

Bowers & Wilkins CM6 S2 loudspeakers

By Alan Sircom

To me, the Bowers & Wilkins 805 is the perfect balance of loudspeaker technology with a bit of art thrown in, coupled with the sort of size that makes them not so large they become ostentatious in most living rooms, but not so small that you need to make apologies for the lack of bass. However, it's now a bit 'spendy'. The latest 805 Diamond version comes in at £3,750 a pair; it might be worth every penny, but that's still a lot of pennies. What's needed, in my opinion, is an 805 at a more affordable price.

What's needed is the Bowers & Wilkins CM6 S2.

When a group of European journalists were invited over to Bowers & Wilkins' Visitor Centre in Worthing, West Sussex to see the new CM range earlier this year, it was clear the team there couldn't quite contain their excitement over the CM6. The whole range seems especially good, but the CM6 S2 was the one they kept smiling over, and for good reason; when they played it, the reviewers in the room immediately started throwing their weight around to try to secure it, and reviewers are a doughy breed, so that's a lot of weight-throwing.

A little bit of history is in order. Back in the middle of the last decade, Bowers & Wilkins (at a time when the company went by the name 'B&W') launched a single loudspeaker called the CM1, which was sandwiched between the 600 and 700 Series loudspeaker designs. This little two-way standmount proved so popular it spawned a whole range in and of itself, in the process pushing the 700 Series out of the running. This year saw the most radical change to the range since its launch (although in the case of the top CM10 floorstander, the original model was launched so recently it already featured many of the changes, so the S2 is a largely cosmetic upgrade).

The change from original to Series 2 is a fairly significant one. The Double Decoupled Dome tweeter seen in the new 600 Series has filtered up into this range, and this has allowed the company to redesign (and in the process, significantly improve and simplify) the crossover network in each speaker. The wood veneer, extensively cross-braced, rigid cabinet remains, although the lines are softened slightly. And one what might look like a purely cosmetic change actually contributes a surprising amount to the performance. Where the bolts holding the driver units were visible on the previous models, the new models are held in place with concealed screws, allowing a smoother baffle-step and better dispersion properties with a much stronger mechanical fixing between the drive unit and the cabinet. Midrange clarity is also helped by mushroom-shaped anti-resonance plugs, which were first used in the diminutive (and, to my mind, excellent) PM1 loudspeakers. ▶





“It also features Bowers & Wilkins’ Decoupled Double Dome tweeter, an aluminium dome unit bonded to a thicker aluminium ring to aid rigidity, which sits in a ring of gel to isolate the tweeter from its surroundings. The tweeter in the pod is therefore a Double Decoupled Double Dome Design... daring, and a bit of a mouthful!”

▶ The CM6 S2 is a wholly new design in the range. The top CM10 was the first model to feature a separate tweeter pod, and the CM6 S2 follows in its footsteps, as the new top of the CM series standmounts. In an obvious description of a concept, this top-mounted tweeter pod is called ‘Tweeter On Top’ technology, and the bullet-shaped pod is said to aid dispersion properties of the tweeter dome, while the loosely fixed tweeter pod is effectively decoupled from the main loudspeaker cabinet. It also features Bowers & Wilkins’ Decoupled Double Dome tweeter, an aluminium dome unit bonded to a thicker aluminium ring to aid rigidity, which sits in a ring of gel to isolate the tweeter from its surroundings. The tweeter in the pod is therefore a Double Decoupled Double Dome design... daring, and a bit of a mouthful! The protection grille across the tweeter is permanent and hard to damage.

The two-way design sports a 25mm aluminium dome tweeter and Bowers & Wilkins’ signature 165mm woven yellow Kevlar mid/bass cone with a dust-cap. The three CM S2 standmounts all share the same FS-CM S2 stand, which stands some 56cm tall and allows filling with damping material/ballast. This is fairly important to get right, and the stand should be considered a mandatory part of the CM6 S2 experience. Don’t fill the stand to the very top, because you can overdamp the speaker this way. In my small listening room, filling the stands about half full with high-mass material provided the best balance, allowing the bottom end to fill out, without the stand chiming in on its own. The rear Flowport does mean the loudspeaker is best served out into the room somewhat, but it doesn’t impose too great a series of demands on room position and half a metre or more from the back wall is usually good enough. The speakers are biwireable, although they don’t seem to be too fussy about whether the listener uses them in single-wire, biwire, shotgunned, or any other configuration. Purists might want to consider using better links than the ones supplied, but I didn’t feel a burning desire to go for more exotica on the speaker cable than the speakers themselves.

The loudspeakers come in three finishes; gloss black, satin white, and rosenut. We got the black versions in for test, and they really look the part. One thing to consider; follow the instructions on the box carefully when unboxing the CM6 S2; open, invert, remove box, remove bottom plastic ▶

▶ covering first, invert again, remove 'transit' packing, and you are away. Do not simply slit the box, reach in and pull at the first thing you get your hand on. As in life itself, being grabbed by the pods is not a good idea.

The first thing you notice in the sound stakes is just how precise the CM6 S2 loudspeakers are, almost irrespective of the amplifier to which they are connected. They are fast and taut in the bass, open and accurate in the midrange, and clean and natural in the treble. They present a wide and deep soundstage, and excellent solidity for a two-way design. They are articulate with voices in a manner not too dissimilar from their bigger brothers. And they present music as a cohesive whole, but (if pushed) can also strip the music to its component parts if used as a monitor. They also go extremely loud without complaint in a small room. This all combines in that 'precise' term that is first on the note pad.

How this pans out in musical terms is fairly easy to hear. It's all about control. Put on 'No Pussy Blues' from the eponymous first Grinderman album [Mute, CD] and play it at a fair lick to see what 'control' means. It means Nick Cave's guitar wrangling when the track wigs out in the middle eight doesn't swamp the rest of the band. It means when he spits "... still you didn't want to" you understand this on a fundamental frustrated-bloke level, and it means the bass underpins the track with surprising energy and malevolence, rather than just flopping along (which, given the subject matter, is the worst thing a bass line could do!).

If you switch to something less angst-ridden, the same thing happens. On the soft, reggae-tinged 'Garota' on the *Legao* album by Kings of Convenience frontman Erlend Øye [Bubbles], the precision of Hjalmar's reggae beat and the soothing, vocals can be mistaken for something out of the 1970s JJ Cale/Eric Clapton playbook, where it's something more subversive and brooding. This doesn't easily come across unless the system controls the sound very well, as the CM6 S2 is clearly doing brilliantly. Moving to any genre puts the same notes on the page; control, precision, good bass, great soundstaging, excellent detail with a vocal standing proud and articulate from the mix, and an honest overall presentation.

In some respects, the CM6 S2 is more of a universal loudspeaker than its bigger 800 Series brother. It's less demanding of source and amplifier and it appears voiced for a typical small domestic living room, rather than a heavily-treated listening room. You can temper this with judicious use of stand filling, but the CM6 S2 in a kind of studio-like, almost over-damped environment will sound almost undynamic, where in the domestic environment, it gets the balance right.

Don't think this as a back-handed drubbing of the 805 models though; order is restored when you consider a spot of high-end envelope-pushing. The CM6 S2 is a great loudspeaker that has a performance ceiling, where the 805 can take almost anything you put in front of it.

The Bowers & Wilkins CM6 S2 is definitely a speaker where head rules heart. It's a civilised, cerebral, and focused communicator, and that's something that comes as a refreshing change when faced with a world of slightly wild and wayward sounds. This is a grown up's loudspeaker, and not simply a stepping-stone to the 805. In fact, I think the CM6 S2 could just be the 805 for the rest of us. +



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Two-way, rear ported standmount loudspeaker

Driver complement: 1x 25mm

Decoupled Dome aluminium tweeter, 1x 165mm Kevlar cone mid/bass unit

Frequency response: 50Hz-28kHz \pm 3dB

Sensitivity: 88dB SPL

Nominal impedance: 8 Ω (minimum 3.7 Ω)

Crossover frequency: 4kHz

Recommended power: 30W-120W

Finishes: Gloss Black, Satin White, Rosenut

Dimensions (HxWxD): 40.3x20x30.1cm

Weight: 8.9kg

Price: £1,500/pr (stands £400/pr)

Manufactured by Bowers & Wilkins

URL: www.bowers-wilkins.co.uk

Tel: +44(0)800 232 1513