower down, the lift in response in the vocal region works wonders in bringing singers well forward

from their backing tracks and the Mentor 6s turn in an emotive and spacious performance as a result. Equally, backing instruments were not lost as a result of this effect, which can sometimes be the case. Acoustic instruments were blessed with fine timbre and balance, and groups of them, such as in an orchestral setup, remained well defined and easily distinguishable from their companions. Electric instruments such as guitars were handled with equal aplomb, and the Mentor 6s revealing treble picked up on fretboard hand movements well. The Dalis were also impressive in the way in which they were able to reveal the inadequacies of poorer recordings but without making the result unlistenable.

At the bottom, those twin drivers and ports do a sterling job of providing a highly impressive low end performance. Bass lines were punchy, detailed and pleasingly fast without descending into boom or overhang. The Mentor 6s are quite sizeable units and their sound reflects this in the way in which they offer a commanding presence in the listening room.

Once again, a test like this throws up some interesting results. Firstly, the question postulated in the introduction, namely, whether £2,000 loudspeakers are better than £1,000 ones, can be quickly despatched - yes they are. Obviously, there are relative degrees of improvement but generally, the extra budget is spent on the important parts of the loudspeaker and this brings changes that are sometimes quite surprising.

Another interesting aspect of the increase in budget is that you start to see designs creeping in with their own 'Unique Selling Points'. In this case, we have the PMCs with their transmission line, the Dalis with their Hybrid Tweeter Module and the KEFs with their Uni-Q driver. It can be seen that designs are starting to diversify at this point, whereas a collection of, say, £500 loudspeakers, say, will all tend to be fairly similar in terms of basic topology. Still, for a group test, the result is the important thing, so whose technology triumphs this time around?

The only contenders I would actively discount would be the Dynaudios, I'm afraid. On the plus side, they are well built and offer a lot of cabinet and drive units for the money, with a resultingly large-scale sound. The problem is that their midrange is decidedly forward and verges on being unpleasant at times, especially in terms of vocals, which end up rather coloured and overblown, and this is a dominant characteristic. If your system lacks life and presence in this area then they may be just what it needs but in this company, the Dynaudio Excites failed to excite me.

Of the other contenders, the KEF XQ40s are magnificent performers in soundstage terms. They are unfussy about positioning and hold a solid stereo image over an impressively wide area. The whole sound melds together very well and they are never less than enjoyable from top to bottom. Their only problem appears when complex material is played, and they start to fall over their own feet a little, muddling the music's aspects all together somewhat. All in all though, impressive and definitely worth shortlisting...

Next to consider are the PMCs, which offer an eye-opening good rendition of vocals, and have the lovely, effortless but subtle bass that you only get with a good transmission line design. I still think they are the most handsome loudspeakers in the test and they are

have that monitor-like sonic nature that gives you the impression you're hearing what you're supposed to, and nothing else. My only gripe is the slight chestiness in the lower midrange but that apart, the PMC FB1s are very fine transducers. They do smell rather good, too!

However, it's a three-way fight for the top spot and a very close-run thing, closer than any other group test I can recall, in fact. Firstly, we have the Dali Mentor 6s, which offer an impressive, large-scale sound like that of the Dynaudios, but with a much more even-handed midrange performance, that captures the nature of the music well. Add in a very healthy bass performance and a highly revealing top end and you have a very capable loudspeaker. If

"the extra budget is spent on the important parts of the speaker, bringing changes that are quite surprising..."

only that very slight top end hissiness wasn't so distracting on occasion, these could well have won, but strong competitors mean they come a very close runner up.

So that leaves us two contenders, the first of which are the Totem Hawks. I can't help feeling that if Albert Einstein were still with us, he would be on the phone to Totem, asking them to kindly stop bending the laws of physics, as this can be the only explanation for how the company manages to extract such bass and such sheer gusto from a small driver in a compact cabinet! The Hawks look lost alongside the likes of the Dalis and Dynaudios and each cabinet can be picked up with one hand, yet power them up and they leave you in no doubt that they mean serious business. I still have a slight concern over the port behaviour, and its effect on vocals, but the Hawks are always fun, always dynamic and always totally impressive. I feel they are a mandatory audition at this price point.

So how do you top two five-globers with very minor foibles? Easy - with a five glober that does not appear to have any! The Monitor Audio GS20s are the cheapest loudspeakers in the test at £1,700, yet to my

ears they are convincing winners. When you consider that they love to rock, with a deep, tight and well controlled bass, a beautifully open and emotive midrange and a crisp and insightful top end then this pushes them right to the top of any audition list.

Consider then that they also easily capture the filigree detail of more subtle source material, have an encompassing soundstage that fills any room with ease, are a friendly and efficient load to drive, are superbly finished and packaged and come with a beautifully made, chunky set of feet and spikes. As a result, they virtually sell themselves and are a worthy winner. If only they didn't whiff so much - but I'm sure that will pass with time!

