



# Too late – or Just-in-time?

With the Formation series, B&W presents a complete wireless multiroom system. Was the long wait worth it? We have examined the current top model „Duo“ and the control unit „Audio“.

*Michael Lang*

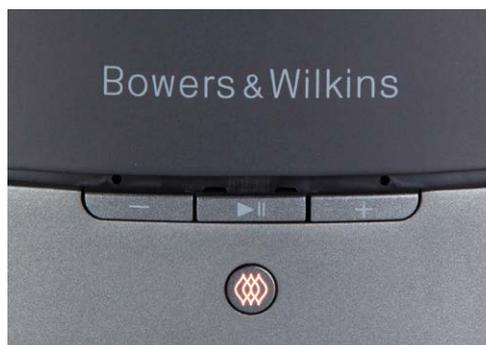
Often in their history, the British from B&W did pioneering work and showed the competition the taillights with innovative solutions. However, when it came to wireless speakers in true high-end quality, other suppliers were there first. With the Duo, a compact loudspeaker sporting the Continuum mid / bass driver from the 800 series and a carbon tweeter in the famous Nautilus tube, we have ordered the current top model of the „Formation“ series for testing.

## True to their roots

Looking at the Duo, it is also easy to perceive an evolution of B&W's design language. The curves are even more pronounced and at the same time more coherent than, for example, in the 700 series. The fact that the cabinet is made of a special plastic and not MDF is hardly noticeable visually. You only notice the difference when you feel it. The reason for the material change lies in the technical requirements for reliable wireless operation. The antennas built into the loudspeaker have an easier life if they don't have to bother with wooden walls. Fears that the use of this material would be at the expense of cabinet stability and resonance-freedom are unfounded – the famous B&W matrix interior for stiffening was used

here. So no signs of lazy compromises up to this point, and the integrated amplifiers with around 250 watts of total power per speaker are also rather impressive. The frequency response is optimized by means of the integrated DSP chip. In order for the speakers to show their full potential, they should be screwed to the optionally available stands, which also conceal the only cable required for operation in an integrated canal. They cost 800 Euros a pair.

Also beautifully made is the streaming hub with name „Audio“ costing 700 euro, which offers connection options for analogue and digital devices and is room-ready. The necessary Room license costs another 500 Euro in its unlimited form and guarantees the best sound with perfect ease of use. It's



The lit button of the Formation Duo is usually the only required control element.

**A force to be reckoned with: the wireless HighRes-multiroom system from Bowers & Wilkins**

## TEST-DEVICES

### CD-Player:

T+A MP 2500; Audio-lab 8300 CDQ

### Integrated amp:

NAD M10; Audionet SAM 20SE

### Speakers:

Canton Smart Vento 9; Dynaudio Special Forty; PMC 5.22



hardly a surprise that B&W made their system HighRes capable. Further products of the series are the successor of the Zeppelin, which is called „Wedge“ and costs about 1000 Euro – a stereo system in one cabinet–, and the subwoofer „Bass“ for 1100 Euro as well as the streaming-enabled soundbar „Bar“ for 1250 Euro.

An obstacle for many mutiroom-capable systems is the delay between the units, the so-called latency time. This results in loudspeakers of different zones being heard with a slight time delay and a slight echo. B&W has set a new record here with a delay of just 0.1 seconds. Setup and operation are quick and easy once you have downloaded the Formation app. We have done our listening tests with Qobuz as well as with the analog and digital output of a CD player and finally Bluetooth via mobile phone and Youtube.

Not to beat about the bush: what the British have put together here would have impressed us already, if it had been done under the motto "first try" – but it is so much more than that. From a standing start, the developers have created a future-proof, expandable, easy-to-use multi-room system that is also convincing in terms of sound. Even the lowest tones are easily handled by the Duo. To create a sound that is completely effortless even at high levels and with large orchestras such as Rimsky-Korsakow or bass thunderstorms such as "Walking on the Moon", is one thing, but also to conjure up a tonal balance and an amazingly precise spatial reproduction in various listening rooms is another. ■

**WHAT WE'VE HEARD**

Various artists:  
**STEREO Hörtest-CD IX**



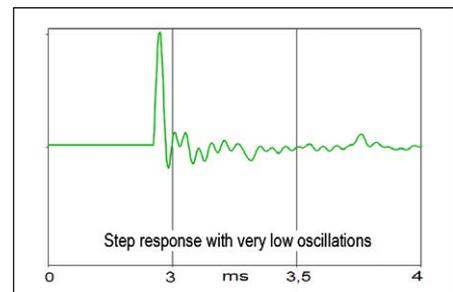
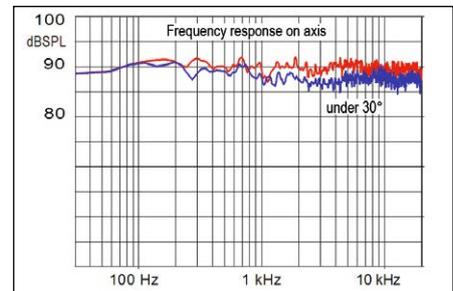
Versatile, interesting and always with great sound: the listening test CD IX has it all.

**B&W Formation Duo**

**Price:** from 4000€ (also available in white; Streaming Hub: 700 € Stands: 800 €)  
**Dimensions:** 20 x 40 x 34 cm (WxHxD)  
**Warranty:** 2 Years  
**Contact:** Bowers-Wilkins  
Tel.: 05201-87170  
www.bowerswilkins.com

The British are serious about their entry into the world of the wireless and multiroom. The sound, workmanship and operating concept are convincing, but they have their price. Especially positive: the system's updatibility and expandability.

**Measurement-results**



**Distortions at 63/3k/10k Hz** 0,3/0,1/0,1 %  
**Power consumption Stby/idle** /16,7 W

**Lab-Commentary**

Very good step response with minimal secondary oscillations. Very balanced frequency response and wide dispersion thanks to DSP correction; low distortion and low-reaching frequency response.

**Features**

Closed, active, wireless and multiroom-compatible two-way system; Airplay2; Roon Ready; Bluetooth; two built-in 125 watt Class D amps; carbon dome, Continuum bass/midrange driver; free 2-month Roon trial subscription



The streaming hub „Audio“ has all essential connection options but no gold-plated sockets.

**STEREO-TEST**  
SOUND-QUALITY 81%  
VALUE FOR MONEY  
★ ★ ★ ★ ★  
**OUTSTANDING**

**INTERVIEW** with B&W Head of Germany Stefan Splawski

**Mr. Splawski, B&W finally offers wireless loudspeakers. Do you think this launch is just in time or already too late?**

It's not about whether you cross the finish line first or last, but whether you're doing the right thing. Bowers & Wilkins now introduces the Formation series, a complete HighRes multiroom system. With the stereo speakers, sound bar, subwoofer and wedge, we offer our customers a true high-end system that is easy to expand upon. The customer can now make his quality decision from among all the systems available on the market.

**How long did your developers puzzle until they were satisfied?**

Exactly, they have fiddled until they were absolutely satisfied (... laughs). In order to be able to transmit several music signals simultaneously with the precision and synchronicity required for audiophile reproduction, our developers have developed a radio technology specially optimized for this purpose. This allows us to hear all audio signals with a previously unattainable accuracy and synchronicity between the individual loudspeakers and between several rooms without delay.

**What were the biggest obstacles?**

One of the challenges was to determine from the many possibilities and exciting new product ideas a powerful line-up for the global launch in over 60 countries. The effort required to launch such a large number of new products at the same time on a global scale should not be underestimated. The development of a reliable software-based high-end system is also a major challenge.

**What makes your approach special?**

To meet the high demands of our customers on B&W sound was only possible with specially developed new technologies. Automatic updates for all Formation products will offer new functions and even greater ease of use in the future. All existing formation systems will therefore always be automatically kept up to date. This guarantees the best possible user experience and continuous product improvement at all times. With Formation Audio as an intelligent interface (with digital and analog inputs and outputs and 24 bit/96 kHz resolution) to existing HiFi and high-end systems, a convenient and cost-effective entry into the fascinating world of HighRes streaming and new media is offered. This can also be the starting point into the new Formation world, which can easily grow according to the wishes of the customer.



**What importance do you attach to the new Formation Series?**

It is of paramount importance to B&W. It represents our new platform, which combines the advantages of the analog and digital worlds. It is our ultimate offer for all customers who are looking for the best possible sound with an extremely high ease of use and flexibility that is highly futureproof. Modern listening habits on the road and at home place different demands on a playback chain or the individual device than a few years back. The almost unlimited choice

of music via the mobile Internet and streaming services offers our customers a level of comfort that they would not want to do without at home in their familiar surroundings. Formation is the perfect answer for every demanding customer.

**How will the system develop further, e.g. with regard to surround use?**

As I just mentioned, yes, the Formation series represents a novel platform. It will, of course, continue to evolve. Automatic updates will provide additional features and services. Of course, further development and additions to the product range can be expected. The special attractiveness of wireless loudspeakers for a surround system and their simple installation is certainly an important aspect.

**Will there be custom installation systems with this technology?**

In our experience, the desire for a multiroom option is always at the top of the list for almost all fixed loudspeaker installations. This possibility can also be realised in the future with our extremely wide range of built-in loudspeakers.

**Will other series be activated and integrated into Formation in the future?**

The Bowers & Wilkins Formation Suite's proprietary new technology provides the platform for many interesting products and attractive opportunities that result from this, along with our existing product portfolio. (But I don't want to reveal too much at this point ...)

**What were the first reactions of dealers and consumers?**

The Bowers & Wilkins Formation Suite has exceeded the extremely high expectations placed on it. The initial reactions from retailers and customers to the design, ease of use and sound experience were phenomenal.