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PSB Alpha B1/C1/SubSeries 5i Home-Theater Speaker System

Over the last year I reviewed a number of lifestyle-oriented loudspeakers. By *lifestyle*, I mean speakers that have been designed to go well with modern décor as well as sound good. I've found two things common to all of them: they have thin, great-looking enclosures, and the price for their great looks is high. The latter isn't surprising; most of these speakers have enclosures made of relatively expensive aluminum rather than wood. Nor is it surprising that this is a hot market: a lot of people want thin speakers to match their flat-panel TVs.

The best bang for the bargain hunter's buck can be had if you're willing to sacrifice a bit of that thinness. I've always told friends that the best value can be found by buying the bread and butter of almost every speaker manufacturer's product line: a bookshelf model. Its advantages include a simpler crossover that serves only two drivers, a smaller cabinet that doesn't require as much bracing as a tower speaker, and a subsequently greater number of placement choices.

A great example of outstanding value in such a system is the one based on the PSB Alpha B1. At a cost of just \$1336, this 5.1-channel surround system should have deal seekers lining up to audition.

Alpha B1 and C1

PSB's Alpha has gone through many refinements over the years. The latest Alpha line comprises seven speaker models: two bookshelf, a tower, a center-channel, a versatile LCR, and two subwoofers. Buyers can mix and match these speakers in a number of ways to come up with a system to suit their room and budget.

The Alpha series is handsome and well finished. PSB sent me two pairs of the larger bookshelf model, the B1 (\$279/pair), along with a C1 center-channel and a SubSeries 5i subwoofer. The B1 is of classic bookshelf size: 11.9"H by 7.1"W by 9.3"D. Its rigid enclosure is made of dense MDF with a vinyl veneer. The enclosure is subtly tapered to give the speakers a more interesting look than the rectangular boxes usually seen in this price class. The curved grille is made of aluminum. The Alpha C1 center-channel speaker (\$229 each) has the same tapered shape as

frequency extension reportedly exceeds 21kHz. This, along with a subtle flaring of the tweeter surround and a phase device to increase dispersion, is said to produce a smooth response below 20kHz. The B1 and C1 use the same 5.25" woofer of metalized polypropylene; supposedly, the metal increases the cone's stiffness and thus reduces distortion. The B1 has just one of these woofers, the C1 two; the latter's drivers are in the horizontal woofer-tweeter-woofer array used in most center-channel speakers.



the B1 and measures 17.8"W by 7.1"H by 9.3"D. Around back, the B1 and C1 have keyhole cutouts for wall mounting, and five-way, gold-plated binding posts. The C1 and one of the pairs of B1s were finished in black ash, the other two B1s in maple. I used one pair of B1s for my mains, the other as surrounds.

The Alpha series uses a newly designed, 0.75" aluminum-dome tweeter whose high-

The SubSeries 5i subwoofer was familiar to me — it's the same model that was sent with the PSB VS300 system, which I recently reviewed. It's a near-cube measuring 12.4"W by 16.5"H (plus 1" for the feet) by 14.8"D and weighing 31 pounds. A powerful (rated at 150W continuous) class-H amplifier drives a 10" polypropylene woofer with a 28-ounce magnet and a 1.5" voice coil. All the usual controls are present, including a phase switch and front-mounted controls for crossover and volume settings.

Listening

I positioned the front Alpha B1s 9' from my listening seat, which put them well away from the front and sidewalls. The Alpha C1 was in the center of the front wall, 9' from my seat, and the two B1s I used as surrounds were 5' from my seat, at about a 110-degree angle to the C1. The SubSeries 5i ended up tucked into the right front corner of the room, firing out into the room.

Watching the laughably bad *Æon Flux* and thinking to myself *This is dumb*, I was distracted by a great sound effect in the opening scene: an insect is buzzing around, and *Æon* (Charlize Theron) traps



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it in her eye. The buzzing sound circulates continuously, from the left surround to the right surround, then back to the left. The Alpha B1s' wide dispersion let me easily track the sound of the buzzing bug behind and to the sides of me. The B1 surrounds responded well to the Cinema DSP modes available on my Sony STR-DA5ES receiver, giving a better sense of envelopment. An example of this is in chapter 3, when *Æon* visits the Handler (Frances McDormand). This scene has a lot of reverb to give the sense of a large, stark space. The echoing was more involving through the B1 surrounds when I switched in the Sony's Cinema A mode.

I also watched *Syriana*. The film is driven by its dialogue, and this DVD showed me the importance of a good center-channel — if I didn't listen carefully to what each character said, I found *Syriana* difficult to follow. The Alpha C1 reproduced dialogue clearly; I never had to switch on the subtitles. When I sat to the side of my room, well off axis, I did detect some loss of detail, where the high frequencies sounded dull. Most woofer-tweeter-woofer center speakers I've heard have this characteristic, but the PSB C1 was better in this regard than others I've heard, especially when listened to within a 60-degree arc in front of the speaker.

Another great attribute of the C1 center was the seamless timbral match it made with the B1 front speakers. Chapter 4 of *Æon Flux* includes a scene in which *Æon* and Sithandra (Sophie Okonedo) run through a field as tree pods shoot darts at them. The darts make a crisp clinking sound as they fly everywhere, and all of the speakers are used. Throughout this scene, the sound was seamless from speaker to speaker; there was never a change of sound or timbre as they moved around the room.

The SubSeries 5i subwoofer was a great match for the Alpha B1 system. Using my Sony receiver, I'd set the crossover from 5i to B1s at 80Hz. This setting proved ideal for both models — both have good output in this region, so a good blend was easy to achieve. Although there are subwoofers out there that play louder or lower, the SubSeries 5i had good output in a room of small to medium size. Chapter 10 of *The Haunting*, a classic subwoofer test, played loudly in my room through the SubSeries 5i. There are subwoofers that will shake your walls more, but expect to pay far more for them than the \$549 PSB asks for the SubSeries 5i.

Comparison

Close in price to the PSB Alpha B1 system (\$1336) is the Athena Technologies WS100 system (\$1275). The WS100 consists of main speakers that feature slender aluminum cabinets and multiple woofers. When I compared the two systems, I really began to appreciate what the PSB Alpha B1 could do.

Listening in two-channel stereo, I couldn't characterize either front-channel speaker as "warm." Neither the B1 nor the WS100 had a treble response that was shrill, but nor did it extend into the highest frequencies as smoothly as those of more expensive speakers I've heard. This was evident when I listened to the strings in "S'Wonderful," from Diana Krall's *The Look of Love* [SACD, Verve 34 589 597-2]. The strings were pleasant to listen to through both speakers — it was actually difficult to tell which speaker was playing — but lacked the air that I hear with much more expensive speakers.

The Alpha B1 shone when it was pushed hard, never losing its composure at higher volumes. Playing "S'Wonderful" loudly, I

could begin to hear a bit of hollowness in Krall's voice through the Athena WS100s that I couldn't through the Alpha B1s. Comparing the center-channel speakers, the Alpha C1 performed well in comparison to the Athena WS60. Watching *Inside Man* at high volume, I detected some coloration in Clive Owen's voice through the Athena WS60, a trait completely absent through the Alpha C1. In fact, Owen's voice had more weight through the C1.

The Athena AS4000 and the PSB SubSeries 5i performed very similarly. Both provided decent sound-pressure levels of LFE effects in DVDs, such as the explosion in chapter 12 of *Æon Flux*, but lacked the size to really move the walls of my larger listening room.

Conclusion

The Alpha B1 is a classic entry-level speaker system that appeal to those shopping for their first serious home-theater system. I would also look at this system as a budget stretcher — it's good enough to allow you to spend more money on other parts of your home-theater system, such as a flat-panel TV. After listening to PSB's Alpha B1 system, I feel that my standard advice now holds true more than ever: Your best value is in bookshelf speakers. If you're looking for a high-performance speaker system, put this PSB Alpha B1-based system at the top of your audition list.

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