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HOME THEATER NEWS & REVIEWS



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CHAMPAGNE VIDEO ON A BUDGET

GTT'S 9" CRT FRONT PROJECTOR

Sonance Cinema Ultra II In-Wall Loudspeaker System

I don't watch movies. That may sound odd in a magazine called *The Perfect Vision*, but really, I don't. I listen to them. I play them on my DVD player, but my attention is always drawn to the sound, not the picture. A well-recorded-and-mixed movie soundtrack pulls me into the story and makes me feel like I'm part of the action far more than the picture. Think about it: Home-theater sound is a three-dimensional experience, and video is presented in two dimensions. Obviously a picture is important to follow the story, but good sound tells a story, too. And the story the Sonance Cinema Ultra II in-wall loudspeaker system tells is well worth listening to.

Sonance is synonymous with high-quality in-wall loudspeakers and has built its business on this foundation. Its most recent speaker offerings are the Cinema Ultra II Series, designed to appeal to the serious home-theater enthusiast. They are built to THX Ultra 2 specifications, an enhancement of the THX Ultra spec that optimizes performance for 5.1-channel music sources, as well as movies. The THX Ultra 2 spec designates a 7.1-channel speaker system with left, center, right, two surround, and two surround-back speakers.

The Cinema Ultra II Series speakers are available in two models: the LCR model for left, center, and right front-channels, and the SUR model for the left and right surround and left and right surround-back channels. The LCR model is a direct-radiating speaker with one eight-inch black aluminum-cone woofer, two three-inch black aluminum cone midrange drivers, and a single three-quarter-inch silk-dome tweeter. The SUR model has the same woofer with two midrange drivers and two tweet-

ers positioned to project sound forward and backward into the listening area. The midranges and tweeters are connected in-phase, making this a bipole rather than the more common dipole speaker. Also, the tweeters and midranges on the LCR and SUR models can be rotated ninety degrees for horizontal wall-mounting. Sonance and THX recommend installing two LCR speakers for the surround-back channels if your system will primarily be used for multi-channel music sources, or two SUR speakers if your system will primarily be used for movies. More about this later.

The only way to effectively evaluate an in-wall loudspeaker is to install it in a wall—or, in this case, seven speakers in multiple walls. I wasn't enthusiastic about cutting seven holes in my living room walls to evaluate speakers and then patching the walls when the review was

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completed. So, I built seven portable walls using the same construction as a typical interior residential wall. I used two-by-four studs, five-eighths-inch drywall on both sides of the walls, and R-13 insulation inside the walls. The size of each wall was thirty-two inches wide by forty-eight inches tall. With a two-by-four base attached to the bottom for stability the LCR speakers were positioned at the height recommended for the best sound. I used a taller base for the surround and surround-back channels



to raise them to recommended height. The portable walls were heavy and not very attractive, but they were certainly functional and also allowed flexibility in “room placement.”

The Sonance in-wall speakers can be installed during new construction or retrofitted into an existing wall. For new construction Sonance offers an optional FlexBracket that serves as a guide for the drywall installer to reserve a location for the speaker. Installation into an existing wall is relatively simple, and can be done by a homeowner, assuming that you have interior walls made of drywall. Walls made of lath and plaster may require more work and a professional contractor. A template is included with the speakers to trace the hole to be cut in the wall. After ensuring that there are no pipes, wires, or other blockages behind the wall, use a dry-wall saw to cut a hole eighteen-and-three-quarter inches tall and ten-and-one-quarter inches wide (the Cinema Ultra IIs are larger than most in-wall speakers). A depth of three-and-fifteen-sixteenth inches (less the thickness of the drywall, usually one-half or five-eighths inches) within the wall is required for installation. However,

the Cinema Ultra II speakers are enclosed in an ABS (heavy-duty plastic) enclosure that can be removed to accommodate a wall that is not deep enough. With the enclosure removed the speakers require an in-wall-depth of only three inches.

Attaching the speaker to the wall is simple. The speakers use a Rotolock clamp to secure the speaker to the wall. After attaching speaker wires to the dual-binding posts on the back of the speaker, insert the speaker into the hole, and tighten six screws on the front of the speaker enclosure, which automatically puts the Rotolock clamp into position and secures the speaker to the wall. The Rotolock clamp holds the speaker tightly to the wall and prevents potential vibrations. After installation, the speaker grille is attached. Incidentally, both speaker and grille can be painted to match your interior décor. If painted to match your walls, the speakers would virtually disappear. There is even a “paint plug” included that covers the drivers to protect them while applying paint to the frame around the front of the speaker.

While preparing to listen to the Ultra IIs, I paid close attention to the recommended placement of the speakers. Sonance and THX recommend that the surround speakers be to the sides of your listening position, and the surround-back speakers behind the listener, either close together or about three feet apart. If your listening position is against the rear wall, check to see if your A/V receiver or processor/amplifier offers the ability to electronically compensate for your distance from each speaker. Ideally, you want your listening position to be equidistant from each speaker, but this is not always possible.

After positioning the speakers I was ready for a listening evaluation. But first, I allowed each speaker to pre-condition or “break-in” for several hours, using a test disc that outputs beat frequencies. Since beat frequencies are not the best test of the capabilities of a loudspeaker, I tried

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some two-channel and multichannel music discs, too.

One would not expect an in-wall speaker to sound as good as a speaker in a tuned enclosure. Speaker manufacturers use the laws of physics to design and construct a cabinet that optimizes the characteristics of the drivers. Most residential walls are anything but well-tuned enclosures.

Nonetheless, my first reaction was that the Ultra IIs sounded more like a well-tuned floorstanding speaker than an in-wall. Although they benefited from a powered subwoofer for low bass, midbass response was robust and full from the eight-inch woofers. A cello is a particularly good musical instrument for midbass testing, and Eugene Friesen’s cello performance in “Remembering You” [*Arms Around You, Living Music*] sounded full and resonant, even without a subwoofer. The Ultra IIs also displayed a noticeable lack of tubbiness in the midbass. Instead, they sounded tight and crisp.

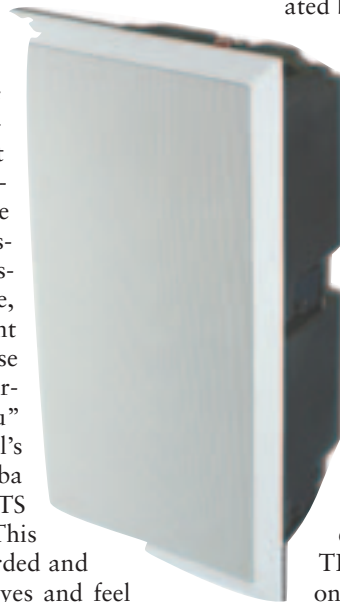
Vocals were outstanding. Linda Ronstadt’s rendition of “What’s New” from the DVD-Audio disc *What’s New* [Elektra] produced a transparent vocal presence without overpowering the Nelson Riddle orchestra. Her voice was distinct, very articulate, and lacked even a hint of sibilance. Likewise Anjani’s delicate version of “Over You” from Freddie Ravel’s *Sol to Soul* [Kalimba Records], a 20-bit DTS multichannel CD. This disc is very well recorded and you can close your eyes and feel like you’re right in the studio listening to Anjani’s performance. The Cinema Ultra IIs also revealed all of the subtle details in James Taylor’s

Hourglass SACD [Sony]. Imaging was very focused and complemented by a coherent soundstage. Visual placement of instruments and vocalists was effortless with both two-channel and multichannel sources.

Equally impressive was the soundtrack from *Master and Commander* [Universal]. Music was completely enveloping, adding to the mystery and intrigue of the story. There are many scenes filmed in the ship’s hold where the creaking of the ship and the stomping of boots from the crew on deck overhead not only surround you, but are also accurately positioned overhead. I felt like I was swaying on the couch in stormy seas. Dialogue was clear and distinct. I used this disc as a test partly because the nineteenth-century accents in the film sometimes make the words difficult to understand. Even dialogue from modern-day films is often difficult to understand, but from the Ultra IIs dialogue was intelligible, clear, and distinct.

Additionally, the soundfield created by the Ultra IIs enhanced scenes from *Seabiscuit* [Universal]. The excitement and emotion in this film is far more powerful when the picture is complemented by a good sound system. The Sonance made the experience better. Go Biscuit, go!

Up to this point, my opinions have been based on using two LCR speakers for the surround-back channels. As mentioned earlier, Sonance and THX recommend using one or two LCRs for the back-surround if your system will be used primarily for music sources and one or two model SUR for movie sources. This review would




not be complete if I hadn't listen to the same system with two SUR speakers for the surround-back channels, so I swapped speakers and continued listening. The RotoLock clamps are as easy to remove as they are to install, which means servicing will not be difficult.



I would be remiss if I didn't express my annoyance about choosing between music and movies for a speaker configuration. I enjoy listening to both, and in my opinion, so do most consumers. It's like asking me if I want to eat my steak with a knife or a fork. My answer is both! I understand that the objective of different speaker configurations is to duplicate in the home the sound that the movie's sound designer or the music's recording engineer hears in a dubbing stage or studio, but I find it unfortunate to have to choose. However, after listening to both configurations, I would recommend using two SUR models for the surround-back channels for both music and movies. Although the LCR model provides more pinpoint placement of sounds in the rear channels, the SUR model adds a more diffuse quality to movie soundtracks and

was not distracting for multichannel music.

It's also important to mention that the Cinema Ultra IIs are not just for systems that incorporate THX Ultra 2 processing. Although I primarily used as a reference receiver the Marantz SR-9300 with THX Ultra 2 processing, I also used a Yamaha RX-V3300 A/V receiver without THX processing with excellent results and sound quality.

I would highly recommend the Sonance Cinema Ultra II speakers for a home-theater speaker system. When installed correctly they sound as good as many floorstanding enclosures. And when permanently installed in a wall they virtually disappear. I think part of the secret to their sound quality is the ABS enclosure, which tends to take the "sound of the wall" out of consideration. Each speaker is housed in an enclosure, designed to optimize the characteristics of the drivers. Build quality is also excellent. If you're considering in-wall speakers for movies and music, they are a must-audition.

OK, now it's time to remove the portable walls and put my living room back together again. 

	Excellent sound quality
	Excellent build quality
	Attractive cosmetics
	Easy installation
Choosing between direct sound and diffuse sound loudspeakers for surround-back channels 	
Recommendation: Add a subwoofer for deep bass in movies and music; Sonance offers several subwoofers including in-wall and cabinet.	

SPECIFICATIONS

Cinema Ultra II LCR

Recommended amplifier power: 5–200 watts
 Frequency response: 70Hz–20kHz ±3dB
 Sensitivity: 90dB SPL
 Nominal impedance: 6 ohms
 Price: \$950 each, sold separately

Cinema Ultra II SUR

Recommended amplifier power: 5–200 watts
 Frequency response: 40Hz–20kHz ±3dB
 Sensitivity: 90dB SPL
 Nominal impedance: 6 ohms
 Price: \$1950 per pair, sold only in pairs

MANUFACTURER INFORMATION 

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