

Bowers & Wilkins 805 D4

THE LATEST GENERATION OF THE BRITISH COMPANY'S FLAGSHIP SPEAKER SERIES IS HERE: ED SELLEY HAS SET ABOUT THE SMALLEST MEMBER OF THE RANGE TO SEE WHAT MAKES IT TICK

The 800 Series has long occupied a unique place in high-end audio. Such is the market share that Bowers & Wilkins has of the total sales of speakers in this price category that the models that result enjoy both a ubiquity and economy of scale nothing else can really match. Insofar as a 'normal' member of the public can envisage a high end speaker, it's generally the 800 Series that springs to mind.

For those more familiar with the high-end category, the 800 Series still holds considerable interest as a demonstration of design features Bowers & Wilkins will no doubt trickle down its range in due course and are likely to influence other manufacturers, too. The £6250/pr 805 D4 is the smallest member of the range, the only standmount model and, on paper at least, the simplest design of the lot, yet there's still considerable new engineering at work here.

In terms of its drivers, outwardly at least, it is business as usual. The 805 D4 makes use of a 165mm 'Continuum' mid bass driver, partnered with a 25mm diamond tweeter. This is the same configuration as the preceding D3 model's – and in the 805, where the 165mm unit functions as a mid/bass unit, it makes use of a conventional mounting spider, whereas all the other models in the range have a newer vestigial one designed to reduce pressure build-up behind the driver. However, a new phase plug and revised mass damper are fitted here.

The 'Tweeter on Top' principle, with the treble driver mounted atop the main cabinet has been retained, but the aluminium housing this employs is now longer, and attached to the 'box' with a pair of decoupled mounts, now sitting in a deeper recess. The result is both visually more appealing than was previously the case and also feels a great deal more reassuring in terms of its solidity.

The revisions to the cabinet are most extensive in the 805 (and the floorstanding 804). They are now constructed in the same way as the other 800 Series models, in a process Bowers & Wilkins calls 'Reverse wrap': this forms multiple layers of birch ply into an oxbow shape using heat and pressure, integrating the front and sides of the cabinet in a single piece. The rear of the cabinet is sealed inboard of the point where the ends of this assembly, creating a space for the crossover which is attached to a metal 'spine' section at the rear – this was used on the larger models in the old 'D3' range, but is now employed across the entire 'D4' line-up.

Internally, the 'matrix' bracing system, long a feature of Bowers & Wilkins cabinets, is now also made of birch ply, with additional metal stiffening sections, while the top of the cabinet is formed from an aluminium casting, sealing the enclosure and acting as the mounting point for the decoupled tweeter. Bowers & Wilkins has elected to coat this in 'Leather by Connolly' (real rather than 'vegan'), giving a far greater aesthetic consistency across the range than was the case in the previous generation.

Revised crossover

By comparison to the 801 D4's, the 805D4's crossover is a relatively simple design, but considerable care has gone into the components used and the claimed measurement and sensitivity figures of the new speaker are entirely benign. The 805 D4 claims a sensitivity of 88dB/w with an 8ohm impedance, a minimum impedance of 4.6ohms and a frequency response of 42Hz-28kHz, meaning there's nothing here to require vast reserves of power to unlock. Relatively unusually for a speaker in 2021, the 805D4 supports biwiring but you do get some very good quality cable links to join the HF and LF terminals together for single-wiring.

In fact those links are only a tiny facet of how well the Bowers & Wilkins is put together. The review samples were absolutely immaculate in build and finish – some rivals are every bit as stoutly constructed as the 805 D4 but lack the quality of cosmetic finish at which Bowers & Wilkins excels – and even the process of unboxing and placement serves to congratulate you on your choice.

For all this though, I'd hesitate to describe the 805 D4 as beautiful: true, form follows function with the 800 Series but the result is somewhat fussy, even though there are some neat touches like the smaller circular grilles rather than full-face ones and the contrasting metal panel at the rear. Compared to something like the Franco Serblin Accordo (similarly priced once the 805's dedicated stand is costed in)