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When you're spending the best part of £1000 on a pair of speakers, you want to be able to hear the difference in your music. This octet won't disappoint...

At this price, loudspeakers come in all shapes and sizes. Big ones, small ones, rectangles, trapezoids - heck, we've even got a frustum (look it up).

In this test you'll find a two-time Award-winner battling talented veterans and enthusiastic younglings, some of which we've not tested before. Some of them have tried-and-trusted designs, while others are armed with new tricks.

One thing's for sure, though: we've amassed a huge pool of talent. Whether it is clever engineering or raw power you're after, each set of these speakers has something different to offer. But which will come out on top? Read on and find out.



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TESTED

Dynaudio Excite X14
Focal Aria 906
GoldenEar Aon 3
Guru Junior
KEF LS50
Martin Logan Motion 15
Monitor Audio Gold GX50
Tannoy Revolution DC6 SE



FOCAL ARIA 906 £760

★★★★★

We don't expect much variety comes to speakers. Most of them consist of drivers in some kind of box. So when we hear a manufacturer is experimenting with new materials, we're intrigued. In this case the manufacturer is Focal, whose latest cones are made with flax - a material that dates back thousands of years. And we think that's pretty amazing.

The ancient Egyptians and Chinese used flax *way* back. It's a plant, and fibres from its stem are used to make linen. Bunches of the fibre resemble blonde hair - hence the word 'flaxen'.

Flax has been chosen because it's self-damping and has the same rigidity as Kevlar. Its hollow structure also makes it light, so it has half the weight of glass-fibre. The new 'F' cones have a layer of woven flax sandwiched between two layers of fibreglass. They're on all of Focal's new Aria speakers.

First Aria suggests great range

The 906 is a two-way bookshelf speaker, and is the first of the Arias we've tested. If its performance is anything to go by, we've got a lot to look forward to.

It's a big sound for starters. There's a sense of scale here that we rarely, if ever, hear at this price. It's tall, wide, and effortlessly encompassing. It's also muscular, with enough authority to hold you to your seat, but not so much that you feel bullied. That has a lot to do with the 906s' bass, which is abundant, weighty and nicely extended.

"It's a big sound. There's a sense of scale here that we rarely, if ever, hear at this price. It's tall, wide, muscular and effortlessly encompassing"

Despite the size and power of the sound, the level of control is impressive. We played a mix of classical, pop and rap (Holst, Rihanna and Eminem) and the performance was consistently agile. The 906s aren't quite as light on their feet as KEF's LS50s or the Martin Logan Motion 15s, but each turn is taken with precision.

It's a mature, stable performance with considerable polish. Unlike the rather manicured Monitor Audio Gold GX50s, the Focals aren't afraid to get their hands dirty. Far-reaching dynamics ensure there's a strong kick where necessary, and a keen sense of timing keeps it all taut.

Elsewhere, the 906s are tonally balanced and well integrated. The clear treble, direct midrange and rich low-end play together nicely. Make sure to warm the speakers up for half an hour or so before you get down to some serious listening though, otherwise the bass can sound a little confused.

Is all this down to the flax? It's hard to tell, because Focal has another trick up its sleeve - an inverted dome made of magnesium-aluminium alloy. The material is designed to increase damping and rigidity. A glass top and sloped sides might have something to do with it too.

The Focal Aria 906s are extremely enjoyable speakers. If you value standmounters that offer scale, power and refinement, you won't find better for the money.

Rating ★★★★★

FOR Large-scale sound; great power; refined presentation; solid build

AGAINST Some rivals have a more enthusiastic way with music reproduction

VERDICT A great set of speakers with a big, mature sound and plenty of grunt to deliver it

