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GROUP  
TEST

# Grand Standers

If you're looking to breathe fresh life into your system with affordable speakers, Steve Harris is here to help. In our latest group test he compares sub-£1000 pairs from Acoustic Energy, Dali, Monitor Audio and Triangle. Which one is the winner?

In the beginning, speakers were big and bulky. They were especially so if you happened to want any sort of half-decent bass response. Today, most people expect loudspeakers to be slim, while still delivering the goods at the bottom end. Fortunately, with modern driver technology and cabinet design, this is now possible.

For a start, 'long-throw' bass drive units of 165mm (6.5 inch) diameter or less have replaced the old 200mm (8 inch) and 250mm (10 inch) types, once thought essential for serious hi-fi. Another way of getting good bass out of smaller drive units is to use more of them, their combined cone area (and hence the amount of air being moved) being equivalent to that of a much larger single cone. So pairs of bass units have now become the norm for floorstanding speakers.

## CONVENTIONAL SYSTEM

These bass units may be just connected in parallel, then combined with a tweeter to form a conventional two-way system, or with a midrange and tweeter in a three-way system. A cleverer approach is the so-called two-and-a-half-way system, in which two apparently identical bass units are in fact doing different jobs. Both cover bass and lower-mid frequencies up to a few hundred Hertz, but the crossover is designed so that one of the two will also provide midrange output, only handing over to the tweeter at (usually) around 3kHz.

It goes without saying that the loudspeakers we buy for music systems are now nearly always designed also to do duty as the main front channels of a home cinema system. But unless your heart (or your other half) is set on a set of those spindly silver poles that really can't do anything without a subwoofer attached, you should be able to find a pair of column or tower-type designs that should be able to fill the room with music, without filling the floor. Here we compare four strong contenders...

All the loudspeakers were run-in on continuous music for several days before listening began. Partnering equipment was Arcam's truly excellent FMJ A32 amplifier and FMJ CD36 CD player (special thanks to Geoff and Nadine at Arcam) ▶▶



**DETAILS**



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Sweet and musical



Can sound a tad peaky

The tallest speaker in the group at 1140mm high, the Antal Esw is undeniably room-dominant. The extra height is also a factor in its sonic presentation, but more of that later. This is a true three-way speaker, in which a pair of 130mm woofers cross over at 300Hz to a 100mm midrange, which in turn hands over to a titanium-dome tweeter at around 4kHz. Crossover slopes are 12dB/octave from bass to mid and 24dB/octave mid to treble.

That added 'w', reflecting a revision of the existing Altea Es, Antal Es and Celius Es

models, indicates a modified woofer – still using a cellulose pulp long-fibre cone, but now with an 80mm aluminium core cover, said to add 5Hz to the bass frequency response.

The sturdy, stylish cabinet is supplied with a bolt-on curved cast-metal base. This has four small rubber feet but can optionally be fitted with spikes. These are screwed in from above. However, doing most of the grounding work, I suspect, is the fifth, larger spike mounted under the front of the cabinet itself.

The 'veneer' wrap is synthetic, but indistinguishable from the real thing. Triangle calls its finishes champagne, bordeaux and cognac (as the review pair), corresponding roughly to beech or cherry, mahogany and walnut.

**SOUND QUALITY**

The Triangle Antal Esw produces a big soundstage,

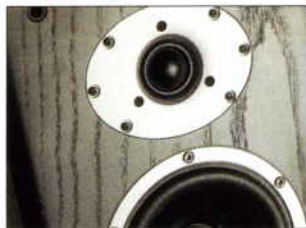
that's seemingly both high and wide. The speaker immediately showed a rather attractive sense of scale, a 'full-sized' character. For example, Rickie Lee Jones' voice sounded particularly sweet and appealing. On that Miles Davis 'So What' intro, the bass was not so punchy as when heard through the other speakers in the group but was somehow a little bit more genuinely stringy in sound. Meanwhile, Miles' trumpet could sound more shaped, more plaintive, though with just a hint of 'peakiness' in the response.

On the Heifetz record, the violin seemed reasonably well tamed, the orchestra well laid-out and actually audibly supported by a line of bass notes. On Jennifer Warnes' 'First We Take Manhattan', for example, that ability to create a big space was really appreciated. In short, this is a fine-sounding speaker.

## MANUFACTURERS' SPECIFICATIONS

## ACOUSTIC ENERGY AELITE THREE

Cabinet type: floorstanding, wood veneer  
 Bass loading: 2 reflex ports at rear (+mid)  
 Number of drive units: four  
 Driver configuration: three-way  
 Treble unit: 25mm dome, Nd magnet  
 Midrange unit: 110mm al-alloy cone  
 Bass units: 2x125mm al-alloy cones  
 Crossover frequency: mid-tweeter 3.3kHz  
 Frequency response, ±3dB: 40Hz–24kHz  
 Sensitivity: 89dB for 1W at 1m  
 Nominal impedance: 8 ohm  
 Recommended amp power: n/s  
 Maximum power handling: 175W



Magnetic shielding: yes  
 Dimensions (hwd): 920 x 230 x 297mm  
 Weight (each): 18kg  
 Finishes: Birch, Black, Cherry  
 Price: £749/pair

## DALI IKON 6

Cabinet type: floorstanding, synth. veneer  
 Bass loading: reflex port at front  
 Driver configuration: two-and-half-way plus supertweeter  
 Treble units: 28mm soft dome tweeter, 17mm x 45mm ribbon  
 Bass/mid unit: 165mm paper/wf cone  
 Bass unit: 165mm paper/wf cone  
 Crossover freq: 800Hz, 3.2kHz, 14kHz  
 Frequency response, ±3dB: 37Hz–30kHz  
 Sensitivity: 91.5dB for 2.83V at 1m  
 Nominal impedance: 6 ohm  
 Recommended amp power: 25W–150W  
 Maximum power handling: n/s



Magnetic shielding: yes  
 Dimensions (hwd): 1000 x 188 x 332mm (1020 x 222 x 332mm on spiked feet)  
 Weight (each): 18.6kg  
 Finishes: Light Oak, Light Walnut  
 Price: £899/pair

## MONITOR AUDIO SILVER RS8

Cabinet type: floorstanding, wood veneer  
 Bass loading: reflex ports at front and rear  
 Number of drive units: four  
 Driver configuration: two-and-half-way  
 Treble unit: 25mm C-CAM ceramic/Gold  
 Bass/mid unit: 150mm, C-CAM ceramic/metal cone  
 Bass units: 2x150mm, C-CAM c/m cone  
 Crossover frequency: 3kHz  
 Frequency response: 33Hz–25kHz  
 Sensitivity: 91dB for 1W at 1m  
 Nominal impedance: 6 ohm  
 Recommended amp power: 40W–175W  
 Maximum power handling: 175W



Magnetic shielding: yes  
 Dimensions (hwd): 900 x 185 x 310mm  
 Weight (each): 21kg  
 Finishes: Black Oak, Rosenut, Natural Oak, Cherry  
 Price: £800/pair

## TRIANGLE ANTAL Esw

Cabinet type: floorstanding, synth veneer  
 Bass loading: reflex port  
 Number of drive units: four  
 Driver configuration: three-way  
 Treble unit: 25mm metal-dome tweeter  
 Midrange unit: 100mm, cellulose pulp long-fibre cone  
 Bass units: two, 130mm c/pulp l/f cone  
 Crossover frequencies: 300Hz, 4kHz  
 Frequency response, ±3dB: 43Hz–20kHz  
 Sensitivity: 91dB for 1W at 1m  
 Nominal impedance: 8 ohm  
 Recommended amplifier power: n/s



Max power handling: 120W (240W peak)  
 Magnetic shielding: no  
 Dimensions (hwd): 1080 x 200 x 340mm  
 Weight (each): 22.5kg  
 Finishes: Champagne, Bordeaux, Cognac  
 Price: £975/pair

## WE LISTENED TO

- Debussy, *12 Etudes*, Mitsuko Uchida [Philips 464 698-2]
- Mendelssohn, *Concerto in E Minor/Prokofiev, Concerto in G Minor*, Jascha Heifetz, Boston SO/Munch, 1959 [JVC XRCD JMXR-0010]
- Rautavaara, *Angels and Visitations* [Ondine ODE 881-2]
- Miles Davis, *Kind Of Blue* [Columbia CK 64935]
- Rickie Lee Jones, *Rickie Lee Jones*

[Warner 256 628]

- Jennifer Warnes, *Famous Blue Raincoat* [Classic RTHCD 5052]



Market forces have all but done away with the between 'home cinema speakers' and 'two-channel speakers'. But I don't think it's too unfair to say that while some ranges contain home cinema speakers that have a stab at music, others are primarily music loudspeakers that are sporting enough to try home cinema too.

Arguably in the first camp, then, is Acoustic Energy's Aelite series. The Aelite Three is a smooth, powerful speaker

**'Some ranges contain home cinema speakers that have a stab at music, others are primarily music speakers'**

that doesn't seem to put a foot wrong, always civilized, yet with very good detail and able to cope with any dynamics the CD could throw at it, and to make some sense of complex, muddly recordings. It's a loudspeaker that won't let you down, if not one to take you to the heights.

With its undisguised metal drive units making the Aelite Three look visually sombre, Monitor Audio's Silver RS8

is every inch a home cinema product. Yet its ear-catching speed and dynamics were attractive on music too, while its good balance and apparent low distortion belied the brashness [with grille off] of its styling. All this seems to have been achieved at the cost of some loss of body and subtlety of timbre – but this may not be a problem for most pop and rock listeners.

Dali's Ikon range embraces home cinema, but the Ikon 6 just feels more like a real music loudspeaker. It has dynamics and detail, but also the subtle textures, overall coherence and stereo staging ability that audiophiles still want to be able to conjure up from just two boxes. It's an excellent all-rounder, is unfussy about room positioning and proves to be endlessly listenable.

Perhaps even more obviously made for music is Triangle's newly revised Antal Esw, which can create a high, wide and deep stereo stage. It's not as overtly detailed, not as neutral, or as system- and room-forgiving as the Dali in this group, nor indeed is it as driving as the Monitor Audio. But it offers a sound that breathes even a little more precious life into the music. □

## THE REPORT

## HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

While the Acoustic Energy Aelite Three is a good, well-engineered speaker with a strong bass performance, Monitor Audio's Silver RS8 offers a little more excitement. As a great musical all-rounder, the Dali Ikon 6 has to be the best buy – but if you can spend a little more you might take a chance and scale the heights with the characterful Triangle Antal Esw.