

REVIEWS SVS ULTRA TOWER
FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKER **£2,200**



Twin towers

When SVS calls a speaker a Tower, it really isn't joking **Ed Selley** reaches new heights as he scales the enormous Ultra Tower.

SVS is a relative newcomer in the UK but it is a major player in the US speaker market with its extensive range of subwoofers, some of which offer truly organ-displacing performance. The company has now launched a range of stereo and surround loudspeakers of which the Ultra Tower is the flagship.

The SVS is a relatively unusual design. As well as the forward-firing drivers, the Ultra Tower also mounts a pair of side-firing 203mm bass drivers in the bottom of the cabinet. These five drivers are controlled by a 3.5-way crossover, which makes the Ultra Tower one of the more complex speakers available at the price.

Given the expertise that SVS has in the field of subwoofers, it is a bit of a surprise that it hasn't made the tower as part of a 2.1 configuration but equally, its pedigree with large drivers

The performance is more nuanced than simply being a wall of sound

is considerable. The 203mm drivers are mounted in an opposed layout that is intended to give a sense of omni directionality. They also give the SVS a claimed low-end roll off of 28Hz, which is impressively deep.

The Ultra Towers have an unusual profile. The cabinet is considerably deeper at the base than the top and even allowing for the size of the bass driver, the bottom is extremely large. The rear panel is sloped rather than stepped and the result is a speaker with fairly considerable volume. There is a single large bass port on the rear, which is supplied with the largest foam bung I've ever seen.

It is a cliché to attribute aspects of design to national stereotypes, but the Ultra Tower could only be American. Standing well over a metre tall, they are unashamedly enormous and the large base means that they have a considerable footprint. The gloss

black finish is probably the more domestically friendly of the finishes available (black oak is also an option) but doesn't do much to reduce the perceived size of the SVS. In a UK lounge, the SVS is going to dominate and even with port bungs, it's going to need some space to breathe. With the side-firing drivers, the SVS also benefits from being away from side walls as well as the rear one.

The good news is that the partnering electronics don't need to be as large. The SVS has a claimed sensitivity of 88dB/W, which means that it shouldn't be too tricky a load for an amplifier. That said, with five drivers a side, a reasonable amount of current will help. The impedance is a benign 80ohms throughout and in use it doesn't seem to show any nasty characteristics. The build quality is impressive, too. The cabinets feel extremely solid to the touch and the lacquering is carried out to a very high standard. The SVS finds itself going up against some daintier competition and the finish is a matter of taste, but it does feel like a lot of speaker for the money.

Sound quality

It would be natural to assume that the Tower might be as imposing sonically as it is physically, but the reality is actually rather surprising. There is certainly no shortage of scale to the presentation, but the performance is more nuanced than simply being a wall of sound.

The good news is that all of the different drivers firing in different directions come together to form an impressively seamless whole. There is no perceptible handover at any part of the frequency response and the tonality is consistent across the different driver materials. The other area that is immediately noticeable is the bass response. This never overpowers any other part of the performance, but has exceptional depth and clarity. There are very few speakers anywhere near the price point that can match the SVS for low-end extension.

DETAILS

PRODUCT
SVS Ultra Tower

ORIGIN
USA

TYPE
Floorstanding
loudspeaker

WEIGHT
35.2kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
345 x 1,125 x
406mm

FEATURES

- 8in woofers: aluminum shoring
- 3.5in wide-flared rear-firing port
- 1in tweeter: aluminum dome
- 6.5in midrange drivers: composite glass-fiber cone

DISTRIBUTOR
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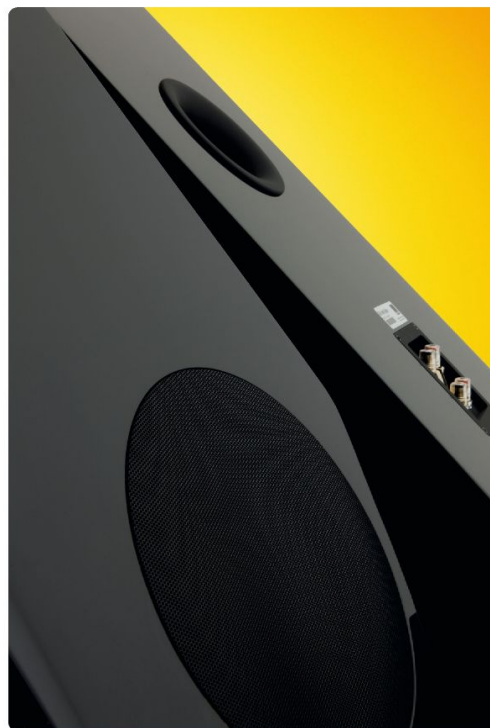
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This means that the Ultra Tower has the ability to give scale to instruments that can be a real challenge for smaller speakers. A grand piano manages to be the room-filling device it actually is and the double bass has an impressive impact to it. For fans of large-scale classical music, the SVS is one of the most affordable speakers that can do some justice to a full orchestra. The soundstage is big and extremely easy to follow with placement of performers and instruments arranged in an entirely believable fashion. The soundstage also manages the neat trick of being vast when required, but smaller and more intimate when needed. It never sounds small but neither is everything presented in an oversized way.

The tonality is convincing as well. The SVS can occasionally lack a little fine detail, but the overall presentation is believable and very hard to provoke into any form of harshness or aggression. This makes it easy to listen to for long periods – there is no shortage of dynamics, but the performance is suitably refined that they seem to be a natural progression of how the SVS works. Listening to the wonderfully rich and emotional *Black Pudding* by Mark Lanegan and Duke Garwood, the SVS is absolutely in its element and produces a performance that is fantastically composed and involving. ▶

Size matters, and you'll need a lot of space to fit these beauties in



Q&A

Gary Yacoubian

President & managing partner SVS



ES: Was there any thought about making the Ultra Tower smaller and intended for use in partnership with a sub in a 2.1 system?

GY: There are no plans for changes to the Ultra speaker series. If someone were heart-set on a 2.1 system featuring Ultra series performance, I would suggest pairing an SVS subwoofer with the Ultra Bookshelves. The Ultra Towers were designed to provide a complete experience in a two-channel setup and would not require or benefit from a subwoofer for most listeners.

Given that we're a little more pressed for space in the UK, can we expect a smaller floorstander?

We are developing an affordable full-range speaker series to deliver outstanding performance at a lower price point than the Ultra series, which includes a floorstander with a much smaller height and footprint. The Ultra Series was meant to perform on par or better than speakers costing three and four times as much, regardless of size, but we understand not everyone can fully utilise such a robust, high-output speaker. Space and price-conscious audio enthusiasts will definitely appreciate the dimensions, dynamics and soundstage of our new floorstanders. No word on a launch date yet, but our engineering team is very excited about the early results.

In the course of development, has SVS encountered any electronics it feels work especially well with the Ultra Towers?

The Ultra Towers were designed to work well with pretty much any electronics, from a high-quality AV receiver to the highest-end separate components. They are extremely revealing, so will show the shortcomings of source material and, of course, source components but they are forgiving as well. I think they did quite well with the Primare gear we connected them to at the Bristol HiFi show, and I've seen them acquit themselves well with even higher-end gear than that. But there's no 'price of admission' as most quality gear works well with the Ultra Towers.

IN SIGHT



- 1 Composite glass fibre cone
- 2 Aluminium tweeter
- 3 Large rear bass port
- 4 Gold-plated binding posts
- 5 Aluminium bass drivers
- 6 Sloped rear panel helps reduce standing waves

HOW IT COMPARES

The SVS makes for an interesting comparison with the Sonus faber Venere. In terms of performance, the SVS is a little easier to drive than the Italian, has low-end extension that the Sonus faber can't match and the soundstage is slightly superior. The Sonus faber hits back with a slightly better fine detail retrieval and a greater sense of immediacy to the performance. Ultimately, if you have the space and are looking for a speaker that can do justice to an orchestra, the SVS wins out. The Sonus faber, despite the refined looks, is much happier to get its groove on with faster, more up-tempo music. Both are very fine speakers, though.

Some speakers might be able to find nuances that the SVS misses, but the 'bigger picture' is captured with impressive assurance.

The only real weakness to the performance is when the SVS is asked to pick up the pace a little. The speakers never sound slow and there is no overhang or boom to the bass, which suggests that the opposed bass drivers achieve the designed aim. The problem is that the Ultra Tower never sounds as lively as some of the competition at the same price. It would be fair to argue that the liveliness of some rival designs achieve is at the expense of bass depth where the SVS excels, but with John Grant's *Pale Green Ghosts*, the SVS is slightly matter of fact where you really want to it to groove a bit more. Of course, excitement is a subjective area and something that could be mollified by choosing more exciting electronics, but equally many people will find that refinement and accuracy that the SVS possesses to be exactly what they are looking for.

The biggest decision that anyone will have to make with the Ultra Tower is whether they can actually accommodate them. The SVS is big and uncompromising and while they're fairly unfussy in terms of placement, they will benefit from being given a bit of space. There is no

getting around the fact that visually they are hardly subtle looking.

Conclusion

If you can fit them in your listening room, these are speakers that warrant attention. The SVS is capable of giving scale and cohesion to performances that other speakers can struggle with and their control and integration is extremely impressive. There are some rivals that can find a little bit more fine detail and equally some others that can sound a little more fleet of foot with up-tempo music. For many people though, the way this gentle giant goes about making music is something that they will find extremely compelling ●

HiFiChoice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Controlled sound, plenty of scale and dynamics

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: Huge size and lack of excitement with some material

BUILD QUALITY



WE SAY: If you have the space, this is a formidable performer with some very likeable characteristics

EASE OF DRIVE



OVERALL

