

## TESTS

## Wharfedale Diamond 8.1

### £120 speakers look striking and sound superb

Andrew Everard takes a listen to the latest model from a famous British audio name, part of a whole new Diamond range

It comes down to a simple matter of perception: anyone with an awareness of hi-fi history will think of Wharfedale as a grand old name of British audio manufacturing, with an enviable world-wide reputation. Meanwhile, more recent arrivals on the consumer electronics scene will probably think in terms of the name on budget DVD-Video players in their local supermarket. So is the new Wharfedale a case of moving with the times, or a famous name selling out? Opinions are deeply divided, but it's impossible to overlook the effect Wharfedale has had on the DVD arena, its DVD-750 spawning a whole generation of low-cost machines and thus ensuring rapid growth of this sector of the market.

It may now have interests from Quad and Leak to those inexpensive Chinese-made mass-market consumer electronics products, but present Wharfedale owner IAG hasn't lost sight of its old core business, loudspeakers. Heaven forbid! To do so would be about as shocking as discontinuing the Quad electrostatic speaker range, and though the brand may now be under Far Eastern ownership, it still plays heavily on the legacy of Wharfedale founder Gilbert Briggs, who started the whole thing in the cellar of his home in Ilkley, Yorkshire, in 1932. Indeed, the company now has a manufacturing and distribution facility in Bradford, which is apparently only a short distance from Briggs's very first factory, established in 1933.

Agreed, some of Wharfedale's recent offerings have been about offering 'maximum bang' for the rock or dance music fan rather than the kind of smooth, refined sound on which the company's reputation was built, and for a while the company was under the Verity wing and looked set to be positioned as a lower-cost counterpart to Mission. It must be acknowledged that there have also been some outrageous styling jobs along the way – anyone remember the pivoting tweeters of some Modus speakers of recent years, and the light that helped you aim

them? – but Wharfedale is still very much in the speaker business.

The Diamond range, which for a long time dominated the budget speaker market, has been part of the Wharfedale equation since 1982, to the extent that the latest version carries an '8' model designation. Over the lifetime of the Diamonds we've had a range of driver and cabinet technologies, from bolted-through plastics mouldings to active variations, and the new speakers look set to carry on this tradition. It may be that the company is a dedicated follower of fashion, or possibly is simply adopting technology that has been tried and tested in the market, but the new Diamond 8.1s use 13cm Kevlar mid/bass drivers with a bullet-shaped pole-piece, meaning they have a distinctly B&W DM600-series air about them even though they are actually derived from Wharfedale's Pacific Series. What does stand out, however, is the silver-coloured moulded baffle, with a split effect and exaggerated driver framing, making this a design many will choose to use with the grilles on. This design is repeated throughout the range, and to my eyes seems somewhat less dominant in the floorstanding 8.3 model, which has some wood-effect vinyl on offer to balance the silver moulding; in the 8.1s, it seems over-fussy.

The Diamond 8.1s are front-ported, which should bode well for use close to a rear wall, and can be biwired – indeed, should be biwired for the best possible sound. The tweeter is a 25mm silk dome and they're easy to drive, thanks to 86dB/W/m sensitivity and 6 Ohm impedance, and will work happily on shelves. However, they really sound best on good rigid stands, which might cost at least 50 per cent of the price of the speakers.

#### Performance

Listening to the Diamond 8.1s, it's hard not to find oneself repeating a mantra under one's breath. It goes '£120. £120? £120!!', and is said with a rising degree of disbelief and no little glee, so good do these little speakers sound. In fact, one might even find oneself forgiving the somewhat 'obvious' looks once the baby Diamonds have been heard in action, so well do these speakers handle even demanding

music, not to mention having the wherewithal to work rather well with amplification way beyond their natural partnering level.

For all that ability, these are very forgiving speakers, perfectly at home with good mini-systems or amplifiers and sources in the sub-£200 market. They have an open freshness to their midband and treble, but not to the extent that they'll create problems with bright-sounding discs, while the bass is full, rich and remarkably substantial for enclosures so small – they stand just under 30cm tall and are relatively shallow.

Biwire the 8.1s to more accomplished electronics, however, and they display true giant-killing ability. Used with the NAD C350 and Rotel RA-1060 amplifiers I had to hand during this test, they proved capable of a hugely involving presentation of the music, and the performance suggested they had a price closer to £300 plus. That bass simply gains power and impact when the amplification is improved, having great extension coupled to superb rhythmic grip, while the midband and treble open up further, creating a fine sense of ambience with concert-hall recordings, and ensuring sections of an orchestra, or even individual performers, are precisely located in a well-focused sound-stage picture.

Set the speakers up with a slight toe-in toward the listening position, well supported with their treble drivers around ear level, and those stereo images can be truly magical, extending between and out beyond the enclosures and with striking front-to-back perspective. Yes, biwiring will help fix the focus here, and the speakers certainly improve over a running-in period of a few days, but beyond that this design proves very easy to install and optimise, which will disappoint the tweekers but delight those of us who just want good music.

As footballers are prone to say of their sport with the least provocation, the budget speaker market is 'a funny old game': for a while one brand dominates the sub-£200 arena, and then another rises to the top and has its day (or more usually year) in the sun. With the Diamond 8.1s, Wharfedale has firmly established itself among the tall poppies of the moment, and instantly set the level to which its rivals must now aspire. Ⓒ



The looks aren't subtle, but the entry-level Diamond 8 speakers have a sound to redefine expectations



#### Wharfedale Diamond 8.1

**Type** Two-way, reflex-loaded standmount loudspeakers

**Price** £120

**Drive units**

13cm Kevlar mid/bass unit, 25mm silk dome tweeter, linked with biwireable crossover

**Frequency response**

55Hz-20kHz

**Sensitivity**

86dB/W/m

**Impedance**

6 Ohm nominal

**Maximum power handling** 100W

**Dimensions (H x W x D)**

296 x 198 x 181mm

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