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PASSION FOR SOUND

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FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKERS £499-£16,000

Speakers corner

If you can afford the space and are serious about full range performance, you'll almost certainly want to get a floorstander. Take your pick from six of the best



Acoustic Energy AE109

PRICE: £499
TELEPHONE: 01285 654432
WEB: acoustic-energy.co.uk
REVIEWED: HFC 425

AE's 30th anniversary year is an important time for the company, and the new 100-series – which the AE109 tops – is a key new range. A budget, slimline floorstander, it sees the company's design direction focus on traditional values in a modern setting. It uses a conventionally shaped cabinet with no gimmicks, but every aspect of the design has been carefully thought through. The headline news is the WDT waveguide technology, which is said to integrate the tweeter with the room better, for superior dispersion and imaging. The 28mm soft dome tweeter is married up to twin 110mm paper coned mid/bass drivers, while a carefully worked out 2.5-way crossover does the business at 2.3kHz.

Sound quality

The new AE109 is a little rolled-off up top and has a surprisingly sweet treble that's substantially better than budget AEs of yore. Tonally most agreeable, it is nevertheless quite a 'seat of the pants' listen. It gets straight into the music with no messing about. The tweeter impresses with its smoothness and ties in seamlessly with the midband, which is carried with surprising accuracy and immediacy. It's not as wide ranging as a high-end loudspeaker, but by the standards of its price it does exceptionally well.

WE SAY: An attractive, affordable small floorstander that sounds unexpectedly refined considering its price



ELAC UF5

PRICE: £1,250
TELEPHONE: 01285 643088
WEB: hifi-network.com
REVIEWED: HFC 423

Unboxing the UF5 reveals a very contemporary, clean lined and elegant floorstander that says understated chic far more than showy craftsmanship. The MDF cabinet is well constructed and the satin black finish is seamless and practical, but not as refined as some at this price. Speaker grilles can be attached magnetically and metal outrigger feet with adjustable spikes are provided to increase stability. The speaker is a full three-way design featuring a 25mm soft dome tweeter protected by a grille within a short waveguide placed within a dedicated concentric 102mm midrange aluminium driver, with an array of three 133mm aluminium bass drivers completing the slim but purposeful baffle.

Sound quality

This loudspeaker is clearly capable of driving large rooms with ease and having those three rear ports, it benefits from being kept out of corners. It displays quite superb articulation of the bass frequencies, but with an incredibly deft light touch around the extended treble. Vocals are portrayed beautifully, with a very natural timbre that suggests the tweeter and concentric midband drivers are well matched and extremely coherent. The midband performance is also noteworthy for its dispersion, creating a wide and tall sweet spot that makes it possible for the listener to enjoy being bathed in the imaging.

WE SAY: A modern and generous design that majors on an open, transparent and highly dynamic performance



KEF Blade Two

PRICE: £16,000
TELEPHONE: 01622 672261
WEB: kef.com
REVIEWED: HFC 420

KEF has taken the design features of the original Blade and shrunk the dimensions by roughly a third to create a speaker more appropriate for those with smaller rooms. Beyond the size reduction, other compromises are not on the menu. The speaker is still built around the concept of the 'Single Apparent Source' that ensures that the 'acoustic centre' of every driver is the same. This gives the brain the impression that it is listening to a single extremely wide bandwidth driver with none of the phase or alignment issues that a conventional forward-facing driver array usually faces.

Sound quality

It should be expected that a speaker that looks the way this one does will never be an unobtrusive wallflower and there are rivals, even at this elevated price, that might be easier to live with. This doesn't matter, though. This is an uncompromising piece of engineering brilliance that does things with soundstage, scale, impact and three-dimensionality that are truly exceptional. Anyone lucky enough to own a pair will have a sculpture that's also one of the most awe-inspiring loudspeakers on sale today.

WE SAY: The Blade Two demands your attention and focus in every possible way. It's quite simply astonishing





Correct positioning of your speakers is extremely important. If you place them too close to a wall, it will tend to reinforce the bass at particular frequencies. Obviously, having them too far away from the wall is impractical, but try to aim for at least 30cm as a starting point. Also, ensure that the distances of the speakers from the back walls and the side walls are different. If they are the same, the inevitable reflections from the back

walls will tend to either reinforce or cancel the reflections from the sides, creating another potential source of peaks and troughs in frequency response. Another issue is the apparent soundstage depth. Increasing the distance from the speaker to the wall behind will increase depth, but this can have a detrimental effect on instrument focus. A trial and error approach will help determine the best positioning for your loudspeakers.



PMC twenty5.23

PRICE: £3,095
TELEPHONE: 01767 686300
WEB: pmc-speakers.com
REVIEWED: HFC 425

In effect, the twenty5.23 is a compact floorstander sporting a complex loading system for its two relatively conventional drive units. It sports a PMC-designed, SEAS-made 27mm fabric soft dome tweeter, cooled by Ferrofluid. This crosses over at an unusually low 1.8kHz to a single 140mm woven glass fibre coned mid/bass driver with cast alloy chassis. This stiff cone material is new for PMC, which has previously used doped paper; it claims that it's able to deliver greater excursion than before, making for a lower distortion and improved power handling. The transmission line that this is at one end of is effectively 2.4m long, which is quite remarkable considering that the speaker stands just 907mm tall.

Sound quality

The twenty5.23 behaves more like the sort of large three-way speaker design you find in studio monitoring environments. Its bass doesn't thunder like a top JBL with a wide front baffle, yet it has a wonderfully authoritative quality that is always there. Even, firm and insistent, the bottom end is quite unusual in this category of floorstander and you're quickly aware you're listening to something a bit out of the ordinary. The PMC sounds more expensive than it is, giving a commanding, authoritative performance that's largely devoid of any vices. Instead, your attention is drawn to the music, and the speaker itself largely dissolves away.

WE SAY: Serves up an authoritative sound that majors on power and punch, but is smooth and sophisticated too



Q Acoustics Concept 500

PRICE: £4,000 TELEPHONE: 01279 501111
WEB: qacoustics.co.uk REVIEWED: HFC 426

Best known as the benchmark for entry-level loudspeakers, Q Acoustics has taken tech and design features recognisable on its lower-cost models and developed them for the upmarket sector. The result is a speaker that promises a level of rigidity and damping way beyond more conventional cabinet construction arrangements. A 28mm soft dome tweeter is joined by a pair of 165mm mid/bass drivers in a woofer/tweeter/woofer layout that is visually almost identical to the more affordable 3050 (HFC 398). The mid/bass units boast a significantly beefed up voice coil, while the tweeter is completely decoupled from the cabinet.

Sound quality

The extensive work on the cabinet results in a floorstander that sounds like six beautifully integrated drivers suspended in free space. The soundstage is solid, three dimensional and filled with instruments with perfect tonality. Vocals are so believable you realise that what you thought was accurate was some way wide of the mark.

WE SAY: An exceptional loudspeaker that offers remarkable value for money and a quite stunning performance



Totem Sttaf

PRICE: £1,799
TELEPHONE: 003215 285585
WEB: totemacoustic.com
REVIEWED: HFC 417

Bucking the trend for floorstanders being imposing towers that dominate the room they're placed in, the Sttaf is disarmingly slim. There are just two drive units, a 25mm fabric dome tweeter and a 140mm mid/bass driver with a doped paper cone. The folk at Totem are into "the emotion and soul of music". And for that, you don't need a truck load of tech, just a painstaking eye and ear for detail and an understanding of what works musically. A fairly weighty plinth with spike sockets is supplied to marginally increase footprint area but rather than being attached to the enclosure with bolts, tiny dabs of mastic-like material do the fixing and provide a degree of decoupling.

Sound quality

This is an absolute gem of a speaker that blows the idea that you need a big box with multiple drivers to fulfil the 'quality floorstander' brief clean out of the water. Although arguably a little less sensitive than larger rival offerings, the Sttaf nonetheless throws out an impressively wide and deep soundstage with convincing spatial perspective and truly nailed cohesion. Vocals sound like an integral part of the mix rather than being thrust forward in a bulging bubble. Bass, meanwhile, might be a little softer than on other models, but it is still lucid and expressive, full of warmth and subtlety so that it remains decently extended and effortlessly musical throughout.

WE SAY: Size, it would seem, really doesn't matter as this relatively mini marvel can more than hold its own with the big boys

