

Fyne Audio F301 loudspeaker | Review

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Located outside Glasgow, in a geographical area that's also home to Linn Products and Tannoy Ltd.—and also near the storied whisky distilleries of Aberfeldy and Blair Atholl—Fyne Audio got off to a fast start. A mere three years after the company's 2017 founding, Fyne already has distribution deals in 50 countries and offers 24 products in seven series.

How did they do it? There's a clue on the company's homepage, which claims "more than 200 years of experience" among Fyne employees: The founders are a core group of former senior managers from Tannoy Ltd.—including former Tannoy operations director Gabriel O'Donohue, product development director Stuart Wilkinson, and Dr. Paul Mills, who spent 27 years as Tannoy's director of research and engineering and now serves as Fyne's technical director.

Those 24 products cover a wide range of price and luxury, from the big, five-figure F1-12 at the top of the line to the small, standmounted F300. The subject of this review, from the F300 series, is Fyne Audio's second least-expensive speaker, the F301 standmounter, which sells for \$425/pair.

Design

The F301 is a compact, two-way, ported loudspeaker designed and engineered at Fyne's headquarters in Lanarkshire, Scotland, and assembled and manufactured in China. (Upper-tier Fynes are manufactured in Scotland.) Tannoy is known for its coaxial drivers,

and Fyne's founders carry on that tradition, but there are no coaxials in this model. The F301 utilizes a 1" (25mm) polyester-dome tweeter, which the company says produces "a more insightful, detailed sound" than the more common silk dome. The F301 tweeter, which incorporates a neodymium magnet, is protected by a steel-mesh grille with a "phase loss compensator" said to "delay the output from specific areas of the dome to give a smooth and extended response."

The matte-silver "multi-fibre" cone of the F301's 6" (150mm) mid/bass driver is a blend of paper fibers said by Fyne to be "a proprietary mix, designed to offer stiffness at low frequencies for a piston-like behavior, but also to obtain damping and smooth rolloff in the midrange." The driver's synthetic rubber surround is dimpled or fluted at 0.25" intervals—the manufacturer calls this their FyneFlute technology—which is said to cancel the "mis-termination" effects that occur when energy not fully absorbed by the surround is returned to the cone, causing resonances and colorations. The mid/bass driver incorporates a ferrite magnet system, the rear of which is joined to the cabinet's internal crossbracing using a "lossy resonant-absorbing" mastic resin, intended to maintain support for the back of the magnet while damping energy fed into the brace. The mid/bass driver is reflex-loaded via a rear-mounted port. The speaker's stated sensitivity is 89dB/2.83V at 1m, with a nominal impedance of 8 ohms.

The F301's cabinet is built with CARB-compliant MDF panels that are cross-braced internally. The front baffle and back panel are also made of MDF, glued in place using polyvinyl acetate adhesive. Each F301 cabinet is damped internally using a fill of bonded acoustic fiber. Visually striking—and somewhat novel in my experience—is the convex-curved, 2"-high, 0.5"-deep band of polished acrylonitrile butadiene styrene (ABS) thermoplastic glued to the upper section of the F301's baffle, where the tweeter is mounted. The ABS housing is "designed to minimize diffraction, [and] is fabricated from polymer chosen for its robust properties and its ability to be aesthetically finished to a high standard," Paul Mills wrote in an email. The F301's back panel holds a single pair of recessed, gold-plated binding posts, positioned below a 2" wide × 5" deep port—which, like the tweeter housing, is made from an ABS thermoplastic polymer (although here it is unpolished). A slip of eight peel-off rubber nubs is included for use as feet. My review pair of F301s were nicely finished in walnut veneer. Magnetically attached grilles were supplied, but I preferred listening without them.



Setup

The F301s didn't work well in the positions I'd used for the ProAc D2R—see my review in last month's *Stereophile*—and the Quad S2 standmount speakers. In those positions the Fynes lacked bass, and their treble sounded forced and thin. Hoping for a stronger sonic foundation, I pushed the speakers closer to the front wall. I ended up with the Fynes 23" from the front wall and 61" apart, positioned 75" from my listening seat, all distances measured from the centers of the front baffles. As predicted by the Fyne manual, toeing in the speakers to aim directly at my listening position provided the best image focus and coherence. My ears were situated roughly ½" above the level of the speakers' tweeters.

As my Thorens TD 124 Mk.II turntable had recently developed a hum, I used my Kuzma Stabi R turntable with Kuzma 4Point tonearm and Hana ML cartridge as the source component for evaluating the Fynes. The Kuzma tonearm's phono cable was connected to a Tavish Design Adagio phono stage; a one-meter pair of Shindo interconnects connected that phono stage to the inputs of the Cary SLI-80HS and Schiit Ragnarok 2 integrated amplifiers. (I used the Cary's 8 ohm speaker taps.) Auditorium 23 speaker cables connected the amps to the Fyne Audio F301s. A pair of 24" Sanus NF24B Natural Foundations wooden speaker stands were used throughout the review period.

Listening

After a break-in period, the Fyne F301s impressed with their exceptional rendering of soundstage width and depth, reasonably wide dynamic range, extended low end (for their size), and exuberant, I-can't-stop-spinning-records presentation. The Fynes presented a finely layered, spatially convincing soundstage with images that were solid, if small. The F301's treble could sometimes have a tinge of dryness or hardness on brass and strings. Otherwise, the F301s consistently sounded warm and rich for their size.

Paired with the Cary SLI-80HS integrated amplifier and playing Miles Davis's 1969 stereo release *Filles de Kilimanjaro* (LP, Columbia CS 9750), the F301s presented the quintet of Miles, Wayne Shorter, Herbie Hancock, Ron Carter, and Tony Williams in vivid miniature. The F301's treble range gave Miles's trumpet spice and heat, while the mids helped outline the top end of Carter's acoustic bass. The Fynes recreated the rumbling lower notes of Carter's bass—except that instrument's very lowest notes—with convincing weight. Tony Williams's ride cymbal was clean and distinct, surrounded by realistic air, with dryness appropriate to 1960s Zildjian cymbals.

The F301's spatial performance was apparent when playing Igor Stravinsky's *The Firebird*, performed by the London Symphony Orchestra conducted by Antal Doráti (LP, Mercury Living Presence 478-8318, Netherlands pressing, 2015), with images small but realistic. Whether plucked or bowed, string textures were reproduced with visceral intensity. The F301s sometimes made it difficult to distinguish the sounds of instruments from one another in ensemble recordings, but only to a minor degree, never detracting from the musical content. The F301s were fast, fast, fast, with strong bass reproduction, generating a degree of involvement that let me forget, for a moment, my reviewer's job and flow with the music. I noted the Fyne's fine transparency while spinning Analogue Productions' 45rpm version of Rimsky-Korsakoff's *Scheherazade*, by Fritz Reiner conducting the Chicago Symphony (LP, Analogue Productions APC 2446-45). Powering the Fynes with the Schiit Ragnarok 2 integrated amplifier (60Wpc into 8 ohms), I sometimes heard a coarseness in string-section climaxes, which mostly fell on the safe side of the smooth/piercing scale, never crossing the line into forward, spitty, or bright. Flute and oboe were vivid and lifelike, the orchestra's low end was plummy, with good weight, and the soundstage on this recording was both deep and wide.



Sticking with the Fyne-Schiit pairing, I pulled out a guilty pleasure that may excommunicate me from the cool kids' listening party. Growing up as I did with rock, then prog rock, then jazz fusion, then pure jazz, I was all in when I first heard the music of Canadian-Italian belter Gino Vannelli. His *Powerful People*, *Storm at Sunup*, *The Gist of the Gemini*, and *Nightwalker* albums remain, for me, some of the most smartly performed and crafted, and, yes, over-the-top, macho jazz-rock ever recorded. Just stay away from YouTube: You don't want to see Gino's marionette dancing circa 1975 if you want to continue to live a normal life.

Recorded in 1976 at George Martin's AIR studios in London with Gino and brother Joe Vannelli sharing production with Geoff Emerick, *The Gist of the Gemini* (LP, A&M Records SP4596) sounds like it was recorded in the smaller of AIR's two large live rooms; it benefits from its natural reverb and long decay trails. A melodramatic love/war protest set to song, the album is a colossal presentation of jazz-rock quartet and full orchestra navigating groundbreaking synthesizer rock ("Love of My Life," "A New Fix for '76"), leading to the second side's "War Suite."

Driven by Graham Lear's creative drumming and the resounding timpani strokes of percussionist Richard Baker, and joined to a male choir, orchestra, and even more synthesizers, "War Suite" is operatic, bombastic, and intimate all at once. The Fynes presented this music in all its overblown glory, giving me chills on multiple listenings. After the marchlike orchestral intro, "Prelude to the War," comes a furious Afro-Cuban rock-to-uptempo-swing blowout, complete with vocal chorus. The Fynes reproduced the song's stomping drums, bellowing choir, and War of the Worlds–worthy synthesizers with power, impact, and '70s studio profundity—it was all there through the powerful F301s. I was greatly entertained. The track concludes with a grinding snare drum and synthesizer duel. Here and throughout *The Gist of the Gemini*, the Fynes recreated the marathon studio experience with a sense of ease, never bending to the power demands, never flattening dynamics, and never squeezing instruments together.

On *Relaxin'* with the Miles Davis Quintet (LP, Prestige PRLP 7129, 1958), Paul Chambers's acoustic bass sounded clear and full of tone, sinewy and agile. But piano, trumpet, and tenor saxophone sounded a little dry. The presentation was very good in every other way, but this dryness robbed the record of some of its humanity. JMT Productions was a German jazz label founded in 1985 by Stefan Winter, who currently oversees the Winter & Winter label. JMT issued some 90 releases focused on New York's downtown jazz scene, documenting the early work of Steve Coleman, Cassandra Wilson,

Tim Berne, Greg Osby, Paul Motian—JMT lists 10 Motian titles—and others. Though reissued digitally by Winter & Winter, JMT LPs have never been reissued on vinyl. They're worth searching out, both for their music and as documents of a time in NYC when artistic innovation flowed out of East Village tenements, and rents were cheap.



The label's very first issue—Steve Coleman Group's *Motherland Pulse* (LP, JMT 850001)—joins the trailblazing alto saxophonist with Cassandra Wilson, Geri Allen (RIP), Marvin "Smitty" Smith, Mark Johnson, Lonnie Plaxico, and Graham Haynes for an album of soul-levitating, exploratory jazz. A youthful, playful Wilson graces the buoyant "No Good Time Fairies," which swings in a peculiar way, like old folks ambling across the street at 4am. The production sounds thick, viscous, humid. The F301s, which consistently presented music in first-row fashion, delivered this sultry jazz with extended bass notes, naturally vivid trumpet, willowy saxophone, and appropriate force. The music had drive through the F301s. Tonal balance was tilted toward the dark side, but that worked well with this music.

The Fyne F301s did a good job navigating the extreme micro and macro dynamics of Act 1 of Wagner's *Die Walküre*, with Georg Solti conducting the Vienna Philharmonic (5-LP box set, London Records OSA 1509). A brief introductory section of churning orchestral textures and extreme dynamics, Act 1 has enchanted and haunted me for months. The little Fynes gripped the music and held on, reproducing the large-scaled soundstage with relative ease, and they didn't totally lose it on the music's grand climaxes, although there was some fleeting, mild dynamic compression. The Fynes' clarity and speed let me enjoy the music; I replayed disc one from the box set a number of times before moving on.

While the Fynes consistently produced finely resolved images, a rich midrange, and very good bass for a speaker its size, I could nitpick their tendency toward dryness in the upper frequencies, sometimes making tenor or alto saxophones, cymbals, strings, and brass sound a bit thin. Careful system matching—perhaps pairing the Fynes with the NAD C 328 (\$599), Heed Audio Elixir (\$1395), or Outlaw Audio RR2160 (\$849) integrated amplifiers—is essential to make these capable bookshelf speakers shine.

Comparisons

The only other bookshelf speakers on hand for comparison were the Quad S2s (87dB at 8 ohms, \$999/pair). The Quad is a more refined, harder-to-drive—and more expensive—bookshelf speaker than the Fyne F301. The Quad works great with jazz, orchestral music, female vocals, and all acoustic music. It's a little laid back, a little pipe-and-slippers, but it's sweet and assured. The F301, by comparison, is loads of fun, jumps higher, pounds its chest more fervently, and is as comfortable channeling ZZ Top on "La Grange" as placing Birgit Nilsson singing Wagner.

Conclusion

At \$425/pair, the Fyne Audio F301 loudspeakers punch way above their price point. Their ability to cast a wide, deep soundstage with super imaging was as good as any bookshelf speaker I've had in house. Their serious jump factor and meaty bass frequencies were a consistent treat. The speaker's slightly dry upper frequencies demand careful amplifier matching, but otherwise, for a sub-\$500 speaker, there's not a lot to criticize. Coherent to their core, they never made me focus on a single aspect of their performance but led me deeply into the whole of the music. Whatever the reason, the F301s are an unmitigated success for the young Scottish company. I can't wait to hear its elder siblings.