

PSB Alpha Studio Theater System

June 2006 Steve Guttenberg

Canada's PSB Speakers offers a wide range of models, but it's the entry-level, hugely popular Alpha series that consistently makes the biggest splash with budget-minded audiophiles. The original Alpha series was introduced in 1991 and has been upgraded a couple of times over the years (most recently in 2002), but the 2006 revamp may be the most extensive yet.

Though the Alpha speakers are available separately, for this review, we're looking at the complete Alpha Studio Theater System (\$1,256), which features a pair of Alpha B1 bookshelf speakers, the Alpha C1 center speaker, a pair of Alpha LR1 satellites used as surround speakers, and the venerable SubSeries 5i subwoofer. Owners of 7.1-channel systems can purchase additional Alpha LR1s for \$199 per pair. The PSB Alpha Studio Theater System is available in three colors: maple, black, and sienna (or cherry woodgrain, as it's more commonly known).

The Alpha B1 front speakers are larger than those of a typical satellite design; they're 11.8 inches high, 7.1 wide, and 9.25 deep. The C1 center is even bigger, at 17.8 inches wide, 7.1 high, and 9.25 deep. The front B1 and center C1 speakers feature 5.25-inch woofers and a high-quality 0.75-inch aluminum dome tweeter (the B1 uses one woofer while the C1 uses two). The LR1 surround speaker is the baby of the group, filling out at just 7.25 inches high, 4.75 wide, and 6.3 deep. It uses a 3.5-inch woofer and the same 0.75-inch tweeter as its siblings. The new drivers required an upgraded crossover design, and PSB's engineers used the opportunity to design a simpler crossover that maxed out the fidelity of the new drivers. The Alpha speakers are all fitted with

heavy-duty binding posts that accept banana plugs, spades, or bare wire ends.

The revised Alphas feature new cabinets, tweeters, woofers, and crossover networks, and the engineers even reworked the woofers' ports to eke out better bass from the speakers. The Alpha cabinets are all built with high-quality medium-density fiberboard for structural integrity, with molded plastic front and rear baffles. All of the speakers' cabinets feature nicely integrated, curved, and perforated metal grilles. The



Alpha speakers' backsides are fitted with threaded inserts and keyhole slots to ease wall mounting, but since the B1 and C1 have rear-mounted bass ports, flush wall mounting may negatively affect their bass performance.

The 31-pound SubSeries 5i subwoofer matches the satellites' style; it measures 16.5 inches tall, 12.3 wide, and 14.8 deep. Its twin ports are mounted up front, so it can squeeze into corners without suffering any ill effects. It utilizes a front-mounted 10-inch woofer and a 150-watt amplifier. Connectivity options are better than average; stereo line-level inputs (RCA connectors) are flanked by stereo speaker-level inputs and outputs (high-quality five-way binding posts). The built-in 50Hz-to-150Hz crossover can and should be bypassed when the sub is used with an A/V receiver. The

subwoofer is magnetically shielded, allowing placement near a direct-view TV (most subs are unshielded).

Most subs' crossover and volume controls are hidden on their back panels, but the SubSeries 5i's controls are conveniently located near the bottom of its front baffle. We were especially grateful for the easy access, as the volume control required a deft touch to get the bass balance with the satellite speakers just so. It took a while to find the magic spot--we went back and forth over the first few days--and anything over the 10 o'clock position on the sub's volume control resulted in too much bass. But if you really want to rattle your windows, this little sub can rock out without distorting. Oh, and we'd like to praise PSB for its owner's manuals. In these days of skimpy

pamphlets that are mostly filled with legal warnings intended to minimize potential lawsuits, PSB's literature offers truly useful setup info.

We hooked up the Alpha Studio Theater System to our A/V receiver and immediately recognized PSB's signature sound. The Studio Theater's sound is clear and vividly transparent; the "see through" quality stands in contrast to the muddled or overly bright sound of many similarly priced and sized competitors. The subwoofer's home-theater bass was comparably clear and true. The Underworld: Evolu-



tion DVD is loaded with squishy, blood-spewing scenes, and the Studio Theater revealed every last drop. When the occasional head gets lopped off, we could feel the impact of the thud and sense it

“PSB’s entry-level Alpha Studio Theater System is a winning compromise between relatively small size and exceptional sound quality at an affordable price.”

rolling across the floor. The omnipresent background of thunder and rain sounded especially vivid and wet. The Alphas are conventional box speakers, but they came close to developing the sort of three-dimensional, holographic imaging we heard from the omnidirectional Mirage Nanosat

5.1 system. The five Alphas put us inside the steamy jungle scenes of the King Kong DVD--the sense of home-theater envelopment was total. Kong’s bellowing roars emerged from the C1 center speaker with

the ferocious scale we associate with larger speakers.

CD sound was no less impressive. The blend between the satellites and the sub was truly excellent; the middle bass region--always tricky to get right--was evident in

the way the system reproduced the sound of stand-up bass on Holly Cole’s Temptation CD. Every plucked note was present and accounted for. Vocals had just the right balance of full-bodied chestiness and articulation. Treble detail on brass instruments, cymbals, and drums was beautifully natural, without any harshness.

Just remember the Alphas are small speakers, so they can’t play as loud or fill large rooms as a full-size speaker system would, but in moderately sized rooms, the speakers will satisfy most folks’ needs. Then again, if you want to rock out, consider something along the lines of PSB’s larger Image speakers or Aperion’s System D--both of which will cost you considerably more money. That said, the PSB Alpha Studio Theater System is a great deal for anyone looking for modestly sized speakers that can deliver excellent audiophile-friendly sound at a relatively affordable price.