

KEF

Reference 1 Meta £7,500



▶ DETAILS

- PRODUCT**
 KEF Reference 1 Meta
- ORIGIN**
 UK
- TYPE**
 3-way standmount loudspeaker
- WEIGHT**
 18.2kg
- DIMENSIONS**
 (WxHxD)
 205 x 440 x 422mm
- FEATURES**
- 25mm aluminium dome with MAT tweeter
 - 125mm aluminium cone midband driver
 - 165mm aluminium cone bass driver
 - Quoted sensitivity: 85dB/1W/1m (4ohm)
- DISTRIBUTOR**
 KEF

Everything about the KEF Reference 1 Meta is deeply reassuring. Reassuringly expensive, of course.

Reassuringly deep, too – as deep as the ‘long body’ AVID and EgglestonWorks, no rakish fastback angles required. It looks like a proper, no-nonsense speaker with square corners, perfectly flat panels and forward-facing drivers. One – well, two – make up KEF’s UniQ concentric mid/tweeter array, now de-coupled from the cabinet and fully re-fettled for the updated Reference 1 that inevitably also gets Meta, KEF’s Metamaterial Absorption Technology (MAT). A round coaster-sized, maze-like structure that sits just behind the tweeter to absorb unwanted sound radiated from the back of the 25mm aluminium tweeter dome, MAT’s presence is intended to kill distortion and allow a cleaner, clearer output, and experience

suggests it does just that with one possible caveat, which I’ll come to.

Installed in the lower half of the cabinet is the 165mm aluminium coned bass driver. Apart from room acoustics, how low it goes largely relies on the user-adjustable rear-firing reflex ports. Slotting into a common aperture, these are made of foam and swappable – the shorter item rolling off at 40Hz, the longer an almost trouser-flapping 37Hz.

At 18.2kg, the Reference 1 Meta is work-out heavy and feels just as solid and well finished as the comparably beefy B&W. The chunky weight speaks of its extensive internal

One obvious win is fabulous clarity and integration top to bottom

bracing, constrained layer damping and the seemingly bullet-proof aluminium front baffle. Finishes run to Walnut (silver Uni-Q/bass driver), High Gloss Black (grey or copper Uni-Q/grey bass driver) and High Gloss White (blue or champagne Uni-Q/white bass driver). Should be something there for everyone.

To go with the Reference 1 Meta, KEF will sell you a dedicated stand, the S-RF1, for a cool £1,000. Like the speaker itself, it’s good looking, beautifully made and seriously heavy. Fact is, weedy stands simply won’t give the required, safe degree of stability. I use my 24in Slate Audios, which do the job, but the KEF ones look much nicer.

Sound quality

Darker thoughts. Nothing sinister, it’s a tonality thing. A characteristic we’ve noted before with KEF’s MAT-equipped UniQ tweeters is they typically sound smooth, refined and insightful but just a little ‘darker’ than most posh metal domes, lacking that often-sought-after ‘top-end air’. This can sometimes be a perceived brightness brought on by certain types of distortion, something MAT is good

at getting rid of. Whatever the case, the Reference 1 Meta prosecutes the idea that you can have sparkle and shimmer, high-frequency harmonic complexity – indeed, all the necessary detail – without a mountain breeze on a sunlit day upping the ante.

This means that moving to the KEF requires a moment of adjustment as the Reference 1 Meta’s presentational style delivers hitherto unsampled levels of body, weight, bass power and extension (forget the Nico EVO’s claimed spec-equaling 37Hz, it doesn’t get close in room) and a midband richness that seems positively luxurious, but still retains serious powers of resolution.

One obvious win is fabulous clarity and integration top to bottom. The deep, weighty bass doesn’t bleed into or overshadow the transparent and open midband’s immaculate reconstruction of spatial cues, image placement, instrument separation and dynamic expression – something the KEF sustains right down to the tiniest, noise floor-dusting details. These are assets for the ages that simply perform, whether it’s the ragged, exertions of Jack Garratt or the tender, plaintive tones of Kate Bush ●



HIFI Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Sets the standard for refinement, body and bass

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: Small perceived shortfall of top-end ‘air’

BUILD QUALITY



WE SAY: Reference by name, reference by nature

EASE OF DRIVE



OVERALL



Group test verdict

As this month's high-end adventure returns to earth, **David Vivian** is left with the thorny job of choosing a winner from a mega talented bunch

WE FEARED PICKING a final order would be problematic at the start, but are twice as torn now. It would be absurdly obvious and trite to say there are no losers here. How could there be? These costly standmounts are all superb, differing only in style of execution. Roundup lesson? Maybe we've been lucky with our selection, but paying more really does pay off.

Even invoking personal preference we're struggling and feel particularly equivocal about starting with the gorgeous Boenicke. For something with such an accommodatingly bijou, decor friendly footprint, it has no

right to sound as effortlessly big, natural and musically sussed as it does. For some, this is the genius-level high-end solution.

Audiovector's beautifully put together R1 Arreté is a thoroughly convincing communicator with an uncanny knack for homing in on the musical pulse while minimising the distractions of a less than pristine recording. It consistently delivers.

It's all but impossible to separate the Evos from AVID HIFI and EgglestonWorks. Not only do they look similar, but their sonic personalities also appear to be

reading from the same no flim-flam, music-first script – the AVID offering stronger dynamics, the Nico more obvious midband presence and detail.

Which leaves the KEF and B&W to compete for top spot. They're equally brilliant – two would-be apex predators, neither dominant. Once again, preferences must be drawn according to style, and they are very different. The 805 D4 is the runner up, not because it lacks anything as such, but because – just occasionally – it pushes a little too hard on the throttle.



WINNER

The KEF might not be as immediately arresting, but the longer you listen the deeper you fall. It has the best stereo, the most convincing blend of weight, body, dynamics and finesse, bass you can feel and what seems like molecular-level musical coherence.



Make/model	Audiovector R1 Arreté	AVID HIFI Evo Four	Boenicke W5	Bowers & Wilkins 805 D4	EgglestonWorks Nico EVOLution	KEF Reference 1 Meta
Price/month	£5,650	£8,000	£5,145	£8,750	£6,900	£7,500
Sound	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Value	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Build	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Ease of drive	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Overall	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
	Has the happy knack of making music, whatever the quality of the recording	The Evo may be more purposeful than it is pretty, but there's huge sonic talent here	This marvel defies all expectations by holding its own in high-end company	A virtuoso skillset that covers all bases and never fails to impress	The Nico EVO ticks an awful lot of high-end boxes and dedicated stands are included	The addition of MAT, sees KEF's best-game standmount hit stunning new heights
Website	audiovector.com	avidhifi.com	boenicke-audio.ch	bowerswilkins.com	egglestonworks.com	kef.com

Key features	Audiovector R1 Arreté	AVID HIFI Evo Four	Boenicke W5	Bowers & Wilkins 805 D4	EgglestonWorks Nico EVOLution	KEF Reference 1 Meta
Sealed	No	No	No	No	No	No
Ported	Rear	Bottom	Rear	Front	Rear	Rear
Two-way	Yes	Yes	Three-way	Yes	Yes	Three-way
Quoted sensitivity	87dB	87dB	83dB	88dB	87dB	85dB
Bi-wire terminals	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes

TRY WITH THESE

INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER:
Exposure 3510 **£2,250 HFC 485**

A reassuringly old-school purist design that sounds highly musically engaging and is slightly euphonic too – with a full and warm bass, subtle midband and sweet treble. It offers a range of expansion options, but still isn't quite as versatile as some price rivals.



TURNTABLE:
Rega Planar 8 **£1,870 HFC 505**

Although you'll get decent results with a cheaper turntable via any of these speakers, this really hits the spot. It's small, light and compact, and has been developed so as not to absorb or store air or ground-borne vibrations. The result is a really high-end sound.



CD PLAYER:
Cyrus CDi-XR Phantom Black **£2,200 HFC 499**

Familiar Cyrus traits such as clean speed, crisp timing and a strong sense of transparency are present and correct here, but bolstered by a weighty, warm balance that sounds natural and inviting, resulting in a winning melding of talents.

