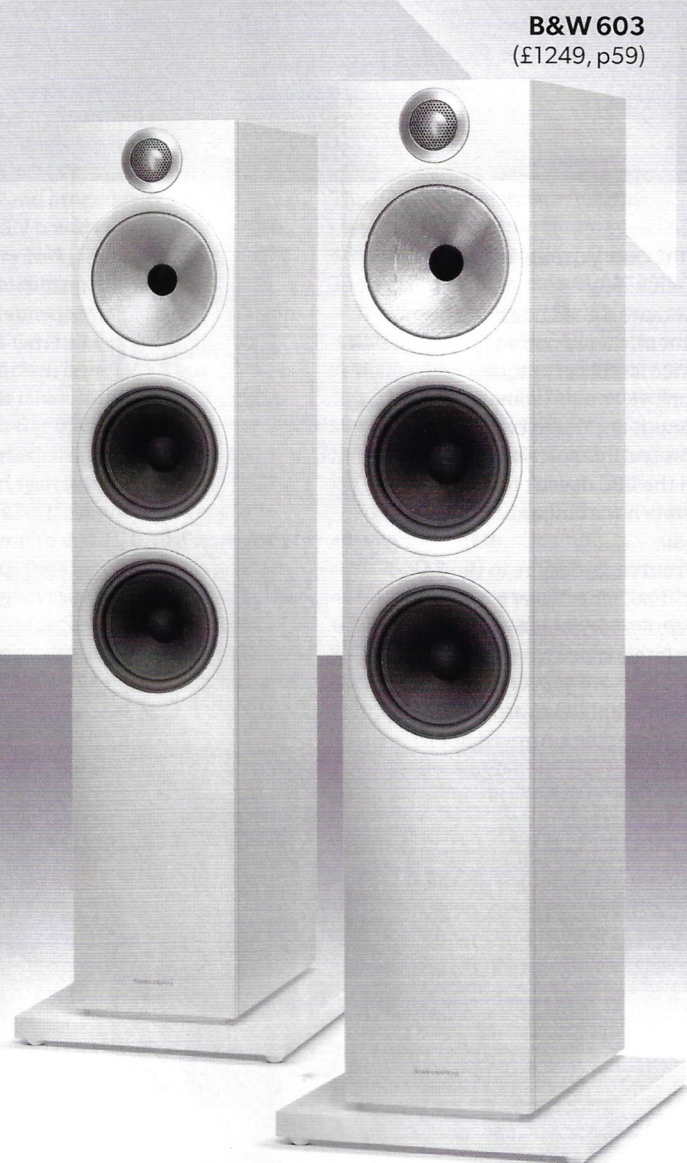


Battle *of the* grands

Four talented contestants and a four-figure budget. Each of these performers will play their heart out to win your favour. But there's only ever one winner



**Acoustic Energy
AE309**
(£999, p 58)



B&W 603
(£1249, p 59)

Things are getting serious when you have a four-figure budget to spend on a new pair of floorstanders. The compromises are fewer, and those engaging characteristics present in the best towers further down the chain can be complemented by a maturity truly befitting a hi-fi label.

Supremacy in this £1000 to £1500 sector of the market is particularly hard fought, as this quartet of five-star speakers attests. Of course, it includes our current Award winner at the price - Fyne Audio's superlative F501s - but also two pairs that have earned top marks in the time since we made that decision last year.

Those are from big brands, too - namely Acoustic Energy with its AE309s and Bowers & Wilkins with its 603s - so this group test is very much there for the taking.

Fyne isn't the only Award-winning brand with a horse in this race: Neat's distinctive Iota Alpha speakers took home a trophy when they triumphed over all competition up to £2000 in 2017. On paper then, this is anybody's race.

There will be a winner, of course, but none of these contenders deserves to be overlooked. We can only implore you to take this issue down to your local dealer and hear each pair for yourself - it will be an experience to savour.

Fyne Audi F501
(£1200, p60)



Neat Iota Alpha
(£1470, p61)



£999

Acoustic Energy AE309



WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★

We are busy souls here at *What Hi-Fi?*; so there's rarely time to sit and wait for a pair of speakers to run in.

But it's testament to Acoustic Energy's AE309s that, by the time the process is complete, we've almost forgotten that we've swapped them for our usual ATC reference speakers.

Not that our ATCs are replaceable with a pair of towers costing less than a grand, but, for that jump not to be immediately noticeable, the AE309s must be a pretty capable pair of speakers.

Run them in fully and they'll reward with a warm, cohesive sound

The AE309s certainly look the part. Their slimline cabinets, measuring 28cm wide and just under 18cm deep, each house a 28mm aluminium tweeter and a pair of 13cm mid/bass drive units configured in a 2.5-way arrangement.

The tweeters have been developed specially for Acoustic Energy's 300 series, using the company's Wide Dispersion Technology waveguides to better match dispersion to the woofers, with the promise of a wider listening sweet spot.

Those woofers feature a ceramic aluminium sandwich cone with a shallow profile and powerful long-throw motor system, and are aided in their bass response by a rear-firing slot-shaped reflex port.

These speakers harness power and range beyond their dimensions - they will fit into a snug space, but have the scale to fill a larger room. That versatility runs to the heart of the AE309s, and is echoed by their handling of music.

Patience will be rewarded

Of course, you need to give them a decent time to run in before you'll hear how capable they are - as well as screwing in the spikes included in the box - but almost immediately you'll get a sense of their innate musicality.

It's in the way everything hangs together; each piece of music is effortlessly whole. Rhythmically, the AE309s are tight but non-regimental; they can be playful and laid back when necessary, as much as they're able to hammer home a pulsing 4/4 beat.

Dynamically, they display enough range to accommodate a full orchestra but, most pleasingly, they also have that same fluid character that is comfortable conveying expression without being too up front.

It isn't the most spacious of soundstages. There is room for the music to breathe, but things are kept relatively compact so no instrument is left isolated or untethered from its cohorts.

We get a healthy dose of bass weight as well. It's not the most taut response we've heard, but that comes across as extra body rather than tubbiness; the AE309s are still capable of tracking a swift walking bassline and have the low-end punch necessary to make your guts wobble.

Rich and balanced

There is richness throughout the frequency range, extending nicely into a treble that toes the line between rolling off too much high end and allowing itself to become overly bright.

There's a comparison to be made with Neat's Iota Alpha floorstanders, in that the AE309s focus on the same kind of musicality over studiously analytical detail. Like Neat, Acoustic Energy has made an insightful pair of speakers, but these seem concerned more with conveying the mood of the music than being blindsided by resolution over expression.

A more spacious and detailed performance is available in the shape of the Award-winning Fyne Audio F501s, but you will have to spend an extra £200 for the privilege.

No fuss, plenty of fun

Passive speakers are generally plug-in-and-play, but for these Acoustic Energy towers that rings as true for their performance as much as it does for physically wiring them into your system.

This is simply a fun, well-rounded pair of floorstanders, as likeable as anything we've heard for less than a grand. We'd urge you to offer them an audition.

WHAT HI-FI?

RATING ★★★★★

SOUND

★★★★★

COMPATIBILITY

★★★★★

BUILD

★★★★★

FOR

- Music hangs together well
- Good timing and dynamics
- Decent detail
- Plenty of bass

AGAINST

- Strong competition

VERDICT

Acoustic Energy has produced a pair of floorstanders that are instantly likeable - and never lose that quality

£1249

Bowers and Wilkins 603



WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★

Whether it's budget or high-end speakers, B&W usually delivers on the engineering front, and the 603s are no different. Peel away the magnetic grilles - a first for the 600 Series - and you'll see what we mean.

Traditionally, a 600 Series speaker would sport B&W's trademark yellow Kevlar midrange cones. But this material has now been replaced by B&W's eye-catching silver Continuum cone material, first introduced on its flagship 800 Series Diamond. Here, the cone is actually part of a B&W FST drive unit.

FST drivers replace a traditional rubber surround with a specially designed foam ring. B&W claims the foam damps vibrations in the cone better, thus improving clarity and reducing distortion. The only limitation to the design is that it restricts the

movement of the cone, so it can be used only for midrange, not bass.

Hence the 603's 15cm FST driver is used with a pair of 16.5cm paper bass cones. Add a 25mm double-dome tweeter for high frequencies and you have a true three-way speaker, which is quite unusual at this level.

Unfortunately for the 603s, it feels like the driver design might have distracted B&W from the speaker's overall finish. The cabinet exterior doesn't look like it belongs on a product worth over a grand. It feels quite scratchy and basic, and the plinths seem like an afterthought. They're functional but don't do the 603s' appearance any favours.

B&W recommends listening to them without the plinths for the best audio performance, so it's a good excuse to leave them in the packaging. Compare the fit and finish of the B&W 603s to the similarly priced Fyne Audio F501s and, in our opinion, the latter come across as considerably more premium.

The 603s are rear-ported, so it helps if you can give them a bit of room to breathe. We'd suggest around 50cm from a rear wall, a decent width apart and slightly toed in to the listening position.

Elements in space

We start with *I'm A Ghost* by Australian hip-hoppers Hilltop Hoods. A solitary harp carves a furrow through the opening seconds of the track and the speakers track its plucking with intent. The track's vocal emerges front and centre, and is met with a mixture of piano and strings. The B&Ws deliver with focus and precision, but there's loads of space - it's a huge, expansive stereo image which allows you to dip in and enjoy each of the elements individually.

As the track ups the tempo and injects a fluttering bassline and more percussion, the B&W's step up their

game too. The speakers handle the dynamic shifts and flows of the strings with confidence. And confident is exactly how we'd describe their character. Whether it's bass weight, vocal clarity or general detail, the B&Ws sound as if they know how to handle a tune.

Switch to Muse's *Dead Inside* and the B&Ws hammer home their strong-willed sense of delivery. As the track drives along, every drum thwack hits with intent and purpose. The bass notes are deep and probing when required, the speakers reinforcing Muse's reputation for powerful stadium rock.

Strong vocal support

Arguably the B&Ws' biggest attraction is the way they handle vocals. That FST driver does a great job of presenting and communicating with the listener. We play Jorja Smith's *Don't Watch Me Cry*, and the B&Ws show just how attentive and revealing they can be. This piece sounds intimate and emotional - whether it's the subtle echo or the detail in the breaths between lines, the B&Ws have no problem extracting the information and telling you what's going on.

Our only slight reservation would be the 603s don't deliver the most relaxed of listens. If you prefer a balance that's a little less forward and more easy-going, you might want to consider the Acoustic Energy AE309s instead.

The 603s are the kind of floorstanders that won't struggle to sell themselves during a demo. They are blessed with a certain wow factor, especially with voices, that other speakers at this price can only dream of. And the listening experience just gets better, thanks to their wide soundstage, impressive sense of scale and insightful delivery.

If you have just over a grand to spend on a new pair of speakers, you should give the B&W 603s a whirl.

WHAT HI-FI?

SOUND



COMPATIBILITY



BUILD



FOR

- Stunning with vocals
- Impressively spacious soundstage
- Loads of detail

AGAINST

- Not the most relaxed sound
- Build lacks the expected luxury feel

VERDICT

A supremely talented pair of speakers, the B&W 603s are up there with the best at this kind of money

RATING ★★★★★

£1200

Fyne Audio F501



WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★

bass driver, nominal impedance of 8 ohms and 90dB sensitivity won't raise any eyebrows at this kind of money.

But Fyne Audio has brought some interesting thinking to bear. The tweeter - a highly rigid titanium dome - sits in the throat of the mid-bass driver in an arrangement Fyne calls IsoFlare. The aim is to preserve the time-alignment and the stereo imaging of the sound.

The bigger drivers are multifibre paper cones, with unusually sculpted surrounds. Fyne Audio calls this design FyneFlute, and claims it offers more efficient dissipation of cone energy and reduction of unwanted resonances.

A new approach to diffusion

And at the bottom of the cabinet, Fyne has employed some technology so singular its patent is pending. Called 'BassTrax Tractrix Diffuser System' (and we can't help thinking Fyne got a little carried away there - try saying it fast), it combines a fairly conventional downward-firing port above a carefully profiled, conical diffuser. This is designed to convert the standard plain-wave port energy into a 360-degree wave front.

All of this low-frequency regulation takes place behind some slatted vents, which also add a little visual pizzazz.

The F501s' grilles are, like many a rival design, held in place by magnets. Unlike many rivals, though, Fyne has fitted magnets to the back of the cabinet too, for safe, convenient grille storage.

We give the F501s the chance to show off with Diana Krall's version of *Almost Blue*. This is a high-gloss hi-fi recording, with painstakingly recorded piano and close-mic'd vocal supported by stand-up bass, brushed drum kit and economical guitar - and the F501s lap it up.

Initial impressions are of a broad, well-defined sound stage, solid stereo

focus and a lavish amount of detail. No nuance of Krall's phrasing, no creak of double-bass fretboard, no lingering decay of a piano note is ignored. But, while they're borderline-fanatical about laying out the last scrap of information, the F501s don't sacrifice the coherence or unity of a performance in the process. Timing and integration are excellent.

Upping the assertiveness quotient more than somewhat with a switch to *Burn With Me* by DJ Koze allows the F501s to show off their beautifully even, consistent tonality. This, along with sweet timing and transparency, paints a very convincing picture.

A move to *Rhapsody In Blue* by the Los Angeles Philharmonic under Leonard Bernstein allows the F501s to demonstrate their dynamic prowess. *Rhapsody* is full of attention-seeking shifts from ruminative piano to full-orchestra outrage, and the F501s handle each with confidence, snapping into the leading edges of notes, alive with well controlled drive and attack.

Punch and assertiveness

There's low-frequency punch, speed and body aplenty, and the treble response is absolutely as confident and assertive as it can be without becoming hard or tiring. Just make sure you avoid leaner electronics for your partnering kit.

And while we're laying out our few caveats, we don't think the F501s are that tolerant of background-music levels of volume. They remain cogent and listenable when quiet, but their vibrancy properly comes to the fore once the volume nudges above 'polite'.

It's a bold move to set a loudspeaker against these three capable rivals, but Fyne Audio has no problem with acting boldly. And, in the case of the F501s, that boldness is more than justified.

Fyne Audio has been around now for a couple of years now, but it's still relatively new company. Yet it has already made a significant splash with its comprehensive speaker range.

The F501s are the smaller of the brand's two floorstanders, measuring 98cm tall, 20cm wide and 32cm deep. In terms of build quality and finish, they're exactly what a £1200 floorstander needs to be - they're sturdily made, from the chunky spikes beneath the substantial plinth to the gently curved MDF-beneath-real-wood-veneer cabinets and the finish is smooth and seamless.

On a technical level, the F501s are an intriguing combination of the predictable and the unusual. The broad strokes are pretty predictable: a two-and-a-half way design using a 25mm tweeter, 15cm mid/bass driver and 15cm

Fyne blends the conventional with the innovative to great effect

WHAT HI-FI?

RATING ★★★★★

SOUND

★★★★★

COMPATIBILITY

★★★★☆

BUILD

★★★★★

FOR

- Well made and finished
- Some interesting technical aspects
- Detailed, engaging, confident sound

AGAINST

- Require judicious system-matching
- They sound best at reasonable volume

VERDICT

Remarkably accomplished in every respect, the F501s are serious contenders

£1470

Neat Iota Alpha



Neat's Iota Alphas are odd-looking things. Thanks to the mixture of knee-high stature and strangely angled appearance, it's difficult to take them seriously. Yet, if you believe that beauty is as beauty does, then these floorstanders are something to savour. They're for people that want great sound without room-dominating hi-fi.

We're big fans of the original Iota standmounters. They remain a superb utility choice; small enough to squeeze into all sorts of places but always performing well. The idea behind the Iota Alpha is to take this can-do attitude and add an extra dose of sonic authority.

The top half of the Alpha is straight from the original. A 50mm Emit magnetic/planar tweeter sits alongside a 10cm polypropylene mid/bass unit. However, here they're in a sealed compartment in an effort to help integration with the downward-facing 13.5cm pulp-paper bass unit. The bass is tuned by a rear-firing port.

Connection is limited to a single pair of high-quality terminals. Some may bemoan the lack of biwiring, but the fuss-free attitude of these Neats is reinforced by the singular connection.

Take care when you lift the speakers out of the box. That bass unit is exposed and it's easy to damage. There are some distinctive spikes in the packaging. You'll need these because they set the gap between the bass driver and the floor, and so to a large extent govern the quality of the low frequencies.

Build quality is good. These feel like solid boxes and the finish is pleasing too. Those spikes aren't particularly sharp, so may have issues piercing through thick carpet. It's worth persisting, as a secure footing will bring sound benefits.

These Neats aren't particularly fussy about placement. They need a bit of wall reinforcement - we place them around 30cm out into the room, with a hint of angle towards the listening position. The position of the tweeters gives extra scope for tweaking. Leave them on the outer edges, as we end up doing, and you'll get a wider spread of sound. Set them on the inside and you'll add a touch more focus. The optimum placement depends on your room and system.

While these speakers aren't particularly picky, they respond well to higher-quality kit. We think something like Rega's Elex-R integrated amplifier with a suitably capable source would be a good starting point. If you move on to more ambitious electronics the Alphas have enough sonic stretch to take it in their stride.

A good angle

If you were thinking short speakers mean a soundstage aimed at your knees you'd be wrong. That angled baffle helps throw the sound upward, resulting in a surprisingly expansive and spacious presentation that wouldn't be out of place from rivals at twice the height.

There's a good amount of precision here, and the presentation stays stable even when the music becomes demanding.

We start with Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake* and the Neats immediately sound way bigger than expected, delivering a sense of authority and solidity totally out of keeping with their size. If we'd first heard these speakers with our eyes closed we would have massively overestimated their dimensions.

The Alphas' presentation is wonderfully cohesive and appealingly robust, the three drivers integrating seamlessly. Dynamics are strong too, with larger-scale dynamic shifts handled with confidence, even at higher volumes.

Tonally these speakers aren't wholly even, but the deviation isn't enough to worry us. Once we start listening, it's the Neat's ability to capture the essence of the music that grabs our attention, rather than any tonal shortcoming.

Driven, yet refined

Moving on to Stevie Wonder's *Superstition* shows off the Iota Alpha's excellent handling of rhythms. It's surefooted and communicates the drive of the music superbly. There's plenty of attack here, yet there's also enough in the way of insight and refinement to keep us happy. Stevie's distinctive vocals come through with clarity and passion, while the hard-charging instrumentation is well organised.

While there is a good amount of low-frequency action, it's fair to say that one or two of the larger, similarly priced rivals in this test - notably the B&Ws and Acoustic Energy AE309s - will dig deeper and louder.

It would be unrealistic to expect such compact speakers to fill a larger room properly, but in a small to medium space they're fine for anything up to nightclub levels of sound.

These Neats are surprising speakers. If you're after fuss-free floorstanders that don't dominate your listening room there are few better alternatives. They sound way bigger than they look and deliver a combination of detail, dynamics and rhythmic integrity that competes with the best of the traditional competition. They're not about analysing the recording, more about having fun. And that's just fine with us.

WHAT HI-FI?

SOUND



COMPATIBILITY



BUILD



FOR

- Fun presentation and expressive dynamics
- Surefooted with rhythm
- Compact size

AGAINST

- Similarly priced rivals tend to go louder and deeper in the bass

VERDICT

Great speakers for those who want an entertaining sound without dominating the room

RATING ★★★★★



TEST WINNER

£1200

Fyne Audio F501

The trouble with winning an Award is that, for as long as you have it, it'll never be safe. In this four-way battle, Fyne Audio's grip didn't need to be merely vice-like, the trophy effectively needed to be superglued to its hand.

In the end, though, these remain the best all-round speakers at this price. In the right system - one that avoids the temptation to knock that lively treble over the edge to make it an irritant - the F501s build on the exceptionally entertaining character of the company's F302 floorstanders, offering a yet more spacious soundstage and plenty of extra insight for a wildly engaging performance.

An expressive quartet

The B&W 603s come close with their own exciting character, but lack a little of the dynamic subtlety, refinement and rhythmic precision of the Fynes, instead favouring a more forward presentation that might not be to everyone's taste.

Musicality is, again, no issue for Acoustic Energy's AE309 towers, which reveal their talents almost immediately and show good understanding of the timing and dynamics that is so core to expression. And they leave us with a pound to spare from our £1000 budget.

For the extra £200, though, there is greater space and analysis to be had in the form of the F501s, which represent a fine bargain themselves. Without ignoring the fact that that jump is a not-insignificant 20 per cent on top of the AE309s' cost, for us that is fine value for the added insight - if your budget is able to stretch that far.

More battles to come

Neat's Iota Alphas have their place, too, as their 2017 *What Hi-Fi?* Award will attest, and they put up a strong fight to retain their trophy last year.

They are somewhat restricted by their size, though, unable to reach quite the volume of their opponents in this group, and unsurprisingly not quite as capable of reaching so far into the bass; though given the F501s' preference of being played relatively loudly, they remain a go-to for those with a smaller room.

So Fyne Audio hasn't come through this battle without a few scars, and we'd not be surprised if there's another tussle like it before we get to Awards judging later this year.

For now, though, they remain top of our ever-lengthening list of recommendations for floorstanders at this sweet spot of the market.

HOW THEY MEASURE UP

	Acoustic Energy AE309	Bowers & Wilkins 603	Fyne Audio F501	Neat Iota Alpha
Max power	175W	200W	150W	100W
Impedance	6 ohms	8 ohms	8 ohms	4 ohms
Sensitivity	89dB	88.5dB	90dB	86dB
Biwireable?	No	Yes	Yes	No
Finishes	3	2	4	4
Dimensions (hwd)	90 x 18 x 28cm	99 x 19 x 34cm	98 x 20 x 32cm	45 x 20 x 16cm
Weight	22kg	24.1kg	18.9kg	6kg