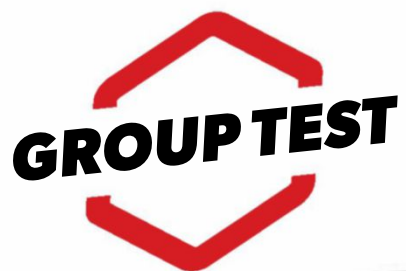


Triple Aces

One established champ plus two outstanding challengers equals three of a very fine kind. There are no weak hands in this contest – let’s deal...



In the world of stereo speakers, £500 is the sweet spot. It's a step above the budget offerings, and as such becomes the common jumping-on point for discerning listeners making a start on their hi-fi journey.

It's also a few steps below the serious high-end models. That means you avoid a massive price tag, but you may also benefit from some advanced technology trickled down to junior models.

That's what happened with the Bowers & Wilkins 685 S2, which took design cues and components from its more luxurious seniors, and went on to win two *What Hi-Fi?* Awards.

Questions and answers

But are they still as good? Or are they ripe for replacement? Here to help us find out are two fresh challengers: the Dynaudio Emit M10 and the Quad S-1, both offering a different bag of tricks for the same money as the reigning champ. Let's see how they get on.



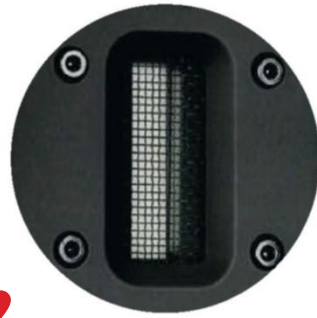
SPEAKER SPECIFICS



B&W says the dimples on the bass port create a smoother air flow for better sound



The Magnesium Silicate Polymer driver, says **Dynaudio**, optimises rigidity and damping



Uniquely in this trio, **Quad** uses a ribbon design for the S-1's 12 x 45mm tweeter



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THE GREAT DEFENDERS

B&W 685 S2 £500

FOR Big, powerful sound

AGAINST The best rivals offer greater detail and subtlety



It's tough being king. It's only a matter of time before somebody makes a move for the crown, and then you have to defend your honour. So it was for the original Bowers & Wilkins 685s which blew our socks off nearly 10 years ago, firmly establishing themselves as venerable favourites before eventually being bested.

Then came the 685 S2s, and B&W once again found itself at the top of its price range. These speakers have since won two Awards, including the coveted Product of the Year. And yet they never get to sit still before they are hauled into a testing room for another fight.

It will take a lot to beat them, for they are made of sterner stuff than their predecessors and incorporate technology taken from B&W's high-end speakers.

Premium technology

The headline act is the decoupled reinforced dome tweeter. The 25mm aluminium dome in the 685 S2 is reinforced with a thicker metal ring to make the tweeter strong and better damped - a technology handed down from B&W's premium CM10 floorstanding speakers - and ensures a higher degree of clarity and accuracy in the upper ranges.

The tweeter assembly is suspended in a ring of soft gel, which helps to isolate it from any cabinet vibrations. B&W has covered up the fragile dome with a protective grille mesh, which helps with dispersion too.

Elsewhere, the 16.5cm Kevlar mid/bass driver remains mostly unchanged. The bullet-shaped phase plug of the previous generation is replaced with a mushroom-shaped 'dust cap' derived from the high-end B&W PM1 speakers, which further damps the driver down at certain frequencies.

Back to finishing school?

While the speakers are solidly built, we can't help but wish for a more premium-quality finish. We noted in 2014 that the 685 S2s look and feel rather plain, especially considering the price, and our feelings haven't changed. It doesn't help the B&W's case that the Quad S-1 and Dynaudio Emit M10 both have much nicer finishes.



Two sets of recessed speaker terminals mean you can biwire the 685 S2s

But enough of that - how do they sound? In a word: good. From the start, the B&Ws burst to life with a powerful, clear and agile sound.

These are talented and enjoyable speakers, and a definite step up from their predecessors. The sense of scale is massive, especially coming from relatively compact standmounters.

A dynamic duo

The soundstage is wide and deep, enveloping you in a richly detailed, dynamic performance, whether you're playing Aerosmith, Lorde or a Hans Zimmer soundtrack.

The bass is pleasingly deep and powerful. Play Led Zeppelin's *Whole Lotta Love* and the bass notes are so rich that it almost feels like there's a subwoofer in the room.

All the technology tweaks have paid off as well, as the 685 S2s sound clean and precise. They can also go extremely loud with little obvious distortion - we rarely have this much fun listening to music so loudly in our listening rooms. Get them into your home and we think you'll agree.

But there is the competition to consider, and while the B&Ws are

talented in their own right, they face tough competition from their latest batch of rivals. Take the Quad S-1s, for instance. While they certainly cannot offer the B&Ws' scale or dynamics, they can counter with greater subtlety and transparency from the midrange through to the higher reaches of treble. And the Dynaudio Emit M10s match the B&Ws in energy (if not in scale), while superior timing, cohesion and detail make for a more engaging performance.

The 685 S2s are entertaining, and their power, vigorous dynamics and detail retrieval impress. But they are no longer at the top and so, with due deference, we have to take away that fifth star.

KEY FEATURES

Impedance: 8 ohms

Weight: 6.8kg

Dimensions (hwd): 35 x 19 x 32cm

WHAT HI-FI? says

Rating ★★★★★

SOUND ★★★★★

COMPATIBILITY ★★★★★

BUILD ★★★★★

VERDICT Former champs still impress – they've just been overtaken by newer rivals

MISCHIEF, MELANCHOLY OR MENACE

Dynaudio Emit M10 £500

FOR Versatile, detailed, subtle, entertaining sound

AGAINST Nothing at this price

★★★★★

There was a time when Dynaudio ruled these parts. It was unstoppable, armed with a great formula for lovely listening. That was years ago, however, and while the company has consistently put out fine products, we were accustomed to more. Well, it looks like it is time for a comeback, because that's what you get with the Dynaudio Emit M10: more.

You get a bit of everything here. Versatility, transparency, energy, precision, scale and volume: you name it and the Emit 10s deliver in spades.

Transparency and detail

We begin with the impressive transparency and bags of detail, which help to provide context into the performance's environment. In a hall, on a stage, in a studio, with or without air conditioning (in the case of *The Sopranos* soundtrack) - it's quite apparent what sort of setting and acoustic you're listening to, with production techniques laid bare.

It's a lively listen. The Emit 10s have a masterful grasp of rhythm, and what you get is more precise than anything offered by the B&W 685 S2s or Quad S-1s. Give them something challenging and they just lap it up. Major Lazer's *Pon De Floor* is a messy obstacle course for most speakers at this price, littered as it is with varying rhythms and dynamic shifts. But these Dynaudios breeze through it with agility and panache.

Model of inclusivity

They're versatile too, capable of slowing right down without missing a beat, then ramping things up again with apparently effortless enthusiasm and verve. We switch between Dusty Springfield, Nina Simone, Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana* and Prince. Whether you want mischief, melancholy or menace, the Emit 10s demonstrate an impressive ability to mould themselves for any occasion.

These speakers are not afraid to express themselves either. The detail and precision help with their enunciation, but you also get strong, free-flowing dynamics. If it's a hard-hitting, passionate sound you're after, then you've got it. If you want volume, you've got that too. You don't necessarily



Give them some space and the M10s will make you question whether you paid only £500

need it, though - the sense of energy is always there, even at lower volumes.

The Emit 10s have a compact design. At 29cm tall they are barely bigger than the Quad S-1s, and yet they have the scale, power and dynamics to rival the larger B&W 685 S2s.

It's not just scale, but organisation too. Not only do all the instruments get plenty of space, they are also impeccably arranged in a way that gives the performance a convincing sense of depth. And despite the wide and deep soundstage, everything works together in a cohesive unit.

Second nature

All of this comes naturally, like a maths prodigy bashing out trigonometry: we're not sure how Dynaudio has done it, but we are astonished at the ease with which spectacular results have been achieved here.

Is there a catch to all of this? Not really. In terms of sheer scale we think the bigger B&W 685 S2s still have the advantage, but that is of little concern when the Dynaudios are really not that far behind and ahead in every other sonic department.

It's not just the sound, either. We really like the look and build quality of the Emit 10s, which make the B&Ws look a little cheaply made. They are also easy to set up (just give them some space) and unfussy with partnering equipment. We're struggling to say anything negative.

All-round talent

It may have taken a few years, but it looks as if Dynaudio is back in great shape. Put it all together and you have some tremendously talented all-rounders, capable of giving out layered, intricate, versatile sound that we cannot believe costs only £500. Whether you're starting out in hi-fi or looking to upgrade, the Dynaudio Emit 10s should be on your list.

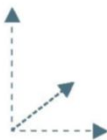
KEY FEATURES



Impedance: 6ohms



Weight: 5.6kg



Dimensions (hwd):
29 x 17 x 24cm

WHAT HI-FI? says

Rating ★★★★★

SOUND	★★★★★
COMPATIBILITY	★★★★★
BUILD	★★★★★

VERDICT A confident and outstanding return to form for Dynaudio

SMALL IN STATURE, BIG ON ABILITY

Quad S-1 £500

FOR Detailed, precise sound with superb midrange; design

AGAINST Not the most authoritative sound

★★★★★

When we think of Quad speakers, our thoughts immediately turn to the EL-2812 - massive electrostatic speakers costing upwards of £6000. From now on, we'll have something else to salivate over, because the company has come up with a fabulous pair of mid-range standmounters: the Quad S-1. They are the smallest of Quad's new five-strong S-series, which comprises these and the S-2 standmounters, two floorstanders and one centre channel. If the S-1s are anything to go by, we can't wait to meet the rest of the family.

Instant attraction

It's love at first sight. The exterior is exquisite, with quality woodwork that brings to mind a fine dining table. Our review sample is black, but the S-series also comes in a lush mahogany. Quad says it is also planning glossy piano black/white finishes.

Whichever finish you pick, you get rounded front and rear edges top and bottom (the side edges remain straight). It's an unusual move, one that helps the S-1 stand out in a line-up. Quad claims no acoustic benefits - it just looks nice, and there's nothing wrong with that.

No, the acoustic tinkering comes from the cabinet's construction, which sees MDF sandwiched with high-density particleboard. This is supposed to reduce panel resonance and colouration.

Elsewhere, the S-1s feature a bespoke 12 x 45mm ribbon tweeter and a 10cm Kevlar cone for midrange and bass. The floorstanders in the S-series feature rear passive radiators for bass. The S-1 makes do with a small reflex port at the back.

Quad recommends a minimum distance of 20cm from rear walls, and 30cm from side walls, toed in towards the listening position. Don't be tempted to stick them right out in the open, especially in a large room. The S-1s are only little, and they rely on the rear wall for some reinforcement.

Voice boxes

When it comes to thinking about how these speakers sound, the standout element is the vocals. The way the S-1s handle voices is, in a word, lovely. Two words? Seriously lovely. Whether you're



listening to Prince, Sufjan Stevens or Devendra Banhart, the performance has the same intimate quality that makes you want to dig out all your songs. You get heaps of subtle detail and remarkable clarity; a treble that is insightful and agile; a midrange clear, direct and smooth. The integration between the drive units is terrific, never giving the impression that they are not working in tandem.

A fine balancing act

Tonal balance is good, with no part of the frequency range sticking out. These are rhythmically precise, well organised speakers and their sound is spread wide, with a good sense of space and placement.


But compared with larger rivals, the S-1s struggle to convey a sense of authority. Of course, for their size, we wouldn't expect them to have the scale or dynamics of the B&W 685 S2s. Put on Massive Attack's *Angel* and while the Quads possess a decent amount of weight, they don't quite convey the ramping sense of menace in the song's opening section. Then again, the B&Ws don't have the Quads' way with vocals, or their finesse either.

A word on kit matching. The Quad S-1s have a sensitivity of 84dB, which is a little lower than average and makes this a relatively insensitive design. You may need to work your amp a little harder (or have a powerful one). We have the good fortune to listen to a lot of products, and the best ones are those that allow you to lay aside your critical faculties and leave you with the music. This happens a lot with the S-1s. These speakers are not about to muster much authority, but we don't think that's a big deal when you're already listening with rapt attention. If you have a smaller room and you like your performances intimate, these are an absolute treat.

KEY FEATURES


Impedance: 8ohms


Weight: 5.2kg


Dimensions (hwd):
29 x 16 x 24cm

WHAT HI-FI? says	
Rating	★★★★★
SOUND	★★★★★
COMPATIBILITY	★★★★★
BUILD	★★★★★

VERDICT Smooth, intimate and insightful, these little Quads really sing



Dynaudio Emit M10 £500

Never mind their rivals here, these Dynaudios could take on much pricier rivals and still prevail

We never know what to expect in a group test of speakers, but this one was full of surprises. We certainly couldn't have foreseen the fate of the Bowers & Wilkins 685 S2s: not only did they not win the test, they lost a star as well.

For now, they remain entirely commendable: they offer a big, powerful sound that has no problem engaging and entertaining you.

Differing strengths

It takes a lot to knock a double Award-winner off its perch and into four-star territory, but that's exactly what's happened with these two new challengers. They have very different priorities, however.

The Quad S-1s excel in treble and midrange, and their handling of vocals is sublime. There is an intimacy here that's hard to beat. They're not the most flexible



"It takes a lot to knock a double Award-winner off its perch and into four-star territory, but that's exactly what's happened in the shape of these two new challengers"

speakers, though; their compact size and small mid/bass drivers restrict low-end reach. But in smaller rooms they shine.

That's where the Dynaudio Emit M10s come in. They are not quite as sweet with vocals, but they're as good (if not better) at rhythmic precision, and that's balanced with power, dynamics,

flexibility and energy. Layers of music are stripped back to their emotional core, and the experience is hard to resist.

These are terrific all-rounders, and offer the sort of performance that we might expect from something much higher up the food chain. That they are available for £500 is little short of astounding.



Your M10s will need quality partners – try these



STEREO AMPLIFIER

Rega Elex-R ★★★★★ £900

A wonderfully musical amp that complements the M10s' precision with fine rhythmic ability



CD PLAYER

Naim CD5Si ★★★★★ £1080

The Naim has a winningly enthusiastic delivery and a real feel for the music



SPEAKER STANDS

Custom Design FS104 Signature

★★★★★ £200

These will allow the Dynaudios' vibrancy, transparency and rhythm to really flourish

Total build £2680

★ FOR A FULL LIST OF SPECIFICATIONS AND OTHER USEFUL INFO VISIT WHATHIFI.COM

HOW THEY MEASURE UP

	B&W 685 S2	<div>TEST WINNER</div> Dynaudio Emit M10	Quad S-1
Weight	6.8kg	5.6kg	5.2kg
Sensitivity	87dB	86dB	84dB
Impedance	8 ohms	6 ohms	8 ohms
Dimensions (hwd)	35 x 19 x 32cm	29 x 17 x 24cm	29 x 16 x 24cm
Finishes	Black ash, white	Black satin, white satin	Black, mahogany
Biwireable	Yes	No	Yes