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FYNE AUDIO F501 VS MONITOR AUDIO SILVER 200

We pitch a pair of precocious new boys against some floorstander grandees



"This is a high-gloss hi-fi recording, with painstakingly recorded piano and close-mic'd vocal – and the F501s absolutely lap it up"

You may be forgiven for thinking any product with a What Hi-Fi? Award is exclusively the best. After all, we use them to identify and celebrate class leaders, and there are many that require relatively little mulling over to reach a decision.

But take into consideration the 14 we dished out for stereo speakers this year, five of which went to floorstanders, and you'll begin to understand that some categories are more hotly contested than

others. What is best for you is not necessarily so cut and dry.

Fyne Audio's toppling of Monitor Audio this year is a great example. The former hadn't even entered our consciousness at the time of last year's Awards, yet won two gongs in 2018. Its Award for these F501 towers is the more astounding achievement, precisely because of the talents of rivals such as Monitor's Silver 200s. But this was more a majority verdict than a knockout.

Fyne Audio might be a new name but the company didn't just emerge from the ether; it is a brand built upon the decades of hi-fi expertise of its founders.

At 98 x 20 x 32cm deep, the F501s are of unremarkable dimensions for a product of this type. In terms of build quality and finish, they're sturdy and substantial, and on a technical level they are an intriguing combination of the predictable and the unusual.

It's the broad strokes that are pretty predictable: a two-and-a-half-way design using a 25mm tweeter, 15cm mid/bass driver and 15cm bass driver, nominal impedance of 8 ohms and 90dB sensitivity won't raise any eyebrows.

Unusual approach

But Fyne Audio has brought some interesting thinking to bear. The tweeter sits in the throat of the mid/bass driver and the bigger drivers are multifibre paper cones, with unusually sculpted surrounds aimed at aiding efficient dissipation of cone energy.

And at the bottom of the cabinet Fyne combines a conventional downward-firing port above a carefully profiled, conical diffuser designed to convert the port energy into a 360-degree wavefront. It means the speaker should, in theory, be less picky about its position in your room.

Conversely, Monitor Audio is now on its sixth generation of its Silver Series speakers, so the marvellous build of these 200s is less of a surprise.

They have two HiVe II, rifled (to reduce port noise and help airflow) reflex ports at the back and slim magnet-held grilles for a more elegant look.

The benefits of the cabinets' slender form have also been maximised by the company's engineers, who have worked to tune the speakers so they work best around 50cm from a back wall, but with only minor variances in tonal balance when they are placed closer, or a decent way out into the room.

There's a new version of Monitor Audio's iconic gold-dome tweeter,

"At the lower end, the Silver 200s reach those pulsing frequencies you feel more than hear. Most important, though, is the richness and clarity throughout the range"

fine-tuned for clear, smooth and distortion-free high frequencies, which sits above a pair of 13cm aluminium/magnesium drivers, the upper handling midrange and bass, the lower focusing on bass frequencies alone.

Differing virtues

Differences in design are ultimately unsurprising, but the varying sonic charms of this pair really are most intriguing.

Starting with the F501s, we begin by giving them a chance to show off their chops with Diana Krall's version of *Almost Blue*. This is a high-gloss hi-fi recording, with painstakingly recorded piano and close-mic'd vocal supported by stand-up bass, brushed drum kit and economical guitar - and the F501s absolutely lap it up. Initial impressions are of a broad, well defined sound stage, solid stereo focus and a lavish amount of detail. No nuance of Krall's phrasing, no creak of double-bass strings, no lingering decay of a piano note is ignored.

Timing and integration are excellent, and the sympathetic responsiveness of the musicians is never overlooked.

Upping the assertiveness quotient more than somewhat with a switch to *Burn With Me* by DJ Koze allows the F501s to show off their beautifully even, consistent tonality, while a Deutsche Grammophon recording of *Rhapsody In Blue* by the Los Angeles Philharmonic under Leonard Bernstein allows them to demonstrate their dynamic prowess.

A driven, vibrant Rhapsody

Rhapsody In Blue is full of bold shifts, from ruminative piano to full-orchestra outrage, and the F501s handle each with confidence, snapping into the leading edges of notes, alive with well controlled drive and attack. And they put significant distance between 'very, very quiet' and 'very loud indeed'.

We will concede the F501s' treble response is absolutely as confident and assertive as it can be without becoming hard or tiring, but leaner electronics are

probably best avoided because the top end isn't impossible to provoke.

That boundless enthusiasm, which best shows itself when the volume control is turned beyond 'polite', makes for an intriguing encounter with the Silver 200s, where Monitor Audio has decided versatility and well rounded character is key.

Playing LCD Soundsystem's *This Is Happening*, the percussive intro of *Dance Yourself Clean* shows off just how fast these Monitors are. The tune snaps in perfect time, and synthesizer stabs arrive precisely on each bar's first beat.

The 200s are perhaps at their fastest when brought into the room - but wherever we position them they deliver a sense of fun that has been slightly lacking in previous generations.

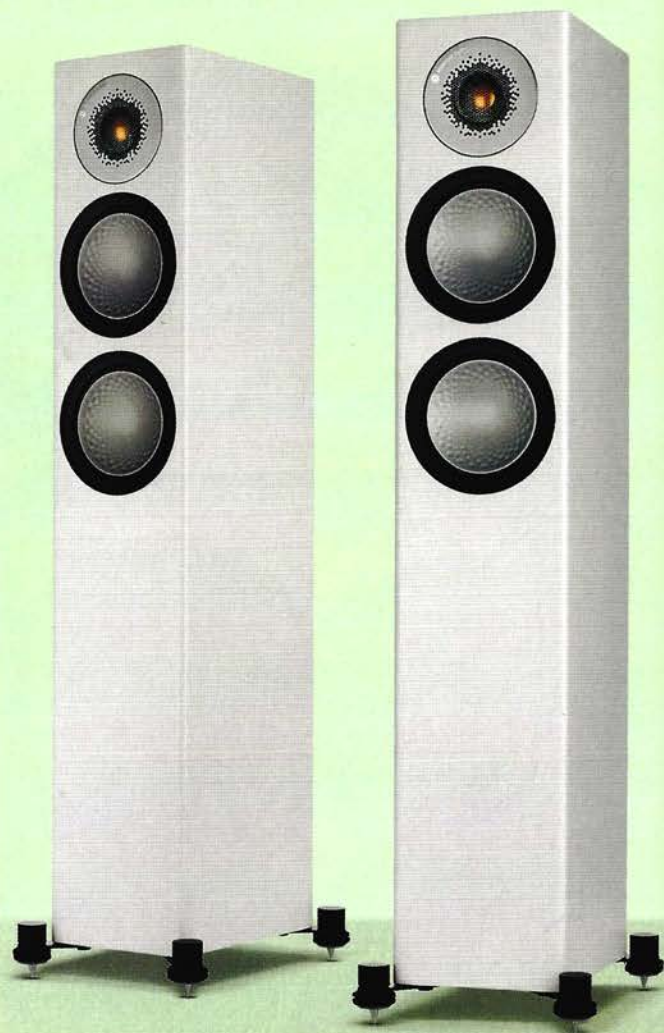
Signs of maturity

Don't think Monitor Audio has foregone any sense of refinement in pursuit of excitement. This is still a very mature performance, marked by a penchant for rhythmic and instrumental organisation.

At the lower end, the Silver 200s reach those pulsing frequencies you feel more than hear, while there is plenty of headroom too. Most important, though, is the richness and clarity throughout. Nowhere do these speakers sound flabby, coarse or thin.

Playing Clint Mansell's score for Darren Aronofsky's *The Fountain* shows off the the 200s' skill with detail and clarity. The strings of the Kronos Quartet have a texture that resonates in the bodies of their instruments and reveals the room around them, and yet lower-resolution files and coarse bedroom recordings are treated with a flattering, forgiving nature.

So ultimately your decision, just as ours when picking our Award-winner around this price, boils down to which facets of the performance of these two rivals you feel are most important, and where you are willing to make slight - though ever so slight - compromises.



In terms of the trophy, we opted for the F501s due to their altogether more enthusiastic, engaging character, which is able to take a piece by the scruff of the neck and force it to reveal its potential. After that, the attention paid to analysis and detail only adds further layers to a performance that will suit casual and more discerning listeners alike.

But we mustn't ignore the care it takes to find sympathetic partnering kit - something that may mean you need to make changes elsewhere in your system as well. Monitor Audio's Silver 200s are far more willing to appease an overly excitable amplifier or source, without selling themselves short when it comes to their own sense of playfulness.

The Silvers are also less fussy about volume and, most importantly for some, they are currently available for £999 - £200 less than the Fyne Audios.

Even if you're not in the market, this is certainly a wildly intriguing match-up we'd urge you try out at your local dealership. Just remember at least to buy something on your way out.

WHAT HI-FI? says

Overall winner
Fyne Audio F501 ★★★★★