

NIGEL PALMER
auditioned a Blue
Sky system in
search of the
catch... there was
none.

Ah, price-to-performance ratio. In so many consumer areas of life this is increasingly important: how good does that car/TV/kitchen really need to be, with what features, and how much can I shave off the feature set and price to end up with something that's appropriate for the use I'm going to put it to? This is no less true in audio, and modern materials and production design coupled with burgeoning labour markets in the Far East mean that manufacturers are increasingly striving to produce a premium product at a less-than-premium price, to the point where many of these items are very usable in a professional audio environment providing they are applied in an informed way to the job in hand. Sometimes, however, both the price and feature set of a product are good enough to make you wonder where the catch is, my first reaction on encountering Blue Sky monitors.

Overview

Blue Sky is a US firm manufacturing in China, and although a relative newcomer as a company it's staffed by seasoned industry professionals. Its products are THX certified and are used by facilities such as the prestigious Skywalker Sound in the States, which has many systems. Blue Sky set-ups usually comprise two or more active satellite speakers and an active sub-woofer sold as a set, and the company's philosophy is to generate a full frequency range so the



BLUE SKY SYSTEM ONE SURROUND MONITORS

sub has been designed to integrate as seamlessly as possible and should always be used. The system for review comprised five SAT 6.5 satellites and a single SUB 12 sub-woofer plus a Bass Management Controller (BMC) and remote, with the possibility of setting up either a 2.1 (stereo with sub) or 5.1 (surround) configuration.

The two-way SAT 6.5s measure 31cm x 20cm x 26cm (HWD) plus an extra 3cm or so of heatsink at the back for the built-in amplifiers (100w each for woofer and tweeter). The low-frequency driver is an interesting-looking silver 16cm unit that is highly damped and has a hemispherical polypropylene cone, and the highs are handled by a 3.5cm tweeter with a central plug that acts as a wave guide. The SAT crosses over at a relatively low 1.5kHz and is magnetically shielded to avoid colour distortion on CRT computer and TV monitors. The SAT is designed to concentrate its efforts above 80Hz and deliberately rolls off rapidly below this frequency, so consequently there's no need for a port or other low bass assistance — the unit performs quite well on paper, staying within 3dB between 80Hz and 20kHz. At the rear all is pretty much as one would expect in a powered speaker of this type with an XLR input and gain control plus power LED towards the top, and below them a power switch, 2.5 amp slow blow fuse holder and mains inlet; there's no visible power indication from the front.

Turning to the sub, this is a 46cm x 40cm x 51cm box with a 200W amplifier and a 30cm bigger brother of the satellite's LF driver (also shielded) with a 20-200Hz usable range. The sub-woofer has Left and Right I/O XLRs and Sub In and Out when daisy-chaining another sub or using the BMC, and phase and auto-mute switches complete the feature set.

The BMC is a 1U box with just a power switch on the front panel and 13 XLRs at the back so a user can feed six sources including the LFE (low-frequency effects) channel to the unit and matrix them to their correct destination in a setup that can have up to two subs. There's also a phone socket for a lead connecting the remote, which has a large

rotary level control and mute, reference level and set-up switches. The comprehensive and well-written manual takes you through the BMC and 5.1 setup procedure in a painless way, easing the transition for those new to multi-channel but it's worth pointing out that the BMC doesn't have to be used with Blue Sky speakers and will interface with any surround rig.

In Use

Set-up in a 2.1 configuration is simplicity itself: just plug two satellites into the sub plus the stereo output of your console or workstation, adjust levels to taste and away you go. Most of my critical listening was done this way, using CDs and work-in-progress sources and I knew as soon as I played Marcus Miller's track *The Blues* which has very punchy and extended bass together with a number of lo-fi speech samples that I was on to something: the bass presented in an unforced and effortless way with little if any apparent compression, and the intelligibility of the samples was about the best I've heard. Further investigation with CDs like Phil Keaggy's beautifully played and recorded acoustic guitar album *Beyond Nature* confirmed my initial impression, showing the system's extremely natural treble and excellent imaging and pointing up some subtle musical parts I hadn't previously noticed. I never felt the sub to be a separate element in the overall sound but nicely combined into the whole, and the satellite internal crossover point operated to

advantage on material other systems can render harshly such as Jan Garbarek's soprano saxophone on the *I Took Up The Runes* CD. Further experimentation with the surround rig showed as expected that this is a worthy contender in the area, though I found that if I wanted to mute a single speaker such as the sub there was a delay while I worked my way through the menus to identify and switch it off — as the remote is software controlled perhaps this could be addressed in a future update?

Conclusion

Although Blue Sky systems don't have quite the level of truthful immediacy of similarly-sized competitors such as the exceptional PMC AML1, and to my ears have a somewhat smaller soundstage, you have to bear in mind that a pair of AML1s costs significantly more than the entire Blue Sky surround package with associated bass management and level control electronics — this really is a price/performance achievement on a grand scale, giving a nearfield system that I would highly recommend for the budget conscious in music studios or post production, and for those with more to spend I would still suggest you audition Blue Sky as you may be very pleasantly surprised. □

INFORMATION

- ① Blue Sky System One (2.1) £1095.00 + VAT.
Surround system (5.1) £2595.00 + VAT.
- ② UK Distributor: Sonic Distribution.
- ③ +44 (0)1525 840 400.
- ④ www.sonic-distribution.com

- ⑤ Blue Sky, USA.
- ⑥ +1 631 249 1399.
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