



The Home Theater Authority
www.hometheatersound.com

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Ascend Acoustics CMT-340 SE / CBM-170 SE Home-Theater Speaker System

In 2003, I described the original version of the Ascend Acoustics CBM-170 as “the state of the art of budget loudspeakers.” The CBM line has been an incredible success in terms of sales, but David Fabrikant, owner/designer at Ascend Acoustics, saw room for improvement and has designed Signature Editions of the CBM-170 and the CMT-340 main and center models. The system I received for review consisted of one CMT-340 SE center (\$298 each) and two CMT-340 SE mains (\$568/pair) for the front channels, and two CBM-170 SEs (\$348/pair) for the surrounds. The five retail for \$1118 when purchased as a system, \$1214 when purchased separately.

The Signature Editions

Ascend claims several improvements for its Signature Edition designs—most significant, a “high-definition” chambered SEAS tweeter and a lower-distortion woofer. Reportedly, the SEs also exhibit overall lower distortion, greater power handling, and a more refined sound. Some things remain unchanged, particularly the speakers’ looks. The tall, sharp-edged CMT-340 SE still comes dressed in a textured vinyl of basic black that looks durable enough and doesn’t easily show fingerprints or scratches, and my wife was moderately pleased with its appearance—surprising, considering that the Ascends took the places of a pair of Silverline Sonatinas clad in a high-quality finish of burl veneer. But the same vinyl finish on the squat, round-edged CBM-170 SE looks far more utilitarian and seemed to have a polarizing effect; many, including my normally tolerant wife, have been less than complimentary. If basic black isn’t your thing, Ascend offers custom automotive-quality paint finishes at additional cost and some delay in shipping.

The two-way CMT-340 SEs—both the upright main model and the horizontal center versions—sport dual 6.5” woofers and a 27mm soft-dome tweeter in a woofer-tweeter-woofer arrangement. The smaller CBM-170 SE has just one woofer,

placed below the tweeter in a more conventional two-way configuration. Both models are built of MDF and have a rear port, and are biwireable via binding posts of gold-plated brass. They’re also claimed to be fairly sensitive: 90dB/W/m for the CMT-340 SE, and 89dB/W/m for the smaller CBM-170 SE. Each has an impedance of 8 ohms. They should be easy loads for any decent amplifier or receiver.

Because my 24” stands were in use at the time, Ascend sent along matching stands for the CMT-340 SEs—simple MDF affairs that perfectly match the speaker’s size



and finish and cost \$100/pair. They can be filled with sand, which is good—the stands themselves are pretty lightweight, making the whole setup more than a little top-heavy and unstable. However, once the stands were filled (each takes 50 to 75 pounds of sand), they were virtually immobile, and seemed as close to sonically inert as I’ve heard. A hardboard connector plate couples speaker to stand, though it flexes a bit too much for my comfort. With a four-year-old granddaughter occasionally running around the house, the safety of stand-mounted speakers is always a concern, especially with something as tall as the CMT-340 SE. Four blobs of Blu-Tack on each connector plate made them stable enough.

During the course of this review, I used the CMT-340 SE in each of my three review systems. The real torture test was the tube system in my less than acoustically correct family room. If a speaker can pass muster with this system, it should do well anywhere. The CMT-340 SEs did surprisingly well in this room, though the 8-ohm impedance is less than ideal for use with a tube amp. On the plus side, the 340’s excellent off-axis response helped negate some of the room’s acoustical problems. My small theater—a room of average size with decent acoustics but no room treatments—is pretty close to what most people live with. The Ascends comprised one of the best-sounding speaker systems I’ve had in that room in some time, being good enough to point out the flaws and high-frequency harshness of my rapidly aging A/V receiver. But the speakers themselves exhibited no such harshness when paired with the more expensive Anthem electronics in my reference home-theater system, which occupies a dedicated space that has been acoustically treated to provide optimum performance. In this room, equipment can show what it’s really capable of, and here the Ascends sang their hearts out.

Listening

I’m not a fan of most current popular music. Maybe I’m just getting old, but today’s pop seems more about looks and showmanship, at the expense of raw talent. I offer Britney Spears as the most painfully obvious example. Thus, it always comes as a bit of a surprise when I find someone firmly entrenched in the popular music scene who is as eminently talented as Alicia Keys. Her debut effort, *Songs in A Minor* [CD, J-Records 20002], is one of my favorite contemporary popular CDs. Here’s a young lady with soul and talent who isn’t afraid to show her influences in fresh and exciting ways. Surprisingly, it’s also a well-recorded album that displays an incredible sense of image depth. The opening track, “Piano & I,” immediately caught my attention as a radical departure from today’s standard R&B releases.



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The simple purity of the piano solo at the beginning is something many speakers fail miserably at, but not so the Ascends, which made the instrument come to life. That classically styled opening soon dissolves into a taste of hip-hop, and the Ascends followed right along, never missing a beat.

Beck's music defies categorization. It's rock, but the word doesn't begin to describe the musical twists and turns his music has taken. Lately, I've been listening to *Guero* [CD, Geffen 9010]. Though not as inventive as some of his other discs, it's still excellent, and somewhat reminiscent of *Odelay*. The Ascends' soundstaging and imaging on such tracks as "Girl" were nearly as good as those of my reference speakers—no small feat for speakers costing a little more than a quarter the price. The soundstage depth was so impressive that at one point I found myself checking to make sure I hadn't inadvertently engaged the AnthemLogic surround mode. *Guero* is one of those albums I like to play loud—I advanced the Volume control deep into the danger zone, with nary a complaint from the Ascends. I detected a bit of hardness at absolutely stupid levels, but anyone who regularly listens at such volumes soon won't be able to tell the difference anyway.

I'm a longtime James Bond fan, but in recent years the franchise has looked a bit tired. That all changed with the new *Casino Royale*, which could be called the *Batman Begins* of the Bond series. It's a great, hard-hitting rebirth of a venerable series—a little darker, a lot less reliant on gizmos and gadgets, and all the better for it. It helps, too, that, unlike some past Bonds, Daniel Craig can, you know, *act*. Of course, *Casino Royale* is still a spy action flick, and boasts enough special effects, explosions, and general mayhem to exercise a surround system for a solid 144 minutes. One of the criticisms of the earlier version of the CMT-340 was that it couldn't handle being pushed really, really, really hard. I found this no longer an issue with the CMT-340 SE/CBM-170 SE combo. Hooked up to an amp with a

little reserve power, these puppies rattled the rafters, the windows, and the wall sconces. They could take being played abusively loud, but if that's your plan, be prepared to do a little room debugging to eradicate rattles.

Of course, if you can't hear the dialogue in quiet passages, then nothing else matters, and Daniel Craig is sometimes so understated that he nearly mumbles. Luckily, the CMT-340 SE center did a nice job of rendering clearly audible what would be nearly unintelligible through many other speakers. I've heard far more expensive center-channel speakers do significantly worse.

Flyboys may not be the greatest flying or war movie ever made, but it's certainly not the worst. The frequent flying sequences keep the surrounds plenty busy throughout much of the film, which makes it a good reference DVD—and it beats the heck out of sitting through *Driven* yet again. The surround envelopment in the aerial sequences is nothing short of spectacular, and even though the CBM-170 SE surrounds exhibit some differences in tonal balance from the fronts in individual listening, you'd never know it from the front-to-rear pans, which were perfectly seamless. The sound in *Flyboys* is all about increasing the realism of the flying scenes, and the excellent soundstage depth provided by the Ascends did this better than any other speaker system I've got in the house right now.

Comparison

Pitting Ascend's Signature Editions against the speakers in my reference theater was hardly fair, but I did it anyway. My main reference speakers are Paradigm Studio 100 v3s, which at \$2100/pair cost more than three times as much as the CMT-340 SEs with stands. You'd expect a sonic leap that corresponded with such a huge gap in price, but I heard more similarities than differences. In fact, the Ascends surprised me by producing a slightly deeper soundstage than the Paradigms. The Ascends fell slightly short of the

Paradigms in detail, at which the Studio 100 v3 excels. Also, the Paradigms handle dynamics somewhat better—to be expected, considering that they have twice the number of woofers.

My current center-channel speaker is the once-excellent PSB Stratus C5. When my budget recovers from the building and equipping of my reference theater, I'll replace the PSB with an appropriately matched Paradigm center-channel, partly because the Ascend CMT-340 SE center has made me realize just how dated the PSB now is. The CMT-340 SE center outperformed the Stratus C5 in every respect, and vocal clarity in particular was greatly improved. Though the match wasn't perfect, the CMT-340 SE center proved a vastly superior partner to my Paradigms than the PSB Stratus C5.

Conclusion

With its Signature Edition system of CMT-340 main and center and CMB-170 surround, Ascend Acoustics continues to stretch the boundaries of the level of performance possible from relatively inexpensive loudspeakers. The Ascend SEs are detailed, fast, and dynamic, and can pass along to the listener the superior qualities of high-end electronics—all at a mass-market price. These speakers' levels of design, capability, and refinement far exceed what could previously be expected from this price range. Those considering buying far more expensive speakers would be well advised not to ignore the Ascends simply because of their low prices; you could be passing up one of the great speaker bargains of all time.

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REVIEW SYSTEM

Speakers	Silverline Sonatina, Paradigm Studio 100 v.3 (mains); PSB Stratus C5 (center); PSB Alpha AV Mite, Infinity Primus 150 (surrounds)
AV Processors	Anthem AVM 20, NuForce AVP 16, Onkyo TX-DS696
Amplifiers	Anthem PVA 7, NuForce Reference 8.5
Sources	Toshiba HD-A1 HD DVD player, Oppo OPDV971H DVD player, Sony SAT-HD200 DirecTV receiver, Adcom GCD-600 CD player
Display Device	Panasonic PT-AE900 LCD projector
Cables	Analysis Plus, Audio Magic, Straight Wire, Monster Cable

DESCRIPTION

Model: CMT-340 SE bookshelf speaker

Price: \$568 USD per pair

Dimensions: 21"H x 7.5"W x 10.5"D

Weight: 26 pounds each

Model: CMT-340 SE center-channel speaker

Price: \$298 USD

Dimensions: 21"W x 7.5"H x 10.5"D

Weight: 26 pounds

Model: CBM-170 SE surround speaker

Price: \$348 USD per pair

Dimensions: 12"H x 9"W x 10"D

Weight: 14 pounds each

Warranty: Five years parts and labor.

System Price: \$1118 USD

FEATURES

27mm, wide-dispersion, soft-dome chambered tweeter
 6.5" composite polygel woofers
 Internally flared rear port
 Woofer phase plug
 Nonresonant, glass-fiber-reinforced tweeter faceplate
 Flush-mounted drivers and grille mounts to reduce diffraction and baffle reflections
 Front baffles have radiused edges
 Advanced, biwirable crossover with gold-plated jumpers
 Five-way binding posts of gold-plated brass
 MDF construction Black textured finish

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