



BOWERS & WILKINS 803 D3

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New drivers, new enclosures and a raft of improvements mark the advent of the new B&W 800 Series D3 loudspeaker range. The 803 D3 is two stops down from the top of the range, but it hits a particularly sweet and musical spot.

It's particularly apt that the new Bowers & Wilkins 800 Series D3 range made its debut in 2016 — the year that the British marque celebrated its 50th anniversary. That's because the 800 Series D3 is one of the company's finest speaker line-ups ever.

One could be forgiven for hailing the flagship 800 D3 as the obvious star of this particular show — and make no mistake, it's a stupendous product. But having spent a couple of weeks in the company of the more compact 803 D3, I'm tempted to single it out as the pick of the bunch.

The 803D is more compact than the 800, albeit not exactly small. In fact, it looks very much like a scaled down 802 D3, complete with a rounded, slightly corpulent cabinet that tapers towards the rear, an integrated plinth, and retractable coupling spikes.

That rounded front is a departure from the flat baffles of conventional speakers, and is said to benefit efficient dispersion. The dual bass drivers stand proud of the curved front, further reducing interaction with the baffle surface, while there is a separate aluminium pod/head assembly for the midrange and tweeter.

The bass reflex port is located at the base of the speaker, and fires downwards. The main enclosure is slightly raised from the plinth, partly to allow the air from the bass port to escape unencumbered.

The plinths also contain an intricate locating system, that comprises integrated castors to easily manoeuvre the speakers into position, after which sturdily machined coupling spikes are lowered, thus raising the entire speaker. The system also allows for easy levelling.

Except for the tweeter, the driver complement is all new. If you're a B&W fan, the first thing you'll notice is the absence of the trademark yellow Kevlar midrange — a driver still synonymous with B&W, and still in use in some of its current speaker ranges.

That Kevlar mid is replaced by an all-new 130 mm design, dubbed Continuum, and employing a new cone material B&W claims represents a substantial step forward as far as colouration, noise floor and transparency are concerned, thanks

to better defined break-up control.

The exact make-up of the cone material hasn't been revealed, but close up, the texture is finer, and the silver-grey material seems thinner and more precisely formed, than the previous Kevlar versions. It's housed in a new, more acoustically inert aluminium head assembly, featuring radial bracing.

The two 200 mm Aerofoil bass drivers are also new. While they continue their composite core sandwich construction, the variable-thickness cones also employ a new, unspecified composite core, said to be both lighter and stiffer for more precise piston behaviour.

Finally, the diamond dome tweeter has been carried over from the previous 800

Series, but it's now housed in a slimmer, solid-aluminium enclosure that is completely inert, benefiting overall accuracy.

Inside the 803 D3's rounded cabinetry, the substantial plywood bracing is thicker than before, requiring fewer bracing spars and fewer joins, which further benefits strength, stiffness and resonance control.

B&W describes the 803 D3 as a full-range, studio-quality speaker specifically targeting home users. And in many ways that makes it the most important member of the new range, making the full benefit of the 800 Series technology available to a broader audience for the first time.

Unpacking and positioning the 803 D3s was easier than I thought. Those castors make accurate positioning a pleasure, and once the final location has been defined, lowering the spikes is a slightly awkward and time consuming, but hardly difficult process.

The final position saw the 803 D3s placed about 1.7 m from the rear walls, and 680 mm from the sides, then toed in two-thirds towards the listening position. Toe-in proved the most critical adjustment in our room, but the final result was a fairly generous sweet spot, with a powerful sense of dimension and cohesion.

The delivery of the review pair fortuitously coincided with the arrival of an Audio Research Reference 6 pre-amplifier (see review elsewhere in this issue), which was then partnered with our reference Parasound Halo A21 stereo power amplifier. Source signals were delivered from both our Synology NAS/Olive One network player and a Marantz SA-KI Pearl Lite CD/SACD deck, via a Bryston BDA-3 D/A converter.

The review pair had already been thoroughly run in, so once speaker location was defined, listening could commence almost immediately — and continued over a number of evaluation sessions during the ensuing days and weeks.

The 803 D3s were instantly likeable and arresting, demanding rapt attention, and rewarding that attention with a thoroughly intriguing, engaging musical experience.

From the outset, what really struck me was their generous, open and enveloping delivery: they produced a performance that was as beguiling as it was enthralling.





The B&Ws presented a clear and unencumbered view of the music, while also faithfully, believably expressing the emotive content.

In that sense, the performances were never merely accurate, sterile renditions of the recordings selected, but vibrant and engaging expressions that captured the essence, the excitement and the presence of the music with real authority.

In sheer sonic terms, the 803s sounded big in the best full-range tradition, with the bottom end delivery particularly impressive: large, wholesome, almost tactile, with loads of pace and slam. Timing was immaculate, greatly adding to the sense of realism and authenticity.

And yet, these speakers never sounded overpowering or bombastic, preferring instead to seek out and deliver their sonic wares with a sense of poise and smooth, alluring tonal balance. The midrange was sublime — it added fantastic presence and realism, and allowed the music to be delivered with a certain substance and charisma that was compelling.

The trebles were lucid and revealing, with a crispness that could be considered almost too revealing, but certainly assisted in extracting finer details and subtleties, and never lacked outright finesse. Yes, the 803 D3s will faithfully reveal shortcomings in the signal path — but then, they deserve to be presented with a quality of material mirroring their own, painstaking execution!

Timing was always spot on, allowing the music to flow with a sense of unencumbered freedom, and adding to the vital, lively quality of the presentation. There was never anything flabby or ponderous about the sound, even when the 803 D3s were asked to reach down very low. Instead, those notes were delivered with zest and enthusiasm.

However, for me, the staging and imaging of the big B&Ws were the real highlight. They paint a seamlessly rendered, thoroughly immersive musical picture that accurately represents the full spread of the sonic harvest.

At the same time they achieve exceptional levels of transparency that allows them to become virtually invisible as point sources — no mean feat for substantial floorstanders, and a trait more typically associated with eloquent stand-mounters

## Associated Equipment

*Audio Research Reference 6 pre-amp*  
*Parasound Halo A21 power amp*  
*Bryston BDA-3 D/A converter*  
*Marantz SA-KI Pearl Lite CD/SACD player*  
*Olive One network player*  
*Synology 216e NAS*  
*StraightWire Virtuoso speaker cable and interlinks*

## Software

*Matthias Landaeus Trio — Opening (MA Recordings 176,4/24 WAV)*  
*Leonard Cohen — Popular Problems (Columbia 96/24 FLAC)*  
*Haydn — Violin Concertos — Hadelich/Müller-Brühl/Cologne Chamber Orchestra (Naxos CD)*

such as their smaller 805 D3 stablemates.

Not only was the sonic image expansive and three-dimensional, allowing a real sense of scale and majesty, but the B&Ws were also expressively eloquent, with a

real talent for gathering and presenting fine detail.

They tackled large-scale orchestral works with glee, easily reproducing the grand and expanded ambience of such



performances, yet always managed to expose and contextualise the finer nuances and subtleties.

So open and transparent were the 803 D3s that they made it easy to pinpoint individual instruments on the soundstage. And while that level of realism can sometimes seem exaggerated and overwhelming, the 803 D3s always sounded truthful and alive: their ability to create a sense of air, of space and scale, allowed the music to breathe.

On the Matthias Landaeus Trio's rendition of the Louis Armstrong classic, 'What A Wonderful World (from *Opening*)', the openness and transparency of the B&Ws was succinctly, show-stoppingly demonstrated.

They unlocked the huge, expansive and inviting soundstage of the recording, allowing the vivid, virtuoso piano to become vibrantly, incandescently alive. The piano was perfectly underpinned by the crisp percussion, and the sinewy, precise riffs of the muscular bass.

For all that air and space, the intimacy of the trio's performance, and the close rapport between the artists, was truthfully rendered, so that it felt as if I wasn't merely listening to the music, but actually experiencing it: each rim shot of the snare, every deeply resonant bass guitar pluck, each gentle keystroke of the piano.

Moving on to Leonard Cohen's 'My Oh My' (from *Popular Problems*), the 803 D3s drilled right down to the core of this clean, finely focussed production, again displaying a strong sense of temporal and spatial coherence, and allowing the music to come vividly, commandingly to life.

The dialogue between electric and acoustic guitars, the relaxed timing of the almost casual drumwork, and the melancholy-tinged keyboards, were expressed with a concentrated, burnished intensity that was never allowed to wilt in the presence of Cohen's gravelly vocals, the almost ethereal choruses of his backing singers, or the perfectly behaved, yet exuberant brass section.

The 803 D3s were able to portray each of these elements with an almost eerie realism, so that the growl of Cohen's sepia-soaked vocals were almost menacing in their intensity. And yet, these speakers never lost sight of the cohesion, the thrust and the intent of the music.

Joseph Haydn's violin concertos in A-major and C-major may not enjoy the same reputation for greatness as some of the grand violin concertos composed by the likes of Beethoven, Bruch and Mendelssohn. But they are deceptively accessible and enjoyable to listen to, while presenting the soloist with a stern technical challenge.

Augustin Hadelich's brilliance brought vital shine and dynamics to the A-major concerto, ably supported by the Cologne Chamber Orchestra under Helmut Müller-Brühl — and the 803 D3 ensured that the orchestral accompaniment was delivered with true momentum and substance.

Again, the B&Ws were able to capture both the energy of the music and the lively acoustics of the recording venue — German Radio's chamber orchestra studio — adding to the realism and immediacy of the performance. There was an almost step-in dimensionality to the sound that made it seem quite possible to walk

right into the soundstage and stroll among the musicians.

I've heard lots of high-end B&W loudspeakers — from the fabulous benchmark, alien-shaped Nautilus to various iterations of successive 800 Series ranges. All have been impressive, and most have been musically engaging. But these 803 D3s are special: they display a grasp of and an empathy with the music that is more organic than it is electronic — if that makes any sense.

Despite their revelatory talents, their tonal breadth, their wide-open accessibility and their dimensional generosity, it's the way they treat the music — and the way that music communicates with the listener — that remains their most endearing talent.

The B&W 803Ds turn hi-fi into full-blown, glorious, heart-stopping, I-want-more music. And isn't that what hi-fi is supposed to be about?

Deon Schoeman

## VITAL STATS

Enclosure type .....	Three-way bass reflex
Drive units .....	1x 25 mm diamond dome tweeter, 1x 130 mm Continuum FST midrange 2x 180 mm Aerofoil woofers
Bi-wiring .....	Yes
Impedance .....	8 ohms nominal
Sensitivity .....	90 dB (2,83V on axis)
Frequency response .....	19 Hz — 28 kHz (±3 dB from reference axis)
Power handling .....	500 watts, 8 ohms, unclipped programme
Dimensions (HxWxD) .....	1 160 x 334 x 496 mm
Weight .....	65,5 kg each

PRICE..... R299 990

### Verdict

Arguably one of the most significant speakers Bowers & Wilkins has ever built. Delivers the full benefit of the latest 800 Series technology and performance in a more home-friendly package. Musically authoritative and arresting.

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OUR RATING: 91 / 100

