

B&W 805 Diamond Loudspeaker

Affordable Gems

Kirk Midtskog

Bowers & Wilkins introduced the Matrix 801 speaker in 1979 followed by a line of speakers based on the 801 in 1986. B&W has continued to update the 800 range every few years ever since. As such, it may be one of the longest-running speaker lines around. The most recent 800 Series Diamond revision was unveiled at CES 2010 with the most obvious change to the range being the inclusion of B&W's new diamond tweeter in the smaller 804 and 805 models and the absence of the 801 model. While some consumers will welcome the availability of the new diamond tweeter across the range, others will miss the option of buying an updated version of the 801 with its single 15-inch woofer instead of the double-woofer arrangement of the 800 and 802.

There must have been compelling reasons for B&W to offer the new diamond tweeter in the two lower-priced models in the range. I am glad it did because consumers can now take advantage of B&W's diamond-tweeter technology at price points that were not previously possible—yet more evidence of the increasing performance levels now available for considerably lower prices than just five years ago. The 805 Diamond costs \$5000 per pair and is available in cherrywood, rosenut, and piano-black gloss finishes. The matching stand runs \$700 per pair and is well worth considering. The FS-805 stand is a good sonic match to the speaker it is designed to support. The Dynaudio Stand4 also worked well, but I found that the 805 Diamond sounded a bit more fleshed out in the midrange with its own beautifully made stand.

Briefly, some of the improvements in the new 800 Diamond Series include four magnets in the tweeter instead of one, a new tweeter surround, Mundorf capacitors in the crossover, and specially designed oxygen-free speaker terminals and hookup wire. Please see Robert Harley's full description of the new tweeter and other technical differences between the former and new 800 Series in his review of the 802 Diamond in Issue 208. Retained design elements are the familiar tapered tweeter tube on top of a curved cabinet, Kevlar midrange drivers, the dimpled "flowport," and interlocking matrix internal bracing. Cosmetically, new polished aluminum rings surround the drivers and port, a magnetic grille attachment method now makes for a classier front-baffle appearance, and the former flat-black-ash



finish is replaced by a gloss finish. I can understand how some users may not care for the shiny elements of the new look, but I quite liked the piano-gloss black with aluminum rings of the review samples. The color scheme faintly reminded me of a black Jaguar sedan from the 1970s with a fresh coat of wax and polished chrome trim.

The 805 Diamond is a small, stand-mounted, two-way, vented-box speaker that weighs a fairly stout 26 pounds. The cabinet seems to be well damped. My unscientific test of running fingers on the various cabinet surfaces while playing steady heavy-beat music revealed relatively soft sympathetic vibrations. The top-mounted tweeter pod is further isolated from the main mid/woofer cabinet through a mounting bracket that includes a synthetic gel. This "floating" tweeter position also apparently allows for greater unimpeded dispersion and reduced cabinet-induced diffraction from the tweeter's wavelaunch. The first-

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order network—optimized for simplicity—crosses over at 4kHz. Sensitivity is listed as 88dB (2.83V, 1m), the nominal impedance is eight ohms, and the stated frequency response is 49Hz–28kHz (-3dB). The 120-watt Hegel H100 integrated amplifier (Issue 206) had absolutely no trouble driving the 805. While it was a bit trickier to place in my room than my reference Dynaudio C1, maybe owing to the 805's seemingly wide dispersion characteristics, I did not have to struggle with positioning to achieve fantastic sound in my setup. I ended up placing them with the 805 Diamond tweeters 31" from the sidewalls, 65" from the back wall, about 7.5' apart, and toed in so that they directly faced my listening seat. I gave the review samples over 200 hours of break-in. The fit-n-finish, packaging materials, and owner's manual are all first-rate at this price level.

As for sound, the 805 Diamond covers its range so well that I found myself wondering "How does B&W do it?" more than a few times—especially at this price. Its level of resolution and coherence, coupled with respectable dynamic punch, are simply beyond any speaker at or near its price point, in my experience. The 805's resolution is the kind that honors music itself, not the so-called hi-fi-hyped kind that usually results in a stilted sound that wears poorly over time. The 805 just seems to allow the unique moods of various music to come through without telegraphing an obvious artifice in the process. It is almost disarming in its refined "rightness," or, to put it another way, its overall performance is quickly recognizable as "fundamentally correct." If I had to sum up the 805's ability to dig deeply into recordings, I would say "detail without pain." This should not imply a relaxed soft focus at all—although one does relax into the music. Rather, a wealth of musical information is laid out for you without the nearly-ubiquitous side-effects of artificial zip and dryness that accompany too many speakers whose designs attempt to provide high resolution in a less complete way. It is not just about the diamond tweeter, either. The resolution extends seamlessly from the upper frequencies into the lower ones. The Kevlar mid/bass unit, crossover, and cabinet are all obviously working together with the tweeter to pull off the 805's compelling resolution.

Note the qualification: "Covers its range." As a small speaker, the 805 Diamond simply can't go much lower than the mid-to-upper 40Hz zone in my 12.5' x 17' listening room, and I really didn't expect bass much deeper than that. I have to say, though, the 805 gave chamber music, acoustic jazz, most pop, and even some full orchestra recordings credible weight and dynamic impact. My room tends to handle bass well, so I can't really surmise how the 805's bass will fare in other setups. I admit to being a bit of a sucker for bass extension, and that sense of power and "sonic mass" behind large-scale music is one of the reasons I like the Dynaudio C1 (\$7000)—a freakishly bass-extended small speaker. Even so, the 805 Diamond really did serve most music admirably well in overall range. Compared to live music, one could consider the 805's lower extension to be akin to sitting in a section of a hall that has a bit of a bass null while listening to an orchestra that did not use a full complement of upright basses and maybe a small concert bass drum. I have been to different concerts that varied greatly in the sound that the concert bass drum makes. In some cases, it sounds thunderous and carries a wallop that I can feel in my chest. In other cases, I have looked right at the percussionist as he struck a relatively small concert bass drum, seemingly

forcefully, and I barely heard it. My point is that the 805's bass portrayal is consistent with some live music experiences. The full majesty of a large orchestra or the nearly frightening propulsion of power rock will be short-changed by most small speakers, and the 805 Diamond is no exception.

Within its range, the 805's tonal balance is basically true to live music with perhaps just a touch of welcome warmth in its overall sound. As mentioned, it is also surprisingly dynamically alive for such a small enclosure. Kick-drum strikes carry respectable weight and impact in my system, for example. The upper-frequency extension is exemplary—as you might have anticipated by now. It is smooth, open, detail-rich, and consistently refined, even throughout wild dynamic swings that would normally cause compression and raggedness and make most of us turn down the volume. Somewhat like the low-noise Hegel H100 integrated amplifier in this regard, the 805 does not overlay passages of aggressive electric guitar and cymbals with its own clanky distortion or breakup. As a result, music has a kind of uninterrupted momentum that I find thrilling. The 805 allowed me to listen right through Tool's "Reflection" [*Lateralus*/Volcano] at full (but still sane) volume without strain, as the disc slowly progresses toward eruption by about the 9:20 mark.

Many large choral passages, when heard live, tend to have a whistling sound that whirls around the hall as singers really project.

SPECS & PRICING

Type: Two-way, vented-box system

Drivers: One 6.5" woven Kevlar mid/bass, one 1" diamond dome tweeter

Frequency response: 49Hz–28kHz (-3dB)

Sensitivity: 88dB (2.83V/1m)

Impedance: 8 ohms

Recommended amplifier power: 50W–120W into 8 ohms

Dimensions: 9.4" x 16.5" x 13.8"

Weight: 26 lbs. each

Warranty (parts and labor): Five years

Price: \$5000 (pair) in cherrywood, rosenut, piano-black gloss; FS-805 stand, \$700 (pair)

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ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Analog source: Basis Debut V turntable with Vector 4 tonearm, Benz-Micro LP-S cartridge

Digital source: Ayre C-5xeMP universal player

Phonostage preamp: Ayre P-5xe

Linestage preamp: Ayre K-1xe
Integrated amplifier: Hegel H200

Power amplifier: Gamut M-200 monos

Speaker: Dynaudio Confidence C1

Cables: Shunyata Antares interconnects and Orion speaker wire, Wegrzyn power cords

A/C Power: Two 20-amp dedicated lines, FIM receptacles

Room treatments: PrimeAcoustic Z-foam panels

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This music seems to be pretty difficult to recreate successfully in home systems—and is probably fairly tricky to record properly too, I would imagine. Morten Lauridsen's *a cappella* movement "O nata lux" from *Lux aeterna* [Layton/Hyperion] has a crescendo that will cause some speakers to break up miserably and the whistling effect comes across as a recording flaw. The 805 sails through this and similar passages that capture some of that live choral whistling quality. The 805 takes care of the strain factor, yes, but the real boon here is that it puts the whole thing together in a way that captures music's ability to spark our imaginations and emotions. Some of the more touching moments of the Lauridsen CD caused me to tear up.

Imaging and soundstaging are just fabulous. Have I heard better? Of course, for considerably more money. I can tell you that the 805 Diamond conjures a wall-to-wall, deep, open soundstage that is populated with images that are stable and solid. Top-to-bottom coherence throughout its range, together with very good imaging, helped the 805's cabinet blend into the soundfield and get out of the way. I could "peer" into a good recording's portrayal of images and space with ease. I could readily get a sense of the back and sidewalls of the venue on "Meditation No. 2" from Bernstein's *Mass* [Bernstein, Oue/Minnesota, RR] as cellist Anthony Ross and the accompanying orchestra unfolded this odd, almost disturbing music. Again, a transporting experience.

How does the 805 Diamond stack up against the Dynaudio Confidence C1, my reference since late 2007? The C1 is almost as musically communicative in general, and it certainly has noticeably lower bass extension and greater dynamic impact. This will appeal greatly to those of us who crave that visceral tug that comes from the perception of sheer physical presence of large-scale music. The C1 has shockingly deep and powerful bass for a speaker of its size (at least into the upper 20Hz range in my room) and is, in a way, more musically impactful when the music program has deeper bass and dynamic content. Where the 805 Diamond takes over is in its unflappable resolution from the midbass on up. The 805 sounds just a bit faster, just a bit clearer, and just a bit more real within its range. The C1 gets imaging and the spatial context of records very well, but the 805 just gets it a tick better. As I hinted earlier, I suspect that the C1 may be a bit more forgiving about proximity to room boundaries.

As you can tell, I loved the 805 Diamond. Its overall performance went well beyond its \$5000 asking price. The fine level of resolution it brings to bear is almost planar-like, and it packs respectable dynamic verve that does lots of music justice. Its bass response is sufficient for many music collections and listening environments. Personally, I was beguiled by the 805's winning way of transforming records and CDs into deeply involving musical experiences. This is what it is all about for me: technical accomplishment in service to art. **tbs**

RMAF 2010 Best of Show



"...the best USB DAC I had ever reviewed."
Steven Stone, *The Absolute Sound*, Feb. 2010



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