

Danny Phillips finds both music and movies get love from this DALI set

Embracing the Dark Side

With its Opticon series, DALI aims to deliver a speaker range accessible to a wide audience, yet without compromising its high-end values. Easier said than done perhaps, but by taking matters into its own hands the Danish brand might have found a winning formula.

1. Other Opticon finishes available are Black Ash and White Matt Satin

Crafted at its factory in Denmark from custom parts, the Opticon range is the result of a strict in-house process that allows the company to take control of every aspect of production – a move that DALI believes lets it offer higher-quality designs than you'd normally expect for the money.

This new range is positioned below the larger and more advanced Epicon, Helicon and Rubicon series and comprises seven new models: the compact Opticon 1 and mid-sized Opticon 2 standmounts, the wall-mountable Opticon LCR, the Opticon Vokal centre and three floorstanding options – the Opticon 5, 6 and 8 (in ascending size order).

For the system on test here, I'm using a £1,000 pair of Opticon 6s and the £430 Opticon Vokal at the front, with Opticon 2s on surround duty (£650 per pair). Bass is reinforced by the new £900 SUB K-14 F. It's probably no coincidence that this subwoofer sounds like a deadly Soviet submarine.

Out with the Ikons

Opticon is the replacement for DALI's Ikon series, but its design is more living-room friendly than its predecessor.

The floorstanding Opticon 6 is a quite glamorous-looking speaker, but the 1m height and considered styling keep it the right side of imposing. A boxy cabinet leaves envelopes un-pushed, but it's as robust and hefty as you'd expect from a set of £1,000 speakers, with internal bracing providing extra rigidity. On the back are chunky gold-plated bi-wirable binding posts, with a heavy power bridge for single wiring.

The entire Opticon range comes in Black Ash, Light Walnut (pictured) or White Matt Satin vinyl finishes. The use of vinyl means that while they all look nice, they feel plasticky to the touch, reducing the sense of luxury slightly. The high-gloss baffle, embellished by sparkling silver trim and a metal panel at the top housing DALI's familiar hybrid tweeter module, impresses more.



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AV INFO

PRODUCT:
5.1-channel floorstanding system

POSITION:
Between the Fazon and Rubicon lines

PEERS:
Q Acoustics Concept 5.1; Acoustic Energy 1-Series

That tweeter module plays host to a 1.1in dome tweeter mounted below a ribbon tweeter, the latter rolling in for high frequencies above 10kHz and reaching up beyond 30kHz, claims DALI. The ribbon resides in its own separate chamber, fitted with rigid bracing, shielding it from the woofers beating below.

The use of a hybrid tweeter system should bring several benefits – wide horizontal dispersion and high-frequency extension above the ear's audible range, mixed with the dome tweeter's ability to produce sounds from 2kHz upwards. It does mean, however, that you need to be careful about placement. Because of the ribbon's wide dispersion, DALI doesn't recommend toeing in the speakers as it could result in an overly bright sound.

The Opticon 6 floorstander also features a pair of 6.5in woofers constructed from a mixture of paper and wood fibre, screwed directly into the 25mm-thick MDF baffle. Behind it, the magnet motor system uses a pole piece made from Soft Magnetic Compound (SMC), a coated magnet granule that can be formed into any shape. SMC, I'm told, boasts high magnetic conductivity and low electrical conductivity – highly desirable properties for a speaker magnet – keeping distortion and colouration at bay. This magnet mashup is used by all models in the Opticon range.

The Vokal centre channel enclosure also uses the hybrid tweeter system, alongside a single 6.5in woofer, while the two-way Opticon 2 sports a dome tweeter and a single 6.5in woofer. Both share the Opticon 6's solid construction. The entire range features a bass reflex system, with rear porting on the Opticon 6 and 2 and a front slot on the Vokal.

As the name implies, the Sub K-14 F uses a sizeable 14in front-firing aluminium long-stroke woofer, driven by a 450W Class D amplifier. It's handsomely styled, but is

'These combine a superb level of musicality with a barnstorming home cinema performance'

only available in a White Matt Satin or Black Ash vinyl finish, meaning it looks a little out of place in our array. Again, it has a high-gloss front baffle.

Compact it ain't, but build quality seems fabulous, courtesy of a solid MDF cabinet and sturdy aluminium base. On the back are LFE and phono inputs, plus crossover, phase and volume controls.

The aforementioned Opticon LCR model is designed for cinema rooms where wall-mounted speakers are a must. These feature a 130mm deep cabinet and use a single midbass driver and hybrid tweeter.

Awakened by audio

For sheer sonic thrills, I'm finding it very hard to resist *Star Wars: The Force Awakens'* sublime DTS-HD Master Audio track, and the Opticon system does a credible job of bringing it to life.

DALI's signature sound is one of refinement and detail, and this permeates every scene. As Kylo Ren questions Lor San Tekka during the Jakku village raid in the movie's opening act, the speakers' clarity and impeccable timing adds a 'real world' flavour to effects – torched huts crackle



and pop as if you were stood next to them, while footsteps on the sandy floor have a crunchy texture.

When the action switches to Rey scavenging inside the Star Destroyer, it's a stunning showcase for the DALI's top-end resolution. From the microscopic rustle of dust as she peels back the hatch to the metallic clicks as she rips out parts, it's absolutely breathtaking. And the wide dispersion characteristic of that hybrid tweeter is in evidence, with this top-end clarity maintained over an expanded listening area.

John Williams' refreshed *Star Wars* score seems tailor-made for this system's insightful presentation. The opening fanfare is accompanied by musical elements that I hadn't really considered before, like the tinkling bells and percussion. Brass lines are crisp and punchy, and the system's masterful imaging accurately places musical elements at specific points across the front soundstage, making the beloved composition sound like a live performance.



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But such forensic precision isn't limited to the Opticon 6s and their hybrid tweeters. The Opticon 2s ensure a similarly high level of detail in the surround plane, as demonstrated by subtle metallic rattling inside the Millennium Falcon, or the soft hiss of windswept sand on Jakku.

And because they offer excellent bass extension – more so than the smaller £500 per/pair Opticon 1s, which could also be used as a surround speaker option – the Opticon 2s create a deep, atmospheric bed of surround sound, peppered with crisp effects that pan seamlessly. Tonally, all of the speakers sound well-matched, creating a smooth, uniform soundstage.

Fast and furious

Don't let this system's musicality and sophistication fool you though – it does the rough stuff as well as many other packages around this price. The front trio conveys exploding TIE fighters and roaring Rathtars with vigour. There's bite aplenty, and during frantic sequences with multiple effects, there's a clean, quick nature to the sound. While paper and wood may not sound like the sexiest materials for a speaker driver, DALI's mid/bass units are agile and responsive.

The Opticon array also does scale in its sleep, thanks in no small part to the K-14F subwoofer, which DALI describes as more home cinema-focused than its previous models. The in-built amplifier has suitable power reserves to get its pistonic woofer going like the clappers, and it easily conveys the enormity of some of *Star Wars*... galactic-scale explosions, sending tremors through the room. I could feel the air flapping.

After a bit of trial and error with placement and volume, the sub melded invisibly into my room, fusing with the other speakers and giving no indication of its position. Its low-frequency output bleeds into everything, lending depth and body to Ren's voice without compromising its intelligibility behind all that apparatus.

And despite its impressive scale and muscularity, the K-14 is relatively quick on its toes. There were moments in the JJ Abrams blockbuster where I was jolted by its ability to slam hard, and quick blaster shots burst tightly with no overhang.

Changing down a fear gears to *Drive* on Blu-ray, the Opticon setup makes short shrift of the movie's subtle soundtrack. It nails the tension of the opening car chase – the throbbing electro bass, the ticking watch and the chunky thud of a police helicopter doing a 360 around the room. Later, as Ryan Gosling rips around the racetrack, the throaty growl of the engine is full and forthright.

I was also impressed by the Vokal's dialogue skills. Gosling's infrequent words come through clearly, with the hybrid tweeters tickling out his vocal nuances.

Despite its talent for home cinema, two-channel music will always be where DALI's heart lies and on that note the Opticon system really excels.

Its treatment of *Breezin'* by George Benson on CD is sublime. The transparency and refinement gives you a faithful reproduction of the signal; DALI doesn't stamp any particular sonic agenda on the sound, other than a slightly embellished top-end that lends air and texture.

Harvey Mason's drums are full and punchy, with hi-hats that tick with nigh-on metronomic precision; when coupled with the lithe, weighty bassline my head wouldn't stop nodding.

SPECIFICATIONS

Opticon 6
DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 1.1in soft dome tweeter; 1 x 17mm x 45mm ribbon tweeter; 2 x 6.5in paper/wood fibre mid/bass drivers **ENCLOSURE:** Bass reflex **FREQUENCY RESPONSE (CLAIMED):** 49Hz-32kHz **SENSITIVITY (CLAIMED):** 89dB **POWER HANDLING:** 25W-200W **DIMENSIONS:** 195(w) x 1,001(h) x 330(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 18.9kg

Opticon Vokal
DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 1.1in soft dome tweeter; 1 x 17mm x 45mm ribbon tweeter; 1 x 6.5in paper/wood fibre mid/bass driver **ENCLOSURE:** Bass reflex **FREQUENCY RESPONSE (CLAIMED):** 47Hz-32kHz **SENSITIVITY (CLAIMED):** 89.5dB **POWER HANDLING:** 30W-150W **DIMENSIONS:** 435(w) x 201(h) x 312(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 8.8kg

Opticon 2
DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 1.1in soft dome tweeter; 1 x 6.5in paper/wood fibre mid/bass driver **ENCLOSURE:** Bass reflex **FREQUENCY RESPONSE (CLAIMED):** 59Hz-27kHz **SENSITIVITY (CLAIMED):** 87dB **POWER HANDLING:** 30W-150W **DIMENSIONS:** 195(w) x 351(h) x 297(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 7.8kg

SUB K-14 F (subwoofer)
DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 14in aluminium long-stroke bass driver **ENCLOSURE:** Bass reflex (down-ported) **FREQUENCY RESPONSE (CLAIMED):** 29Hz-160Hz **ON BOARD POWER:** 450W Class D amplifier **REMOTE CONTROL:** No **DIMENSIONS:** 396(w) x 429(h) x 428(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 26.4kg **CONNECTIONS:** LFE input; phono input

PARTNER WITH



ARCAM AVR550: This high-spec AV receiver (£2,400) features state-of-the-art HDMI switching, gutsy Class G amplification and carries the Dirac Live EQ suite, meaning it can tune the DALI system's output to work best in your room.

Its handling of the airy flutes and luscious strings is sheer luxury, but the *piece de resistance* is Benson's nimble guitar work, every pluck clean and well defined.

Step up to a higher resolution and the Opticons shine even brighter. A weird Japanese 5.0-channel 96kHz/24-bit DVD-Audio called *Tokachino* by J Project – basically a hi-res easy listening album set to scenic photographs, check it out if you can – sounds absolutely stunning, despite the doctor's waiting room vibe.

Sumptuous top-end detail gives pianos and clarinets a three-dimensional 'in-the-room' presence, while synth and pizzicato strings are warm and immersive.

Refinement... with muscle

This superb level of musicality, combined with a barnstorming home cinema performance, makes DALI's Opticon system an absolute must-audition if you're shopping at this price point. Few systems mix refinement and muscle this successfully and look so good doing it.

It's beautifully built, gorgeously styled and a treat to listen to ■

HCC VERDICT



DALI Opticon 5.1
 → £3,000 → www.dali-speakers.com/uk

WE SAY: A classy mid-range proposition from DALI that balances hi-fi sensibilities with the power and snap that home cinema fans crave. Good-looking, too

2. The Opticon 6 (and Vokal) speakers use DALI's hybrid tweeter arrangement

3. The back panel of the subwoofer offers controls for gain, crossover and phase