



B&W

CM Series Speaker System

Ever notice the way cheap audio gear usually gives you controls with names like “spatial expander” and “hyper bass” to, well, hype up the sound, whereas top-of-the-line gear is typically devoid of such controls? While I suppose many would argue that a cheap system usually needs a little sonic goosing at the top and bottom to sound good, I feel it has more to do with the system’s ability, or lack thereof, to deliver an accurate and articulate midrange performance. While foundation-shifting bass and a soaring top end might keep the kiddies impressed for a few minutes, it’s that vast stretch of octaves in between that really separates the men from the boys when it comes to delivering knockout audio performance.

The B&W CM7 tower speaker was designed in step with this way of thinking. As a true three-way model, the speaker has a dedicated midrange that employs B&W’s FST (“fixed suspension transducer”) technology. This innovative fixed-edge design (with no driver surround) takes advantage of the fact that a pure midrange driver doesn’t require the

longer excursion capabilities of the midwoofer typically found in more common two-way or two-and-a-half-way speakers. This means a stiffer cone edge support can be used, which in turn gives the driver much improved damping and faster response times with less “ringing.” The CM7’s tweeter is pretty special, too, a naked aluminum dome that’s back-loaded using B&W’s well-known Nautilus tube design, while the Kevlar/paper-blend woofer is loaded using a clever adjustable port (more about that later).

These speakers are strikingly handsome in a simple, elegant, almost Scandinavian kind of way, especially in the blonde maple veneer. The other real-wood veneer options are something called wenge, similar to dark oak, and the “rose-nut” finish sent for review, which appears to be rosewood-stained walnut. Other nice touches include the hidden magnetic mounts for the grilles, biwireable binding posts, and spiked feet with optional rubber covers. And as someone who has become accustomed to nicely made gear like this sporting an Asian point of manufacture, it was a bit of an eye opener to see

the speakers proudly wearing their Made in England badges.

While it seems clear that the CM7 was designed to work as a standalone product for the stereo music listener, we rounded out a multichannel package with the matching CM Centre, a pair of the CM1 bookshelf speakers for surround-channel duties, and an ASW750 subwoofer. Much like the CM7s, the CM1s can be used as standalone high-performance mini-monitors, and while these are so-called bookshelf speakers, for optimum performance they can be mated with a dedicated stand, the FS 700C/M. Both the CM Centre and the CM1 use the same tweeter as the CM7, although being simpler two-way speakers, they pair it up with a more conventional Kevlar bass/midrange driver.

Usually, a CM Series package would be completed with the striking PV1 spherical subwoofer, but B&W must have figured that we take our bass particularly seriously, because it supplied the somewhat hefty ASW750 sub from the company’s more upscale 700 family. B&W’s use of a sealed enclosure rather than the more commonly seen ported or passive radiator designs again suggests an emphasis on musical accuracy over ultimate output, although the massive 1,000-watt amplifier tosses aside any fleeting thoughts of wimpiness.

The Short Form

Snapshot

Skillfully tailored for maximum musical performance, these Euro-chic speakers can also hold their own with most Hollywood fodder.

Plus

- ⚡ The CM7’s exceptional midrange transparency.
- ⚡ Decorator-friendly styling and fine finish.

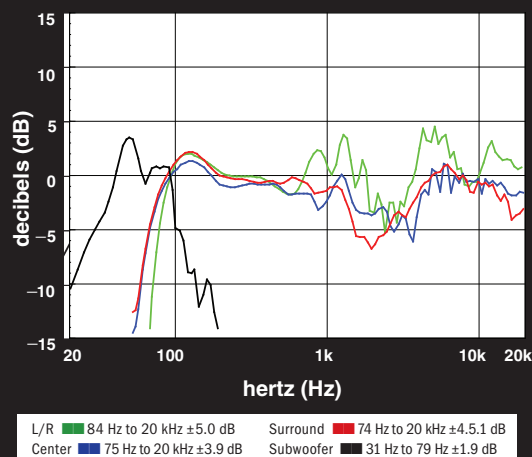
Minus

- ⚡ Not the last word in big-scale dynamics.
- ⚡ Unprotected tweeter domes vulnerable to damage from small fingers.

Price \$4,900 (as tested)

Test Bench

Full lab results at soundandvisionmag.com/cm7



The curves for the CM7, CM Centre, and CM1 all showed a midrange depression between 1.4 and 4 kHz that was apparent at every radiating angle and got worse as the angle widened. The CM7 also has a 3-dB floor bounce at 300 Hz, but with the foam port plug inserted (as reflected here), output below 200 Hz was cut notably (−2 dB at 100 Hz and −10 dB at 60 Hz). The sub had impressive output from 40–62 Hz, hitting 109 dB max SPL at 62 Hz, but fell 21 dB/octave below 40 Hz. —Tom Nousaine

SETUP

As with many other speakers that are tuned to deliver extended bass from a relatively compact cabinet, these are fairly inefficient speakers on paper — although I found that in practice, even the 65-watt-per-channel Outlaw 1070 could drive them quite effectively. The CM7s are perfectly satisfying when used by themselves for two-channel music, but there's no question that for a home theater, you'll want to augment them with a subwoofer. With the ASW750, I got the most transparent blend when I crossed over the CM7s at 60 Hz, using a higher 80-Hz setting for the CM1s and CM Centre (although 80 Hz all around would work if your processor won't set crossovers independently for each speaker).

Initially, I had the CM7s pulled well into the room to keep the bass in check, but then I started to experiment with the foam port-stuffers that come with the speakers. Once I installed them on all five speakers, I found that not only did they make the bass significantly smoother, but I was also able to move the CM7s back closer to the walls. (Measurements later confirmed that the plugs significantly tamed bass output; see Test Bench.) I ended up with the CM7s about 28 inches from the side walls, 20 inches from the front wall, and pointed straight ahead. The center and surrounds went in my usual spots under the TV and directly to the sides and about a foot above my ears, respectively, with the subwoofer just to the right of the left CM7.

MUSIC PERFORMANCE

It's clear that someone at B&W has been doing his homework, because once you put all of the talk about the various technologies aside and start to listen, you soon realize that this is a system that can really deliver the goods musically. Overall, the emphasis is on its warm and articulate midrange, balanced nicely by a detailed but well-behaved tweeter and a tuneful al-though slightly lean bottom end (at least with the plugs inserted). Even a midrange torture test like "Voca Me" from Libera's *Free*, with its powerful yet pure treble voices singing in close harmony, was handled with aplomb. Donald Fagen's *Kamakiriad*, which provides a tough test for tweeter blending and smoothness with its hot top end and punchy dynamics, sounded quite exquisite and refined. The bouncy yet deep bass line of that album's "Trans-Island Skyway" was delivered with plenty of weight, while each note remained clear and easy to follow. The neat, well-ordered sound makes it easy to follow individual instruments in a way that serves many types of music — although anyone looking to blast some AC/DC will probably want something with a little more raw excitement than the B&W's slightly polite, pipe-and-slippers approach.

While the center and surround speakers can't quite match the CM7's FST midrange performance, multichannel music was still well served by the complete package. On the DualDisc of the final Talking Heads album, *Naked*, the surround mix of "Nothing but

Flowers" had an excellent immersive feel to it, with the band up front and percussion spread around to the sides and rear.

MOVIE PERFORMANCE

The British call it "home cinema" rather than "home theater," and just that subtle name change kind of sums up how the CM Series handles movies. If your idea of great home theater sound is beautifully clear dialogue, a sweeping music soundtrack, and splendid delineation of all those tiny, subtle ambient details in the mix, then this system will be hard to beat. If, however, you want to play the bank-lobby scene from *The Matrix* at movie theater levels, you're going to have some problems. Luckily, the ASW750 didn't balk even when faced with the depth charges in *U-571*, so no problems there, but the CMs aren't exactly plaster-crackers.

I played dozens of movies on this system, from 1971's *Le Mans* to last year's *Cars*, and I was consistently impressed with what I heard. Just don't ask it to become a sonic sledgehammer, and it will more than impress.

BOTTOM LINE

If you've reached the point in life where you value honesty and refinement over hype and flash-in-the-pan excitement, this B&W system is worth seeking out. With its cool, sophisticated looks and subtle yet truly impressive performance, particularly in the all-important midrange, this is the type of system whose capabilities you'll really learn to love.

S&V

Key Features

CM7 (\$1,800/pair)

:: 1-in aluminum dome tweeter, 5-in cone midrange, 6½-in cone woofer; 36 in high; 44 lb

CM Centre (\$600)

:: 1-in aluminum dome tweeter, (2) 5-in cone midranges; 19 in wide; 16½ lb

CM1 (\$900/pair)

:: 1-in aluminum dome tweeter, 5-in cone woofer; 11 in high; 14¾ lb

ASW750 (\$1,600)

:: 12-in driver; 1,000-watt amp; 15¾ x 17¾ x 19 in; 70 lb

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