

Fyne Audio F301

A group of ex-Tannoy engineers bring their experience to bear on a new speaker brand
Review: James Parker Lab: Keith Howard

As past reviews have noted, the market's not exactly short of budget speaker offerings. Though prices down at the entry-level have shown an upward trend – after all, the £100-a-pair 'superboxes' of a decade or two back really wouldn't be sustainable these days – there's also an argument for saying there's not exactly a crying demand for new speaker brands.

All of that seems to have bypassed the team behind Fyne Audio, for the new Scottish-based brand has come to market with an unusually comprehensive offering. This peaks with the £26k F1-12 [see p24], the very latest of a complete high-end F1 series, right down to the £250 F301 standmount speakers we have here, one step up from the even smaller F300 model and available in a choice of high-quality black ash, light oak or walnut finishes.

GOING PUBLIC

Two other ranges fill the gap between top and bottom. There's an F500 lineup, running from the compact F500 itself, a single-driver design with an unusual BassTrax loading system, of which more in a moment, this design being echoed in the larger F501 and F502 floorstanders. Above that sits the single-model F700 series, the F702 basically having the same driver configuration as the F502 but in a classier cabinet. Backup is provided by the three-strong range of active F3 subwoofers, their model designations provided by the size of the driver used, from 8in/20cm upwards. The top-end F3-12 model sees a 30cm woofer driven by 520W of 'DDX Direct Digital' amplification that comes with on-board DSP control.

The F1-10 differs from the rest of the range in its design, an immaculate walnut-veneered cylinder, just under 120cm tall,

with burr walnut detailing, on the front of which is mounted, Cyclops-like, a single driver. Each speaker weighs in at a substantial 57.7kg, with Fyne Audio adding, amusingly, 'including spikes'.

The extent of the initial offering can seem baffling, but one must assume that the Fyne fellows know what they're doing. After all, as our boxout explains [see p73], they have over 200 years of cumulative speaker-building experience with that well-known loudspeaker brand you'll find in the dictionary as a (well-defended) term for public address systems. They gained major fame on railway platforms and in defence applications during the Second World War, and in holiday camps thereafter. When Spitfire and Hurricane pilots scrambled, they did so at the behest of orders issued over Tannoy speakers, and if anyone did ever cheerily announce 'Hi-de-hi, campers!' – well, you get the idea.

What is immediately apparent when one looks further up the new range, including the F1-10 flagship, is that some of the celebrated technology of the old company has been reinvented for the start-up's products. Most obvious is the heritage of the point source – don't mention the words 'dual' or 'concentric!' – Fyne Audio IsoFlare

driver. But there's also innovation here, such as in the 'BassTrax' Tractrix loading found in some of the larger Fyne Audio models. This may draw on some Voigt designs of almost a century back, but the company claims its application is novel.

MAGIC FLUTE

However, the F301 seems shorn of such innovation – after all, how much can one do with a budget-limited compact two-way reflex-ported speaker, designed for use on stands or shelves? The tweeter sits above the woofer, and the 30cm-tall enclosure – though solidly built and nicely finished in a decent vinyl wrap plus gloss surrounding the high-frequency driver – gives no hint of anything unusual going on.

Yet this is part of a new, cost-effective range, extending from the tiny F300s up through two floorstanding models to the F303, using two mid/bass drivers in



LEFT: The F301's cross-braced MDF cabinet is further reinforced by anchoring up against the rear of the mid/bass unit's magnet. This 150mm unit employs a fibre cone, the tweeter a 25mm polyester dome. Crossover is at 3.2kHz

thus avoiding what the company describes as 'mis-termination' – in other words reflections back into the cone from the roll rather than absorption of the cone energy – and reducing coloration.

That aside, this speaker looks fairly conventional, having a magnetically-attached grille covering the mid/bass unit if required, and a fixed mesh over the tweeter in that upper gloss panel. Single-wire terminals are fitted below that rear port, and the speaker is happy on stands of around 60cm or so. I used a pair of hefty mass-loaded Atacama SE24s.

As already mentioned, there are some speakers down at this end of the market offering remarkable value for money, including the likes of the Wharfedale Diamond and D300 series models [HFN Jan '19], the smaller Q Acoustics offerings and – albeit at a higher price – the Bowers & Wilkins 607s. But the Fyne Audio F301 is a design well worthy of its place on the must-listen list of those building a highly cost-effective system, or indeed anyone putting together a 'second room' set-up.

WINNING MIX

Supported on my Atacama stands, slightly toed-in and with a spot of boundary reinforcement, Fyne's F301 delighted with its winning mix of smoothness and impact, making them sound anything but small, cheap speakers. What lack of ultimate extension they showed was well covered by the smartness with which the bass moved, and the way it integrated seamlessly up into the midrange. Meanwhile, the treble managed to seem open and airy without demonstrating any roughness or excessive brightness.

What's more, despite the lab testing revealing they're not quite the easygoing amplifier load their manufacturer may suggest [see KH's Lab Report, p75], the F301s proved easy to drive. I used them with the relatively inexpensive Audiolab 6000A amplifier [HFN Mar '19] and a Naim Uniti Nova all-in-one streamer [HFN Nov '17] as well as my reference set-up of Naim NAC 52/52PS/NAP250. I found them both amenable to modest amp power while revealing of the benefits of upping the quality of the electronics used.

One of the more remarkable experiences was listening to the Buddy Holly *Down The Line – Rarities* set [Decca B0011675-02], where the little

a D'Appolito configuration in a 96cm-tall tower. So there must be something to set it apart – a spot of Fynesse, perhaps?

Well yes, there is, for below the 25mm polyester dome tweeter sits the 15cm multi-fibre mid/bass driver, the crossover

point being 3.2kHz. And it's this larger driver that shows the most obvious signs of that experienced engineering team's input, in the form of its 'FyneFlute' surround. This uses variable-geometry fluting moulded into the surround to break up its profile,

SCOTLAND'S FYNEST

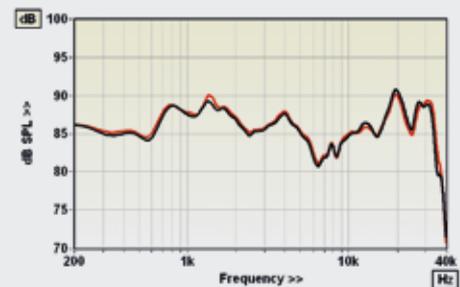
Not many start-up hi-fi companies begin business with two centuries of experience behind them, but that's what Fyne Audio can claim for its seven-strong core team. After a couple of takeovers of Tannoy – being first swallowed up by Danish speaker company TC, itself later acquired by Uli Behringer's Music Group – that team, formerly running the famous Coatbridge factory, found itself with not much to manage. So, moving on, it founded Fyne Audio with investment from overseas, as well as significant funding from Scottish Enterprise. It designs and engineers its products at its HQ in Lanarkshire, with a technical team led by Dr Paul Mills, a Tannoy veteran of almost 27 years, and formerly that company's Director of Research and Engineering for domestic products. Incidentally, the Tannoy name lives on as part of Music Group, alongside brands such as Midas, Lake and Turbosound, but its main focus these days is on the pro audio sector.

LAB REPORT

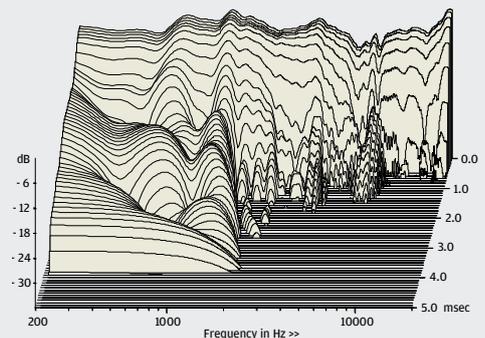
FYNE AUDIO F301

A speaker of this size, impedance and bass extension (details of which follow) was never going to achieve Fyne's specified 89dB sensitivity. Our measured pink noise figure of 86.4dB, averaged for the pair, is fully 2.6dB short of that claimed but much more in keeping with the F301's compact dimensions. If you require that impedance never falls below 80% of the nominal figure then the F301's claimed 8ohm impedance is optimistic too. Although our measured minimum of 4.6ohm is still quite high for a modern speaker, it indicates a 6ohm nominal rating is more appropriate. But the F301 is easy to drive nonetheless: low impedance phase angles mean that the EPDR (equivalent peak dissipation resistance) falls to a minimum of 2.7ohm at a low 20Hz, the 2.9ohm at 140Hz and 3.0ohm at 413Hz being more relevant in practice. So the F301 should not over-stretch the class of amplifier it's likely to be partnered with.

Forward frequency response [Graph 1, below] was measured at 1m on the tweeter axis with the bass-mid driver's grille removed. While the overall trend is pretty flat, the unevenness is enough to result in rather high response errors of ± 5.0 dB and ± 4.5 dB respectively, although pair matching over the same 200Hz-20kHz frequency range was good at ± 0.8 dB. Diffraction-corrected nearfield measurement showed bass extension to be 55Hz (-6dB re. 200Hz), entirely in line with expectations for a compact standmount design. The CSD waterfall [Graph 2, below] hints at resonances associated with the 800Hz and 1.4kHz response peaks but at higher frequencies resonance suppression is generally good, albeit with modes associated with the 4kHz peak and 8kHz 'wiggle' visible in the on-axis responses. KH



ABOVE: The forward response is flat in trend despite broad dips and troughs of ± 5 dB. Pair matching is good



ABOVE: Resonances are coincident with peaks in the response, most obvious here at 800Hz and 1.4kHz



LEFT: Single, gold-plated 4mm binding posts are provided beneath the F301's substantial, rear-facing reflex port

but in typical domestic spaces they're more than willing to give it a go, and motored through the easy groove of Van The Man's latest album – where does he get the energy? – *The Prophet Speaks* [Exile/Caroline International 7707186; 96kHz/24-bit]. Instruments were appropriately close-focused and given space to breath, while

speakers did an admirable job of conveying the intimacy of these simple recordings. If the measure of a good system is how well it communicates a performance, then the F301s do just fine in bringing out the characteristics of Holly's voice, stripped of overdubs and often with nothing more than guitar accompaniment. Rather as the celebrated *From The Original Master Tapes* set [MCA MCAD-5540] does for the sound of Holly and his band, so this set gives further insights into the compositions and performances, and the immediacy here serves the recordings exceptionally well.

MOTORING ON

This combination of openness and sweet treble, allied to good low-down weight – for loudspeakers of this size – also preserved the dynamics of Cara Dillon's *Live At The Grand Opera House* [Bowers & Wilkins Society Of Sound 30; 96kHz/24-bit]. The speakers also delivered small ensemble jazz such as Lars Danielsson's 2014 *Liberetto II* [ACT 9571-2; 96kHz/24-bit] in highly convincing fashion, from Danielsson's bass to Mathias Eicke's restrained trumpet and Magnus Östrom's precise drumming. With a bit of back wall to aid the low-end, the bass never lacks conviction, but is neatly controlled, while that spot of toe-in helps 'fix' the sonic image.

These aren't the speakers you'd choose if you had a huge room to fill with rock music at live gig levels,

Morrison's voice was delivered with no shortage of character.

Up the scale to a big bruiser like Fleetwood Mac's *Tango In The Night* and the low-end limitations of the F301s are a little more apparent, but still the speakers crunch out the big slams of the title track. And this holds true whether in its original version or the rather more stately demo iteration on the 2017 30th anniversary deluxe set [Warner Bros 018227946388; 96kHz/24-bit].

The speakers also have sufficient crispness and control to give good insight into Anna Netrebko's 2013 *Verdi* album [DG 479 1052]. Sounding neither brittle nor strident, instead they give a fine – or is that Fyne? – view of the warmth of the soprano's voice, balanced well with the orchestral accompaniment. ⚡

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

They may show the limitations of absolute low-frequency weight inherent in all loudspeakers of this size, but the little F301s do a good job of conveying a well-integrated sound, and are as enjoyable as they are mature-sounding. In a market that's not exactly short of choice, they're a worthy addition to the entry-level 'must listen' list, and certainly bode well for what else this new company has to offer.

Sound Quality: 83%



HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL/1m/2.83Vrms – Mean/IEC/Music)	86.4dB/86.4dB/86.5dB
Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	4.6ohm @ 195Hz 17.3ohm @ 95Hz
Impedance phase min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	-37° @ 113Hz 38° @ 26Hz
Pair matching/Response Error (200Hz–20kHz)	± 0.8 dB/ ± 5.0 dB/ ± 4.5 dB
LF/HF extension (-6dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	55Hz / 37.0kHz/37.5kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m)	0.6% / 0.6% / 0.6%
Dimensions (HWD) / Weight	300x190x271mm / 5.3kg