

Group test

STANDMOUNT SPEAKERS £639-£810

Hot property

Rising house prices means smaller homes for many. **David Price** rounds up six of the best smallish standmount speakers to fit inside



OUR HOMES ARE generally less spacious than they used to be, and new-build houses are a world away from the size of those built in the sixties. Britons are downsizing, and that especially goes for the young who simply can't afford to buy a large place to live or need to continue to reside with their folks.

So where does this leave hi-fi? Smaller is the simple answer to that

one. Expect high-quality one-box systems like Cyrus' new Lyric (check out our review of the 09, starting on page 16) to appeal more to those who in previous generations would have bought big stack systems. And don't be surprised if the boom in big floorstanders – which took off so strongly in the late nineties – shows a real sign of slowing down in sales. The lack of available space in people's

abodes will become an ever more pressing issue as the population continues to grow.

Modern age

Fortunately though, help is at hand in the hi-fi world. The latest crop of mid-price standmounters is refreshingly capable, with manufacturers ever more inclined to be bold and innovative. We're seeing wider use of modern cone materials, better braced cabinets and all sorts of other design flourishes. It's a really healthy state of affairs because it gives buyers choice. Choice means competition, and competition drives quality up and prices down. The only trouble is where to start?

Here to help is our roundup of six high-quality standmounting speakers. Read on to see how they sound, and then use this as a starting point for your final purchasing decision... ▶



ON TEST



ATC SCM7
£810 p27

A hi-fi standmounter from a company with a reputation for professional monitors. It looks great, but how does it sound to a domestic audience?



Dali Ikon 2 Mk2
£639 p29

There's no denying this Danish loudspeaker company's fine provenance, and there's also no denying the Ikon 2's very interesting three-driver design.



Focal Aria 906
£798 p31

One of France's largest and most successful brands, this new box sports a dramatic upgrade to its mid/bass unit in the form of a new flax cone material.



KEF LS50
£800 p33

Celebrating its fiftieth anniversary recently, esteemed speaker maker KEF decided to knock up something a little special, and the LS50 (get it?) is the result.



Mission SX2
£700 p35

One of Britain's most commercially successful speaker brands of the modern age, can the smart little SX2 put its name on your shortlist?



Monitor Audio Silver 2
£650 p37

A British company that's sold serious speakers since the seventies. The Silver series is MA's strongest ever affordable range, and promises much.



ATC SCM7 £810

Here's a loudspeaker company with its heart and soul in the professional audio market, but how does it sound?

DETAILS

PRODUCT
ATC SCM7

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
Standmount loudspeaker

WEIGHT
7.5kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
174 x 300 x 215mm

FEATURES

- Two-way, infinite baffle loudspeaker
- 25mm tweeter, 125mm mid/bass unit
- Claimed sensitivity: 84dB/1W/1m

DISTRIBUTOR
ATC Loudspeaker Technology Ltd

TELEPHONE
01285 760561

WEBSITE
atcloudspeakers.co.uk

It's only since the eighties that ATC has made domestic loudspeakers, and even now it doesn't change its range very often. This is the company's most affordable speaker, as it's far smaller than most of its products, but still fairly big by the standards of this group. The two-way design sports a new ATC designed and built 25mm soft dome tweeter with neodymium magnet and precision alloy wave guide, working with a 125mm ATC designed and built mid/bass unit with an inhouse, hand-wound precision flat wire coil and 3kg optimised motor assembly.

Compared to many speakers here, the ATC seems rather old fashioned – but that is because it doesn't have any of the features that some regard as gimmicks, such as elaborately shaped cabinets or fancy-sounding cone materials. You might say it is conservative with a small 'c', and none the worse for it; certainly the construction quality is excellent. One trait it shares with all ATCs is that it needs a lot of power to drive; the company claims 84dB/1W/1m sensitivity and this is very poor for a modern loudspeaker, but understandable considering its size and infinite baffle design. ATC says it is an easy load, but it still needs a serious amount of watts; I'd advise that at least 40W RMS per channel is needed to make the SCM7 go loud in

even a medium-sized room – so do take care to match carefully.

Sound quality

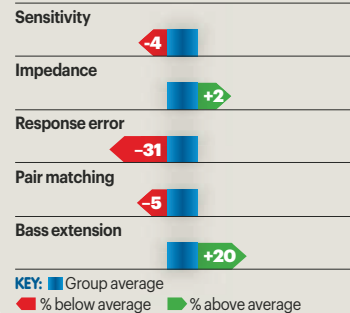
This little speaker sounds nothing like the others here. What it doesn't do is throw a massive sound into the room, hanging holographic images all around – that's the KEF. Nor does it thump out large amounts of bass (the Monitor Audio), or indeed go loud in an easy and lazy way (Focal, take a bow). Rather, the ATC brings its own unique skill set to the party, and does things none of the others here can. It is tight, taut, rhythmic, propulsive, expressive and unerringly musical. More than any other speaker here it gives you the sense that music is foremost an emotional experience.

Bass fans will love its tunefulness, but miss hearing the bottom octave of their favourite songs. Its midband is very good in its way, but doesn't sound sumptuous or especially sophisticated, and the treble is solid but doesn't have any special, ethereal quality. But cue up Isaac Hayes' *Life's Mood* and suddenly you're engrossed, absolutely captivated and pulled right in. It's the high quality, small and sealed cabinet that does it; it doesn't store any energy and has no bass port to huff and puff, and the result is that bass transients are lightning-fast with no overhang. At the same time, the ATC really showcases dynamic accents, and together this makes for a

ON TEST

As the SCM7 is the smallest speaker in the group and has closed box bass loading, it is no surprise that it has the lowest sensitivity at 82.1dB – almost 2dB lower than ATC claims. Lower impedance could help, but ATC has chosen to keep the SCM7 relatively easy to drive. Its minimum modulus of 5.0ohms was highest in the group, but large phase angles reduced the minimum EPDR to 2.4ohms at 118Hz, near the group average. On-axis frequency response trend is essentially flat, leading to the second-lowest response errors, 200Hz-20kHz, of ± 2.7 dB and ± 3.1 dB. Pair matching wasn't as good at ± 1.7 dB, but mostly the matching was tighter. Given the small cabinet, bass extension of 58Hz is fair, but most of the larger speakers here achieve better. Fast initial energy decay and well-controlled resonances make for a mostly clean cumulative spectral decay waterfall. **KH**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



seat-of-the-pants listen. The Smiths' *Girl Afraid* is an enthralling three minutes, wonderfully fast and fluid.

Tonally it's a little dry, but it does still give a decent sense of what's going on in the recording. Not having a big cabinet thrumming away unlocks a whole world of detail, making Herbie Hancock's *Speak Like A Child* a pleasure. Piano has a solidity of tone that you can't not love, and flutes and flugelhorns have a simple purity that's only available when there's no cabinet joining in the party. Even with a relatively light bass, jazz sounds gloriously propulsive, the listener getting their rhythm cues elsewhere. Bliss ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Wonderful propulsive; taut bass; clean midband; build

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Poor bass extension; needs lots of power

BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Fantastic, characterful speaker that won't appeal to all

EASE OF DRIVE
★★★★☆

OVERALL





Dali

Ikon 2 Mk2 £639

Coming straight out of Denmark, Dali has been around for a few decades, but will it make experience count?

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Dali Ikon 2 Mk2

ORIGIN
Denmark

TYPE
Standmount loudspeaker

WEIGHT
8.4kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
188 x 441 x 317mm

FEATURES

- Three-way bass-reflex loudspeaker
- 28mm tweeter, 17 x 45mm ribbon, 160mm mid/bass unit
- Claimed sensitivity: 86.5dB/1W/1m

DISTRIBUTOR
Dali UK

TELEPHONE
0845 6443537

WEBSITE
dali-uk.co.uk

Because the UK market is a particularly hard nut to crack, especially for speaker manufacturers, it's fair to say that Dali is less well known than it deserves to be. But recently there's been a concerted push and the name is making inroads here, in no small part due to a very impressive range. The Ikon 2 dares to be different thanks to its three-way design. A single 160mm wood fibre coned bass driver takes care of all frequencies up to 2.5kHz, while a 'hybrid tweeter module' handles everything further up. The 17x45mm ribbon and 28mm soft textile dome share mid and treble duties, crossing over at 14kHz. This is a most unusual arrangement on a speaker of this price, and should give it a distinctive sound. Ribbon tweeters are almost unknown under £700 and offer a delicacy and spaciousness that conventional domes can't.

The cabinet is more customary being a standard bass reflex box available in a choice of black ash vinyl, light walnut vinyl and white high gloss vinyl. Neither of these finishes are particularly attractive, and the Ikon looks and feels the cheapest speaker here. Perhaps Dali has spent the money on the drive units rather than the cabinet finish, which would be no bad thing! A quoted sensitivity of 86.5dB/1W/1m makes this better than the ATC, and

fairly class-competitive, but still not an ideal partner for low-powered amps; ideally you're looking at using it with a decent transistor amplifier of at least 50W RMS per channel.

Sound quality

The Dali sounds a lot better than it looks. It presents a slightly bright face even when off axis, although not firing them directly at the listener helps considerably. This tonal brightness doesn't necessarily mean it's harsh, as it sounds fairly even and all-of-a-piece, although every now and then, the odd cymbal crash comes out and hits you a little harder than expected!

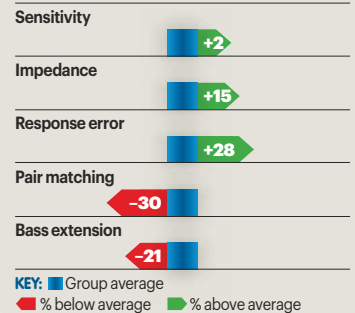
The Dali comes over as a well engineered loudspeaker with a surprisingly extended and firm bass, but this never overpowers the listener. It's also to be congratulated for lacking any kind of boxy thrum in the upper bass and lower mid – despite the rather cheap-looking cabinet that you'd think might not behave itself. Up in the midband it's detailed and open, but again it doesn't approach the KEF or Monitor Audio in this respect. Happily, the Dali hangs the soundstage back just a little more than the Mission, so never appears overly forward or aggressive despite its 'well lit' tonal balance.

The Herbie Hancock track shows the Ikon 2's stereo width to be a little disappointing – it doesn't push out as

ON TEST

Dali claims 86.5dB sensitivity for the Ikon 2 Mk2, which is a little on the conservative side according to the 87.2dB that we recorded. Nominal impedance is 6ohms, which accords well with our measured minimum modulus of 4.5ohms, and impedance phase angles are well enough controlled that the EPDR dips to a minimum of 2.7ohms at 116Hz, making the Dali the easiest speaker in the group to drive. On-axis frequency response is essentially flat in trend before beginning to rise above 7kHz – an uptilt that will be countered if the speakers are listened to off-axis as recommended. The response errors should then be less than the ± 5.8 dB and ± 5.0 dB we measured. Pair matching was good at ± 1.1 dB while 38Hz bass extension was best in the group. The CSD waterfall shows fast initial decay, but some low-level residual breakup resonances from the bass-mid unit. **KH**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



far left or right as most speakers here, falling way behind the KEF. Still, the music flows along well, the Dali managing to throw out just enough timbral detail to keep the listener gripped. The elaborate tweeter array helps here, lending a satisfying degree of space and depth to the music. Speaking of which, despite being bright, the tweeter(s) never sound harsh; they're obviously good quality and really add to the speaker's overall performance with excellent filigree detail on struck steel string guitars. An interesting speaker, there's nothing weak anywhere and it's never a boring listen, just don't partner it with unduly bright ancillaries. ▶

HIFIChoice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★

EASE OF DRIVE
★★★★★

OVERALL
★★★★★

LIKE: Engaging, animated sound; detailed, open treble; taut bass

DISLIKE: Tonally too bright for some; poor finish; dated styling

WE SAY: Quirky but capable speaker that some will love, others may not



Focal Aria 906 **£798**

The biggest speaker brand in the world that's pretty much unheard of in the UK. Is this about to change?

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Focal Aria 906

ORIGIN
France

TYPE
Standmount loudspeaker

WEIGHT
8.5kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
225 x 390 x 250mm

FEATURES

- Two-way bass-reflex loudspeaker
- 25mm Au/Mg tweeter, 165mm flax mid/bass unit
- Claimed sensitivity: 89.5dB/1W/1m

DISTRIBUTOR
Focal UK Ltd

TELEPHONE
0845 6602680

WEBSITE
focal.com

Flax cones bring a more neutral and sweeter sound to mid-priced Focals, one that's smoother and softer yet if anything faster and more musical. The 906 gets an all-new 165mm mid/bass unit then, manufactured in France. Flax is a special type of textile fibre said to have been around since the fourth century BC, and used by the Egyptians as protective cloth for mummies, no less! In this speaker it is sandwiched between thin glass fibre sheets, making for a light but rigid speaker cone. It marries up to a 25mm aluminium and magnesium inverted dome tweeter, again a bespoke Focal design, crossing over at 2.8kHz. The cabinet is made from MDF with non-parallel side panels, braced internally; it comes in a choice of black high gloss and walnut finishes, with a leatherette-finished front baffle. A rap of the knuckles reveals this isn't the quietest cabinet here, even if it is one of the best finished. The Focal proves to be one of the more sensitive, going loud with only a moderate amount of power.

Sound quality

Previous mid-priced Focals had a slightly shouty upper midband that required careful matching, but the new Aria 906 is nothing like this. The new flax cone invests the speaker with a warm, almost sumptuous

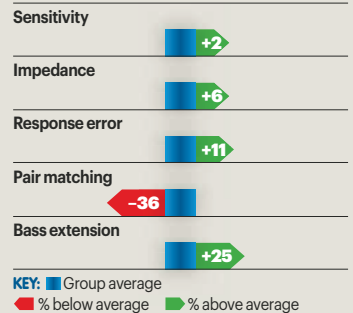
nature that takes it right to the heart of the sound that many British buyers go for. For its size, it's surprisingly large in scale, the fulsome sound is generally enjoyable to listen to. There's more bass energy from the 906 than most others in this group, adding a sense of physical heft to the music that isn't there with, say, the KEF LS50. This goes up to a wide, open and quite deep midband that's far less intrusive than the Mission; you find yourself being sucked into the music rather than having it brought right to you. Treble is good, with a fair amount of extension, but the metal tweeter does make its presence felt slightly; its less slick than the Dali or the KEF.

Cue up the beautifully recorded Isaac Hayes track and you find yourself luxuriating in a deep, wide and tall recorded acoustic; the keyboard is powerful and rich with sparkling harmonics, vocals are effortless and full of timbre and strings sweet and satisfying. But when the backing instruments kick in with a powerful bass guitar part, the Focal begins to show a slight overhang lower down. Bass is satisfyingly deep and lacking in compression – one of the best here – but there's definitely a sense of the cabinets thrumming a little too much, especially in comparison with the KEFs and ATCs. The upside of this is that the 906 can pummel out vast tracts of low

ON TEST

Focal's claim of 89.5dB sensitivity for the 906 looks optimistic in light of our measured pink noise figure of 87.6dB. Neither does the nominal 8ohms impedance equate with the specified 4.6 ohms minimum (we measured a dip to 4.4 ohms) – 6 ohms would be more appropriate. But impedance phase angles are sufficiently well controlled that the EPDR doesn't fall below 2.5ohms, making the Focal one of the easier loads to drive. On-axis frequency response displays a marked presence band depression followed by a rise in extreme treble output because of the low 24kHz breakup resonance of the tweeter. Response errors are consequently above the group average at ± 4.6 dB and ± 4.7 dB respectively, but pair matching was tight at ± 1.0 dB. Bass extension was poorest in group at 60Hz, but the CSD waterfall was mostly clean with only low-level treble resonances visible. **KH**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



frequencies, without so much as breaking into a sweat.

The Smiths track shows that you're always listening to the Focal's own particular rendition of things. It's less transparent than the KEF, for example, and invests a sort of big-hearted warmth into everything it touches. It actually makes a really nice noise, but the problem is that the speaker does add its own two cents. I can see the 906 working best in larger rooms with a lower-powered amplifier – including more lively valve types – as it makes a spacious, enjoyable sound without demanding too much power. It's always fun, and you can't say fairer than that ●

HIFIChoice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★

EASE OF DRIVE
★★★★★

OVERALL
★★★★★

LIKE: Scale; warmth; smoothness; musicality; easily driven

DISLIKE: Slight bass looseness; slight upper treble glare

WE SAY: Great, friendly, enjoyable standmounting speaker



KEF LS50 **£800**

What better way to celebrate a 50th anniversary than releasing a special speaker, but will it do KEF justice?

DETAILS

PRODUCT
KEF LS50

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
Standmount loudspeaker

WEIGHT
7.2kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
200 x 302 x 278mm

FEATURES

- Two-way bass-reflex loudspeaker
- 1x 25mm Al tweeter, 130mm Al/Mg mid/bass driver
- Claimed sensitivity: 85dB/1W/1m

DISTRIBUTOR
GP Acoustics Ltd

TELEPHONE
01622 672261

WEBSITE
kef.com/gb

Justifiably popular, the LS50 gets off to a great start thanks to its gorgeous looks. There aren't many speakers in this Group Test that partners are likely to enthuse about, but this might just be the one. Its lovely 130mm 'rose gold'-coloured, magnesium/aluminium coned mid/bass driver makes a bold visual statement. Set into this is a 25mm aluminium tweeter, forming KEF's patented Uni-Q array, which appears to come from a single-point source – it's far more than just a gimmick. Crossover point is 2.2kHz.

The cabinet is really nicely done too, with a beautiful piano black lacquer and superb detailing – this loudspeaker looks far more expensive than it actually is. The front baffle is curved and made from a special polyester resin combined with glass fibre and calcium carbonate; the rear panel sports luxurious single-wire terminals and a decidedly unconventional-looking bass reflex port. It feels solid when you rap it with your knuckles, and is quite heavy given its relatively diminutive dimensions. KEF claims a sensitivity of 85dB, which is middling for a box of this size.

Sound quality

The LS50 is a larger than life loudspeaker, throwing voices and instruments wide into the listening

room, giving that uncanny feeling of the sound hovering out into the space, completely detached from the speakers. Soundstaging is superb then, making most others here sound boxy and shut in. UB40's *Tyler* is amazing, a vast expanse of music with each instrument in the mix located with laser-like precision.

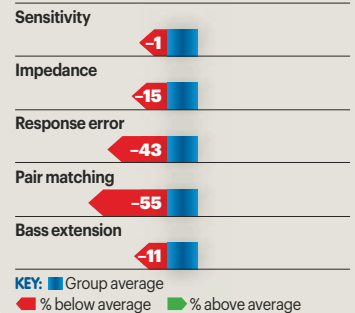
The KEF has an even, uniform tonal balance. It doesn't sound particularly powerful down in the bass, but what bass there is, is enjoyably tuneful and well extended. Ever so slightly warm, the LS50 doesn't dry out the recording, sucking the natural tonality out of instruments. Instead, it allows them to be heard in their full glory, and this extends to vocals, where there's a tangible and believable timbre. Isaac Hayes' *Life's Mood* sounds refreshingly natural, with no sense that the KEF is editorialising too much.

Indeed, the LS50 doesn't add much; it's actually a pretty neutral performer and throws out lots of fine detail from recordings. It's really good at conveying the gaps between the beats on the dense, crowded Smiths track, so you can hear right in and enjoy the attack transients of Johnny Marr's strummed guitar chords, for example. This gives the speaker real clarity, and also makes for a rhythmically satisfying feel. There's some slight overhang in the upper bass, which pads the sound out slightly –

ON TEST

Given its compact dimensions, the LS50's lowish 84.7dB pink noise sensitivity was expected and accords well with KEF's specified 85dB. Low impedance is required to achieve this, though, the modulus dipping to 3.9ohms (KEF claims a lower 3.2ohms) while phase angles are sufficiently large to reduce the EPDR to twin minima of 2.0ohms at 25Hz and 148Hz. On-axis frequency response is the flattest in group with response errors of only ± 2.3 dB and ± 2.4 dB respectively, and pair matching error was group-leading too at a commendably tight ± 0.7 dB. Payback for the lowish sensitivity and impedance comes in the form of bass extension of 43Hz, which beats most of the larger speakers here. The cumulative spectral decay waterfall evinces fast initial energy decay across the spectrum, but some low-level breakup resonances in the bass-midrange cone are visible. **KH**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



especially compared to the ATC, which is superbly tight – but this aside the KEF is a snappy thing to listen to. Music bounces along with heady abandon, and so do you!

The treble is really good for a speaker of this type. It's smooth and well integrated with the midband, and nicely spacious too – making for a lovely, even, full-range loudspeaker that conveys the air of a good recording. Indeed, it's so insightful you can also hear the tape hiss on the UB40 track. The only caveat is that it's a little more directional than you might hope; there's definitely a sweet spot; owners will need some experimentation here ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Soundstaging; detail; transparency; build; finish

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Treble more directional than some

BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★ **WESAY:** Beautiful looking little box with great sound

EASE OF DRIVE
★★★★★

OVERALL





Mission SX2 £700

In the speaker game since the late seventies, Mission knows the key to mid-price success better than most

DETAILS

PRODUCT

Mission SX2

ORIGIN

UK/China

TYPE

Standmount
loudspeaker

WEIGHT

10kg

DIMENSIONS

(WxHxD)

231 x 381 x 365mm

FEATURES

- Two-way bass reflex design
- 25mm titanium tweeter, 160mm metal/fibre mid/bass driver
- Claimed sensitivity: 85dB/1W/1m

DISTRIBUTOR

IAG Group Ltd

TELEPHONE
01480 447700

WEBSITE

mission.co.uk

Speakers like the very first 770 loudspeaker and later the 700 have won Mission many friends over the years. Since those early days it has had a presence in the mid-price standmounter market, and in a sense the SX2 is the 700's spiritual successor. The SX range, launched just a few months back, sports brand new metal/fibre composite cone materials, using a mixture of pulp and aramid particles bonded to a precision-formed alloy 'voice plate'; the SX2 has a 160mm version of this as its mid/bass driver, and this mates to a new 25mm titanium dome tweeter, which takes over at 2kHz.

Unusually, the SX2 has a diecast aluminium front baffle, which should provide a very strong but light and non-resonant mounting for the drive units. The cabinet itself is a very well finished, profiled affair that comes in a choice of standard real wood veneers in black, cherry or rosewood, with premium piano black or piano rosewood lacquered options. The quoted sensitivity of 85dB/1W/1m is middling in this group, so you'll need a reasonably (50W or above) powerful solid-state amplifier if you want decent sound levels in larger rooms. The rear-mounted bass port means the speaker needs a little room from the rear wall to breathe, and it works best slightly toed-in, too, sat on a stand at least 16in high.

Sound quality

The SX2 is voiced for fun; whatever you choose to play the result is always highly engaging. Indeed it proves very immediate and upfront by the standards of the group, but without in any way sounding hard or forward. Indeed, this is quite a clever trick, the result being that Isaac Hayes' *Life's Mood* comes over intimately, almost like listening through a pair of headphones; everything is clearly spelled out and vividly etched in space, right in front of you.

Contrast this to the KEF LS50, and the Missions seem a little crowded and claustrophobic. This is for two reasons; first the KEF is more spacious left-to-right, yet hangs back from the listener a little more, giving a more panoramic view. Secondly, the SX2's midband – although apparently quite detailed – can sound a little imprecise and out of focus. Although it catches the leading edges of notes well, it doesn't let go of the trailing parts of the envelope so well, apparently slurring things slightly.

You'd never call the SX2 a bad speaker, but it doesn't have the clarity of some others here then, and this isn't aided by a tweeter that isn't as extended as the best of the rest. UB40's *Tyler* loses some space, as does The Smiths track. It's decent enough but lacks sparkle at the very top, contributing to a slightly congested feeling across the upper midband.

ON TEST

Mission claims 85dB sensitivity for the SX2, which accords well with our measured 85.2dB. Nominal impedance is 6-8ohms, but Mission's stated 3.9ohms minimum – let alone our measured dip down to 3.3ohms – makes 4ohms more appropriate. With quite large phase angles this is sufficient to drop the EPDR to 1.8ohms at 120Hz and 1.9ohms at 360Hz, making the SX2 one of the more difficult loads. On-axis frequency response has a pretty flat trend up to 7kHz above, which treble output declines before a cliff edge rise to the tweeter's dome resonance at 22kHz. This increases response errors to ± 3.3 dB and ± 4.6 dB respectively, but over much of the spectrum the output is flatter. Pair matching was poor at ± 1.9 dB, but again the extreme treble was to blame. Bass extension beat the group average at 45Hz, but low-level breakup modes were visible in the CSD waterfall. **KH**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE

Sensitivity

-1

Impedance

-23

Response error

-5

Pair matching

+21

Bass extension

-7

KEY: ■ Group average

■ % below average ■ % above average

One point in its favour is that it's never harsh, so it will partner brighter sources better than, say, the LS50.

Bass, however, is the Mission's forte, proving nicely tight and taut, and here it makes some rival offerings appear flabby and ponderous in comparison. The KEF isn't bad, but the Mission is obviously better and combines a good bit of weight – able to better convey the grumbling bass guitar of the Isaac Hayes track, for example, with a slightly more purposeful rhythmic gait. It makes music roll along at a fair rate of knots, and really gets into the groove. Overall, it's a fine speaker then, but certainly not unsurpassed ●

HIFIChoice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

LIKE: Great styling; fine build; large, engaging, upfront sound

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

DISLIKE: Slight lack of upper bass and midband clarity

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

WE SAY: Enjoyable, involving speaker that's fine value for money

EASE OF DRIVE

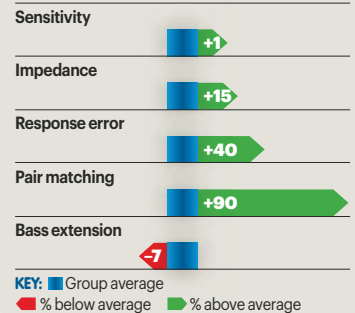
★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

**ON TEST**

MA's claim of 88dB sensitivity looks optimistic given our measured pink noise figure of 86.7dB. Likewise the 8ohms nominal impedance, our measured minimum of 4.6ohms indicating that a 6ohms figure is more apposite. While a low of 2.7ohms in the EPDR would appear to make the Silver 2 one of the easier loads here, further dips to 2.8, 3.0 and 3.1ohms make it more challenging. Overall frequency response trend shows a mild presence band dip, but a narrowband notch at about 2.6kHz increases the response errors to high values of ± 5.7 dB and ± 6.1 dB, and pair matching was the worst in group at a poor ± 3.2 dB although again the worst departures were narrowband. Bass extension was a little better than average at 45Hz. Despite the showy dimpling of the bass-mid diaphragm, severe breakup resonances were visible in the CSD waterfall above 2kHz. **KH**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE

Monitor Audio

Silver 2 £650

Another eighties superstar, Monitor Audio has the pedigree to take the gold, or should that be Silver...

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Monitor Audio Silver 2

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
Standmount loudspeaker

WEIGHT
9.7kg

DIMENSIONS (WxHxD)
230 x 375 x 323mm

FEATURES

- Two-way, reflex ported loudspeaker
- 25mm C-CAM tweeter, 200mm RST mid/bass driver
- Claimed sensitivity: 88dB/1W/1m

DISTRIBUTOR
Monitor Audio Ltd

TELEPHONE
01268 740580

WEBSITE
monitoraudio.co.uk

After a conservative start to speaker production, by the eighties MA was pushing the envelope with metal dome tweeters – and then gold domes – and the Silver 2 features just this in a standard 25mm size. It also has a metal-coned mid/bass unit, which is nothing special in this company, but it's unusually large at 200mm, requiring a fractionally wider front baffle than is fashionable these days. This big driver has been squeezed in, so the speaker doesn't look too bulbous. It confers real benefits; larger drivers tend to have more in reserve, sounding more effortless and promising higher efficiency if implemented correctly. In the case of the Silver 2, it's quoted at 88dB, which is good by group standards and it duly goes a lot louder with the same amount of power as the ATC.

The speaker itself is beautifully finished, one of the very best here, and comes in selected premium quality wood veneers or high gloss finishes. The sense of opulence is heightened by the C-CAM gold dome tweeter and the dished metal mid/bass unit. The 20mm-thick, well-braced cabinet is very sturdy when given the knuckle rap test, thanks in no small part to single bolt-through drive units. Monitor Audio says silver-plated copper wire is used internally, along with premium polypropylene film capacitors. The

bass port sits discreetly around the back, and neat magnetically fixed grilles are supplied.

Sound quality

With the largest mid/bass driver here, it was always going to be an interesting contender, and so it proves. It's an excellent-sounding loudspeaker, blessed with much of the clarity of the KEF, most of the immediacy of the Mission, plus the weight and depth of the Focal and its very own distinctive, highly detailed sound. Rather like a lazy, large-engined luxury car, the Monitor Audio can deliver all the power it needs, but does it in a more relaxed and less forced manner than most here. Those big mid/bass units don't augment its bass output particularly, but they offer a more gutsy yet relaxed presentation that's very good at carrying dynamic accents that most others miss.

Isaac Hayes' *Life's Mood* is a joy. Percussion is better accented than most here, giving a better sense of rhythmic flow, and the crashing keyboard cadences push out in a more arresting and explicit way. But at the same time, the tonal purity is such that the piano sound is beautifully carried. Behind this, violins soar in a wonderfully accurate and expressive way, and the speakers catch the drama of this great song.

Interestingly, the Silver 2 also pushes out a wider soundstage than

its rivals. It can't match the superb KEF, but it isn't far off and gives a great sense of space to recordings. You can really hear inside and drill down into the low-level detail, in a way that the Mission simply doesn't allow. The Smiths' *Girl Afraid* is wonderfully open and detailed, but still carries the emotion within the song. Snare drums sound tight, while treble is delicate and smooth; the Monitor Audio tweeter proves one of the best in the group, with real delicacy that makes other seem ragged. The only downside is just a touch of upper and lower bass box boom, but no worse than any of the other speakers in this round up ● ▶

Hi-Fi Choice**OUR VERDICT**

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★
LIKE: Refined treble; dynamics; detail; musical ease; finish

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★
DISLIKE: Upper bass not rock-solid, but still fine

BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★
WE SAY: Excellent all rounder with a performance way beyond its price

EASE OF DRIVE
★★★★★

OVERALL

Group test verdict

As the dust settles on this month's loudspeaker face off, **David Price** provides us with the final verdict on how the six models really stack up

I AM SURPRISED by how diverse this group turns out to be. That's why it's important to try them if at all possible with the rest of your system before buying.

Mission's SX2 sounds very good in isolation, but in this company it is overshadowed. It's nicely built and has an affable, engaging and upfront sound, but by the standards of the group it is a tad muddled.

The Dali Ikon 2 is a good speaker with especially fine treble, but it doesn't give the sort of scale or bass power that many others managed here, and the overall finish and

styling is frankly sub-par in this very impressive company.

Focal's Aria 906 proves to be an excellent all rounder, the sort of thing most listeners will enjoy and few will take a dislike to. On the end of a decent system it's capable of truly impressive results and has the bonus of being very efficient for those running smaller amps in larger rooms, but is beaten here at the price.

Things get trickier now, as we have three superb but very different speakers, and the ranking really depends more on the buyer than the product itself – but here goes! Placed

third is the Monitor Audio Silver, only because it spreads its abilities a little more thinly and doesn't excel in one specific area. It gives a powerful and expansive sound that's very enjoyable and highly detailed. The standard of finish is better even than the KEF, which is saying something, and the Silver 2 is a remarkable value loudspeaker.

The KEF is another superb speaker with the best imaging here, plus excellent detailing and fine tonality. With most systems it would likely win the group, but it's just beaten here by the ATC.



WINNER

With a powerful amplifier, a smooth source and properly positioned, ATC's SCM7 is capable of a wonderful flowing musicality that gets into the groove like no other here. In a well-matched system, you will be amazed at its rhythmic and dynamic alacrity.



Make/model	ATC SCM7	Dali Ikon 2 Mk2	Focal Aria 906	KEF LS50	Mission SX2	Monitor Audio Silver 2
Price	£810	£639	£798	£800	£700	£650
Sound	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Value	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Build	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Ease of drive	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Overall	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
	The most musically convincing here, but you'll need a serious system to drive it. A worthy winner	A pleasant, engaging speaker with a lovely, sparkling treble – but a little on the bright side of life	A great all rounder with a smooth, easy, open sound; also great for lower-power amplifiers	Outstanding design with a wonderful, room-filling sound – plus loads of detail. Looks great, too	Very exciting listen, with an upfront and engaging sound; nice styling rounds off the package	Extremely high achiever right across the board; superlative finish, powerful sound

Key features

Dual concentric	No	No	No	Yes	No	No
Three-way	No	Yes	No	No	No	No
Bi-wire	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes
Reflex port	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Infinite baffle	Yes	No	No	No	No	No

TRY WITH THESE

CD PLAYER:
Audiolab 8200CD **£700**

Still one of our favourite mid-priced silver disc spinners, it gives nothing away in performance terms to any rival and provides a powerful, detailed source for them to work with. Its digital inputs give it added DAC functionality, and very good it sounds too!



INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER:
Creek Evolution 50A **£700**

A little less lush in tonality than the Arcam, this is more suited to the likes of the even-handed Monitor Audio and the warmer Focal, and also makes the Mission sing. It's an excellent, open sounding amplifier with lots of power at the price and fine dynamics; one of Creek's best value amps.



INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER:
Exposure 3010S2 **£1,350**

All the speakers here will respond well to a really good premium-priced integrated amplifier, and the Exposure is just this. Compared to the cheaper Creek it is a good deal more transparent and controlled, yet is also more musical. Its powerful sound will make any speaker here sing.

