

Towers of power

Adam Rayner finds value for money in a £7,000 7.1 setup that likes nothing better than a hefty tweak of the volume control

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
High-end 7.1 speaker system

POSITION:
The top end of what SVS sells

PEERS:
B&W 800 Series;
Monitor Audio Gold;
KEF R Series

REGULAR READERS MAY recall *HCC* previously getting an SVS subwoofer to play with. Dubbed the PC13-Ultra, it was a large upright tube and, frankly, so ugly it was best hidden away – although, with its 13.5in Peerless driver and a 1,000W amplifier, it could break windows and shake the foundations. Now, SVS has come back to Blightly some years later with a whole new range that still feels a bit American in flavour and concept. Aimed squarely at the seriously high-end market, yet cheekily less money than some, the SVS Ultra series employs a very sophisticated set of drivers and a real no-compromise approach to being loud as well as clear.

Auditioned here is an example of each new product, assembled in a 7.1 system. This means that all the enclosures are called 'Ultra' and after their type, with no fat. Thus we get Ultra Tower, Center (sic), Bookshelf and Surround, as well as the SB13 subwoofer. This last model is built like a prize fighter in every way, with a potent transducer and, like its tubular forebear, a 1,000W continuous output amplifier – as well as a DSP section that can even do time-alignment to ensure the best accuracy at your seating position. It also has professional-style balanced XLR inputs and outputs to go with the regular phono ones.

The SVS enclosures all share the same 32kHz-capable tweeter, as well as superb constructional strength and flush panels for the drivers' edges, all held in with top-quality Allen-headed bolts. A foam bung is provided with each tower to slot into its rear port if you feel the need to tame any bass bloom due to their placement. I didn't use these, preferring the designer's porting of the two flank-mounted 8in drivers in each trapezoidal floorstander (and they were well clear of the walls in my room by about three feet).

The Ultra Surrounds incorporate two completely separate sets of midrange drivers





The Ultra series is SVS's flagship home cinema product



The Ultra Towers feature dual binding posts and gas-flowed rear ports

and tweeters, with a passive crossover inside each wedge-shaped enclosure. As each pair has its own set of terminals, you can wire them as dipolar, bipolar or even as discrete channels. SVS suggests this can enable seven-channel audio from a regular five-speaker array – but you will need to think carefully about where you place them.

The SVS lineup is available in piano black gloss or a black oak finishes. My woofer was oaken, the rest shiny. Overall, setup was

'The SVS Ultra system sounds unstressed – and as clear and powerful as a pro-audio package'

simple, but you could spend a long time happily playing with the subwoofer until you get it tweaked optimally. In my room, it was fabulous pretty much as it came out of the box.

Elemental audio

The brand's literature goes into some detail about FEA (Fine Element Analysis) and the driver and cabinet construction, so just what does all this engineering and mad amounts of bass power add up to?

I started with a familiar balancing track to set up the subwoofer for level alone, and then played some other old multichannel music faves, as well as two-channel material just to see how those big woofer-flanked towers behaved. And immediately I was impressed as well as slightly depressed; this is the same system I heard at the Bristol Show (see p24), but via a front-end thrice the price of the one at Rayner Towers. I could hear the difference in basic utter speed and detail of my own AVR and separate amplifier combi versus the

Primare duo, for all their top-quality chops. The SVS system still sounded about as good as almost anything that has ever been in my demo room, though.

Hungry for movie action I unwrapped a recent bargain I've been saving for a special occasion – *The Amazing Spider-Man* on Blu-ray. Again, the first impression was immediately good.

The detail retrieval by the SVS tweeters is remarkable. In the film's early scenes, a bullied Peter Parker gets his head struck by a basketball, hard. Through the SVS set, you can clearly hear the plasticky vinyl-ball sound as though it had pinged your own head. Likewise, the early credits feature web-slinging as part of the graphics and the rears and dipoles did a cracking job of the sotto-voce, yet still dynamic, sudden localised noises sounds of Spidey's web elements coming in from left and right through the expansive soundfield.

The soundtrack uses deep bass notes in a classic way to build tension. These are often revealing of weaknesses in speaker systems but not in SVS's world. The bass from the quartet of 8in drivers and that weapons-grade hammer of a bass driver is wondrous. Rapid beyond belief, with astonishing grip and literally no overhang at all.

But there's more than just an iron grip and lack of bass boominess (especially if you do take time to EQ the system via the onboard DSP on board) – this is a whole package of loveliness. The sequence when our protagonist discovers his powers is even more potent and large in dynamics, and the SVS system's midband and effortless, soaring, clean and pure highs were able to entertain as well as unnerve. In the moment where he first tries his web skills, Spidey disturbs the traffic and says, 'Watch out! I'm swinging here...!', and the swooping soundtrack leaps around the system with real panache.

And... relax

The underlying story here is linearity. Thoroughly over-engineered, the drivers' technologies and enclosures' constructional parameters are all about creating an array that will not break up or sound stressed while keeping up with a 3,500W peak subwoofer. The enclosures are weighty, thick and rigid; the ports on the towers are big enough to run your arm up and feel the gas-flowed end inside. So, from crickets chirruping in the yard at Aunt May's house to The Lizard ripping open a subway train, the system sounds relaxed and as clear and powerful as a pro-audio package.

If you're looking for a system and have a big budget because you want a sound with real meat, power and clarity, then these simply have to be on your list. The design is hardly living-room friendly, but in a dedicated room it won't be an issue – and note that opting for a 5.1 array shaves at least £1,000 off the price ■

SPECIFICATIONS

ULTRA TOWERS

DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 1in aluminium dome tweeter; 2 x 6.5in composite glass-fibre cone midrange drivers; 2 x 8in long stroke side-firing woofers
ENCLOSURE: Three-way, rear-ported
FREQUENCY RANGE: 28Hz-32kHz, +/-3dB
SENSITIVITY: 88dB **POWER HANDLING:** 300W
DIMENSIONS: 351(w) x 1,143(h) x 413(d)mm
WEIGHT: 34.2kg

ULTRA CENTER

DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 1in tweeter; 1 x 4in midrange driver; 2 x 6.5in woofers
ENCLOSURE: Three-way, rear-ported
FREQUENCY RANGE: 45Hz-32kHz, +/-3dB
SENSITIVITY: 87dB **POWER HANDLING:** 225W
DIMENSIONS: 559(w) x 204(h) x 254(d)mm
WEIGHT: 14kg

ULTRA BOOKSHELF

DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 1in tweeter; 1 x 6.5in midrange driver; 2 x 6.5in woofers
ENCLOSURE: Two-way, rear-ported
FREQUENCY RANGE: 45Hz-32kHz, +/-3dB
SENSITIVITY: 87dB **POWER HANDLING:** 150W
DIMENSIONS: 216(w) x 379(h) x 254(d)mm
WEIGHT: 8.6kg

ULTRA SURROUND

DRIVE UNITS: 2 x 1in tweeters; 2 x 5.5in midrange drivers
ENCLOSURE: Two-way sealed dipole/bipole, or two discrete channels
FREQUENCY RANGE: 58Hz-32kHz, +/-3dB
SENSITIVITY: 87dB **POWER HANDLING:** 250W
DIMENSIONS: 313(w) x 356(h) x 138(d)mm
WEIGHT: 8.16kg

SB13- ULTRA SUBWOOFER

DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 13.5in composite pulp/fibreglass cone
ENCLOSURE: Sealed
FREQUENCY RANGE: 20Hz-460Hz, +/-3dB
ON BOARD POWER: STA-1000D Class D amplifier – 1,000W RMS, 3,600W peak
REMOTE CONTROL: No
DIMENSIONS: 442(w) x 455(h) x 519(d)mm
WEIGHT: 41.75kg
CONNECTIONS: Stereo phono input/output; stereo balanced XLR input and output

HCC VERDICT



SVS Ultra 7.1

→ £7,150 Approx → www.svsound.com
 → Tel: 01423 358 846

HIGHS: Astonishing power and clarity; sounds delicious at low and high levels; flexible dipole speakers; advanced subwoofer
LOWS: Good value but still a big ticket product; towers are bulky

Performance ★★★★★
 Design ★★★★★
 Features ★★★★★
Overall ★★★★★