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APRIL 2008

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loudspeakers**



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MINI SYSTEMS

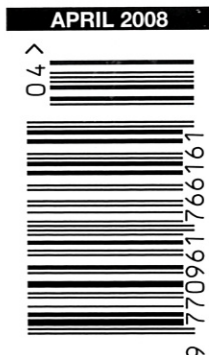
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7 PAGES OF YOUR QUESTIONS ANSWERED

Studio Quality



Can pro audio brand PMC deliver big studio sound with the new 'i' upgrade to their established favourites, the OB1? David Allcock decides...

Whilst originally known for studio speaker systems such as the monster active BB5 XBD-A with dual 380mm bass drivers and almost 2,500W per channel, PMC's domestic systems are thankfully slightly smaller in scale and need less power. The OB1 was the first three way slim column speaker to be launched by the company in 2004, and the new 'i' series is the first upgrade to this speaker since. It is comprehensive, featuring a new tweeter, mid/bass driver, crossover and cabinet.

The cabinet measures a substantial 1,020x200x330mm and weighs a hefty 21.5kg. It's a fairly efficient design at 87dB [see MEASURED PERFORMANCE], meaning this speaker should work with most amplifiers capable of 50 Watts or more, though the speaker can handle over 300 Watts if required. The cabinet is surprisingly complex, utilising PMC's ATL (Advanced Transmission Line) design internally, folding a 3.3m transmission line into the cabinet. The labyrinthine structure inside is lined with several different types of foam to control air flow.

A further difference between these cabinets and those of the original OB1 is in the jointing used, the new method essentially turning the new OB1i cabinet into a monocoque, with substantial gains in rigidity and resonance behaviour claimed. The cabinet varies between 18mm and 25mm wall thickness, and is both rigid and dead, the knuckle rap test simply hurts your knuckles rather than makes any noise. The cabinet is finished with a fabric grill which just covers the drivers, and consists of stretched, acoustically transparent fabric over a plastic frame.

Since the release of the original OB1, the tweeter has been redesigned in collaboration with SEAS, the Norwegian driver manufacturer. This 27mm silk soft dome, Ferrofluid cooled tweeter is claimed to have its power handling, off-axis response and resolving abilities improved significantly. The 170mm mid/bass drivers have improvements to power handling, flatter frequency response and reduced distortion, and the 75mm midrange dome resides in its own, isolated enclosure. Finally the crossover has been completely redesigned; it is now hand built using costly Solen capacitors, three large, hand wound inductors with five smaller inductors and thick glass fibre boards with thicker copper tracks. Crossover points are at 380Hz and 3.8KHz.

These speakers require careful placement.

I found optimal results with them 80cm from the side walls and 1m from the back wall with 1.9m between them and around 5 degrees of toe in. Careful running in is needed – they came on song after around one hundred hours. As is usual I did my listening with the covers off as I found they harmed high frequency performance and impaired image focusing, so they're best employed to protect the drivers against little

"In the lower registers, the OB1s were excellent for their size"

fingers and cat claws if required.

SOUND QUALITY

As someone who spent quite some time with the original OB1, the improvements the 'i' version brings were soon apparent. It retains the excellent bass and lower midrange performance of the original, but builds on this with a more transparent upper midrange and smoother, more highly resolved high frequencies. The new crossover and tweeter removes one of the few criticisms levelled at the original – that the high frequencies could be rather hard and a little forward. This model's treble integration was superb, neither recessed nor forward, but with greater powers of resolution. For example, the Corrs' 'Radio' has layers of high frequency information from the cymbals, acoustic guitar and keyboards, and with most similarly priced loudspeakers the acoustic guitar is masked by the keyboards and cymbals, yet with these it was easily discernable throughout the track.

In the lower registers, the OB1s were excellent for their size, despite their narrow front aspect. Synthesised bass lines from Jean Michel Jarre's 'Aero' produced the kind of bass energy expected from 250mm active drivers, rather than the PMC's 170mm units. In terms of control, even with the slightly softer sounding Shanling STP-80 valve integrated, the OB1s were very well behaved with little overhang; the only sign that valves were driving them being a slight reduction in transient attack on the notes. Switching to the more powerful Bryston 3B-SST solid state amplifier gave the OB1s' bass drivers the kind of speed and response more normally associated with electrostatic units, eradicating the last vestiges of overhang.

Dynamics were excellent for a speaker of this type, with Destiny's Child 'Bootylicious' having both fine extension and articulation to pin

you to the sofa even at moderate volumes. Nudging the volume up a little above my normal levels showed real grace under pressure, the OB1i refusing to compress or distort. If you like to listen to large scale orchestral works or rock at realistic levels, the OB1s are more than capable of producing neighbour-worrying levels in a large room.

The new midrange driver brought about a subtle improvement

in midrange transparency, Laura Branigan's voice on 'Self Control' was slightly more immediate and natural. With warmer recordings such as Norah Jones 'Cold, Cold Heart', vocals were not overtly lush but had a velveteen texture which you could sink into. Lead electric guitars were stunning, Jim Corrs' guitar on 'Radio' was incredibly fast and richly textured, you could hear the slightest change in weight and emphasis on the fret board.

Soundstaging was excellent, with accomplished layering of performers and instruments. Laterally the stage was expansive, but not exaggerated, with instruments realistically placed and proportioned, whilst image focus was precise without being over-etched in a hyper detailed, hi-fi manner. This speaker was also remarkably free of 'lobing', where the sound intensifies around the enclosure. With the OB1i you could close your eyes and the image was so evenly and realistically presented in the room as to make it difficult to locate the speakers. The sound did not emanate from two locations, but rather hung across the front of the listening room, with the acoustic edges of the stage far beyond the room's physical boundaries.

CONCLUSION

For those looking for a big, powerful, grippy loudspeaker with

the accent on dynamics and punch, along with composure at high volume levels, the PMC OB1i is a fine buy. Physically large with an exquisite finish, it can be driven very happily by either solid state or valve amplification to realistic volume levels on large scale orchestral works or rock, yet it proves equally at home on more intimate jazz and string quartet.



REFERENCE SYSTEM

Basis Gold Debut/Vector Mk.3/Benz Glider turntable
Shanling SCD-T200 SACD player
Aesthetix Rhea phono stage
Aesthetix Calypso line stage
Bryston 3B-SST and 14B-SST power amps
Shanling STP-80 integrated amplifier

MUSIC USED

Jean Michel Jarre, 'Aero'
The Corrs, 'In Blue'
Destiny's Child, 'Survivor'
Laura Branigan, 'Self Control'
Norah Jones, 'Come Away with Me'

VERDICT

Big, imposing floorstander with highly communicative, musical, transparent and dynamic sound.

PMC OB1i £2,950

PMC Ltd.

+44 (0) 870 4441044

www.pmc-speakers.com

FOR

- dynamic articulation
- transparency
- speed
- build and finish

AGAINST

- nothing at the price

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

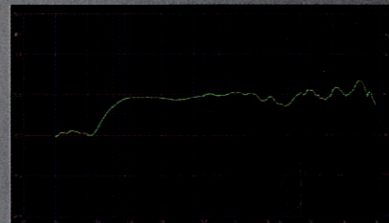
The PMC OB1s show a largely even response across their bandwidth with just a little dip at around the 3kHz mark. This should ensure that they remain composed and do not become shouty across the midband – no bad idea as sometimes midrange domes can make their presence felt in this region as they start to break up. There is something of a treble peak at around 15kHz in addition, which should add a nice touch of top end detail without making things hard.

Lower down, the OB1s have a very smooth and even lower midrange and bass output, with level starting to decrease at around 60Hz, so they should offer a decently weighty performance. The exit of the transmission line is at the front and close to the floor so this will add perceived weight without the boom that can sometimes be associated with a rear-firing line.

Electrically, the PMCs are very well damped, which should augur well for bass control and punch and also means they should present a fairly amplifier-friendly load. On the

downside, they will take a bit of driving as a result of their average measured impedance of 6.9 Ohms, dropping to a minimum of around 5 Ohms. Sensitivity is reasonable at around 86dB so the OB1s will respond best to around 50 Watts minimum. AS

FREQUENCY RESPONSE



IMPEDANCE

