

BOWERS & WILKINS 685 LOUDSPEAKER

Raising the Bar in Affordable Loudspeakers

Wayne Garcia

Let's get straight to the point: B&W's 685 is a terrific little loudspeaker. It has impressive tonal balance, tremendous rhythmic authority, conjures a nice, open soundstage, has impressive if not super-extended bass response, a singing treble, plays loudly without strain (unless you're a semi-crazy headbanger), and, thanks to a forward-firing port, can be mounted on the wall, shelf, or B&W's own FS-700/CM stand. Sweetening the deal, the 685 retails for just \$600 the pair and is finished to a degree that in my experience is unsurpassed at its price.

The second least expensive model in B&W's newest 600 Series—others are the 686 (\$450), 684 (\$1000), and 683 (\$1400)—the 685 replaces two previous models, the 602S and 603S. The company's press release proclaims the 685 to be "the very best value bookshelf Bowers & Wilkins has ever made." As someone jaded by the hyperbole such press releases often contain, I'm glad I read that after I started listening to the speaker. Because with such prompting, I'd probably dismiss such a notion—without it, I wholeheartedly agree.

A great deal of the 600 Series' value can be summarized in just one word: China. Recent tainted-toy stories have left a bad impression about goods imported from that county, but there's no doubt that, without China, the specialty audio industry would have a very hard time building any affordable gear at all, let alone the veritable bounty of moderately priced—and increasingly better-sounding—components we've seen over the past several years. But rather than relying on OEM-sourced products, B&W invested heavily in its own purpose-built Chinese factory, where B&W's engineers and factory managers spent better than two years overseeing construction and training the staff of what is said to be a state-of-the-art facility.

B&W is also proud that, perhaps more than ever, it's been able to bring technology from its most expensive speakers into the realm of its least



expensive—the most obvious example of which is the 600 Series' redesigned Nautilus tube-loaded aluminum dome tweeter, directly descended from B&W's top-of-the-line 800 Series. This new design upgrades the ceramic magnet found in previous models with a stronger and superior neodymium magnet, and its slightly smaller diameter allows for closer placement to B&W's classic Kevlar midbass driver. According to B&W, the closer physical alignment of the drivers results in greater coherence and improved vertical dispersion, tightening the 685's imaging focus. Other technical advancements, like improved surround material, better voice-coil and lead-out wires, and a copper-plated pole piece, allow for a lower resonance frequency and greater high-frequency extension before breakup, resulting in a bandwidth more than double that of its predecessor—out to 50kHz. For a speaker in this range this is not merely impressive, it is downright remarkable.

The woven Kevlar mid/bass drivers are not dramatically different from those found in earlier models and incorporate familiar techniques such as a fixed center "bullet" that is said to reduce standing waves in the cone and enhance smooth response, and die-cast baskets that minimize resonance as well as rear-wave "turbulence." These driver upgrades have also resulted in simplified crossovers, while the cabinet's front-baffle thickness is now a significant thirty-percent greater than that of the old series, adding to the cabinet's overall rigidity.

Finally, the Chinese factory has allowed B&W to add heretofore unaffordable luxury touches, such as a more elegantly painted "soft touch" matte-black front

baffle and screw-free driver trim-rings, making for an unusually handsome look when the grilles are removed (they sound better that way, too).

All of these technical and cosmetic improvements are fine, but the proof is in the listening. I began with René Jacobs' reading of Mozart's *Le Nozze di Figaro* [Harmonia Mundi CD]. Performed on period instruments, this is a swiftly paced, beautifully sung performance that immediately established the 685's qualities. These begin with a rhythmic drive that is lively, dynamically varied, and consistently exciting. It also allowed the 685 to demonstrate its honest timbres, fine balance, and impressively seamless frequency range. The brief overture to Act II also revealed nice, somewhat leaner and more grittily textured string and wind tones than we're used to from modern instruments, as well as showing that the 685 can transform its soundstage as recordings demand. Soprano Véronique Gens' Countess demonstrated the 685's midrange purity, as did the spoken-word recitatives. Though the 685 initially sounded a bit ragged with female voices, with time

and driver break-in this dissipated, though never fully disappeared.

This slight lingering edge, however, is also one of the qualities that make the 685 such an exciting speaker to listen to. Play, for instance, the White Stripes' latest, *Icky Thump* [Third Man/Warner]. I can't recall the last time that such a diminutive and inexpensive speaker got my blood pumping so much, but the 685's punchy, textured bass, which doesn't really go much below 45Hz but feels like it does, allowed Meg White's artfully primitive drumming to shine. This combined with Jack White's crunching chords made for a viscerally rousing experience.

I could also tell you how pure yet full of soul Bettye Lavette's voice was on *I've Got My Own Hell to Raise* [Anti], or how the 685 opened up a notably airy, three-dimensional, and focused soundstage during a 20th-century piece such as Luciano Berio's *Differenzen* [Mainstream LP]. But the main thing to know is what I said at the outset. B&W's 685 is one terrific little loudspeaker. It may very well raise the bar for what we expect in this price class. **TAS**

Specs & Pricing

Type: Two-way, front-vented loudspeaker
Driver complement: Nautilus tube-loaded 1" aluminum dome tweeter; 6" woven Kevlar bass/midrange driver
Frequency response: 48Hz–50kHz
Sensitivity: 88dB
Impedance: 8 ohms
Recommended amplifier power: 25–100Wpc
Dimensions: 7.8" x 13.4" x 12.3"
Weight: 15.4 lbs.
Price (per pair): \$600

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ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Redpoint Audio Model D turntable, Tri-Planar Mk VII tonearm, Transfiguration Phoenix cartridge; Dussen DS 99 integrated amplifier; Artemis Labs LA-1 linestage, PL-1 phonostage, and SP-1 power amplifier; TARA Labs Zero interconnects, digital cable, Omega speaker cables, Zero GX tonearm cable, The One power cords, and AD-10B Power Screen; Finite Elemente Spider equipment racks

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