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02



JBL brings some bigscreen know-how to a range of affordable home cinema speakers, says **Steve Withers**

All the world's a sound stage

If you've been in a commercial cinema, the chances are at some point the sound you heard was reproduced by JBL speakers. The company has been synonymous with film audio since Al Jolson warbled in *The Jazz Singer*, and founder James B. Lansing was among the pioneers who helped usher in the era of the 'talkies'.

After nearly a century in the speaker business, there's something else JBL is often associated with – horn-loaded compression drivers. All the brand's premium loudspeakers use a variation on this approach, from the gargantuan flagship Summit series with horn-loaded mid and tweeters, down to its more domestically friendly HDI and Studio 6 Series where JBL's High-Definition Imaging (HDI) waveguide technology graces the high-frequency drivers.

The Stage Series sees JBL bringing its HDI technology down to an affordable entry-level range. All seven passive models use a 1in aluminium dome tweeter paired with an acoustic lens and HDI waveguide for, it's claimed, a smoother high-frequency response and improved directivity. Mid-range and lower frequencies are handled by polycellulose ribbed drivers, with a white cone finish intended to echo previous JBL designs.

Right on target

The lineup is headed by the A190, followed by two other floorstanders: the midrange A180 and the more compact A170. There are two bookshelf speakers, the A130 and A120, along with a pair of dedicated centre speakers (A135C and A125C). Finally there's a pair of Stage Series active subwoofers: the 12in A120P and the 10in A100P.

There are a couple of obvious omissions for a range aimed primarily at the home cinema market: there's no dedicated surround speaker, and more surprisingly there's no upfiring driver for object-based sound formats. The lack of the former is less of an issue in these days of discrete audio, but the latter omission puts the Stage Series at a disadvantage compared to the competition.

The 5.1 set auditioned here features the £559-per-pair A170 floorstander for front left and right, plus the £279 A125C centre, A130 bookshelf speakers for surround channels (£229p/p), and the A100P subwoofer (£319). Based on those prices, the Stage Series certainly hits the 'affordable' target, yet the construction and finish of these speakers definitely belies that status. JBL's simply crafted

but inert cabinets come in a choice of matte black or wood finishes. Drivers are covered by black fabric grilles that attach via studs, and – given the white cones – you might want to keep the grilles on in a darkened room.

The A170 floorstander is a 2.5-way design with twin 5.25in woofers, one reaching up to a 2.8kHz crossover, the other filtered at 1.8kHz. It has two bass ports at the rear, plus dual binding posts for bi-wiring, and its outriggers can be fitted with a choice of spikes or rubber feet. The A130 is a two-way, with a 5.25in bass/mid woofer, dual binding posts and a single bass port. The sealed A125C centre is also a two-way design, but doubles up on the 5.25in bass/mid units.

The A100P subwoofer features a 10in polycellulose driver, powered by a Class D amp rated 150W (300W peak). The bass-reflex design uses dual ports, for a claimed frequency response of 35Hz-150Hz. The finish mirrors the rest of the system, and setup is equally simple with a single RCA input for LFE, and basic level, crossover and phase controls, plus an auto power feature.

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
Entry-level 5.1 speaker system

POSITION:
Affordable option in the JBL range, sitting below the Studio 6

PEERS:
Triangle Borea; Monitor Audio Bronze; Polk Audio Monitor XT

1. All Stage Series models get the white polycellulose drivers – even the A100P subwoofer

2. The A130 is the larger of two Stage Series bookshelf speakers, and uses a 5.25in bass/mid driver





With the speakers and subwoofer in a standard 5.1-channel configuration, and the surround mixes of the recent David Bowie boxset *A Divine Symmetry* (CD/BD) on hand, these Stage models lived up to the name. During *Life on Mars* they created a balanced soundstage that evenly spread instruments around the room. Bowie's vocals and Mike Garson's beautiful piano were delivered with particular projection, while Mick Ronson's guitar and string arrangements added some scale to proceedings.

The use of identical tweeters and bass/mid drivers in all the enclosures adds to this feeling of tonal cohesion. During the scene in *Spider-Man: Far from Home* (4K Blu-ray) where Mysterio taunts Peter, his voice was steered effectively around the room, although the different orientation of the A125C centre compared to the A170s was noticeable.

Precision time

The 4K Blu-ray release of *Edge of Tomorrow* has a new Dolby Atmos mix, and here the lack of any upfiring option is felt. However, the track still includes some energetic surround steering and a thunderous LFE channel, which the Stage system handled with admirable skill. The floorstanders and bookshelves produced a solid bass

'Punches well above its weight with an aggressive high-end, solid midrange, and well-defined lows'

foundation, before handing off to A100P sub. This – naturally, given its price and spec – lacks the subterranean depth to do full justice to the film's insane amounts of infra-sonics, but it integrated sweetly with the wider system for a smooth, controlled bass response. And the dual-woofer centre also played its part, anchoring the sound between the front left and right channels with an excellent midrange that dug into dialogue.

Where the Stage Series really impresses, though, is in terms of its precision and directivity. This 5.1 set accurately placed sound effects around the room during the oft-repeated beach assault of *Edge of Tomorrow*. This sequence has a complex sound design (with fizzing rockets and explosions peppering the ground), but it didn't feel muddled. Also, while there was plenty of clarity to discern, there's was an all-important fun-factor to the Stage's delivery.

SPECIFICATIONS

Stage A170

DRIVERS: 1 x 1in aluminium tweeter; 1 x 5.25in polycellulose woofer; 1 x 5.25in polycellulose bass/mid **ENCLOSURE:** Rear-ported bass reflex **FREQUENCY RESPONSE (CLAIMED):** 44Hz-40kHz **SENSITIVITY (CLAIMED):** 89dB **IMPEDANCE (CLAIMED):** 6ohm **POWER HANDLING (CLAIMED):** 200W **DIMENSIONS:** 190(w) x 930(h) x 255(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 14.34kg

Stage A125C

DRIVERS: 1 x 1in aluminium tweeter; 2 x 5.25in polycellulose bass/mid **ENCLOSURE:** Sealed **FREQUENCY RESPONSE (CLAIMED):** 75Hz-40kHz **SENSITIVITY (CLAIMED):** 88dB **IMPEDANCE (CLAIMED):** 6ohm **POWER HANDLING (CLAIMED):** 150W **DIMENSIONS:** 469(w) x 190(h) x 220(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 7.95kg

Stage A130

DRIVERS: 1 x 1in aluminium tweeter; 1 x 5.25in polycellulose bass/mid **ENCLOSURE:** Rear-ported bass reflex **FREQUENCY RESPONSE (CLAIMED):** 55Hz-40kHz **SENSITIVITY (CLAIMED):** 86dB **IMPEDANCE (CLAIMED):** 6ohm **POWER HANDLING (CLAIMED):** 100W **DIMENSIONS:** 190(w) x 321(h) x 230(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 5.45kg

STAGE A100P

DRIVERS: 1 x 10in polycellulose woofer **ENCLOSURE:** Rear-ported bass reflex **ONBOARD POWER (CLAIMED):** 150W (RMS) **FREQUENCY RESPONSE (CLAIMED):** 35-150Hz **REMOTE CONTROL:** No **DIMENSIONS:** 335(w) x 340(h) x 380(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 13.63kg **FEATURES:** RCA line-level LFE input; level control; 50-150Hz crossover; 180-degree phase switch; auto power

TESTED WITH



BULLET TRAIN: Starring Brad Pitt and directed by action maestro David Leitch, this bloody but fun adaptation of a Japanese novel features a wonderfully energetic Dolby Atmos soundtrack that delivers the violence with plenty of surround engagement, while the bass doesn't pull its punches. Looks fab on 4K BD too.

JBL's speakers offer a sophistication you don't usually expect from an 'affordable' model, and deliver plenty of dynamics and tonal fidelity. The front floorstanders add width, and there's a nuance to the overall sound that comes from a clean treble and uncongested midrange. Transients sometimes lack the crispness of more expensive speakers, but the system delivers an articulate and often blockbusting performance. Brad Pitt actioner *Bullet Train* (4K BD) brought all these strengths together, allowing the Stage Series to tap into its bigscreen DNA and strut its stuff. It punched well above its weight with an aggressive high-end, solid midrange, and well-defined lows. Like the film, it was thrilling stuff.

Budget brilliance

Overall, JBL's Stage Series is a superb entry-level proposition. There's an energy to the performance that sounds cinematic, even while the delivery is well focused and deep bass nicely integrated. Build quality is impressive for the price point, too, making this 5.1 pack ideal for anyone looking to build a high-class soundstage on a budget ■

HCC VERDICT



JBL Stage Series 5.1

→ £1,386 → uk.jbl.com

WE SAY: JBL's pedigree shines through in these affordable, but well-made speakers. No upfiring seems like a missed opportunity, but the Stage sounds precise, detailed and thrilling.

3. The tweeter of the passive models is a 1in aluminium dome mounted in JBL's High-Definition Imaging (HDI) waveguide