

MK Sound M-5 5.1 speaker system review

Introduction

For years, the letters “M” and “K” have been synonymous with high-quality professional and home audio. Miller and Kreisel, or M&K as the company was known pioneered the satellite + subwoofer speaker system concept. M&K speakers were well known in the entertainment industry as the choice among many big-name professional sound mixing studios, including Dolby Labs, DTS, Lucasfilm, THX, and Sony. Those are some serious bragging rights. But about two years ago, the company was struggling, and ended up going under, as they say. Today, the brand has re-emerged under the name MK Sound. MK Sound has brought back some of the stalwart technologies from M&K, as well as some new products too. Last month, I had the opportunity to review their smallest satellite/sub 5.1 package, the M-5 system. Will the new MK Sound live up to the history behind its famous initials? Read on...

My first experience with M&K speakers was about 10 years ago. While visiting a friend’s parents’ house, I saw an old set of two small wooden boxes and a large wooden box gathering dust in the dad’s office. Upon closer inspection, the wooden boxes turned out to be an original M&K S1 satellite & Volkwoofer sub system. The dad had forgotten he even owned them. We pulled them out, dusted and cleaned them off, and hooked them up to an Onkyo stereo pre/pro and CD player. These speakers were almost as old as I was, and they still sounded great. I think he’s still using them for music in his office to this day. When I heard that I was going to review the modern successors to that original S1 system, I was tickled.

Design & Setup

MK supplied me with a 5.1 system consisting of three M-5 satellites, two M-4T tripole surround speakers, and one SB-8 powered subwoofer. All speakers were medium-gloss (“satin”) white, except for the subwoofer which was a handsome medium-gloss black. The speakers are also available in the black finish, and both the sub and speakers are available in a high-gloss black finish. All six loudspeakers had MK’s distinctive metal grilles, which were held in place magnetically and were easily removable. The M-5s and M-4Ts featured excellent gold plated 5-way binding posts.
(show figures 1 with this paragraph)

Aesthetically, MK Sound has done a wonderful job with these speakers. The finish is beautiful, and the rounded edges are virtually flawless. At first glance, the edges and finish were so smooth, I thought these were cast plastic speaker housings, but they are indeed wood! The cabinets for all the speakers in this system are constructed of ½-inch HDF (high density fiberboard). Almost no resonance can be heard when knocking on the cabinets of these speakers. They are solid and hefty in the hand, and unobtrusive in the living room (what most users of satellite speakers desire). Furthermore, all the speakers in this system, including the subwoofer, are magnetically shielded, for those who may need to place their speakers near CRT displays.

(figure 2)

The M-5's use a 1-inch soft-dome ferro-fluid neodymium tweeter, a magnetically shielded 4-inch coated pulp bass/mid driver with a cast basket, and MK's proprietary "phase focused" crossover. The tri-pole M-4T surround satellites use an identical setup for the main (direct radiating) drivers, and add two 3-inch full-range drivers in a dipole arrangement in the same cabinet. With this design, MK is attempting to get a "best of both worlds" solution to the eternal home theater question of what kind of speaker (direct, dipole, or bi-pole) to use for the surround channels. Both the M-5 and the M-4T speakers use a sealed enclosure design, which results in a very flat frequency response. Both models are rated from 100 Hz to 20 kHz +/- 2dB, and both models are rated at 4 Ohms impedance.

(figure 3)

The cabinet design of the SB-8 subwoofer matches that of the M-5 and M-4T speakers both aesthetically and functionally: The SB-8 is a sealed enclosure subwoofer with an 8-inch long-throw driver. The internal amplifier is rated at 150W rms, although amplifier bandwidth, and distortion/noise values are absent from this rating. Personally, I like to see any amplifier rating include, at a minimum, a test bandwidth and a THD+N value, for the stated power output. The black-anodized brushed aluminum rear panel of the sub is populated with just about every connection one could want for a small-room subwoofer. Connection to the subwoofer can be made either at the line-level or speaker-level, with stereo inputs and outputs for both. As with the M-5 and M-4T speakers, the speaker-level connections on the SB-8 sub are excellent quality gold-plated 5-way binding posts. There is a 180 degree phase switch, which helps in matching the sub to the rest of the surround system, no matter where in the room you place the sub. There are three power switches for the SB-8, "off," "auto," and "on". Fairly self-explanatory, the "auto" setting leaves the sub in a low-power standby state until a signal is detected at which point it comes to full power. There are two fine-tuning knobs on the back panel as well. The adjustable low-pass filter cutoff frequency can be set anywhere from 40Hz to 200Hz, or bypassed completely. The second knob adjusts the amplifier level for the sub. My receiver has a fixed 90Hz crossover frequency for the "small" speaker setting, and level adjustment built-in, so I left the SB-8's low-pass filter set to "bypass," the sub's amplifier level set to "reference," and made the appropriate settings in the receiver.

(figure 4)

Given the very limited low-end extension of the M-5 and M-4T speakers, you definitely want to setup your SSP to treat these speakers as "small". If your SSP has an adjustable crossover for small speakers, set it fairly high – at least 80Hz – preferably at 100Hz. My system's crossover is fixed at 90Hz, and I didn't notice any gaps in the sound field.

I set up the MK Sound M-5 system exactly as I had my own Energy satellite system set up: Left, center & right were symmetrically placed below my 50" plasma TV, with about 6 feet separating the left and right speakers, and the center M-5 placed directly between L&R. My listening position is in a couch along the back wall, with the surround left and right speakers on either side of the couch, separated by about eight feet. The distance

from the center speaker to the listening position is about 14 feet. The subwoofer is located near the right surround speaker, about 2 feet from the back wall.

In Use

My home system consists of a Yamaha RX-V995 receiver, a Sony DVP-S7700 dvd player, and an original Xbox setup as a media center using XBMC software, connected via cat5 to my main PC as the media server. For critical listening (DVDs and CDs) I use the Sony, while for casual listening (mp3s, Divx videos) I use XBMC. I also listen to a fair amount of FM radio, since we have such a great selection here in the Los Angeles basin, the signal strength is near perfect, and the Yamaha's FM tuner is excellent.

Since this review was conducted during the weeks leading up to Christmas, I did a decent amount of listening to choral music. I'm a big choral music fan anyway, but I always listen to it more around the holidays. The M-5s & SB-8 definitely impressed with 2-channel choral music. While playing Chanticleer's original Christmas CD, "Our Heart's Joy," imaging of the voices was fantastic. I've seen Chanticleer in concert enough times to know how they arrange themselves for some of their songs on this CD, and I could clearly hear the location of several members of the 12-voice a cappella choir. Eric Alatorre's deep bass voice was rich and pure, and well localized in the front sound stage, despite the back-wall location of the SB-8 sub. In fact, if I closed my eyes, I'd have sworn I was listening to full-range speakers. The SB-8 handled the low men's voices wonderfully, without calling attention to itself. The rest of the vocal range came through beautifully as well. Precision is a word that can easily be used to describe Chanticleer's singing. They spend countless hours perfecting enunciation of consonants, matching vowel sounds perfectly, and bringing it all together as an ensemble with perfect timing. Any "muddiness" in the speakers is going to be apparent when listening to a choir like this. The M-5s were tight, and accurate, with no sibilance whatsoever.

To sample some music from the other end of the spectrum, I pulled out my CD of Rush's "Counterparts" album. I've been a fan of the progressive rock trio since the 1980's and have always thought their music is an excellent test for a speaker system. Again, the M-5s and SB-8 did not disappoint. Neil Peart's virtuosity on the drums was well served, from the clarity of his top-hat and cymbals in the M-5 tweeters, to the pounding of his bass drums in the SB-8 sub. The album's opening single "Animate" wastes no time in hitting you hard with Neil's drums. I was very impressed with the SB-8's tight speed and accuracy.

The first movie I pulled out of my collection for this review was Episode I of the Star Wars saga. Right off the bat, I was impressed with the imaging put forth by the M-5's and M-4Ts. The overall sound field was fantastic. With the lights out and the movie on, I forgot all about the speakers and got lost in the sound track. Due to the layout of my living room, there is a bit of a gap with pans going from front to back and vice-versa. This happens with my own speakers, and the MK's were not able to mask the problem. Tonally though, the M-4Ts in back and M-5s in front were perfectly matched. Left to right pans in both the front sound stage and the surrounds were seamless. The M-4Ts

were the first pair of multi-pole speakers I'd ever used in my own home. I must say I was quite impressed with what the tripole arrangement did for the surround field. There was definitely a more natural feel to events occurring in the rear/surround channels. During the pod-race scene, you really felt like the opposition's pod was right there, moving all around you. And yes, the SB-8 did an incredible job with the pounding engine noise from Sebulba's pod felt through my chest.

Next up was my brand new DVD of the latest installment in the Batman franchise, "The Dark Knight." Two words come to mind: Hospital explosion. I don't want to make this a review of the subwoofer alone, but I was floored by what that tiny little sub did to my living room when the Joker blew up the hospital. I had to skip back and play it again, just to make sure there wasn't some coincidental gas explosion in my neighborhood or something. I literally felt the shaking through the floor and through the cushions of my couch. To have that kind of kick and power, yet still have the tight speed and accuracy the SB-8 has for music... well, I was very impressed. Let me just continue on the SB-8 track for a moment. I mentioned earlier that my room had some shortcomings, like the gap in the front-back sound pans. Another is (or so I thought) that I have to place the sub in a location that makes it a little too "boomy" for my wife's and my tastes. But my wife's taste (and admittedly mine too) also prohibits me from placing it where it might sound better (e.g. in plain view). It's been a long struggle between too "boomy" and too quiet with my current sub in this location. Having listened to the SB-8 for several weeks, I now think the problem is as much with my sub as with my room. The SB-8 exhibited none of the boominess I was used to hearing. I imagine this comes largely from the fact that my sub (also an 8-incher) is ported, whereas MK's SB-8 is a sealed enclosure. A sealed enclosure generally gives you better sonic accuracy, at the cost of lower gain. With a sub this usually means that it won't be as loud, nor go as low, as an otherwise similar but ported design, but you'll get "tighter" bass (more accurate). What's so amazing about the SB-8 then, is that it seems to accomplish both: it's very "tight" or accurate, yet it still rocked my house big time when the Joker did his thing. (figure 5)

Conclusion

While not quite in the "budget" class that many other small satellite + subwoofer systems fall into, MK Sound's M-5 system is undoubtedly top-notch for such a small package. These speakers can easily disappear into your living room if you so desire, yet sonically they can hang with many much larger speakers. Given their incredible imaging and accuracy, they easily surpass many larger speakers out there. Their fine wood construction is almost unheard of anymore in this price range, and especially in this size. It seems like everyone is constructing their small satellite speakers out of some sort of composite these days, which is apparent in the look and sound of those lesser speakers. The M-5 and M-4T from MK Sound are not the tiniest satellite surround speaker system you'll find, but they are definitely small enough to fit into almost any "lifestyle" room design. Their size and beautiful finish will satisfy any aesthetic requirements you may have, while their sound will definitely satisfy your ears. I can not finish this review without one more shout out to the SB-8 subwoofer. This sub is tiny, I mean really small.

Yet, the performance MK has squeezed out of that tiny box will absolutely amaze and astound you and your friends.