



Optional stands raise what are basically bookshelf speakers to sofa-height

Versatile Xeno a budget smash

Most brands design the subwoofer to match its speakers, but MJ Acoustics has done it the other way around. **Jim Hill** gets a strong case of Xenophilia



Xeno, pronounced 'zee know', means loud voice in Greek, apparently, and it's an appropriate monicker for a set of speakers that are built around one of the most potent small subwoofers in the business. Xeno is the latest line from the sub-bass specialists MJ Acoustics, and, in an unusual twist, the monitors have been designed around the sub rather than vice versa. What's more, it's a subwoofer that has two crossovers, which MJA argues is like having two subwoofers for the price of one.

In this 5.1 configuration, four stand-mounted XM1 speakers are partnered with the XCI centre channel, while the Pro 50 Mk II woofer handles the bass duties. So apart from the dual crossovers in the sub it looks like a regular 5.1 system that can be wired up in the usual way, with a line-level input running from amp to sub. But MJA has another trick up its sleeve and an alternative way to get connected: our sample arrived with a Neutrik Speakon cable that connects the sub to the same high-level outputs on the amp as your front speakers. It's the best way to ensure that your sub is getting exactly the same full range signal as your front speakers and it aspires to make little bookshelf monitors sound like high-end floorstanders.

Either way, the five speakers and subwoofer certainly look like a well-integrated 5.1 family. The front and

rear monitors are identical and the centre channel shares the same pulp cone mid-bass drivers and soft dome tweeter.

The cabinets, made from high-grade MDF, are quite compact. They're coated with two layers of high-gloss black paint that gives each one a reflective oil-like finish. And if you're not a fan of the colour then tough – black is all you can get.

At the back of the XM1 and XC1s are single pairs of binding posts, and rear ports that are precisely in line with the tweeters.

Heavyweight woofer

It's hard to believe the tiny cube subwoofer is going to live up to its 'loud voice' reputation, until you try and lift it. It feels like it's been glued to the floor.

That same glossy black finish covers the Pro 50 Mk II on all sides apart from the metal rear panel and the underside – where its pulp cone 10in woofer fires at the floor. The rear panel, with its additional Neutrik input adjacent to the line-level input is the first sign that anything is any different from the norm.

Connecting just the line-level input to begin with creates a classic sub/satellite system in 5.1 mode with the stand-mount speakers working cohesively with sub and its LFE channel. The Dolby TrueHD mix of *I Am Legend* (Blu-ray) keeps the woofer on its toes by throwing lots of

AV/CV

Product:
Stand-mounted
5.1 speaker
package

Position:
Mid-priced
monitors and
sub from MJ
Acoustics' new
flagship line

Peers:
Tannoy Arena 5.1;
Mordaunt-Short
Avant 100i

sub bass information its way. The Pro 50 responds in kind, spilling deep rumbles and subtle booms into the mix where appropriate.

It's best to start with the sub's volume and crossover frequencies on zero, turning them up gradually to find the right balance. You probably won't need to raise the sub's volume too much before you hit the ideal warmth and reinforcement that the LFE channel should be providing, particularly if you have hard floors; **the Pro 50 Mk II is a feisty little fellow and liable to vibrate off of its spot if you crank it to high.**

Balance of power

The five satellite speakers take the rest of *I Am Legend's* audio mix and blend it in seamlessly with the Mk II. Their wide dynamic range and agile 25mm soft-dome tweeters reach high up for the squealing tyres of Will Smith's Mustang as it pointlessly chases unconvincing CGI effects through Manhattan. And, while there's plenty of high-end detail, the XC1's steer clear of sibilance or brightness. Instead the balance between treble and bass is remarkably neutral, which suits all kinds of movie and music genres.

The dialogue channel is particularly adept at picking out subtle nuances. Mumbled lines come across loud and clear and musical mixes that rely heavily on the centre speaker really make it sing. >



The beautifully-made speaker stands (which cost an extra £100 per pair) lift the monitors to ear height if you're sitting on an average sofa, and they look great; but, no matter how you jazz it up, these are still bookshelf speakers, and therefore at a disadvantage when compared to floorstanders. Without the extra cabinet volume it's hard to achieve the same aural presence. However, **what they lack in scale, the monitors make up for in dexterity**, and when they're blended with the subwoofer, it's a recipe for a truly involving soundstage in anything up to a medium-sized viewing room.

Well connected

But what about that other subwoofer input? MJ Acoustics is keen to promote the alternative wiring method of connecting the woofer to the high-level front speaker outputs. This means buying an extra £30 cable, and living with some inelegant wiring behind your receiver where the three bare wires have to be shoved into the front speaker terminals. On the plus side, modest improvements for two-channel listening may make the belt and braces job worthwhile.

You'll also need to dive into your amplifier's menu to disengage the

LFE channel. This means that the all the sub-crossover bass from the stereo mix will be sent to the sub as well as the speakers. The result is a much more rhythmic and realistic low-end, because there's no additional bass management occurring and no doubling up of the bass frequencies. It sounds, in fact, like your listening to a large pair of floorstanders rather than a sub/sat system. Two-channel fans will appreciate this feature, but I suspect it'll remain a tweak for audiophiles only.

Small but powerful

There's no doubting the Xeno system's remarkable voice. It's well-balanced and neutral. There's no evidence of a small system struggling to be heard. Instead, this is a finely-integrated and powerful array that's excellent for movies, with a strong sub performance. The super-charged woofer is powerful enough, but for a really large room, you may want to consider a bigger model. Luckily MJ Acoustics has plenty more to choose from.

My advice is to put the Xeno system on your audition list if you only have £800 in your wallet and you're after a quality 5.1 array ●

Satellite broadcasting: the XM1 surrounds have a dextrous, balanced sound

→ Specifications

XM1 (fronts & surrounds)

Drive Units: 1in coated silk dome tweeter; 6in mid/bass Low mass coated pulp drivers
Frequency Response: 43 Hz-23 kHz
Sensitivity: 91.5dB
Power Handling: 100/180W
Dimensions: 180(w) x 260(h) x 210(d)mm
Weight: 6.8kg

XC1 (centre)

Drive Units: 1in tweeter; twin 6in mid/bass drivers
Frequency Response: 43Hz-23kHz
Sensitivity: 91.5dB
Power Handling: 120/200W
Dimensions: 430(w) x 180(h) x 210(d)mm
Weight: 6.1kg

Pro 50 Mk II (subwoofer)

Drive Units: 10in heavy-duty coated rigid pulp cone
Frequency Response: 13-200Hz
Onboard power: 120W
Dimensions: 278(w) x 278(h) x 316(d)mm
Weight: 15kg
Features: Sealed enclosure with slam boost and twin crossovers; downward-firing woofer



HCC VERDICT

Xeno 5.1 System
 £800 Approx (excl. stands)
 Price check: www.techradar.com

Highs: Compact design; strong centre channel; feisty, versatile subwoofer

Lows: Lacks the scale or dispersion required for larger rooms

Performance: 1 2 3 4 5

Design: 1 2 3 4 5

Features: 1 2 3 4 5

Overall: 1 2 3 4 5