



JBL

ES Series home theater speaker system

Having used JBL speakers in recording studios and at home for many years, there's something about them I've always found reassuring. I may or may not have warmed to the voicing of a particular model, but I've always respected what I've heard. So when cartons bearing the familiar orange JBL logo arrived on my doorstep recently, I was eager to check out the company's latest efforts.

The ES Series occupies JBL's upper-middle price range, a hotly contested market where prospective buyers know what sounds good but don't want to spend stupid amounts of money to get it. I unpacked two ES80 towers, an ES25C center speaker, two ES10 surrounds, and an ES250P subwoofer. With their sizable bulk filling my listening room, I expected significant sonic results.

The ES80 tower stands waist-high. Its trapezoidal cabinet, which widens in front and tapers to the rear, looks very stylish. (All of the satellites, and the subwoofer, work the trapezoidal styling angle.) The

ES80's five vertical drivers are a pair of 6-inch woofers, a 4-inch midrange, and a module with two 3/4-inch tweeters, one covering the normal high-frequency range and the other covering ultra-high frequencies. This same module appears in the other satellites as well. Two pairs of stout binding posts allow mono- or bi-amping. There's also a rear-firing port.

The ES25C center speaker uses an MTM (midrange/tweeter/midrange) driver configuration, with a pair of 5-inch midranges flanking the tweeter module. Adjusting the ported cabinet's two feet can lower its vertical angle. The ES10 surrounds are direct-firing, with one 4-inch driver and the tweeter module. There are two mounting brackets on the back and two ports on top. Make darn sure the kids don't drop pennies in there — or your car keys.

The ES250P subwoofer sports a front-firing 12-inch driver, a downward-firing port, and an amplifier rated at 400 watts. Its control set provides adjustments for level and crossover frequency (50 to 150 Hz with a 24-dB/octave slope), phase (0°

and 180°), and LFE/stereo line inputs. A switch toggles between LFE (for the mono low-frequency-effects channel on Dolby Digital and DTS tracks) and Normal (for a regular stereo input), with the crossover adjustment bypassed when the former setting is selected. All six speakers are faced with removable black grilles.

SETUP

Installing the JBLs didn't present any unusual obstacles. I placed the ES80 towers 10 feet apart, about 1 foot out from the front wall, and toed them in to face the listening position. The towers are supplied with threaded spiked feet, but I used the included rubber feet instead. As with any floorstanders, the proximity of the drivers to my tile floor created a reflection that colored the direct sound path. To mitigate this, I placed throw rugs on the floor in front of each cabinet.

The ES25C center speaker went below my TV. Its vertical angle was good, so I didn't adjust its feet. I placed the ES10 surrounds on speaker stands in the back of the room. I wish they had the same adjustable feet as the center speaker so I could have aimed them down a bit.

Subwoofer performance is very dependent on room acoustics and on the sub

The Short Form

Snapshot

Classic JBL sound quality from towers and a massive sub, complemented by a tonally matched center speaker and surrounds

Plus

- ⚡ Loud, natural sound
- ⚡ Clean high-frequency extension
- ⚡ Solid low-frequency extension
- ⚡ Robust construction

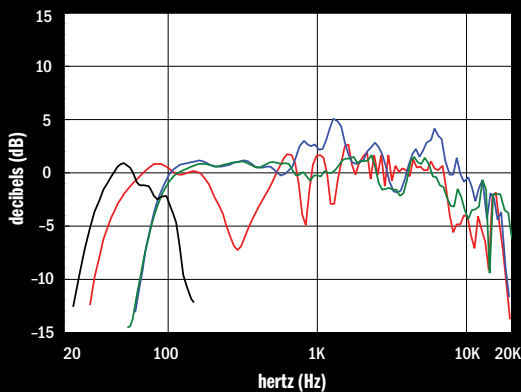
Minus

- ⚡ Sizable cabinets require a sizable room
- ⚡ Sound may be too bright and forward for some

Price \$2,395 (as tested)

Test Bench

Full lab results at soundandvisionmag.com/jbles



L/R 46 Hz to 15 kHz ± 7.6 dB
Center 83 Hz to 14.8 kHz ± 7.8 dB
Surround 85 Hz to 17.8 kHz ± 6.2 dB
Subwoofer 34 Hz to 103 Hz ± 1.9 dB

The ES80 exhibits a 300-Hz floor-bounce notch that's typical for tower-style speakers, along with narrow band irregularities up to 2 kHz and a 5-dB drop in level above 7 kHz. The ES25C center shows

similar irregularities between 800 Hz and 6 kHz, and its response tails off at 6 dB per octave above 6 kHz. It also has a deep (20 dB) notch centered at 3 kHz that extends from 1.6 to 6 kHz. Be assured that off-axis listeners won't hear the same sound as someone sitting front and center. The ES250P subwoofer only has upper bandwidth of 103 Hz using the LFE input. When using the internal crossover, its response ranges from 52 to 81 Hz, even though the crossover is marked from 50 to 150 Hz. To its credit, the sub can deliver 105 dB SPL from 32 Hz upward.

— Tom Nouraine

and listening positions. From experience, I knew to place the ES250P in my room's sub sweet spot, along the front wall and between the TV and the left tower.

MUSIC PERFORMANCE

I started my critical listening with stereo playback, courtesy of KT Tunstall. Her debut album, *Eye to the Telescope*, was a bona-fide hit and proved that not all new stars need to be Idols. The JBLs reproduced the muscular bass guitar on "Suddenly I See" with good musicality; the subwoofer provided solid fundamental notes while the towers' woofers added the attack of the plucked strings. Likewise, the kick drum, pulled back in this mix, sounded steady and strong. The sat/sub blend was seamless — one of the advantages of using towers for the left and right front channels, instead of small satellite speakers.

Tunstall's lead vocal on the song was clean, as was the touch of reverberation around it. Details were clearly audible, such as nuances in the vocal echoes on the line "I can see her eyes looking from a page in a magazine." That I could hear all of this detail suggests good midrange clarity.

The snare sound was appropriately crisp and snappy, albeit a bit brighter than what I've heard on some other systems. The combination of the normal tweeter and the

ultra-high-frequency driver served up lots of presence and air. The entire top end sized with energy, and, in fact, it required a little getting used to. But once I got acclimated, I was quite happy with that extreme high-frequency extension.

Expanding my audition to other faves both old and new, I worked through my evaluation checklist. Imaging was accurate, with a good phantom-center image on pop lead vocals, and likewise the panorama of orchestral instruments was continuous across the stereo arc. The soundstage was open and natural, undoubtedly aided by the plentiful high-frequency response.

Turning my attention to music in surround, I listened to the 6-channel mix on the DVD-Audio edition of Led Zeppelin's *How the West Was Won*. On this album, the center channel is used lightly for lead vocals, but since the ES25C employs the same tweeter module as the towers, the high end sounded well matched. The center speaker's 5-inch woofer falls between the towers' 4- and 6-inchers, but its tonal quality is similar enough. On other surround albums, too, these drivers worked together to reproduce a realistic soundstage across the front, with good image definition.

MOVIE PERFORMANCE

JBL got its start in movie sound, so I wasn't

surprised that its ES system handled with aplomb the soundtrack to *Hero*, a Chinese fantasy spectacle directed by Yimou Zhang. In one scene, the titular character swirls around a blue room, cutting ties holding bundles of sticks. The swooshing sounds of our flying hero, co-mingled with the ringing of his sword, are panned throughout the surround mix. Here, the satellite speakers provided great spatial continuity instead of the blobs of localized sound I sometimes hear on other models.

The subwoofer added to the swirling sound with low-pitched whooshes — an effect that was nicely integrated with the satellites. (A lesser system might have statically localized the low sounds to the sub, degrading the sense of movement.) And when the sticks crashed to the floor in all six speakers, the sense of immersion was complete. Meanwhile, dialogue — hard-panned to the center channel — sounded absolutely clean. As I expected, the center speaker's MTM configuration produced symmetrical horizontal dispersion.

BOTTOM LINE

In a world of tiny satellites — not to mention cute cabinets that are subwoofers in name only — it's comforting to listen to big, traditional speakers from a big, traditional company. JBL has a speaker-design knowledge base that's almost unrivaled. If there's one thing it knows how to do, it's putting drivers in boxes and making them sound damn good.

S&V

Key Features

ES80 (\$549 each)

:: (2) 6-in woofers; 4-in midrange; 3/4-in dome tweeter; 3/4-in ultra-high tweeter; 42 3/4 in high; 46 1/4 lb

ES25C (\$349)

:: (2) 5-in woofers; 3/4-in dome tweeter; 3/4-in ultra-high tweeter; 18 3/4 in wide; 16 3/4 lb

ES10 (\$349/pair)

:: 4-in woofer; 3/4-in dome tweeter; 3/4-in ultra-high tweeter; 12 in wide; 8 3/4 lb

ES250P (\$599)

:: 12-in woofer; 400-watt amplifier; 19 3/4 x 15 3/4 x 16 7/8 in; 43 lb

:: Finish: black or cherry

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