

SVS

SBS-01 Home Theater Speaker System

Though SVS is relatively unknown in the world of big-name hi-fi speakers, that world is connected by ample word of mouth, which has helped the Web-based manufacturer build a strong following for its high-value, high-performance subwoofers. That's how it works: Audition some product for golden-ear listeners, maybe get a nice write-up or two in the online forums or one of the magazines, and get a buzz going. Pretty soon, it's the speaker that no one has heard, but everyone has heard about.

So when SVS recently announced its first full-range subwoofer/satellite system — the affordable 5.1-channel SBS-01 (\$1,149 with optional 12-inch sub) — you

can bet I was intrigued. After hearing the buzz, I wanted to hear the speakers . . .

SETUP

Sometimes you pull speakers out of the cartons and admire their beauty. Things like aluminum cabinets or sculpted side panels encourage oohing and aahing. But don't kid yourself: Appearance has little to do with sound quality, and in a budget speaker, styling means that the money the manufacturer spent on cosmetics came out of the budget for drivers, crossovers, and cabinet integrity. In other words, all things being equal, the better a speaker looks at any given price — especially a low price — the worse it will sound. Sure, I like good-looking speakers, but I like good-sounding speakers more.

These sturdy little SVS speakers do not encourage oohing. The SBS-01 satellites, used here for left, right, and surround, are standard-issue 2-way woofer/tweeter bookshelf speakers; their only concession to style is rounded cabinet edges. The SCS-01 center-channel speaker is similarly spartan, but adds another woofer, and includes a simple tilt stand. I'm not

being critical; I'm congratulating SVS — as long as I'm repaid in sound quality.

As might be expected from a company that made its name in subwoofers, the matching PB12-NSD sub is a monster, measuring 18 x 21 x 25 inches and weighing 74 pounds. Its digital amplifier is rated at 325 watts and drives a front-firing 12-inch cone.

I set up the four satellites on stands, and the center channel on a shelf below my display. I powered each speaker with 150 watts, but you could probably drive them to their limits with less. The sub ended up in my usual spot along the front wall, between the TV and left satellite. After initially crossing over the satellites to the sub at 100 Hz, I notched it down to 90 Hz — just shy of the 80 Hz recommended by SVS. This seemed to provide the smoothest transition in my room.

MUSIC PERFORMANCE

To check out music quality, I auditioned the multichannel R.E.M. releases *Green*, *New Adventures in Hi-Fi*, *Monster*, and *Automatic for the People*, as well as their biggest hit, *Out of Time*, where the boys from Athens (Georgia, that is) moved into mainstream musical philosophy with songs that matched their yearnings to those of millions of listeners.

On “Losing My Religion,” Michael Stipe's lead vocals are feeding all three front channels. To correctly reproduce

**The Short Form****Snapshot**

These plain-looking but terrific-sounding speakers put your hard-earned dollars where you can hear them.

Plus

- ⚡ Great bang-for-buck value.
- ⚡ Warm sound quality.
- ⚡ Earth-shaking, deep-bass sub.

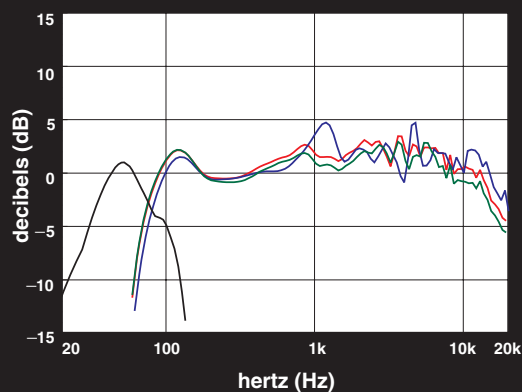
Minus

- ⚡ Zero cosmetic points.
- ⚡ Some tonal coloration in sats.

Price \$1,149 (AS TESTED)

Test Bench

Full lab results at soundandvisionmag.com/svs



L/R ■ 76 Hz to 16.2 kHz ± 3.4 dB Surround ■ 76 Hz to 14 kHz ± 2.9 dB
Center ■ 82 Hz to 19.4 kHz ± 4.3 dB Subwoofer ■ 34 Hz to 78 Hz ± 2.0 dB

Our tests of the SVS system suggest surprisingly good performance for this price class, but with a few rough edges. The SBS-01 has a narrow, on-axis midrange notch at 3.3 kHz (obscured by our averaging technique), though it's unlikely to be significantly audible, and gently rolling highs above 14 kHz. The sub offers world-class dynamics, hitting max SPL of 109 dB at 32 Hz, and 102 dB or greater from 25 Hz up. — *Tom Nousaine*

the spatial soundstage, the center channel needs to be spectrally matched to the front left and right. This proved all in a day's work for the SVS system: The vocals were spatially anchored in the center, and the stereo soundstage produced on either side by the satellites offered a wide stretch. The rear channels had different fish to fry — catchy acoustic guitars, and synth strings. Since I had identical SBS-01s front and back, the dispersion patterns meshed well for good spatial continuity.

I was pleased with the essential "sound" of the SBS-01 speakers. They had a welcoming quality, with mellow high-frequency reproduction (which I much prefer over crunchy) well-suited to their lower-frequency warmth. Songs like "Low" were appropriately sparse and dark, but not muddy. On "Endgame," the overtones of the guitars sounded distantly snappy, but not harsh. On the other hand, vocals were slightly pulled back, lacking the up-front detail and *über*-clarity of some speakers. Our measurements detected a small notch in the midrange response that might account for this (see Test Bench), and it might also stem from the mellow mid/high end, which tended to soften some sibilants. Either way, it wasn't particularly troublesome. If you prefer deep-fried crispy high-end, the SBS-01s might sound a little "soft" to you, but don't get me wrong — there's plenty of "air" here. The sound is just laid back.

I also liked the blend between sub

and sats. The sats' decent bass extension means the subwoofer won't have to push high frequencies, which can contribute to it sounding "loose." No such problem here. The song "Half a World Away," for example, has tremendous musical density packed into the upper bass, and this system didn't miscarry a note of it. And "Belong" is propelled throughout by bass guitar and kick drum, which need seriously percussive energy behind them to cut through heavily processed vocals, backup singing, and a wash of guitars. The PB12-NSD was highly musical on this track, sounding much more like a bass guitar than a subwoofer playing a *recording* of a bass guitar. This sub beautifully marries power and finesse.

MOVIE PERFORMANCE

To check out cinema playback, I turned to the first *Pirates of the Caribbean* film, *The Curse of the Black Pearl*. This rollicking movie is fun for the whole family, and the sound designers didn't miss a trick. The first appearance of pirate Jack Sparrow's ship is accompanied by pure mayhem, including swords and knives that make squishy sounds as they enter and leave human flesh. (Did I mention this is a family film?) While the effects swirl about, the orchestral score energetically pumps up the action, and there's even a bit of dialogue.

It takes a competent speaker system to handle this, and a truly good one to do it justice. I was impressed with this SVS sys-

tem. The front satellites were commanding throughout, remaining punchy without sounding strained, even at loud levels. Later, on board with the skeleton pirates, the percussive orchestral score and sound effects punctuate the action, and the sats complied with taut response. The center channel was alert to its dialogue duty, anchoring the voices to the images, but with good dispersion and intelligibility. The SBS-01 satellites functioning as surrounds lacked the ambient spread of dipoles, but their wide dispersion created a truly surrounding sound field unmarred by any obvious squirting of sound from specific localized points. In that opening scene with the ship, I was truly immersed in the middle of the raid, with cannonball and other effects whizzing through my room.

Not surprisingly, the subwoofer was as impressive on movies as it was with music. Cannon fire and explosions were *explosive*. Wimpy subs go splat when confronted with this much impulse energy, but the PB12-NSD really banged it out, enunciating each effect with deep clarity. This is a *serious* subwoofer.

BOTTOM LINE

These unassuming speakers offer great sonic performance for the money. The sats offer smooth, unfatiguing sound that will warm you on the coldest nights. And if you can find a back strong enough to lift it, the sub will hammer out all the bass you'll need. If you're after a system that takes a commanding position between low-cost and silly-expensive, the SBS-01 hits a sweet spot. **S&V**

Key Features

SBS-01

•• (\$225/pair) 1-in tweeter; 5¹/₄-in woofer; 12 in high; 11 lb

SCS-01

•• (\$185) 1-in tweeter; (2) 5¹/₄-in woofers; 20 in wide; 19 lb

PB12-NSD

•• (\$599) 12-in driver; 325-watt RMS amplifier; 20¹/₂ x 17¹/₂ x 25 in; 74 lb

•• Finish: Black, white, or silver vinyl

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