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Hi-Fi Choice

PASSION FOR SOUND

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INSIDER
The art
of studio
mastering

Stereo starters

**Bargain standmounts
with sensational sonics**

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Acoustic Energy, Klipsch,
Novafidelity & Triangle

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the best decks for every budget



EXCLUSIVE

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Group test

STANDMOUNT LOUDSPEAKERS £200-£270

Cute starter speakers that make it big

Great-sounding standmount speakers have never been more affordable, but which of these six entry-level designs truly hits the sweet spot? **David Vivian** decides

SMALL, INEXPENSIVE SPEAKERS have been the key to many a great-sounding hi-fi system over the years. Back in the mid-seventies, conventional 'even-split' system budget allocation wisdom was turned on its head, thanks to an idea – seeded by Linn boss Ivor Tiefenbrun and enthusiastically nurtured by sections of the hi-fi press – that the best route to a fine-sounding system without breaking the bank was to spend the lion's share of the money on the source (say, a Linn Sondek LP12 turntable) and the least amount on the speakers, which usually meant a decent budget standmount chosen from a few regular faithfuls. Some saw this as a ruse for Mr T to sell more LP12s, but the logic of starting with the best possible source (an expensive amp and speakers would only make a mediocre one sound worse) was solid enough and many 'hierarchy-configured' systems did sound outstandingly musical, even if they didn't go particularly loud or have much bass.

A lot has changed since then, of course – not least the advent of digital, which to some extent has removed the need for a heavily front-weighted budget split. The thing is, had any of the beer-budget bijou boxes doing battle here been around 40 years ago, those Sondek-on-a-shoestring systems would have sounded not merely very good, but quite superb. It's hard to overstate this, but today's starter standmounts wipe the floor, ceiling and next door's back yard with their distant antecedents.

The difference is clear

With the proviso that they are positioned with some care on sturdy stands, fine sonics are a given with enough transparency to track qualitative source upgrades beyond their modest price and right into the foothills of the high end. It sounds unlikely for a group that starts at £200, but what we have here are some of the biggest bargains in hi-fi and one is a true giant killer. To find out which, read on. ▶



ON TEST



Acoustic Energy AE100 £199 p27
There's a simplicity to the littlest AE that's both appealing and underwhelming. But this is a British brand with fine form, so don't let the plain façade fool you.



DALI Spektor 2 £199 p29
Effectively Denmark's answer to the AE at the £200 mark, the more distinctive-looking Spektor 2 is slightly bigger, slightly more traditional, but DALI through and through.



Fyne Audio F301 £250 p31
Fledgling brands usually require a little development tweaking before they hit their stride, but Fyne Audio's budget baby arrives as the polished article with much to prove.



Jamo S803 £249 p33
With Dolby Atmos compatibility, the second Danish contender clearly has one foot firmly in the AV camp and with no little aesthetic flair, but can its stereo chops prevail?



Q Acoustics 3020i £249 p35
The 3020i was something of a budget sector superstar, but its slightly larger replacement boasts even shinier tech and so enters the arena as the speaker to beat.



Wharfedale Diamond 11.1 £270 p37
The largest, priciest speaker in the group also has the longest heritage and a formidable reputation to defend, but there's no question it has its work cut out here.



Q Acoustics 3020i **£249**

The 3020 was the budget standmount to strike fear into rivals for many years, but does the 'i' still have it?

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Q Acoustics 3020i

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
2-way standmount
loudspeaker

WEIGHT
5.5kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
170 x 278 x 282mm

FEATURES
• 1x 22mm soft
dome tweeter
• 1x 125mm
mid/bass driver
• Quoted sensitivity:
88dB/1W/1m (6ohm)

DISTRIBUTOR
Armour Home
Electronics

TELEPHONE
01279 501111

WEBSITE
qacoustics.co.uk

Even if it were new, the recently superseded 3020 (HFC 426) would still be a fine standmount shooting for top honours. But, as the larger of the two offerings in the new 3000i series lineup, the 3020i promises to be nothing less than formidable.

The 3020i boasts 25 percent extra internal volume, which means better low-frequency performance with enhanced sensitivity and bass extension. The 125mm mid/bass driver uses a cone precision formed from impregnated and coated paper and mated with a newly developed, low-hysteresis, rubber surround – claimed to accelerate without flexing and stop very accurately without unwanted resonances. The 22mm micro-fibre soft dome tweeter is decoupled from the baffle to isolate it from vibrations from the mid/bass driver and has a wide surround for increased dispersion.

There are four finishes available: graphite grey, carbon black, Arctic white or, as here, English walnut. The neatly integrated binding posts and natty chrome driver trims look distinctly up market, too.

Sound quality

Group Tests are unbeatable for the juxtaposed contrasts they often pose, and here we have a big one. After the

stripped down, foot-to-the-floor presentational style of the Jamo, the 3020i is a real exhale... and relax moment. It's the "Chill buddy, I've got this" speaker of the group and whether it's hosting Donald, Diana, Stanley or Boz, is an absolute delight from start to finish. The night might belong to Mona, but Fagen's laid back groove is palpably the 3020i's. The QA's impressive hi-fi skillset is definitely a factor here. Its smooth, extended treble has fine inner detail and integrates seamlessly with a midband that is poised, open and articulate, which in turn, melds with the weighty, tuneful bass. The Fagen cut is a good test here, its lower synth-generated octaves are recorded with perhaps a tad too much prominence in the mix, which can easily sound bloated and ploddy on less-disciplined speakers. But the 3020i walks the line perfectly; its bass sounding full and firm with no sign of dissolving into turgidity.

But it's the musicality and coherence that stuns – the sheer scale and generosity of the sound and its unerring ability to lay bare the spirit and emotional power of the music. The Stanley Clarke Band's sci-fi-infused workout might hit new heights of fiery, grandiose absurdity, but it's the gentle beauty of *Desperado* that shows the speaker's true class.



OVER-ACHIEVER

Claims for the new 3020i are predictable and straightforward: better sound and smarter looks. Yet nudging the bar a little higher isn't so simple, you might suppose, when the superseded 3020 was already exemplary in both respects. But with Q Acoustics having achieved so much with its Concept 500 flagship, trickle-down is an obvious and potent gift, most critically the tech it calls P2P. This stands for point-to-point bracing, which according to QA supplies internal support in areas of the cabinet that need stiffening, including an extra precision-cut damping panel – thus eliminating sympathetic resonance. Cue a quieter box and more focused, accurate and low-distortion fidelity.



The deep warmth and husky veneer of Diana Krall's vocal is exquisitely portrayed, the accompanying piano and massed strings possess a shimmering, scalp tingling presence. Strength and subtlety, the 3020i delivers both with apparent ease ● ▶

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

EASE OF DRIVE

★★★★★

LIKE: Beautifully judged and balanced sound quality; effortless musicality

DISLIKE: Cabinet depth will be too much for some stands

WESAY: More than just a sale pair of hands, the 3020i has real star quality

OVERALL

★★★★★

Group test verdict

It's been a week of joyous ups, a few downs but never a dull moment carrying out this showdown, and now it's time for **David Vivian** to reveal his verdict

I SUGGESTED AT the start that today's breed of entry-level standmounts aren't merely good enough to make a similarly budget-orientated system sing, but good enough to stick around as front-end components are upgraded, possibly in steps, to a very high standard. Or put another way: for a given budget you can spend more on a classy source. Either way, I'm glad to report that the proof is right here and, as someone who appreciates a conspicuous bargain, it's very heartening indeed.

The Jamo S 803 has some surprising up-market virtues – not least its

speed, verve and remarkably punchy, agile and articulate bass performance – but it doesn't quite hit the sweet spot in other respects with a lean tonal balance that can rob music of its natural warmth. Placing the Wharfedale Diamond 11.1 fifth has been the result of much head scratching as, in many ways, it's the most able speaker here (as you might expect at the price) with great bass, fine midband insight and a silky treble. It does absolutely nothing wrong and an awful lot right. Up against the fourth-place Fyne Audio F301, however, it doesn't sound quite

as fresh, open, rhythmically alert and fleet of foot. A significant scalp for the Scottish newcomer.

In third place is the Acoustic Energy AE100, a brilliantly executed small box that punches way above its weight, but also has exceptional refinement, composure and timing, even with the wick turned up. It's edged out of the runner's-up spot by the dazzling communication skills, resolution and sheer musical brio of the DALI Spektor 2, where every track comes with a sense of occasion that leaves me wanting more.



The speaker that won't be denied, however, is the truly redoubtable Q Acoustics 3020i, which may not dominate in any one hi-fi metric but puts it all together like no other speaker here to deliver a potent, fully rounded musical experience that will keep you listening.

Make/model	Acoustic Energy AE100	DALI Spektor 2	Fyne Audio F301	Jamo S 803	Q Acoustics 3020i	Wharfedale Diamond 11.1
Price	£199	£199	£250	£249	£249	£270
Sound	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Value	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Build	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Ease of drive	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Overall	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
	Underestimate the AE100 at your peril – never mind its small box, feel the quality and the power	With dynamism and delicacy, this doesn't let go of the music. One listen and you'll be hooked	Its looks may not be for all, but its musical skills are right up there with the very best at the price	This certainly knows how to create a stir with a sound that makes up in speed what it lacks in body	Tired of the old 3020 routinely cleaning up in the standmount sector? You'd better go hear this	No longer a small-change tiny tot, but something more substantial with a sound to match

Key features

Configuration	2-way	2-way	2-way	2-way	2-way	2-way
Bass reflex port	Rear	Rear	Rear	Front	Rear	Front/side
Dome tweeter	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Bi-wiring	No	No	No	No	No	No
Finishes	Black & wood	Black & wood	Black & wood	Black & wood	White, black, grey, wood	White, black & wood

TRY WITH THESE

INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER: Audiolab 8300A £900 HFC 404

Unlike a number of amplifiers currently on sale, the Audiolab is exclusively analogue with plenty of inputs including an MM/MC phono stage. Rated at 2x 75W, the Class A/B design has a clean and insightful sound that will complement the talents of the warm and fluent Q Acoustics 3020i very well.



DAC: Chord Electronics Hugo 2 £1,800 HFC 428

Chord's cutting-edge converter might seem on the expensive side to team with a £250 standmount speaker, but it makes a great partner for the Cambridge CXC transport (right) and there's no question the Q Acoustics 3020i has the muscle and transparency to justify it.



CD TRANSPORT: Cambridge CXC £300 HFC 401

If you aren't ready to give up on CD just yet, the CXC is a keenly priced transport that will extract the best from your DAC. Choose something like the Chord Electronics Hugo 2 (left) or Rega DAC-R (HFC 405) and you'll have a source that will do justice to any of these speakers.

