



After I'd lived with a pair of Ascend Acoustics CBM-170s (\$328 per pair) for several months and gotten to know the speaker's special qualities well enough to write a review, I was asked if I'd be interested in reviewing a full multichannel home-theater system based on the design. It was an easy decision. In stereo mode, the CBM-170 had done such terrific jobs with detail, soundstaging, and imaging that, the whole time I had them in my system, I wondered what a full home-theater package would sound like. I jumped at the chance.

Because I still had the stereo pair on hand, Ascend sent me a second pair of CBM-170s to match the first for surround duty, and a \$298 CMT-340c center-channel to complete the package, which costs \$858 (\$954 when bought separately). Ascend recommends the highly regarded subwoofers from Hsu Research to fill out the bottom end, and sells a selection of them through their website. I still had a Hsu VTF-3 on hand from another review; Dr. Poh Ser Hsu graciously agreed to let me hang on to the sub to complete my review of the Ascends. With the extremely capable VTF-3 in place, I was ready to go.

## Description and setup

When compared to other bookshelf speakers in its class, the CBM-170 is fairly squat and deep: 12"H x 9"W x 10"D. This proved something of a problem, as the CBM-170 is just a little too deep to fit comfortably on the shelf system I've devised to make swapping surround speakers in and out of

my main review system less cumbersome. They aren't that much deeper than the average surround, but in my case a few inches make a big difference. In my room, the CBM-170s were most comfortable on solid floor stands. They can also be mounted on a wall, using the built-in threaded inserts on the back and an optional bracket.

The CBM-170 and CMT-340c center-channel fare quite well against the competition in technology and build quality. It isn't often in this price range that you see composite materials such as Aerogel used for a 6.5" woofer cone. The rounded cabinet corners help reduce diffraction effects, and the all-metal, gold-plated binding posts are a step above the more common plastic-nut variety. The tweeters are 1" soft domes with neodymium magnets and ferrofluid cooling. The dual-woofer CMT-340c can even be biwired!

One of the few quibbles I had in my original review of the CBM-170 was that the speaker, while not exactly ugly, isn't the most attractive design that's crossed my threshold, and its simple finish of textured laminate does little to improve the appearance of the plain black block. Ascend has addressed this issue; the CBM-170 and CMT-340c are now available (at additional cost) in at least eight automotive-grade finishes, including semigloss pearlized white and metallic silver paint. If none of the finishes suits your style and you're handy with a paint gun, they can also be ordered in bare, ready-to-finish MDF.

The CBM-170 surrounds landed in the usual spots in my theater: about 6' off the floor and 8' directly to the sides of the primary seating position. The main left and right speakers stayed precisely where I'd placed them for the two-channel review: about 2' out from the wall and 8' apart. The CMT-340c center landed high atop my projection TV, tilted down toward the listening position with my usual audiophile-grade rubber doorstops, thus resolving any problems with off-axis response caused by this higher-than-normal placement.

In my review of the stereo pair of CBM-170s, I concluded that they presented the "state of the art in budget loudspeakers." The question now was whether this quality was transferable to a multichannel movie-and-music system.

## A day at the movies

In chapter 5 of *The Thin Red Line*, as the soldiers walk through the Guadalcanal jungle, the creaking of the bamboo and the rustle of reeds in the wind are at once enveloping and distinct. With this Ascend system, everything was arrayed on a perfectly intact three-dimensional soundstage, with no seams in the stage's height, width, or depth. Nor were dynamics ever an issue: this system could play ear-shatteringly loud in a room of average size. The CMT-340c center got a bit bright when pushed to stupid levels, but I value my hearing too much to listen at such high volumes for extended periods. At sane output levels, the entire system was always balanced and composed.

In chapter 2 of *K-19: The Widowmaker*, the ambient echo of the captain's voice in his address to his men was perfectly clear, the surrounds integrating seamlessly with the rest of the system to produce a believable space. There was natural warmth to other male voices, too. Many center channels exhibiting such warmth—for example, the original version of the PSB Stratus C5—have problems with dialogue intelligibility, while many others give up that warmth to ensure that the dialogue is understandable. The Ascend CMT-340c managed to balance the two and come out a winner.

*Men In Black* has always been good demo material, but the Superbit version's DTS track goes the standard edition one better. The spaceship crash in chapter 4 is a perfect example: the Ascend system met the task with an expansive soundstage and seamless pans. Have I said that this system can play really loud? In chapter 7, when Will Smith drags a table across the floor, the Ascends' ability to reproduce slight variations in pitch and pinpoint imaging made that screech believable enough that I cringed every time.

## Settling down for some music

The drums at the opening of "Anthony's Blues," on Michel Camilo's *Triangulo* [Telarc SACD-63549], were suspended in air with distinct precision, creating a believable sense of space. This, I believe, was due to the nearly perfect match of all five Ascend speakers. Many years ago, I played the drums, and find that most dynamic cone/dome speakers fall short when reproducing the transient attack of a snare drum. Not so the Ascends. On Camilo's "Descarga for Tito," the transient response on the drums was excellent, more in line with a mid-class planar than a conventional budget speaker. Further, the integration of the Hsu VTF-3 subwoofer with the Ascends

was nearly flawless. The sub was a good match to the Ascends' clean, dynamic reproduction of music.

The horns at the opening of "TKO," on Four80East's *Round 3* [CD, Higher Octave 13069], sounded maybe a touch shrill at extremely high volume levels, but a number of other speakers I've got in the house are much worse with this cut. I'm talking about *extreme* volume levels here. At moderate to reasonably high volumes, the Ascends were very composed with any material I threw at them, with spectacular imaging, a soundstage that extended well out to beyond the outer edges of the speakers, and uncommon depth for a budget model.

The story was much the same with Eric Clapton's *Reptile* [DVD-Audio, Reprise 47966-9]. Playing "Traveling Light," the speakers always seemed very neutral and balanced; voices seemed perfect to me, without the slightest hint of coloration. I've heard speakers costing several times what these do that don't get the overall balance this good. They were just a bit light in bass response by themselves, but when properly integrated with the Hsu sub, they came to life as a full-range system capable of performance far outpacing their meager price. On "Broken Down," the tone of Clapton's acoustic guitar was right on the money, and a uniform soundstage filled the room.

## Comparison

The closest thing in my arsenal to the Ascend Acoustics system was Paradigm's Esprit v.3 towers, CC-270 center-channel, and ADP-170 surrounds. The total bill for this five-speaker system is \$1127, compared with \$858 for the Ascend system without the Hsu Research VTF-3 subwoofer. The Esprit v.3's most obvious advantage is its size—it goes a full octave lower in frequency response in my listening room than the CBM-170. This advantage evaporates, however, as soon as you add a subwoofer to either system. I have a Paradigm PDR-12 sub backing up its brothers; five Ascends plus the Hsu VTF-3 go for a price nearly identical, at slightly less than \$1600. Thus configured, the Ascend system handily outperformed the Paradigm in the low-frequency department.

The Ascend CBM-170 was cleaner and more detailed across the board than the Paradigm Esprit v.3. The Paradigm system, however, was a little warmer and more forgiving of bad recordings, not to mention downstream components. The Ascends won't hesitate to point out the flaws in your basic mass-market budget receiver, so choose carefully.

When it came to surround performance, the two systems presented completely different interpretations of how a surround system should work. The Ascends had a tightly defined, three-dimensional soundstage in which images were placed precisely in space. The Paradigms, with their Adaptive Dipole surrounds, took a different approach that enveloped me in sound that was more expansive but less defined. Both systems did an enviable job of presenting a three-dimensional image; which approach is "better" is an exercise in personal taste.

## Conclusion

The Ascend Acoustics home-theater system is exactly as I expected it would be: phenomenal. The system does require the addition of a quality subwoofer for use in a home theater, but this is a given with most bookshelf speakers and should be factored into the decision. Ascend offers a range of Hsu Research subs on their website, offering enough options that you can pick the level of price and performance needed for your particular situation.

And at this price and level of performance, it was hard to find anything at all to complain about. So I won't. The Ascend Acoustics CBM-170 and CMT-340c comprise the most convincing conventional speaker system I've heard for less than a thousand bucks. It offers sonic abilities heretofore seen only in much more expensive systems, and accepts few compromises in the process.

Features:		
6.5" long-throw Aerogel woofers	Model:	CBM-170 bookshelf speaker
1" soft-dome ferrofluid-cooled neodymium-magnet tweeters	Dimensions:	12"H x 9"W x 10"D
Rear-ported enclosures	Weight:	31 pounds per pair
Internally braced MDF cabinets	Price:	\$328 USD pair
Magnetically shielded		CMT-340c center-channel speaker
Wall-mountable (CBM-170)		21"W x 7.5"H x 10.5"D
All-metal gold-plated binding posts		26 pounds
Biwireable (CMT-340c)		\$298 USD
	System Price: \$858 (four CBM-170s, one CMT-340c)	
	Warranty: Five years parts and labor (transferable)	
	<b>Ascend Acoustics, Inc.</b> 16921 S. Western Ave., Suite 111 Gardena, CA 90247 Phone: (310) 719-9786 Fax: (310) 388-1500 E-mail: <a href="mailto:sales@ascendacoustics.com">sales@ascendacoustics.com</a> Website: <a href="http://www.ascendacoustics.com">www.ascendacoustics.com</a>	

COMPANY INFO

Review System	
Preamp-Processor	Anthem AVM 20
Amplifiers	Chiro C-300 (mains), Rotel RB-976 (surrounds)
Sources	Pioneer DV-563A DVD player, Sony SAT HD200 DirecTV receiver
Cables	Analysis Plus, Audio Magic, Straight Wire, Monster Cable
Monitor	Hitachi 46F500 rear-projection HDTV

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