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Eight and six

B&W's astonishing new 600 Series is finally here, and the 683 has been worth the wait

PRODUCT B&W 683

TYPE Floorstanding loudspeaker

PRICE £899

KEY FEATURES Size (WxHxD): 19.8x98.5x34cm

• Weight: 26kg • Sensitivity: 90dB/w at 8ohms
• Impedance: 8 ohms (nom) • 150mm FST midrange driver • 2x165mm aluminium/kevlar bass drivers

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The 683 is the top model in B&W's most recent incarnation of the entry-level 600 Series. It's not a speaker range to be taken lightly, especially given that B&W is one of the largest dedicated loudspeaker makers in the world and thus one of the biggest players in the audiophile market.

The new 600 Series is smaller than previously, and there are just two standmounts, the 686 and 685, and two floorstanding stereo models, the 684 and 683. There are also three subwoofers: ASW 608, 610 and 610XP (the '8' and '10' refer to the driver size in inches, and XP essentially just means bigger and better). There are also two centre speakers and a surround speaker (detailed in the box-out).

While the standmounts are very similar, except for the size of main driver and box, the two floorstanders are distinctly different. The 684 (£699) is a two-and-a-half-way with two matching Kevlar cones (one dedicated to bass, the other to bass and mid), while the more expensive and taller 683 takes an FST midrange unit from the 800 series and augments it with two new bass drivers. All the 600 series models have the same aluminium tweeter set in its distinctively offset face plate.

The FST midrange driver makes the 683 the most interesting speaker in the new range. This is the same midrange technology that you will see on all of the three-way 800 Series models, including the mighty 800D. And given that the least expensive of those – the 804S – costs £2,700 and yet has a similar driver array, this newcomer would seem to be a bargain. Okay, it doesn't have the fancy 800 Series cabinet work, nor the Matrix internal bracing, and its tweeter is not on top in a separate enclosure. However, there is a Nautilus tube behind the 683's tweeter and the bass drivers look even more 'bling' thanks to their metal cones.

The aluminium dome tweeter has been heavily revised for this series, its neodymium magnet giving it increased

sensitivity while copper plating of the pole-piece extends the frequency response. Meanwhile, mass has been lowered thanks to an edge-wound voice coil, and the resonant frequency of the system has been reduced with a new surround material.

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The FST midrange is distinguished by its very thin foam surround, which is a termination rather than a suspension as such (FST stands for Fixed Suspension Transducer). The driver can work this way because it is limited to the midband and does not have a great deal of

travel. B&W says that to bring the price of this drive unit down to the point where it could be used in the 600 it just simplified the mounting method to a conventional bolt-on approach, rather than the suspended, single point fixing used in the 800 Series. There is

also another major factor that we will return to.

The bass drivers here are aluminium cones with a paper/Kevlar skin on the back – the combination giving stiffness and damping and ending up with the same mass as the carbon fibre/Rohacell-sandwich cones on the 804S.

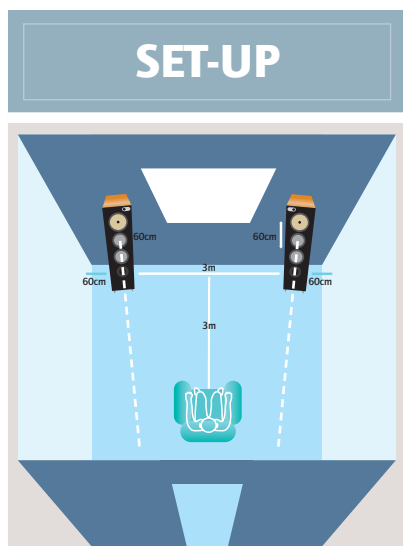
The 683 is a lot of loudspeaker for the money, its weighs in at 28kg and looks great in its Wengé vinyl skin, rubberised front panel and high quality bi-wire terminals. You may even wonder how it can be produced for the price? The answer is that B&W set up its own facility in China, moving the old 600 production line from its Worthing factory. This is the first range that the company has built overseas in its own facility and helps to explain how it can offer so much value for money. But as we know, there's more to the dark art of speaker building.

PERFORMANCE

The results are pretty damn impressive, if perhaps a little darker or more subdued than one might expect of a 600 Series speaker. Having run them in for 24 hours things did change – the balance becoming more lively and up-front. They did this to the extent that we went from an on-axis set-up with the speakers pointed at the listening chair to a straight down the room, parallel axis arrangement. Something to bear in mind should you be auditioning a brand new pair.

We would be very impressed if any other companies could compete with the bandwidth and resolution on offer from the 683, which is a remarkably revealing speaker for its price. You can clearly hear right into the mix, the fine details that are often masked being easily picked out. This applied equally to differences between voices in a choir and to the little extras that accompany the vocal in a densely mixed piece of hip-hop. This is partly because of the speaker's wide dynamic range, ▶





POSITIONING

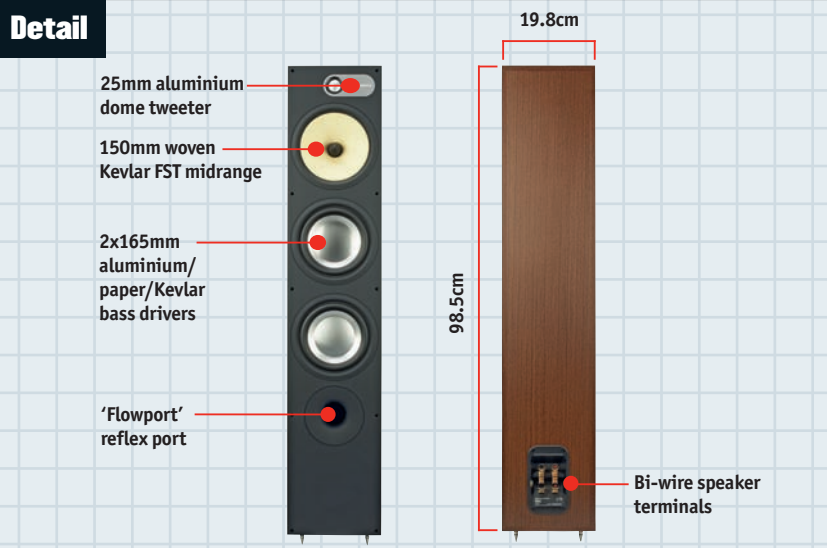
With its impressive bass extension you might expect the 683 to need plenty of space to avoid the bass getting too strong with respect to the midband. However, thanks to the front firing port it works surprisingly well close to a rear wall; we tried a 30cm gap between the rear baffle and the wall and this didn't seem to upset its equilibrium. If you can give it 60cm, the balance is a bit more upbeat and lively, which may be more to taste. You can also tweak the balance by the amount of toe-in you apply. With the speakers firing directly at the listening position you get the most mid and treble energy – too much for our tastes to be frank – but fire them parallel to the walls and things are more relaxed. As rooms vary a lot it pays to experiment, but 60cm to rear walls, a bit more if possible to sidewalls and a flat back, non toed-in orientation is the place to start.

SYSTEM MATCHING

The 683 is usefully sensitive at 90db for a nominal eight ohm load so you won't need a monster amp to get decent level, but the impedance drops to three ohms for a while, so even though the spec suggests power ratings from 25 to 200 watts we'd recommend you avoid much less than 50 watts from a solid-state amp at least. This is also a pretty revealing speaker, so avoid anything aggressive or edgy unless you are into an edge-of-the-seat balance. The most economical amplifiers that will give this speaker a chance to strut its stuff would include the Cambridge Azur 840A, Naim Nait 5i and Arcam DiVA A70. As far as sources go both the Naim and Cambridge amps have partners that more than make the grade, while you need to pay a little more for an Arcam FMJ CD36. Just remember that the source is still king when it comes to it.



Detail



TAKING IT MULTICHANNEL

If you plan to build a multichannel system around the 683, B&W encourages you to choose its 683 theatre set-up. This adds the HTM61 (£399) centre speaker, DS3 (£549) surround and an ASW610XP (£699) subwoofer. The nice thing about the HTM61 is that it has the same FST midrange driver as the 683, so you are assured of the same level of resolution across the critical front speakers. However, it has a Kevlar driver rather than metal bass driver, (albeit in the same size chassis) as the bass units on the 683. This presumably, because home cinema systems hand the lowest bass duties to the subwoofer.

If you are putting together a multichannel system primarily for music, however, a third DS3 and no sub would, perhaps, be the best course. The DS3 is a selectable dipole or monopole surround speaker, its switchability ensuring even sound dispersion even if placement is restricted.

its sensitivity to the smallest notes even when there are far louder ones threatening to hide them. It also comes down to excellent separation of instruments and voices, it's easy to pick out the little bits because there seems to be more space between them and the centre of the musical action.

The 683's bass extension and power adds genuine gravitas to piano and orchestra, and for that matter the less cultivated productions of Dr Dre, Tool and Mr Oizo where the floor literally starts to resonate at specific frequencies. Something that one does not really expect of speakers at this price, especially ones that also deliver tunefulness and control at low frequencies. Helge Sunde's brass extravaganza positively bounces with zip in the B&W's hands, with the instruments taking a solid physical form in the room.

We found little to criticise in

this speaker given its price. It inevitably doesn't have the slam of something like an 804S, nor does it deliver the depth of image of more expensive designs. But when it comes to sheer resolution and lack of colouration from a speaker that also does proper bass, it is in a class of its own. By getting its FST driver into a sub-£1,000 speaker B&W has without doubt raised the stakes for the market as a whole. You may be able to get real veneers on smaller speakers but you will struggle to find the combination of resolution, timing and energy in this competitive sector. **HFC**

Jason Kennedy



VERDICT

SOUND >> 90%



EASE OF DRIVE >> 88%



BUILD >> 85%



VALUE >> 95%



PRO
Remarkably revealing and a wide dynamic range combine with impressive bass extension and a lovely rubberised front baffle.

CON
Vinyl finish won't be to all tastes. They will also reveal any limitations in partnering ancillaries and could damage your neighbourly relations!

CONCLUSION

By taking the fundamentals of the 804S and putting them in a solid box, B&W has laid down the gauntlet at this price point. We have not come across this level of transparency in a sub-£1,000 speaker before – the killer bass is the icing on the cake.

HI-FI CHOICE >> **90%**
OVERALL SCORE