

Blind-listening Group test

STANDMOUNTS £1,000-£1,650

Which small speakers lead the field?

Paul Messenger and the blind-listening panel audition six similarly sized standmounts with many similarities, performance is another matter, however

ALL BUT ONE of this group of speakers fall into the price band between £1,000 and £1,200. All are also compact and attractively finished standmount designs and although there are plenty of detail differences, their overall sizes and configurations are remarkably similar, as are – predictably enough – their measured performances.

The only real way to distinguish between these competing models is, therefore, by conducting careful listening tests. Only the Spendor SP3/1R2 sits outside that price range and the fact that it's significantly larger than the others ought to confer a modest performance advantage and helps to justify its extra cost.

All models in the group are from well known Western brands – one from Canada, one Finland, two Denmark, one Germany and one UK. All claim manufacture in their country of origin, apart from the German Quadral Aurum model, which is rather more ambiguously 'made in Europe'. All are broadly the same size (the Dynaudio

slightly and the Spendor significantly larger). All are reflex-ported, many tuned close to 50Hz (which is not ideal in

“The only real way to distinguish between these models is by careful listening tests.”

terms of our room modes). And all come attractively presented, normally with a choice of real wood veneers at the base price and some with options at extra cost.

Each brand has its own particular drive unit recipes. Three of the six use small 130mm (five-inch) bass/mid drivers, the Totem a marginally larger 140mm unit, while the larger Dynaudio and Spendor models both accommodate 180mm main drivers. The tweeters, too, show significant variations between the models, the Quadral opting for a planar ribbon-type device, while the DALI has a dome/planar hybrid module.



PRICING

OUR GROUP have 'official' pricetags somewhere between £1,000 and £1,650 per pair, though most huddle towards the bottom end of that range. Some models will show price variations, either because of alternative finishes, or the competitive nature of web retailers. The link between price and size, weight or engineering content is hardly relevant here. All are port-loaded and come in real wood veneer as standard, though several also offer paint finishes, too.

ON TEST



Amphion Argon 1 £1,179 **p43**

This unusually slim reflex-ported two-way comes in walnut veneer, but has several options. It uses metal diaphragm drive units and is distinguished by a large black waveguide surrounding the deep-set tweeter, which should assist time-alignment and treble distribution.



DALI Mentor 1 £1,199 **p45**

Arguably the most attractive of the group, in its smooth real wood veneer, the Mentor 1 follows the DALI tradition in using what it refers to as a 'hybrid tweeter module'. This combines a conventional-looking dome tweeter and a planar ribbon device on the same chassis. The main driver has a dish-shaped paper cone.



Dynaudio Excite X16 £1,080 **p47**

Although our samples arrived in fashionable high-gloss black finish, Dynaudio's Excite X16 is also available in a choice of various real-wood veneers. Reflex ported at the rear, the enclosure is a little larger than the group average, as is the diameter of the bass/mid driver's cone.



Quadral Aurum Megan VIII £1,000 **p49**

This German standmount, finished in real-wood veneer, feels particularly solidly built, partly due to its enclosure thickness, but also the fact that the back panel is inset and, therefore, acts as a brace. In the Quadral tradition, the tweeter used here is a ribbon-shaped planar device.



Spendor SP3/1R2 2 £1,650 **p51**

Larger and more costly than the others assembled for this group, the wood-veneered SP3/1R2 also uses a larger bass/mid driver with an EPC plastic cone. The SEAS-sourced tweeter has an unusually wide surround. Spendor has long used a technique which combines a thin-wall enclosure with damping pads.



Totem Rainmaker £1,100 **p53**

A little taller and shallower than most, this pretty little speaker comes with stern warnings that 70-100 hours of breaking in is required for best results. Finished in real-wood veneer, the rear panel has a small port and twin terminals, while the tweeter is a mesh-protected metal dome diaphragm.



Amphion Argon 1 £1,179

An unconventional standmount from one of hi-fi's newer companies, based in Finland



DETAILS

ORIGIN:
Finland

TYPE:
Standmount
loudspeaker

WEIGHT:
8kg

DIMENSIONS:
(WxHxD)
160x310x265mm

- FEATURES:**
- Large waveguide around tweeter
 - Metal diaphragms for both drivers
 - Real wood veneer or painted finish
 - Rear port with foam bung option
 - Ultra-slim front aspect

DISTRIBUTOR:
Robytone BV

TELEPHONE:
00 31 0493 744020

WEBSITE:
amphion.fi

Amphion is a relatively young brand, founded in 1998 and brings some interestingly different techniques to the party.

The most obvious of these is the large waveguide that surrounds the tweeter and matches the diameter of the bass/mid drive unit. This has several implications. The prime purpose is to control the tweeter's directivity, presumably to avoid the directivity discontinuity that usually occurs in the transition from bass/mid driver to tweeter. However, it may also be due, at least in part, to the potentially superior time alignment that results from locating the tweeter down within the waveguide and well behind the front panel, which should help place the two voice coils the same distance from the listeners.

The speaker is slimmer than most of its contemporaries and the enclosure is nicely built, with sharp edges all round. Our samples came finished in a rather anonymous walnut veneer, though two other veneers and three painted options are also available. An attractive bonus is that the waveguide is roughly the same size as the bass/mid drive unit, bringing a rather fetching symmetry to the appearance.

No complete grille covering both drivers is supplied here, but both drive units have metal diaphragms and these are protected from prying fingers by discreet fixed open-mesh metal grilles. The tweeter has the usual 25mm dome, while the bass/mid driver has a relatively small 90mm cone. A modest rear port provides reflex loading and may be

blocked by the supplied foam bungs if the speakers are placed close to a wall. Signal is applied to a single terminal pair.

SOUND QUALITY

Although the vote wasn't entirely unanimous, the majority of panellists in the *Blind-Listening Group Test* placed the Argon 1 at the top of their lists, unambiguously voting it the winner.

It's not perfect, but then no speaker is, especially when it's as small as those assembled here. But despite the inevitable lack of sheer bass weight imposed by the modest size of its enclosure and main driver, this speaker delivers an entertaining and well-timed bottom end, encouraging the feet to tap along with the music.

The restrained top end did leave one panellist complaining of a degree of 'wooliness' in vocal rendition and this is certainly a valid criticism. There is a slight lack of air and sparkle here, though this is arguably less serious than experiencing an excessive top end, especially when a speaker is likely to be used at the end of a fairly modest system.

The major strength of this speaker, however, lies in its unusually coherent and lucid midband. Our choral excerpt sounded clean, clear and free from the rather compressed

sound that had been audible during previous presentations with other loudspeakers. Stereo imaging showed good depth and the overall sound was quick, lively and musically communicative.

The Argon 1 is a fine little speaker that conveys the musical messages in a more convincing manner than many of its peers. The tonal balance might, perhaps, be a little too restrained for some tastes and systems, but the fine timing, smoothness and overall coherence ensure that it leads the way.

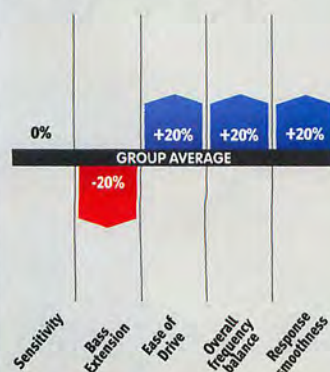
TECH LABS

The Argon 1 sensitivity rating is an average 87dB, just 1dB above the figure specified by the manufacturer and this is in the context of an easy-to-drive load that stays above six ohms throughout.

The port is tuned to around 52Hz, so bass extension is effectively limited to around 40Hz under in-room conditions. However, the 50Hz peak is not too severe and although there were slight variations at low frequencies, the pair matching is pretty good.

The frequency response, measured under far-field in-room averaged conditions, is particularly impressive above 700Hz, showing a remarkably well-integrated transition through the 1.6kHz crossover point, with a notably smooth delivery throughout. Although output is maintained to 20kHz, the treble tends to roll-off somewhat above 5kHz and is certainly well below average by 10kHz.

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Delivers a coherent midband with a seamless crossover transition

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: Top end is a little dull, as was the veneer of our samples

BUILD QUALITY



WE SAY: Supplies fine midband coherence, alongside a tuneful and entertaining bass

PRACTICALITY



OVERALL



DALI Mentor 1 **£1,199**

This exceptional standmount has a unique hybrid tweeter module, combining dome and ribbon diaphragms

DETAILS

- ORIGIN:**
Denmark
- TYPE:**
Standmount
loudspeaker
- WEIGHT:**
5.2kg
- DIMENSIONS:**
(WxHxD)
160x320x240mm
- FEATURES:**
- Two-and-a-half-way design
 - Hybrid dome/ribbon tweeter module
 - High-quality veneer or gloss-painted finish
 - Bass/mid driver has long-fibre dish-shaped pulp cone
 - Choice of black or cherry veneers
- DISTRIBUTOR:**
DALI UK
- TELEPHONE:**
0845 644 3537
- WEBSITE:**
dali-speakers.com

This Danish operation was once closely linked to a leading Scandinavian hi-fi retail chain, but it has always operated entirely autonomously and independently as a speaker manufacturer and indeed has proved more successful on the UK market than most overseas brands.

The DALI name has nothing to do with surrealism here, but is actually an acronym for Danish Audiophile Loudspeaker Industries. The Mentor range, probably best described as 'affordable upmarket', is one of several in the DALI portfolio and consists of six stereo pairs which share a number of proprietary engineering techniques.

The most obvious of these is seen in the tweeter arrangements. The top five Mentors are fitted with a high-frequency module that combines a conventional doped-fabric dome with a somewhat narrower ribbon-shaped planar device, ensuring fine power handling and headroom, while maintaining wide dispersion.

The speaker itself is very compact – DALI describes it as: 'essentially a Mentor 5 with a single five-inch bass/midrange driver' – and our sample came beautifully finished on five of its six faces in a very smooth cherry real-wood veneer. Black wood veneer and high-gloss white are the two alternatives here.

Whereas the front and back of the enclosure proper are gently curved, the front part is completely replaced by a flat panel in textured light grey. Mounting lugs for the optional grille are clearly visible. The rear panel also has mounting lugs, this time for fitting the optional wall bracket, perhaps if used for the surround channels in a multichannel sound system.

The terminal block has a single pair of multi-way connectors and also incorporates a well concealed port.

The main 120mm bass/mid driver has a dish-shaped diaphragm made from long-fibre pulp some 95mm in diameter. The tweeter module combines a 28mm doped-fabric dome with a planar element 45x25mm, the latter divided into three narrow strips.

SOUND QUALITY

The Mentor 1's *Blind-Listening Group Test* gave a disappointing result, as the balance seemed rather lightweight and forward, while its complex tweeter arrangement didn't seem to confer any particular advantage.

While it sounds dynamically quite lively, this might well be because the upper midband is rather exposed and this is probably responsible for inhibiting transparency and introducing a touch of nasal coloration to voices.

Although the in-room measurements didn't provide any particular reasons to anticipate such findings, the Mentor 1 did sound rather small and lacking in body, warmth and weight. There was no denying an observation which was unanimously recorded by the panellists: 'Big percussion seriously lacking'. 'A bit small and aggressive; lacks warmth and



authority'. Furthermore, the top end received some criticism for sounding rather sibilant and detached.

Following damage sustained by the original pair during transit, a brand new pair was sent with the warning that they hadn't been run in. Although we did our best, extra running-in time is difficult to find when carrying out a *Blind-Listening Group Test*. While this might help explain the DALI's weak low-frequency performance, its lightweight forwardness remain significant handicaps.

TECH LABS

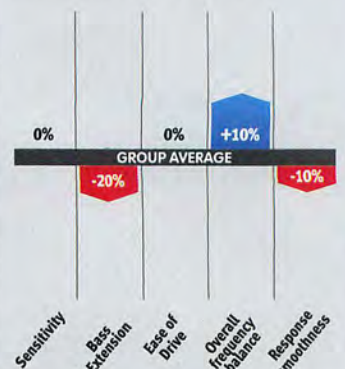
Rated by the manufacturer at 86dB, on our tests the Mentor 1 just scraped 87dB. But it was a very close call and, as usual, depends to a significant extent on the frequencies one selects to provide the figure.

In this case the decision to go for 87dB was due to a mild prominence in the upper mid/lower treble, 1-1.5kHz, a part of the audio range where the ears are very sensitive. This prominence is rendered all the more significant because the regions below (300-900Hz) and above (1.5-2.5kHz) are both somewhat lacking.

The frequency balance holds within creditably tight +/-3dB limits, though that also disguises some lack of mid-bass energy (60-120Hz) and some treble excess (4-5kHz).

The load stays above 5.5 ohms throughout and is virtually flat above 150Hz, so the speaker should be easy enough to drive, though the flat impedance implies some network complexity. The pair match was pretty good.

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★
- VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★
- BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★
- PRACTICALITY** ★★★★★
- LIKE:** Attractive design with lovely veneerwork, alongside a lively sound
- DISLIKE:** Has a rather lightweight and forward character
- WE SAY:** Lightweight sound is rather forward, coloured and lacking in transparency

OVERALL



Dynaudio Excite X16 £1,080

This chunky and solidly built Danish speaker has a larger than average main driver

DETAILS

ORIGIN:
Denmark

TYPE:
Standmount
loudspeaker

WEIGHT:
9kg

DIMENSIONS:
(WxHxD)
205x350x290mm

FEATURES:
• 180mm bass/mid
driver

• Reflex ported
at rear

• Choice of six
veneers or high-
gloss finishes

• Proprietary
Dynaudio drive units

• Long coil ensures
powerful main
driver dynamics

DISTRIBUTOR:
Chord Electronics

TELEPHONE:
01622 721444

WEBSITE:
dynaudio.com

Denmark's Dynaudio operation is one of relatively few brands to enjoy success in both the professional and domestic hi-fi speaker markets – one often notices Dynaudio speakers furnishing BBC TV studios, for example.

However, that's partly due to the high-power handling conferred by the use of extra-large-diameter voice coils on many of its bass/mid drivers. A feature that doesn't appear to be a part of this new Excite range, which seems to be more obviously oriented towards the price-sensitive home hi-fi marketplace.

The X16 sits one rung above the smallest model in the Excite range, which explains why the speaker is a little larger in both volume and main driver than the group average. Our samples came finished in the currently fashionable high-gloss black, just one of half-a-dozen options that include high-gloss white and a choice of four real-wood veneers (maple, cherry, rosewood and black ash). While the high-gloss versions are painted the same on all six faces, the veneered models have a dark charcoal front panel.

Accommodating that 180mm bass/mid driver explains why the X16 looks rather squat compared to the others in the group. However, the front vertical edges have a neat chamfer that slightly softens the lines.

The bass/mid unit has a 125mm diameter cone in a mineral-loaded plastic called MSP (magnesium silicate polymer). The tweeter uses a 28mm fabric-dome diaphragm, and both units have bright frames/faceplates. The two units are linked by a simple crossover network that uses high-quality components and gentle, first-

order 6dB/octave slopes. This is fed from a single terminal pair that shares the back panel with a generous size port.

SOUND QUALITY

Despite its fine neutrality and good imaging, our *Blind-Listening Group Test* panellists didn't warm to the Excite X16's performance. Indeed, excitement was one thing that seemed to be singularly lacking in this case.

Pertinent quotes from each of the four panellists included the following: Number one: 'Very competent [but] lacking some crispness and involvement.' Second panellist: 'boring if neutral [and] spacious...bland if dynamically literate...very matter-of-fact, soulless.' A third listener: 'Soft-sounding on kick drum (they don't rock); seems to lose its pace when something a bit demanding comes on.' And finally: 'Monotone bass, very average detail, slow.'

Although they're genuine enough, not all the comments were as critical as those quoted above. The Excite X16 undoubtedly has some real strengths, in its fine neutrality, lovely balance and quite expressive dynamics. It certainly shows greater power and bass weight than the group average, but hands-on listening did tend to confirm the test findings that it's



also a bit sluggish, and lacks the timing and coherence of the best in the group. Furthermore, it somehow also lacks sweetness and can get uncomfortably 'edgy' when driven hard.

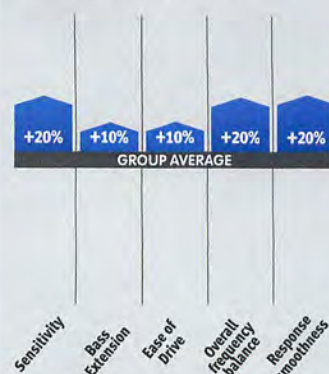
Although the Excite X16 seems to offer decent enough material value, and shows high standards of engineering throughout, it ultimately proved rather disappointing with musical sources. Perhaps the design criteria was based more on acoustic performance than musical reproduction?

TECH LABS

The combination of a larger bass/mid driver and enclosure with a port tuned to 41Hz does result in greater bass extension and sensitivity than average. On our measure the latter is a comfortable 88dB (although the company only claims 87dB), alongside a relatively easy amplifier load that stays resolutely above 5.5 ohms throughout (rather contradicting the spec's 4 ohm claim!). While the speaker delivers some worthwhile bass down to 30Hz, the 50Hz room mode is several dB too strong.

The pair match is very good and the in-room far-field averaged frequency response holds within +/-4dB above 60Hz. Output is a little strong at 130-300Hz and there's a modest peak around 1.4kHz. The presence shows a sensible degree of restraint, centred on 2kHz. The treble continues well up to 20kHz, but rolls off quite significantly above 8kHz.

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★
PRACTICALITY ★★★★★

LIKE: Fine neutrality and a good tonal balance gave fine speech reproduction
DISLIKE: Lacks the coherence and timing for best music reproduction
WESAY: Offers a high standard of neutrality, but lacks the speed for best music reproduction

OVERALL



Quadral Aurum Megan VIII £1,000

This very solid compact features a ribbon-type planar tweeter and a complex alloy main driver diaphragm

DETAILS

ORIGIN:
Germany

TYPE:
Standmount
loudspeaker

WEIGHT:
9kg

DIMENSIONS:
(WxHxD)
194x357x290mm

FEATURES:

- Ribbon-shaped planar tweeter
- Reflex port on rear
- Five standard finishes includes three quality veneers and gloss paint
- Twin terminal pairs add connection flexibility
- Shaped enclosure sides overlap at rear

DISTRIBUTOR:
Quadral GB & Ireland

TELEPHONE:
01785 748446

WEBSITE:
aurumspeakers.com

Little known here in Britain (though we did review a couple of models about five years ago), Quadral is apparently the third most successful hi-fi speaker specialist in Germany, which must mean that it's a good size operation by any standards.

The Aurum range is actually a higher performance sub-brand of the main Quadral operation, with its own website and an extensive range of ten loudspeakers, plus some electronics. We reviewed the Altan VIII standmount quite recently (HFC 350), so now it's time to cast an ear over the somewhat smaller Megan VIII model.

The family resemblance is unmistakable and build again seems very solid indeed. The front and top edges of the sides are heavily post-formed and are deeper at the bottom than the top (overhanging the inset back panel) and the speaker also has a separate base, which is rather unusual. The standard version comes in a choice of three real-wood veneers, though at extra cost, high-gloss white or black are also available, or even a choice of many different lacquer colours to order.

The 135mm main bass/mid driver has a 95mm alloy cone, made from a cocktail of aluminium, titanium and magnesium. The tweeter is Quadral's latest variation on its ribbon-shaped planar tweeter theme. It's an area-drive 22x50mm device, its 22mm width divided into four very narrow strips.

Twin high-quality multi-way terminals are fixed directly through an alloy plate, using wire for the optional links. Internal wiring is from Real Cable, and the network uses metal layer resistors and

polypropylene film capacitors. The enclosure is port-loaded at the rear, and foam blocking bungs are supplied, which could be useful if the speakers are placed close to a wall. An optional grille is supplied and attaches using concealed magnets.

SOUND QUALITY

The Megan VIII didn't fare too badly during the *Blind-Listening Group Test*, but it must be said it didn't raise any great excitement or enthusiasm either. Its key strength is a very well-ordered tonal balance, which delivers a very smooth and evenhanded sound across a broad spectrum of musical material and sound sources.

However, definition and detail are unexceptional and its reproduction did tend to become less clear as the music became more complicated. Simple material comes across rather well, although some midband coloration is audible on voices, especially when reproducing speech, which sounded a little congested and nasal in character.

Although the overall balance is very good, precise timing and midband transparency were not its strengths. Stereo image depth seemed rather limited and this was particularly noticeable when reproducing choral material.

Both frequency extremes attracted some criticism. Although the bass has



decent weight and authority, it also lacks agility, and has a tendency, in the words of one panellist, to 'waffle'. The top end sounds smooth, tidy and well judged in level, but could have been better integrated into the whole.

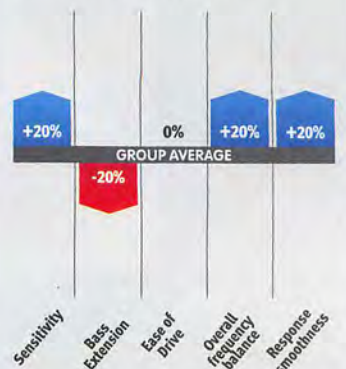
At the end of the day, there's no denying that the Quadral's Aurum Megan VIII produced a decent enough all-round performance, but one that was also sonically rather undistinguished. That said, it's unquestionably a good-looking, smooth and well balanced contender.

TECH LABS

Although the manufacturer only claims a sensitivity of just 86dB/W, our test gives a value of 88dB. That may be because our measurement is based on 2.83V (which corresponds to a consumption of 1W with an eight-ohm load), so part of this discrepancy might be due to the fact that the impedance sometimes drops to around 4.5 ohms in the bass region.

The far-field averaged frequency response looks very impressive, even under in-room conditions. Apart from the usual 50Hz peak, corresponding to the coincidence of the port tuning frequency with a major room mode, the only departures from the ideal are a dip at 120Hz (floor cancellation) and some leanness between 300Hz and 700Hz. However, the latter does leave the band from 800Hz to 1.3kHz looking a trifle exposed. Treble output is smooth and well maintained to beyond 15kHz, assisted by a hint of prominence around 12kHz.

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★
PRACTICALITY ★★★★★

LIKE: Solid build, attractive styling, classy ingredients and very evenhanded balance
DISLIKE: Sounds distinctly coloured, especially on speech
WESAY: It lacks precise timing despite the evenhanded balance

OVERALL



Spendor SP3/1R2 £1,650

Classic 1970s styling distinguishes this relatively large model from the pack

DETAILS

ORIGIN:
UK

TYPE:
Standmount
loudspeaker

WEIGHT:
9.5kg

DIMENSIONS:
(WxHxD)
220x400x280mm

FEATURES:
• Traditional 'classic'
styling

• Reflex-loaded via
rear port

• High-quality veneer
finish

• 180mm bass/mid
driver has polymer
cone

• Tweeter has wide
surround and small
dome

DISTRIBUTOR:
Spendor Audio
Systems

TELEPHONE:
01323 843474

WEBSITE:
spendoraudio.com

Spendor was founded by an ex-member of the BBC's Research Department more than forty years ago, primarily to make broadcast monitor loudspeakers, but that original – and with hindsight very radical – design soon became just as much of a favourite amongst hi-fi cognoscenti.

So much so that, despite changes in ownership and the development of numerous models that look better suited to domestic environments, those original monitors remain the inspiration behind Spendor's Classic R2 range of traditionally styled models.

The five models in the Classic R2 range are all standmounts with 'picture frame' front baffle edges around inset grilles. They cover a wide range of enclosure and driver sizes, but all feature Spendor's traditional approach to enclosure construction, using relatively thin but well-damped panels, albeit now executed in MDF, rather than birch ply.

First reviewed in *Hi-Fi Choice* some three years ago (*HFC 317*), this compact two-way SP3/1R2 is just one step above the bottom rung. Some might find the presentation somewhat old-fashioned; others will find its classically traditional appearance very attractive. It's discreet, commendably restrained, and nicely finished on all six faces in an understated real-cherry veneer (with black ash or dark walnut alternatives).

The SP3/1R2's enclosure is roughly 16 litres, reflex-loaded by a generous rear port. It has a 180mm Spendor bass/mid drive unit with a 120mm ep38 polymer cone, a wide surround, a high excursion

motor and a powerful magnet. Perhaps significantly, it operates up to a relatively high 3.7kHz.

Above that point the signal is handled by an unusual and fairly new tweeter design that Spendor (and others) use in a number of models. It's a 22mm affair with a 'proper' surround and a small 19mm dome. Twin terminal pairs are fitted straight through the enclosure, feeding the drivers via heavy gauge wiring, with high-quality crossover components and careful layout.

SOUND QUALITY

The SP3/1R2 did quite well with our panelists, however, its performance wasn't quite as good as we had expected, given its size and our very positive previous experiences with this model.

The reason is probably due to a degree of coloration associated with the peak around 1.6kHz that we found during the measurement programme, and which wasn't present on the samples we tested some three years previously. This might only be a small anomaly, but it does stand proud of the response as a whole and is bang in the zone where the ear is most sensitive, so there's some justification for assuming that it may well have been responsible for a mild degree of midrange nasal coloration on voices that the listeners noted.



That mild disappointment notwithstanding, the SP3/1R2 mostly lived up to its fine reputation, delivering a beautifully judged and essentially ideal balance between midband and treble, with fine coherence and a spacious, airy sound especially through the midband.

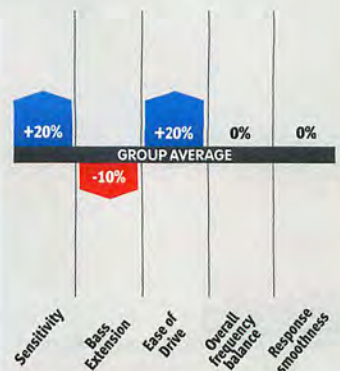
That mild midband anomaly meant that our latest samples of the SP3/1R2 fell a little short of the standard achieved by our 2009 originals, but this remains a fine all-rounder in most respects and deserving of our attention.

TECH LABS

Although the Spendor is the largest speaker in the group, this doesn't assist the bass extension at all, as its port is tuned to a relatively high 57Hz. Sensitivity, however, is a useful 88dB, exactly matching the manufacturer's specification, and this is achieved alongside an easy-to-drive amplifier load which stays above six ohms throughout.

Disregarding the usual 52Hz port/room-mode peak and the 130Hz floor cancellation, the in-room far-field frequency response is rather impressive right through the low-frequency region and all the way up to 1kHz. In most respects the response of these new samples looks almost identical to those tested three years ago. On this occasion, however, the previously flat response peaks up significantly at 1.6kHz, which tends to emphasise a general unevenness 1-5kHz. Above 5kHz the treble is smooth, flat and very well-judged.

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

PRACTICALITY

★★★★★

LIKE: Nice coherence and transparency with good stereo imaging

DISLIKE: Price is significantly higher than the group average

WE SAY: Balance is beautifully judged and sound is essentially coherent

OVERALL

★★★★★



Totem Rainmaker £1,100

Canadian manufacturer Totem has built a strong reputation with its attractive compact speakers

DETAILS

ORIGIN:
Canada

TYPE:
Standmount
loudspeaker

WEIGHT:
5.8kg

DIMENSIONS:
(WxHxD)
173x355x230mm

FEATURES:

- Strong, lightweight enclosure
- Small reflex port on rear
- Real wood veneer
- Borosilicate enclosure damping
- Tweeter dome has large rear cavity

DISTRIBUTOR:
Joenit BVBA

TELEPHONE:
00 32 15 285 585

WEBSITE:
totemacoustic.com

Totem has the rather quaint tradition of naming its models after the country's First Nations shibboleths, a procedure which is, frankly, rather more imaginative than most rivals manage.

The Rainmaker is a compact standmount, loading its bass/mid driver by a reflex-ported enclosure of just nine litres capacity. The shape is a little unusual, rather taller and less deep than most speakers of this size and the construction is strong, linking all the panels with properly mitred joints. Yet it's also quite light in weight, since mass tends to store energy. Totem also adopts its own unusual technique in using a borosilicate paint to line the enclosure and provide some damping.

Our samples came dressed in a mahogany veneer, which is attractive enough, if a trifle anonymous. Black and cherry are the veneer options, and satin white is also available.

The top and side front edges are slightly rounded, while those around the back panel are slightly chamfered, giving the whole thing a touch of class by emphasising the care with which it has been put together.

The 140mm bass/mid driver has an unspecified moulded cone some 100mm in diameter. This has a flared profile, an integral central dust cover and a stiffening raised edge. Although no separate grille is supplied for the complete front panel here, a small protective metal mesh covers the tweeter's 25mm alloy dome. The back panel houses twin terminal pairs that provide some connection flexibility, plus a small reflex-loading port.

SOUND QUALITY

The Rainmaker unanimously came a strong second place in the *Blind-Listening Group Test*, although it does seem a little odd that its character was decidedly different from the company's Arro (see p66), which was reviewed separately, but around the same time.

The Rainmaker might lack the smooth, even tonal balance of the Arro, but it's no less entertaining for all that. The bass end attracted praise for its depth and tunefulness and an ability to create a generous soundstage, while the speaker showed a fine ability to track dynamic changes and deliver convincing contrasts.

In truth, it can also sound a trifle untidy and sometimes a bit 'splashy' with emphasised sibilants. But it's also quite coherent and the tendency towards untidiness somehow doesn't seem to get in the way of the music, largely one suspects because the strong top end remains quite clean and sweet.

However, one listener did point out that this strong top could become a little fatiguing over time and that may well depend on the sources, amplification and ancillaries being used. Because the loudspeaker is at the end of the hi-fi chain, it can prove a little too revealing of any inadequacies introduced elsewhere. The Rainmaker works very well on a



high-quality system, but under some circumstances it might prove a little too transparent to limitations introduced further up the chain.

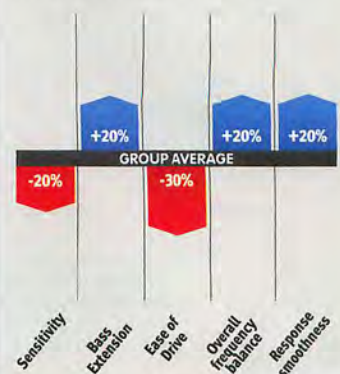
Fine timing, good coherence and a decent helping of dynamic realism all provide plenty of compensation for the Rainmaker's slightly wayward balance. Yes, the broad midband is a bit distant and the top end a little too strong, but the whole is much more than the sum of the parts here and the bottom line is that this is a fun loudspeaker that's always entertaining and informative.

TECH LABS

The Rainmaker delivers a rather unusual in-room far-field averaged frequency response trace. The bass extension is assisted by a relatively low port tuning frequency of 38Hz, while the usual 50Hz room-mode peak is less severe than average here. Under in-room far-field conditions average output is around 87-88dB from 30Hz to 300Hz, but then drops to around 84-85dB over the next 300Hz-3kHz. Output then recovers so that the treble proper (4-10kHz) is up at 86dB. Happily, the midband is impressively flat and the crossover transition very well handled.

Given the above unevenness, it's hard to pick a specific sensitivity rating, so we've picked a broad average 86dB, somewhat below the 87.5dB claimed by the manufacturer. Furthermore, the amplifier load is relatively demanding, twice falling to four-ohm minimum at low frequencies and the pair match is also a little weak through the bass and midrange.

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★

PRACTICALITY
★★★★★

OVERALL
★★★★★

LIKE: Fine communicator with a lively, transparent and coherent character

DISLIKE: Slightly odd tonal balance: strong treble, warm bass and restrained midband

WESAY: This is a very entertaining and involving speaker, with fine timing

Lab conclusions

Our six standmounts showed little variation in technical specifications, but when it came to overall performance, **Paul Messenger** detected some definite pros and cons

TECH LABS

Similar ingredients inevitably lead to very similar sets of test results, so it's hardly surprising that this group showed little variation in terms of such parameters as sensitivity and bass extension.

Even the Dynaudio and Spendor models offer only minor advantages in the rather complex equation that invariably links together bass extension, sensitivity, port tuning and amplifier loading.

The sensitivities of our group actually varied by an almost insignificant 2dB and even that distinction is only an eyeball estimate, since in practice sensitivity

varies significantly with frequency and can, therefore, only be a rough estimate.

The Dynaudio and Totem do have a slight bass extension advantage over the others, but that merely reflects the fact that their ports are tuned slightly lower, at 40Hz and 38Hz respectively. Pair-matching proved pretty good throughout, judged by the impedance curves, though the Totem did show minor mid-band variations.

Bass mode peaks and associated room effects aside, these speakers all delivered rather good frequency responses under in-room far-field averaged conditions, typically holding within +/-3dB or +/-4dB limits over

most of the band. However, while the tightest responses such as those shown by the Dynaudio and Quadral models might be evidence of firm engineering control, these didn't translate into the best sound quality as judged by our listeners.

A major reason for measuring the frequency response of a stereo pair under in-room conditions is to establish the optimum positioning for each model. Close-to-wall siting normally boosts the 50-100Hz octave by several dB. However, since all the models here showed some excess at 50Hz, all were used clear of walls and were, therefore, often a rather lean 60-120Hz.



TALKING POINT
 Under our conditions it's possible to criticise the bass alignments of all these models, because their port tuning frequencies tended to be very close to a significant (roughly 52Hz) gain mode. Even with the speakers sited well clear of walls, this combination results in a significant peak at 52Hz, just above a fairly rapid bass roll-off. This unwelcome scenario might have been better avoided by tuning the ports to a rather lower frequency, or by making the port tuning adjustable.

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Make/model	Amphion Argon 1	DALI Mentor 1	Dynaudio Excite X16	Quadral Aurum Megan VIII	Spendor SP3/1R2	Totem Rainmaker
Price	£1,179	£1,199	£1,080	£1,000	£1,650	£1,100
Sound	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Value	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Build	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Practicality	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Conclusion	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
	Superb sonic coherence and integration, plus well-judged bass, though top end is notably restrained	Veneered finish and very classy presentation, but sound is a bit lightweight and forward	Beefy standmount has plenty of bass power and welly, but lacks sweetness and can get aggressive	Fine presentation and solid build, but sound is rather coloured despite a lovely tonal balance	Classic styling and a well-judged balance, plus fine coherence, but a hint of nasality	Fine all-round coherence though a shade untidy with a notably strong top end

Key features

Size (WxHxD) mm	160x310x265	160x320x240	205x350x290	194x357x290	220x400x280	173x355x230
Driver Config	2-way	2.5-way	2-way	2-way	2-way	2-way
Main driver size(s)	1x130mm	1x135mm	1x165mm	1x135mm	1x180mm	1x140mm
Stand/floor?	Stand	Stand	Stand	Stand	Stand	Stand
Cabinet finish	Real wood veneer	Real wood veneer	Black lacquer	Real wood veneer	Real wood veneer	Real wood veneer
Bi-wire?	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes

Lab conclusions E = Excellent | AA = Above average | A = average | BA = Below average | P = poor

Sensitivity	87dB A	87dB A	88dB AA	88dB AA	88dB AA	86dB A
Bass Extension	38Hz BA	38Hz BA	26Hz A	35Hz BA	40Hz BA	25Hz A
Ease of Drive	+20% AA	0% A	+10% AA	0% A	+20% AA	-30% P
Overall frqncy balance	+20% AA	+10% A	+20% AA	+20% AA	0% A	+20% AA
Response smoothness	+20% AA	-10% BA	+20% AA	+20% AA	0% A	+20% AA

Blind-listening verdicts

Paul Messenger and the panel were impressed by all the models tested, but it's the clever Finnish design that takes the honours

ALTHOUGH THE INDIVIDUAL voices weren't entirely unanimous, the *Blind-Listening Group Test* panel showed pretty good agreement about the pecking order in this group of speakers. The six models assembled here show such great similarities to one another in terms of bass/mid driver size, enclosure volume and port tuning, that our modest measurement regime provided relatively little discrimination, over and beyond obvious tonal balance differences.

The main qualitative differences in the sonic performance of the various models seem to lie both at the low-frequency end of the spectrum and in the crucial integration of the drive units close to the presence band. However, the treble output in relation to the midband also determined the character of each loudspeaker.

It was the fine presence coherence through the crossover zone that really put the Amphion Argon 1 on the top of the pile. That major strength is underpinned by a tidy, clean bottom end that imbues the music with a real sense of purpose.

The most obvious criticism of the Argon 1 is that its top end is rather dull and certainly some listeners might well prefer a rather brighter top end. In which case the Totem Rainmaker could well fit the bill. It achieved a strong second place in the listening tests and also has a decidedly strong top end – or one could describe it as a slightly too-restrained midband. Whatever, it's an entertaining and communicative speaker, but can sound a little untidy at times.

The Spendor came third, and also has plenty going for it, with fine overall coherence and arguably the best-judged relative treble level, though some midrange nasality attracted criticism. It's the largest speaker in the group, which might be why its price is rather higher than the others.

The Quadral and Dynaudio both deliver sound quality that is notably solid and well balanced, though both suffered somewhat from colorations, and neither won over the panel in consequence. The DALI's rather lightweight and forward character also failed to excite the listeners. ●

THE WINNER IS...

THE AMPHION ARGON 1 not only topped the lists during the *Blind-Listening Group Test*, it's also one of the most attractive looking. It's all due to an exceptionally slim front view and a nice aesthetic balance between the main bass/mid driver and the tweeter's waveguide.

Although the walnut veneer on our review samples isn't a particularly pretty example of the type, several alternatives are available and the painted white and black versions look particularly tasty.

Sonically speaking, the seamless presence integration and the consequential overall coherence are its main strength. Timing is invariably good and stereo images are precisely focused with accurate positioning. Add in a tidy, clean and purposeful bottom end (which might lack weight, but avoids thickening effects) and you have a surefire recipe for success.



For a complete system solution based around our *Blind-Listening Group Test* favourites, look no further than these recommendations...

TURNTABLE:
Roksan Radius 5.2 and Nima tonearm **£1,399**

A stylish and shapely turntable that has undergone painstaking refinement over the years, the current Radius 5.2 is usually packaged with its metal/acrylic unipivot Nima tonearm. While not entirely free from coloration, it delivers a sound quality with notably superior rhythm and pace, alongside fine stereo imaging.



CD PLAYER:
Rega Saturn, **£898**

This stylish top-loader has a unique and quite recently developed CD drive mechanism that has more memory than most, the better to read the data accurately, as well as a clever 'ball chuck' to grip the disc with minimal inertia. The result is a very clean and involving sound, that is notably free from 'digital' character, making an unusually attractive all-round package.



AMPLIFIER:
Naim NAIT XS, **£1,455**

In some respects the NAIT XS can be seen as a 'stripped down' SUPERNAIT, lacking the digital input and DAC facilities, but offering similar upgradeability via external power supplies. Though somewhat less powerful on paper, it still has more than enough grunt for most applications and delivers a persuasive musical performance with plenty of sophistication.

