

How we test

Hi-Fi Choice employs the most methodical test and measurement regime in the business. Here's how we do it...

Unique group tests

Our *Group Tests* are supported by rigorous and exhaustive listening tests carried out by experts

STANDMOUNT LOUDSPEAKERS GROUP TEST

THE FIRST CONSIDERATION is to get all speakers in a good state of readiness. Some manufacturers supply well-used examples, others are factory fresh and need to be run-in. That's why plenty of time is spent using them at moderate levels for background music before an IsoTek Test and Burn-In CD is employed.

This done, each speaker is listened to back-to-back, in ascending order of price and cross-referenced with the group. This involves a two-stage process to get the positioning right – either on 16 or 24in stands or in the case of the JBL the ones supplied. The designs require varied positioning, with some sat close to the boundary wall while others need room to breathe.

Then it's a case of going through each model with the chosen music selection, designed to elicit specific responses. The simple, natural Lynyrd Skynyrd recording is good at assessing rhythms while The Human League's pristine electronics highlight each speaker's handling of midband clarity. Meanwhile the Cocteau Twins track shows up any tendency for stridency and that massive reggae bassline from The Congos proves a stiff low-frequency test for some here, but not necessarily all...

Overall, the object is to assess how each speaker does in outright terms, before putting it into context at its price point. The results show that all contenders have merit in their own way.

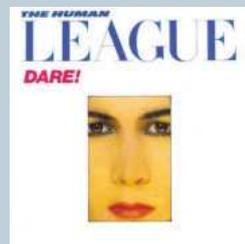


TEST MUSIC

LYNYRD SKYNYRD
Second Helping
Sweet Home Alabama (CD)



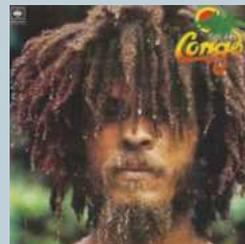
THE HUMAN LEAGUE
Dare
Open Your Heart (CD)



COCTEAU TWINS
Lonely Is An Eyesore
Crushed (CD)



THE CONGOS
Congo Ashanti
Days Chasing Days (CD)



REFERENCE SYSTEM

CD TRANSPORT:
Cyrus CD XT Signature **£1,900 HFC 386**

Compact disc isn't particularly fashionable any more, but it's still right up there in terms of sound quality. This is one of the best sensibly priced silver disc transports on sale at the moment, and it boasts an extremely detailed and revealing sound when fed into a decent DAC.



DAC:
Chord Electronics Hugo TT2 **£4,000**

Perhaps a little pricey, but we want to be sure that we're getting the highest possible quality source to the loudspeakers. This is surely the best mid-priced DAC on sale, with an extremely detailed and musical sound yet it has a very even tonality that's not likely to favour one speaker over another.



INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER:
Exposure 3010S2-D **£1,700 HFC 397**

We need an even-handed solid-state amplifier that's powerful enough not to be caught out by the less sensitive speakers in the group – such as the Sendor A1. This packs a healthy 110W per side and is old-school Class AB – and thus very much a known quantity. It sounds clean and open with lots of get up and go.



Group**test**

STANDMOUNT LOUDSPEAKERS £1,000–£2,500

Stand by me

David Price compares and contrasts six wildly diverse bookshelf loudspeaker designs for your consideration

THERE WAS A time when small loudspeakers were the things you bought when you couldn't afford large ones. Before the seventies, no serious audiophile would even go near such a thing. But as hi-fi became a more mainstream pursuit, it had to adapt to live with people's changing lifestyles, and so began the shift to more diminutive dimensions.

The iconic BBC LS3/5a did much of the groundwork; this was a seriously small speaker designed for nearfield

monitoring, but had a revelatory purity of tone. It never sold in large numbers, but conferred audiophile respectability on little cabinets. At last, discerning listeners with domestic space issues felt confident that it was possible to get decent results from small designs.

Come the eighties and the arrival of the so-called 'standmount' speaker breed saw many floorstanding three-ways of the seventies banished. All the speakers gathered here – with

the exception of the JBL – were basically inspired by this period, one way or another.

This group comprises a diverse selection of standmount designs, ranging from the tiny Spendor A1 (this company had close connections to the BBC LS3/5a, by the way) to the vast JBL 4312G (which is a recreation of its cult seventies monitor). In between we have four fine offerings of differing sizes, all boasting quite distinctive engineering approaches. ▶





Picture credit: Shutterstock.com/superalists

ON TEST



**Acoustic Energy
AE500 £1,000 p23**
From the creator of the legendary AE1 mini monitor comes this small and affordable offering touting clever carbon fibre dome tweeter and mid/bass drivers, plus a rigid little cabinet.



**ATC
SCM19 £2,150 p25**
The professional monitor heritage is easy to spot in this largish design with bank-vault build quality. ATC's superb bespoke drive units, infinite baffle loading and an excellent finish seal the deal.



**JBL
4312G £2,500 p27**
Channelling classic designs of yesteryear, this huge three-way has a 300mm bass driver like a pro speaker, huge cabinets plus tweeter and midrange level controls. It's undeniably epic value for money.



**Neat Acoustics
Ministra £1,800 p29**
One of the most radical models in an interesting group, this compact little speaker has an exotic ribbon tweeter allied to isobaric mid/bass drivers. It sounds distinctively different to all its peers.



**Spendor
A1 £1,150 p31**
A modern reimagining of the classic BBC LS3/5a, you might say. The A1 offers a tiny infinite baffle box that punches way above its size, thanks to high-quality drive units and superb build.



**SVS
Ultra Bookshelf £1,000 p33**
Along with the JBL, the other US contender is an attractive but unusually profiled cabinet with an excellent gloss finish, good-quality drive units and solid build – despite its relatively low price.

**IN SIGHT**

- 1 25mm tweeter
- 2 Slot-shaped bass reflex port
- 3 Single-wire binding posts
- 4 125mm mid/bass driver

Your Heart is like being pushed along on a roller coaster ride. The AE500 sprays out large amounts of detail, yet keeps it coherent and under control – and the result is a highly propulsive listen. It's particularly good on leading edges of notes, with the attack of the drum machine's hi-hat cymbal sounding quite special. At the same time the bass synthesiser is packed with energy, rather than just plodding along.

Texturally, you get a distinctive sound that's rather special. The Congos' *Days Chasing Days* is warmer and smoother than most here; there's a subtle sweetness to vocal tones and percussion that's likely down to the carbon fibre. At the same time, it's not in any way excessive; it just makes things sound more even, less strident and easier to listen to. Cocteau Twins' *Crushed* really highlights this; those loud, processed vocals aren't hard work at all. Indeed, the track is rendered with a delicacy completely at odds with its price.

The Acoustic Energy's excellent tweeter doesn't quite match that of the Neat, but is way more refined than the JBL and nicer than the ATC. Cymbals on Lynyrd Skynyrd's *Sweet Home Alabama* are svelte and sophisticated – despite the fairly agricultural recording quality of the original track. At the other end, bass is taut and tight – pert, even – but rather lacks the weight of most of the others in the group. It don't feel like I am missing out on much, given the fine midband and treble ●

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Acoustic Energy
AE500

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
2-way standmount
loudspeaker

WEIGHT
8kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
185 x 310 x 260mm

FEATURES
● 1x 25mm tweeter
● 1x 125mm
mid/bass driver
● Quoted sensitivity:
87dB/1W/1m (6ohm)

DISTRIBUTOR
Acoustic Energy Ltd.

TELEPHONE
01285 654432

WEBSITE
acoustic-energy.
co.uk

Acoustic Energy AE500 £1,000

A bit a of a dab hand with smaller cabinets, there's plenty to get excited about here

Think of brands famous for small loudspeakers, and Acoustic Energy is bound to ping up on the radar. Its iconic AE1 from the late eighties pretty much made the case for the existence of the breed. The AE500 has little in common with this icon in technical terms, aside from its clear philosophical approach.

Despite being the joint least expensive product here – along with the SVS Ultra Bookshelf – this is one of the

most technologically interesting due to its use of carbon fibre in both the mid/bass driver cone and the dome tweeter. This means big weight savings – the former is only half as heavy as its predecessor. The AE500 mates a small 125mm mid/bass to a 25mm tweeter, via a simple crossover with good-quality components.

The reflex-loaded cabinet is conventionally shaped, but uses the company's Resonance Suppression Composite material – in effect, constrained layer damping. Its panels are 18mm thick and there's a choice of piano gloss white or black, and American walnut wood veneer, plus a magnetic grille is supplied. Its rear-firing slotted reflex port lets it work up close to rear walls. It's of average sensitivity in this group – not as power hungry as the ATC or Spondor.

Sound quality

Despite its modest price, the AE500 never sounds out of its depth in this company thanks to a super clean, well defined and detailed sound that has a penchant for rhythms and dynamics. Listening to The Human League's *Open*

**Hi-Fi Choice****OUR VERDICT**

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Delicate and refined yet fun sound

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: Nothing at the price

BUILD QUALITY



WESAY: A great-value, sweet-sounding bookshelf speaker

EASE OF DRIVE



OVERALL



**IN SIGHT**

- 1 25 mm tweeter
- 2 Bi-wireable binding posts
- 3 150mm mid/bass driver

DETAILS

PRODUCT
ATC SCM19

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
2-way standmount
loudspeaker

WEIGHT
17.8kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
265 x 438 x 300mm

FEATURES
● 1x 25mm tweeter
● 1x 150mm
mid/bass driver
● Quoted sensitivity:
85dB/1W/1m (8ohm)

DISTRIBUTOR
ATC Loudspeaker
Technology Ltd.

TELEPHONE
01285 760561

WEBSITE
atcloudspeakers.
co.uk

ATC

SCM19 £2,150

The second largest speaker in the group, reveals it's more than just a heavy hitter

A classic two-way design, the SCM19 is rare in this group as it's a closed box or infinite baffle type. This means the cabinet has no bass port, which reduces sensitivity and/or bass extension. Yet fans of this design argue that it confers time domain benefits, especially a tighter and tauter bass.

ATC is famous for making its own drive units, and here has fitted its 25mm SH25-76 tweeter, which is a

tough soft dome design with a dual suspension system to suppress resonance. A powerful neodymium magnet is specified, and there's a 5.5mm rigid alloy waveguide. This crosses over to a long-throw 150mm mid/bass unit with a heavy magnet system and tacky (as in sticky) doped fabric cone. The crossover features metalised polypropylene capacitors, large air-cored inductors and ceramic wire-round resistors.

The 19 litre (hence the name) cabinet is braced and laminated for high rigidity and damping, and curved at the back. Real cherry or black ash finishes are offered. ATC claims a sensitivity figure of 85dB, making it the second least efficient offering here after the Spendor; you'll need a powerful solid-state amplifier for it to give of its best. I find it works best up close to my rear boundary wall, on 16in stands.

Sound quality

The SCM19 is one of the best rock loudspeakers here, but has strength in depth so can make pretty much any type of programme material fun. The

speaker's standout characteristic is its handling of rhythms – it has a live, 'pro' sound that makes you sit upright to take in all that's going on in a recording. Consequently, *Sweet Home Alabama* comes across as an absolute treat, this big standmounter stringing together all the rhythmic clues, focusing in on the rhythm guitar, bass guitar and drums, before highlighting how well syncopated they all are with the lead vocals.

Still, it has ATC's characteristic 'dry' tonality that not everyone will like. It is great with the Lynyrd Skynyrd track, but moving to *Open Your Heart* and the fruity, rich tone of those classic Roland Juno-60 synthesisers feels slightly watered down. I adore the verve and gusto of this speaker, but it has a tendency to make recordings sound subtly thinner and crisper than they really are. It's quite music dependent, but those with loose or warm front ends may well think it a boon.

Bass is seriously impressive, not due to its quantity, but its quality; *Days Chasing Days* lets the superb mid/bass driver and infinite baffle loading shine, showing some really tight, taut, sinewy bass guitar that is impactful and tuneful but never flabby or overly full. Treble is tonally clean and timed great, although not quite as deliciously silky as the Neat, for example. *Crushed* reveals oodles of midband detail and avoids the tendency of some speakers to sound shrill, despite Liz Fraser's icy vocals. All in all, a great performer ●

**Hi-Fi Choice****OUR VERDICT**

SOUND QUALITY **LIKE:** Rock-solid, tight and punchy sound
★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY **DISLIKE:** Needs a powerful amplifier to give its very best
★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY **WE SAY:** A highly engaging and fun bookshelf design
★★★★★

EASE OF DRIVE
★★★★☆

OVERALL



IN SIGHT

- 1 25mm tweeter
- 2 125mm midrange driver
- 3 Single-wire binding posts
- 4 300mm bass driver

DETAILS

PRODUCT
JBL 4312G

ORIGIN
USA/China

TYPE
3-way standmount loudspeaker

WEIGHT
23.8kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
362 x 597 x 305mm

FEATURES

- 1x 25mm tweeter
- 1x 125mm mid driver
- 1x 300mm bass driver
- Quoted sensitivity: 90dB/1W/1m (6ohm)

DISTRIBUTOR
Harman UK

TELEPHONE
01223 203200

WEBSITE
harman.com

JBL

4312G £2,500

Supersize your sound with this decidedly old-school seventies throwback

Stretching the standmount definition to its outer limits, the massive 4312G is a direct descendant of the seventies 4310 and 4311 monitors, harking back to when big speakers like Linn's Isobarik and Yamaha's NS-1000M sat on low stands. A large internal cabinet volume and bass reflex loading makes for high efficiency – in this case 90dB. Its large 300mm paper coned bass driver shifts large amounts of air with more ease

than a smaller driver, and the three-way design sports a 125mm polymer coated, pulp coned midrange driver and 25mm magnesium/aluminium dome tweeter. This comes in a mirror image configuration, so one speaker has the tweeter to the left of the mid driver and the other to the right.

Also old school are the treble and midrange level pads, that let you adjust the output of the drivers. The downside is the black wood grained walls seem thinner than the others here, and aren't as well damped when you rap them with your knuckle. Nor is the finish as swish. Placement is easy on the supplied JS-120 stands, the rule of thumb being keep away from the boundary wall.

Sound quality

The 4312G performs like it looks – big, impressive and bold, but rough around the edges. I love the sound, it's just that it's very distinctive and more music dependent than any other design here. Whitesnake and Saxon fans will think it the biggest hi-fi bargain ever, whereas lovers of Randy Crawford or Celine Dion

won't. The headline news is speed and power – it has oodles of both and makes you realise how small scale the others in the group are. Yet its rather dry and arid tonality – and obvious lack of subtlety and low-level detail – will have some hankering for more balanced speakers.

Sweet Home Alabama is a riot. The rhythm guitar seems to be talking just to me, while vocals are strong and expressive. Bass drum hits have a serious thud and the bass guitar is tuneful. Cymbal work is bright enough to wake up my neighbours, and the whole track is carried with a gutsy, punchy attitude that reminds me just how sterile some modern speakers can be. Pretty much the same can be said with *Days Chasing Days*, although the bass handling is notably less accurate than the ATC – even if there is so much more of it.

Moving to *Crushed*, and I initially like the big, enveloping sound but quickly find the upper midband a little strident, especially when Liz Fraser's vocals reach a crescendo. There's a lot of heavily processed keyboard work padding out the mix and this seems a little full on, even if the great crashing drum sound is fun.

Open Your Heart is wonderfully dramatic, again with a boisterous energy and an expansive soundstage from left to right – although the JBL sounds a tad too two dimensional, with everything pushed right up into the lap of the listener. Overall then, this big banger is a memorable listen, but won't be to everyone's liking ● ▶



HIFIChoice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Spacious, dramatic sound; decent sensitivity

VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Lacks refinement; detail; build

BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** The very definition of a 'Marmite' speaker

EASE OF DRIVE ★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

**IN SIGHT**

- 1 50mm true-ribbon tweeter
- 2 Bass reflex port
- 3 Single-wire binding posts
- 4 134mm mid/bass drivers

The rough and ready recording of *Sweet Home Alabama* is sweetened up and smoothed out with the upper bass pumped up ever so slightly without losing any of the song's wonderful rhythmic gait. The butter-smooth tweeter plays a big part here, its ultra light-weight diaphragm capturing every nuance of the hi-hat cymbal, giving a spacious 'glisten' to the high treble that no other model here can match. Its superfast transients really open up the midband and even appear to help the bass driver do its job.

There's nothing better than a banging slice of classic reggae to test a speaker's mettle in the bass department and *Days Chasing Days* proves an ear opener. Whereas the ATC wrestles heroically with the bass guitar work, the smaller Neat can't quite keep things as tight – but still serves up a mighty thump that totally belies the size of the cabinet. It is softer, a little less extended, but injects a warm shot of oomph into things – again its 'fast but fulsome' character coming to the fore.

This is more than just a boom-tiz box, though, as it has one of the nicest midbands here. Fed the more sophisticated eighties pop of *Crushed*, it scythes through the heavy effects and sets up a big soundstage with lots of detail inside. It hangs images a little further back than most, reflecting its general suave and sophisticated demeanour. Overall, it has a multitude of talents, and is hard not to like for many reasons ● ▶

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Neat Acoustics
Ministra

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
2-way standmount
loudspeaker

WEIGHT
8kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
170 x 300 x 290mm

FEATURES
● 1x 50mm true-
ribbon tweeter
● 2x 134mm
mid/bass drivers
● Quoted sensitivity:
86dB/1W/1m (4ohm)

DISTRIBUTOR
Neat Acoustics

TELEPHONE
01833 631021

WEBSITE
neatacoustics.com

Neat Acoustics Ministra £1,800

Don't be fooled by the conservative looks, this offering has hidden depths

Standing out from the crowd thanks to its ribbon tweeter, the Ministra also has isobaric bass loading – not that you'd know either of these things from looking at it.

Along with the AE and Sendor, this is one of the smallest speakers in the pack, and marries a 50mm true-ribbon tweeter to two 134mm treated paper cone mid/bass drivers – the second sat behind the first in the rugged

cabinet that sports a tiny reflex port around the back. You might think this odd in an isobaric arrangement, but its designer sees it less of a port and more of a "controlled leak". The enclosure is 18mm-thick MDF with real wood veneer or paint finishes; natural internal bracing comes from the mounting of the isobaric bass unit inside. The front baffle is attached to the cabinet by a polyethylene membrane said to reduce colouration.

It has a middling sensitivity and you'll need over 50W per side from your amplifier. The speaker works best on a 24in stand, placed at least 30cm from a boundary wall.

Sound quality

This group is full of nice surprises, and the Ministra is perhaps the best yet. It's quite different sounding to all the other speakers here, yet largely in a highly positive way. If you were to boil it down to bare essentials, this standmount is both tonally sweet and silky, and fast and punchy. That's actually quite a unique combination, because typically it's usually one or the other, not both...

**Hi-Fi Choice****OUR VERDICT**

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Sophisticated, punchy, fast sound

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Nothing at the price

BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★ **WESAY:** Excellent all-round standmount

EASE OF DRIVE
★★★★★

OVERALL

**IN SIGHT**

- 1 22mm tweeter
- 2 Single-wire binding posts
- 3 150mm mid/bass driver

smooth yet vibrant with detail, and treble is delicate and considered – not in your face like the JBL.

Its defining characteristic is one of tonal evenness and sophistication – so you can put *Crushed* on at high volume and those shouty, processed vocals don't scare you off. Instead I find myself immersed in the song and not distracted by the production. You'd think it wouldn't be a great rock speaker, but *Sweet Home Alabama* is more fun than expected, too. I become sucked into the delicate and beautifully syncopated rhythm guitar work, locking in with a measured but revealing account of the lead vocal line.

You might think reggae lives or dies by the strength of the bassline, but the Spondor begs to differ. There is little in the way of deep bass, yet what there is is carried in a tuneful way sounding fast and agile. Despite its tonal softness, the A1 handles rhythms very impressively – a trait it shares with the (in other ways quite different) Neat Ministra. *Days Chasing Days* bowls along, sounding engaging and enjoyable. Even *Open Your Heart* proves fun with the very communicative midband letting me know what's really going on in the mix while carrying Phil Oakey's vocals strangely well. The track shows the fine imaging this speaker is capable of; it isn't especially wide, but image location is precise and the recorded acoustic comes across with better depth than most here. Less is so much more, it seems ●

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Spondor A1

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
2-way standmount
loudspeaker

WEIGHT
5kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
165 x 308 x 186mm

FEATURES
● 1x 22mm tweeter
● 1x 150mm
mid/bass driver
● Quoted sensitivity:
84dB/1W/1m (8ohm)

DISTRIBUTOR
Spondor Audio
Systems

TELEPHONE
01323 843474

WEBSITE
spondoraudio.com

Spondor

A1 £1,150

How will the quintessentially British house sound fare in such rarified company?

Making its name in the seventies with its (then) highly innovative BC1 and a BBC-licensed version of the LS3/5a compact monitor, Spondor has always been voiced to be subtle yet revealing, rather than machine-gun the sound out at you. This might be the company's entry level standmount, but its appeal hasn't been diluted one little bit.

The A1 is tiny, modestly presented and has no gimmicks. At its heart is a

150mm EP77 'engineering polymer' mid/bass unit and a 22mm fabric dome tweeter. These are set in a compact sealed enclosure that comes in a choice of three real-wood veneer finishes – black ash, natural walnut and dark oak. The cabinets have relatively thin side walls – deliberately so – and are visco-elastic damped. Magnetically attached grilles are available, but cost extra.

The A1 proves very easy to position on a decent pair of 24in stands, and you can push it close to a rear boundary wall for bass reinforcement. The only caveat being its poor 84dB sensitivity, so you're going to need a meatier amplifier than most.

Sound quality

This reveals itself to be another worthy contender in this fascinating and varied group. It has the most couth and polite presentation here by quite a way. It's one of those speakers that gets better the more time you spend with it. Bass extension is poor, but you don't care because what lows there are, are very well handled – being crisp and tuneful. Midband is

**Hi-Fi Choice****OUR VERDICT**

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Tight but smooth, highly detailed sound

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: Needs plenty of power to drive

BUILD QUALITY



WESAY: A truly excellent nearfield bookshelf monitor

EASE OF DRIVE



OVERALL



**IN SIGHT**

- 1 25mm tweeter
- 2 Bass reflex port
- 3 Bi-wireable binding posts
- 4 165mm mid/bass driver

DETAILS**PRODUCT**
SVS Ultra Bookshelf**ORIGIN**
USA/China**TYPE**
2-way standmount
loudspeaker**WEIGHT**
8.6kg**DIMENSIONS**
(WxHxD)
216 x 379 x 254mm**FEATURES**
● 1x 25mm tweeter
● 1x 165mm
mid/bass driver
● Quoted sensitivity:
87dB/1W/1m (8ohm)**DISTRIBUTOR**
Karma-AV**TELEPHONE**
01423 358846**WEBSITE**
karma-av.co.uk

SVS

Ultra Bookshelf **£1,000**

It might be one of the least expensive in the group, but it promises a lot for the money

Sporting a gloss black cabinet that's been crafted into an unusual and interesting wedge shape, the Ultra has a single 25mm aluminium dome tweeter and 165mm composite glass fibre mid/bass driver bolted flush to its front baffle. Meanwhile, its SoundMatch two-way crossover employs premium-grade capacitors, air-core inductors and heavy-trace printed circuit boards.

The cabinet's use of non-parallel panels is said to reduce standing waves. It's an attractive look and comes in a choice of white or black piano gloss or real black oak veneer. Our black review sample seems extremely well finished at the price, although the cabinet is a little more resonant than most when you rap it with your knuckle. Still, it's a neat design – even down to the classy looking grille.

The bass reflex port around the back means you can't ram the Ultra as close to the rear wall as you'd like, although it's the second easiest to drive after the JBL. Its 87dB/1W/1m sensitivity ensures you shouldn't have any issues matching to any amplifier offering over 50W RMS per channel.

Sound quality

Although the joint cheapest here, the Ultra quickly shows its big heart, wide soundstage and 'get-up-and-go' attitude from the off. It's less detailed than most and a bit more coloured, yet still gives away little in terms of fun. Cheap and cheerful is a useful epithet, but it's certainly not meant in

a negative way. The designer has voiced this baby box very carefully given the limited budget, with the aim of making an involving and sunny sound that will work in a wide range of lower end systems.

It clearly excels in trying to make the music magic without getting bogged down in a forensically accurate sound. *Sweet Home Alabama* shows off its warm tonality while a little extra heft to the upper bass makes the bass guitar easier to follow. Up top, cymbals sound crisp and incisive, adding a visceral feel to the proceedings. The tweeter is nowhere near as genteel as, say, the Neat – yet proves more couth than the JBL, and doesn't have me reaching for the paracetamol. Midband is slightly more congested than the others here, but is still peppered with a decent degree of detail so that the lead guitar work sounds particularly deft.

Open Your Heart showcases another of its strengths – this smallish speaker conjures up a surprisingly wide soundstage, one that is better than the AE, ATC and Spendor in some respects. It's impressively expansive, although images aren't tightly focused and don't fall back quite as far as the pricier speakers here. *Crushed* is lots of fun too, though it reveals a degree of compression at high listening levels; that's understandable from any small box of course. Bass is a little soft and lacks extension, but it always stays tuneful throughout – making this a genuinely enjoyable little box to listen to ●

**HIFIChoice****OUR VERDICT**

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Punchy, expansive and fun sound

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Lacks midband detail and grip

BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Decent value do-it-all design

EASE OF DRIVE
★★★★★

OVERALL

Group test verdict

After days of comparisons, **David Price** thrashes out the ranking order and finds a worthy winner

STANDMOUNT ROUNDUPS ARE getting ever harder to write as there are few bad loudspeakers. This means it's much more down to taste and/or ability to work in real-world conditions than anything else. So it proves here with each option tailored to fulfil a particular role that varies from model to model.

In sixth place the Ultra Bookshelf is a great buy and comes close to the top of the group for value. It gives a spacious, warm, engaging sound that's ideal for inexpensive amplifiers. Only a lack of midband detail and grip let it down in this company.

JBEs 4312G is next, but heavy metal fans would put it top. It's a headbanger of a speaker, with a huge, loud and highly enjoyable sound. High efficiency makes it a natural partner for valve amps. Trouble is, it lacks refinement and midband insight.

Spendor's A1 is the diametric opposite. It's wonderfully couth with a grown-up and balanced sound. It exhibits a taut and sinewy sound that's as fun with rock as it is with classical. A class act, it's a no-brainer for those with small listening rooms.

The AE500 ranks third overall – quite an achievement considering

there are others here at two-and-a-half times its price. Its carbon fibre drivers give it a delicacy of tone and a transient speed that's rare at any price. It's a great all-rounder, if you can live without that bottom octave of bass.

Second is the ATC SCM19, but most rock fans would declare it up there with the JBL without a moment's thought. It has by far the tautest, tightest and most accurate bass here, and the rest of the frequency range is carried in an exactly accurate way with oodles of punch and power.



The Ministra's superb ribbon tweeter gives a treble quality that's on another level, alongside a wonderfully precise and open midband. Then, twin isobaric mid/bass drivers supply a thump that belies its small size – making for loads of fun from this little loudspeaker.



Make/model	Acoustic Energy AE500	ATC SCM19	JBL 4312G	Neat Acoustics Ministra	Spendor A1	SVS Ultra Bookshelf
Price	£1,000	£2,150	£2,500	£1,800	£1,150	£1,000
Sound	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Value	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Build	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Ease of drive	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Overall	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
	Lovely tonality from its clever carbon fibre driver units make for a feisty and funky listen	Rock-solid build and pro-quality drivers add up to a glorious rock and/or live music focused loudspeaker	Retro fun from this iconic US brand, and huge value for money, but too big for small rooms	Super svelte cabinet that's a pleasure to hear with any type of music, despite its smaller dimensions	One of the best ultra-compact designs around, this is the automatic choice for those in small rooms	Big sound, big value. An impressive showing from this do-it-all, US-designed loudspeaker

Key features

	Acoustic Energy AE500	ATC SCM19	JBL 4312G	Neat Acoustics Ministra	Spendor A1	SVS Ultra Bookshelf
Ribbon HF	No	No	No	Yes	No	No
2-way	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
3-way	No	No	Yes	No	No	No
Isobaric	No	No	No	Yes	No	No
Sealed	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No

TRY WITH THESE

INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER: Exposure 3010S2D **£1,700 HFC 397**

Packing a claimed 110W RMS per channel of Class AB power, this is an old-school integrated amp of the muscular variety. It's long been a mid-price reference of mine because it's not frightened of difficult speaker loads and has a balanced yet enjoyably musical sound that's never harsh.



STREAMING AMPLIFIER: Cyrus ONE Cast **£1,300 HFC 464**

This do-it-all streaming amp is a great way into the charms of Spotify, Tidal and Qobuz. It's also a fine integrated in its own right, with a claimed 100W per channel. It's a Class D design so is compact and cool running, but gives a big and sumptuous sound. It's also ideal for the less sensitive speakers here.



VALVE AMPLIFIER: PrimaLuna EvoLution 200 **£2,700 HFC 457**

If you crave the magic of valves, one of the best places to start is this neat integrated. It uses four EL34 valves to produce a claimed 44W RMS per channel, making it ideal for the all but the least sensitive speakers here. It has a tuneful, airy and sweet sound that's very special at the price.

