



B&W 685 S2 £500 ★★★★★

The original 685s were instant stars in their class, but the well-judged improvements brought by the S2s ensure these speakers continue to stand out

"They're the speakers we'd put on to get our friends into hi-fi, and we can't think of a better reason to recommend the new B&W 685s." That's what we said about the S2s when we first tested them and, exactly a year later, we still feel the same.

For a £500 pair of standmounters these speakers are superb. No other speaker in this price category comes close to the sheer power and dynamic punch that they provide. Their layer upon layer of detail unearths nuance and texture that render instruments and vocals startlingly realistic.

Well-toned muscle

Nirvana's *Smells Like Teen Spirit* hits you like a wall of sound, the 685s packing in so much muscle and depth to the low end that you feel the aggression coursing through the grungy guitars and attacking drums. Basslines plunge deep, rumbling along with control and enthusiasm.

Each note stops and starts with neat precision. The rhythm is fast, punchy and agile - these speakers certainly know how to have fun.

Dynamically, the B&Ws are hugely impressive. They communicate the shifts in tone and the build up of

tension in The Dead Weather's *60 Feet Tall* with stunning subtlety, while the top end is free to soar in a clear, spacious soundfield. Vocals are nicely expressive, full of emotion in a way that really draws you into each song.

The S2s are revealing enough for you to hear exactly which of your albums are recorded poorly, but instead of making a fuss they simply apply their trademark gusto to deliver the most enjoyable performance possible. Play your old records through these 685s and you'll feel like you're hearing them for the very first time - it's a thrilling performance.

Added protection

The cabinet itself is sturdy, and the chunky speakers come in black or white finishes. Next to the gorgeous Triangle Esprit Titus EZ speakers the S2s feel just a little plain, but they look pretty smart when perched on decent stands.

B&W's distinctive yellow woven Kevlar mid/bass cone is certainly eye-catching, but what makes us jump with joy is the sight of a metal grille over the previously uncovered tweeter. It aids dispersion and means stray fingers will no longer be able to callously dent the delicate metal.

The S2 version was seven years in the making - plenty of time for B&W to work on the updates to the original 685s. Tweaks include improving the tweeter dome's rigidity to increase precision, and decoupling the unit from the cabinet to reduce vibration. There's also a new mushroom-shaped plug at the centre of the mid/bass driver for better damping. The result is a tauter, punchier bass than the original, and a clear treble that integrates smoothly with the rest of the frequencies.

A rare breed

The 685 S2s remain one of the most captivating speakers we've heard at this price. The agile, musical Triangle Esprit Titus EZs are the only others in this test able to worry them. We urge you to listen to the B&Ws - we guarantee they'll leave you with a huge grin on your face.

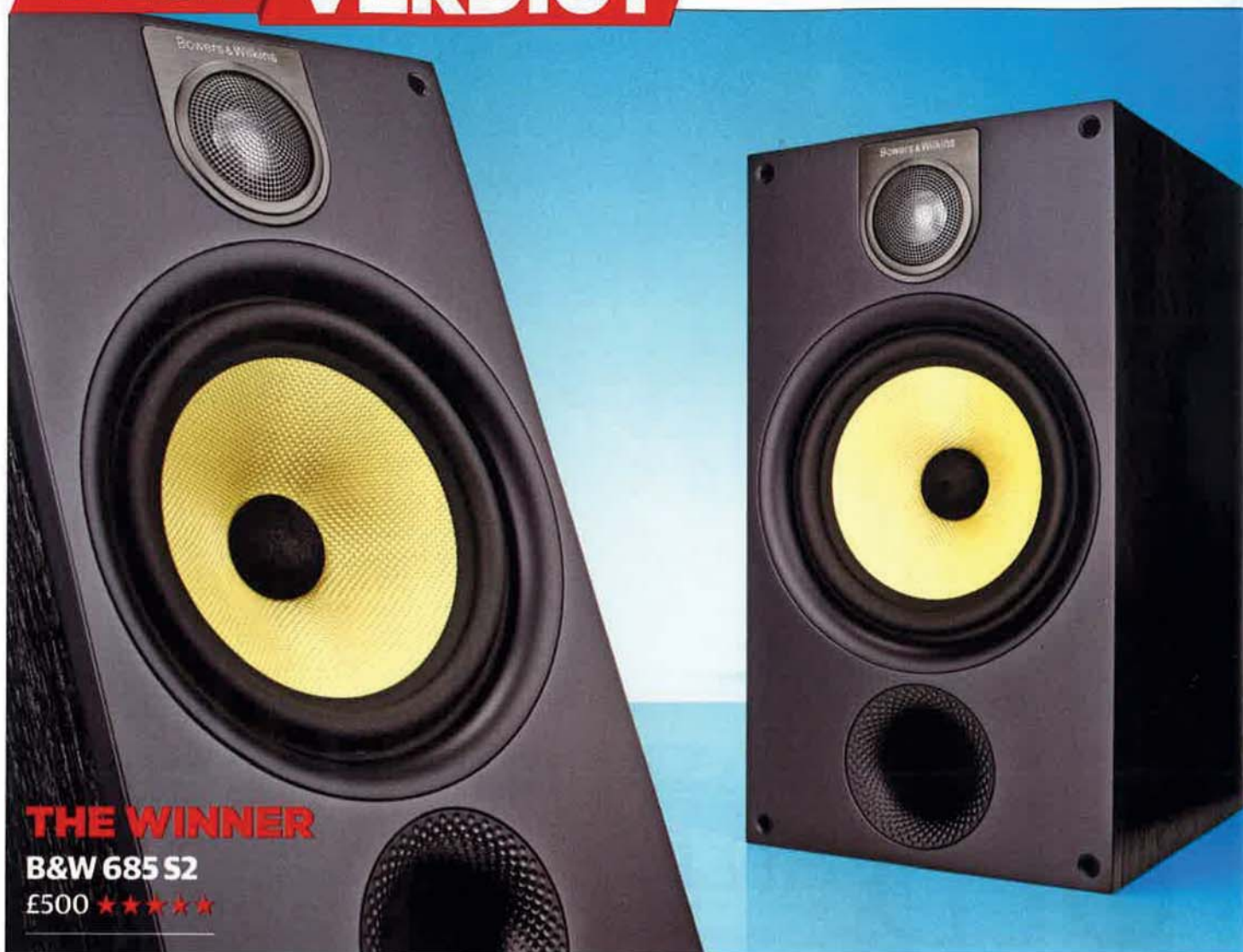
Rating ★★★★★

FOR Powerful, muscular sound; clear, precise and agile; deep, rich bass; stunning detail

AGAINST The Triangle speakers are just a tad more agile, and better finished

VERDICT There's no stopping B&W - these hugely thrilling 685s remain firm favourites

TEST VERDICT



THE WINNER

B&W 685 S2

£500 ★★★★★

They've had to fight hard against varied and talented opposition, but the dynamic and subtle **B&W 685 S2s** continue to keep their rivals at bay and claim the honours at this price

We have to hand it to them - all seven speakers in this test performed admirably. Each had a distinctive sonic flavour that made us pay attention, and we've come away elated that the mid-priced bookshelf speakers market is saturated with such competitive and entertaining options.

Two peas in a pod

Elac and Epos share many characteristics: compact, minimalist design and a lower price compared with rivals. But it's the Epos K1s that win out here. They may not have the insight and precision of the Triangles, but the K1s are nicely detailed and have a smooth balance. They cost just £400, too.

We wish the same could be said about the Elac BS 73s. While they sound perfectly fine in isolation they lack the energy and drive to really grab our attention.

The Focal Aria 905s, on the other hand, are serious about getting every aspect of their

sonic performance right. The rhythm is spot-on, the bass is taut and the top end soars but never sharpens. They should be a shoo-in for top marks, but they just lack the ability to have fun. More expressive dynamics and extra bass kick would help a lot.

If stark precision and control isn't your cup of tea and you'd prefer to be enveloped in a huge, spacious bubble of sound that's utterly pleasing to listen to, the Cabasse speakers are the ones for you. They're full-bodied and smooth without sacrificing too much detail, and the eager attitude is hugely enjoyable, even if the bass gets a little out of hand. Give these big boxes some space in your room, and you'll marvel at how open and expansive they sound.

Reputation maintained

Tannoy has a reputation to uphold, and we think the company can hold its head up high with the newly designed XT 6 speakers. More muscle and weight to the low end wouldn't go

amiss, but the lean presentation means the speakers can be agile, accurate and attacking. We're in two minds about the look of that integrated plinth, though.

And now we come to the two stars of this test. The entertaining B&W 685 S2s have been firm favourites for over a year, but the new Triangle Esprit Titus EZs have wowed us with their incredible agility and that gorgeous finish. If we could give both of them the win we would, but it's the B&Ws that ultimately get the nod. The Triangles can be fussy with partnering kit, they're £100 pricier, and harder to find - but we'd make the effort as they're such a talented and desirable pair of speakers.

The B&Ws remain unmatched when it comes to dynamics, bass depth and punch, and they have the subtlety and control to support that immensely captivating sound. They're just so much fun to listen to, and that's what makes us keep coming back to them. The 685 S2s are the undeniable champions.