

Start ME UP

REL T-5 2.1-Channel System

A System That Is Also a Solution

Neil Gader

Here's the scenario: Small, cozy den with a generous love seat for you and your significant other, who, as it turns out, happens to *love* movies especially on the newly installed wall-mounted flat panel. And here's the conundrum: Two-channel music-listening is *your* priority; yet every once in a while you have to admit that it's nice to have a total cinema experience. It comes down to this—what's your best move in a \$1000 speaker system? Given this set of competing priorities, I say consider putting your money where you're really going to hear it. Give center/surround speakers a timeout and install a fine set of stereo satellites sporting genuine audiophile bona fides and simultaneously augment them with a subwoofer capable of generating the serious slam that will immerse you in the movie event. Something like REL T-5 Monitor/T-5 subwoofer system. True, REL, the British subwoofer firm, is not normally thought of as bundling 2.1-channel speaker systems, but that could change in a hurry.

If the T-5 monitors look familiar, they should. They are actually Pro-Ject Speakerbox 5 mini-monitors that importer Sumiko Audio has designated for this system. (The Speakerbox 5 is also available as a stand-alone product to Pro-Ject dealers who do not have access to the more exclusively distributed REL brand.) An adaptation from an earlier two-way, bass-reflex, Scandinavian-bred design, the Speakerbox 5 has been upgraded by Pro-Ject engineers with an improved bass driver and new decoupling technology to defeat baffle resonances. The high-gloss, piano-lacquer cabinet was increased in size to add bass extension, and its mass was increased via a heavier grade of MDF. The second-order crossover was also reworked with higher-class components. The speakers are shielded and wall-mounting brackets are included. Magnetic fittings neatly affix the black cloth speaker grilles.

The *authority* figure in this system is the REL T-5 subwoofer, the smallest entry in the firm's new T-Series. It's a downward-firing design in a sealed box. With an 8" long-throw woofer and a built-in 125W amp, the T-5 is well appointed and ravishingly finished. Compact in the extreme, its size and form factor make it an ideal complement to the T-5 monitors. (See sidebar.)

Setup is a snap, in part because the bass response of the T-5 monitor rolls off fairly smoothly without the typical midbass boost that makes subwoofer integration difficult. As for satellite placement, the upper bass benefits commensurately with



proximity to a rear wall—a sure bet since we're using the T-5s to flank a flat panel display. Sonically it means the difference between a leaner, overly detailed character, and a warmer, fuller lower midrange that balances some of the treble energy. I adjusted the T-5 crossover to produce flat response in my room to just below 100Hz. The sub drove the room smoothly when positioned about 18" from the backwall, equidistant from the back corners of my room.

Even the most casual listeners will find much to admire in this system but the real magic begins with critical listening. The T-5 system's sonic character is nicely balanced; the midrange has a rewarding amount of heft and substance. I noted a bit of midrange forwardness during James Taylor's "If I Keep My Heart Out of Sight" from the superb recent reissue of *JT* [Warner/MoFi], but the overall effect doesn't diminish the system's solid inter-driver coherence. There's an unexpected harmonic refinement in the upper octaves but also an overall lighter signature, as a hint of brightness in the presence range illuminates the treble somewhat. Midband dynamics are very good for a speaker of this spec.

Voices, male or female, have the requisite impact that I expect from a loudspeaker, which is to say that in the real world singers sing with their entire bodies, and small speakers often fail to convey that physicality. This system does a much better job of reproducing this than most. In the *Mule Variation* recordings I

REL T-5: A Closer Look

My experience with the T-5 subwoofer goes well beyond the T-5 monitor in this review. Its performance with some very upscale stand-mount compacts was similarly impressive, suggesting to me at least that it's destined for a long career in all kinds of settings. And amazingly, until you get a look at the T-5 in person, you're not prepared for how small it is—roughly a one-foot cube. I kept thinking: "Subwoofer...seriously?" Like its larger T-Series siblings, it uses Australian MDF, which Sumiko states was chosen for its consistent quality. Bracing is similarly robust. The 8" paper-cone driver hews to REL tradition in that it is relatively light in weight but high in rigidity, in order to balance speed, output linearity, and extension. After testing a series of Class D amplifiers REL stuck with a tried-and-true 125W Class AB design—its sonic preference in this price class.

And you won't find any cheap plastic ornamentation either. The insignia on top and the heavy footers beneath are thick solid-aluminum billet. The finish is eight coats (thirteen on the bigger Ts) of hand-sanded, hand-rubbed piano-black or piano-white lacquer. REL hasn't shirked its responsibility in connectivity, either. You get the full suite of REL adjustments, which allows for high-level connection, a single channel of low-level connection, plus a single channel .1 input for connection to an AV receiver's subwoofer output. Phase control is a simple 0-180 degree selector. The REL filter/input circuit is a significant part of why RELs sound the way they do. Which is to say, they seem to slip chameleon-like into the character of the main speakers. For the record, the low pass is 12dB/octave between 30Hz and the chosen upper limit, but there's also an additional second-order filter set way up around 200Hz to prevent high- and mid-frequency bleedthrough and far enough out of passband to not interfere with the main filter. Per REL practice there is no high-pass filtering—satellites must be prepared to play full-range. REL provides the ability to simultaneously connect the .1 channel from your theater into all RELs—a real plus when switching from music only listening to movie time. Also included is a separate level control for the .1 channel input. In sum, a little sub that speaks volumes.

expect Tom Waits' deep chest resonance to rumble like a Chevy big block, and the T-5 didn't let me down.

Due to the rigid non-resonant construction of most contemporary small monitors, finely wrought imaging is generally a slam-dunk, but these sats deserve special mention because of the air, the acoustic elbow-room, they generate between instruments. Related to this absence of cabinet resonance is the T-5's transient behavior, which is quick with very good edge definition. During selections from Nickel Creek's *This Side*, Chris Thile's mandolin not only had the expected speed off the pick, but also an articulation of individual strings and a warm resonance underlying the initial ring of each note. At the other

timbral extreme, the same can be said of Edgar Meyer's expressive acoustic bass during *Appalachian Journey* where I could almost feel the tug of the horse-hair bow drawn across the strings, the guttural voice of a deep note, and finally the distinct shudder of resonance from the soundboard. It was on this track that I observed that, even at higher volume levels, the T-5 remains firmly anchored to the floor—an achievement that really sets it apart from other small subs.

Key to a successful sub/sat system is a sense of unification. The T-5 subwoofer and T-5 monitors achieve this union by speaking with a near-unbroken voice. This is particularly true in scale and speed where, often times, smaller mid/bass transducers tend to be fast responders mismatched with less responsive woofers that cloud transparency and soften focus. Here, the combo of the eight-incher in the REL with the five-inch mid/bass in the sats is sensational. There's little in the way of localization, loads of low-frequency energy, and snappy pace into the mid-30Hz range.

Finally, the T-5 system is generous in output, as long as it's confined to smaller room settings. To my knowledge there are no nine-inch-tall monitors that have the dynamic *cojones* to wrestle bass drum transients, tam-tam crashes, and baritone saxophones into submission without some compression. This said, I'd be remiss if I failed to add that when I put on my home-theater crash helmet the terrifying tsunami at the beginning of *Hereafter* was *really* something to experience with this system. There were moments my 46" Samsung seemed to expand wall-to-wall as the tidal surge enveloped the ill-fated Indonesian village. Let's face it: You don't always subwoof a system to appreciate a pipe organ—sometimes you just want a good, old-fashioned Saturday matinee's thrills.

There are a lot of reasons to trumpet the REL bundle, but most of all I love a system that is also a solution. The T-5 solves the small-room challenge of producing audiophile-quality stereo *and* home-cinema excitement while leaving open the path to expand down the road. Whether you're into Stravinsky or *Star Trek* permit yourself a high-five for thinking outside the (home-theater) box. **tss**

SPECS & PRICING

T-5 MONITOR

Type: Bass-reflex
Drivers: 1" silk-dome tweeter, 5" mid/bass
Frequency response: 55Hz-20kHz
Impedance: 8 ohm
Sensitivity: 86dB (1W/1m)
Dimensions: 8.97" x 8.97" x 7.8"
Weight: 9.2 lbs.

Power: 125W Class AB
Inputs: High-level Neutrik Speakon, low-level single RCA, LFE RCA
Dimensions: 10.5" x 12" x 11.75"
Weight: 26 lbs.
Price: \$649
Package price: \$1049

SUMIKO AUDIO
 2431 Fifth Street
 Berkeley, CA 94710
 (510) 843-4500
 sumikoaudio.net

T-5 SUBWOOFER

Type: Closed-box, downward-firing, amplified subwoofer
Driver: 8" long-throw

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