

THE HOME Theater

PSB Alpha B1 Speaker System Listen to the violinist

March 2007 By Mark Fleischmann

“... a great set of affordable speakers with a fine pedigree, designed by someone with a good ear. The redesign of these Alphas is a total success. Highly recommended.”

Reviewing the PSB Alpha B1 speaker system is a bit like coming home. I reviewed the original PSB Alpha for *Rolling Stone* back in the 1990s. Its little sister, the PSB Alpha Mini, anchored my surround system during a time when I was struggling to launch an online business, barely making ends meet, and dissipating my savings. I needed new speakers, wasn't then in a position to freeload, and didn't have much to spend. The Alpha Minis gave me what I needed – a big soundstage in a small package with no off-putting aggressiveness. The bass was just good enough to make a sub unnecessary. Let the record show that a borrowed Yamaha receiver ran the system.

I've since moved on to something higher end, and the old Alpha Minis have moved on to the home of a friend who can't afford much on his salary. The last time I heard them, they were still in good health. But, for the last two weeks, I've been spending face time with the new Alpha B1 system – and, as I said, it's just like coming home, albeit to one redesigned for the better. The sonic signature is recognizable as having Paul Barton's imprimatur, but the Alpha B1 has enough improvements to leave its predecessors in the dust. If the old Alpha Mini had sounded like this, I never would have bothered to upgrade.

Straight Down the Middle
PSB offers several speaker lines, of which the Alpha is the most affordable. Move upscale, and you'll find the

Image, the Stratus, and the Platinum. The lateral move in PSB's hierarchy is the flat-panel-friendly VisionSound.

The Alpha B1 is what I refer to as a monitor-sized speaker or a bookshelf speaker. The downside of midsized speakers is that they're chunkier than many satellites or flat speakers. The upside is that they often have more bass response. That in turn brings a whole bunch of benefits: Mid and upper bass is more localized around the room, the soundstage knits more tightly together at those frequencies, baritone voices needn't leap from sats to sub, and the overall feeling is an improvement in solidity. If you're flexible enough to consider anything from a floorstanding speaker to a sub/sat set, I'd recommend that you look at monitors.

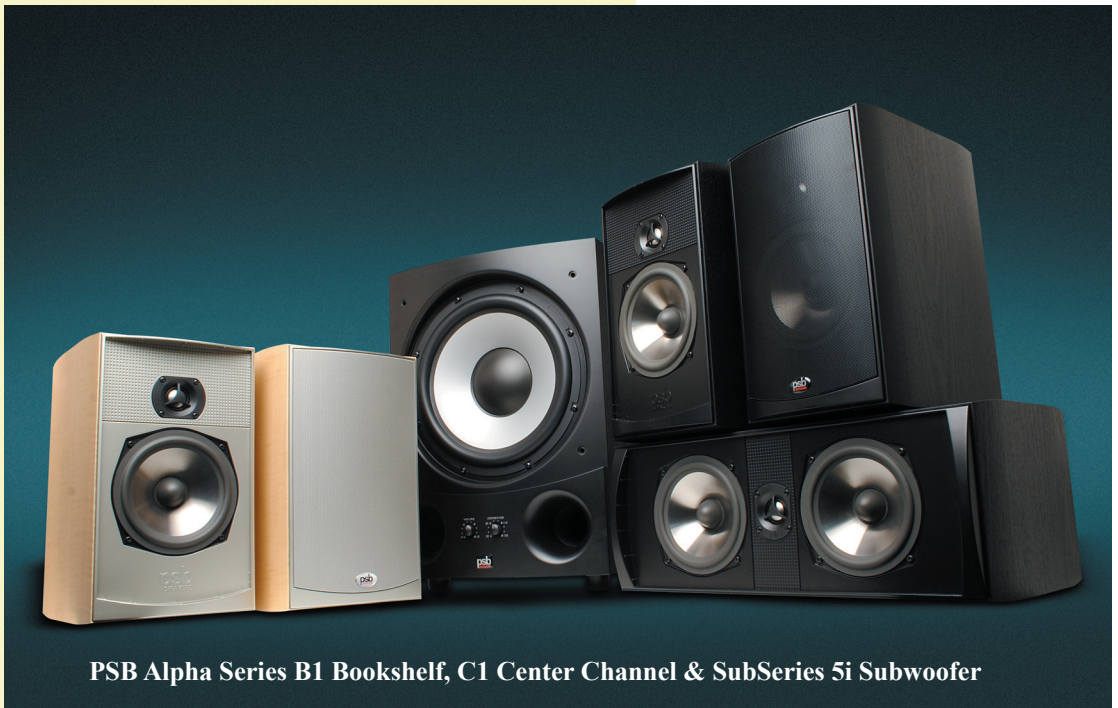
They'll give you the best of both worlds. My reference speakers are monitors.

The formerly polypropylene tweeter – which limited the old Alpha's high-frequency response – has given way to a 0.75-inch aluminum dome. Even more interesting, the 5.25-inch polypropylene woofer has acquired a metalized layer, sits in a deeper basket, and is injection molded rather than vacuum formed.

PSB says this provides greater manufacturing consistency, as well as higher performance. It also improves sensitivity (we measured the Alpha B1 at 88.5 decibels and the Alpha C1 at 89dB), providing an easier load for the perpetually stressed budget and midpriced surround receivers that most people are likely to use with these speakers. Proprietary research has resulted in a change in vent geometry, as well, presumably to reduce port noise and chuffing at low frequencies.

My review system consisted of four Alpha B1 monitors, plus an Alpha C1 center and a SubSeries 5i sub. The Alpha C1 center uses a similar woofer (in duplicate) and tweeter. The Alpha line also includes the floorstanding T1 tower and the CLR1, which is similar to but smaller than the C1. You can use the CLR1 in triplicate across the front. The LR1 monitor is smaller than both the B1 and the old Mini.

The SubSeries 5i is second from the bottom among PSB's six free-standing sub models. PSB also offers the CHS 212 in-cabinet sub for custom-installed gear closets and the CWS8 in-wall sub with the matching CWA-1 amp.



PSB Alpha Series B1 Bookshelf, C1 Center Channel & SubSeries 5i Subwoofer

My reference equipment still includes the five-channel Rotel RSX-1065 receiver, after all these years, although the seven-channel RSX-1067 is the current model. The Integra DPS-10.5 universal disc player feeds the analog multi inputs. On this occasion, I also used my Rega Planar 25 turntable, Shure V97xE phono cartridge, and NAD PP-1 phono preamp (now succeeded by the PP-2).

Fiddling Around

By chance, I happened to add five sidewalk-sale LPs to my collection just as the PSBs had broken in and were reaching their prime. The most revealing was a recording of Jascha Heifetz playing Respighi's Sonata in B Minor and Debussy's far more sophisticated Sonata No.3 in G Minor. PSB's Paul Barton is a violinist and presumably pays attention to the way the instrument sounds through his speakers. In this case, the solo violin recording achieved the most detail when I fed it through the Alpha C1 center. It sang like a hollow-bodied wooden instrument played a few feet from my ears. Thus, it came as no surprise later when the Alpha C1 proved to be the most vocally intelligible speaker I've heard in years. When I rerouted Heifetz to the Alpha B1, his tone became less detailed but more voluptuous, in keeping with PSB's tradition of mellowness. Despite the mono source material, a smidgen of ambience slipped through, as well.

A lot of the movies I've been watching lately are the kind in which people talk one another nearly to death. *The Squid and the Whale* delivered its histrionics through the Alpha C1 even more readily than when I watched the same movie with a far higher-priced system several months before. *Nine Lives* gave me the chills; the interrelated stories sucked me in like the ocean undertow that nearly drowned me when I was a kid. The scene in the supermarket between a pregnant woman and her selfish ex was especially riveting.

My guests often seem to love simple action movies, so, even if I hadn't been subjected to *Underworld: Evolution*, I'd have been subjected to something like it. A succession of pseudo-supernatural effects and choreographed violence had plenty of impact. Much of the blare was centered in the midrange, and I appreciated the Alpha B1s' restraint as much as I dug the Alpha C1's dialogue-sharpening clarity.

To get a handle on the sub, I turned to the higher-quality sonic assaults of *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* – playing “The Breach of the Deeping Wall” scene three times. The first time, with my usual 80-hertz crossover, the bass effects were suitably steroidal through the

sub and its two front-mounted 3-inch ports. The volume and crossover controls are also located in front, between the ports, which proved convenient for fine-tuning. Then I raised the crossover to 120 Hz to let the sub dominate. It did, although I lost some subtlety.

The best performance came when I shut down the sub and let the speakers run full range. Effects were still powerful but not as powerful. They were also less distracting and better integrated into both the soundfield and the story being told, the story of the battle. Of course, the Rotel receiver has power to spare. Your mileage may vary with other receivers – in other words, if you haven't got the watts or love powerful bass, get the sub.

A New Top End

Wide-ranging listening with jazz, rock, classical, and world music in both analog and digital form pointed to the same set of conclusions. The traditional PSB midrange is intact. It's generous and versatile, and its proportions are ideal. These bookshelf speakers – which you should, of course, use on stands – also muster real midbass and a touch of low-bass response. For the best results, get them a couple of feet out from the wall.

What's new here is the top end. I've sampled PSB's old Alpha line extensively and their higher-end Stratus line occasionally. Historically, PSB has gone for what people often call a polite or reticent top end – the kind of sound you'd expect a violinist to prefer. This is by no means a bad thing if the bright-voiced speakers that some audio marketers believe listeners prefer have worn you down. In the Alpha B1, the high-frequency treatment has gone from polite to civilized. It's still far from strident. But it has a new zing, especially in the Alpha C1, and there is greater resolution in the Alpha B1. To borrow a phrase I've used only once before, it's lovingly – not ruthlessly – revealing. Listening to music through these speakers made me feel profoundly comfortable.

And that, in turn, caused the Alpha B1, alpha C1, and SubSeries 5i to linger in my testing area for an unreasonable time, while other review samples gathered dust (which made me sneeze like mad). Here, then, is a great set of affordable speakers with a fine pedigree, designed by someone with a good ear. The redesign of these Alphas is a total success. Highly recommended.