



The 5.1 LS system makes use of 19 drivers in total, guaranteeing a substantial soundfield

JBL brings back hardcore high-end

This luxurious-looking 5.1 package sounds better the more power you put through it. That's no bad thing, says **Adam Rayner**



Fondly known as 'Gerbil' in the oh-so-witty world of pro-audio, American loudspeaker specialist JBL has a long history of some of the most important developments in the physical side of speaker design. The brand effectively set the standard for high-performance theatrical sound systems worldwide and has sporadically produced boxes of considerable import. Now it's back centre-stage with the LS series, which are a development of an old idea, refined much like the humble compact cassette deck was by Nakamichi. The LS series don't just use horns, they feature full-on professional-style compression drivers.

This is an unashamedly sexy set of speakers with all the luscious beauty of tropical hardwood – although it might hurt your environmental soul as this stuff is not a renewable resource and could well have been ripped out of the rainforest, whatever the provenance says. One look at that ebony wood veneer, though and I was in love. They are luscious – opulent even. Funny thing is, a professional acoustic woodsmith I know came to visit and pronounced them hideous. It's all about individual taste...

The grilles are a bit plasticky but when you remove them (there are badges on both the grilles' and enclosures' fronts) you see why these

speakers are so serious. If you don't have kids or a cat you'll want to leave the grilles in a cupboard; the horn-toting front baffles are simply evilly sexy in their form-breeds-function shapeliness.

High-frequency heroes

The 2in high-frequency Bi-radial horns are cunningly formed. They sit like a wide-open frog's mouth beneath the state-of-the-art 0.75in UHF ring radiator tweeter. This deadly duo makes for a high-frequency performance that can be superbly directional (good for well-aimed surround systems) and a massive efficiency in the top notes that enables little details, tings, pings, creaks and clunks to come fabulously to the fore. However, this also means that any hiss at all, any lack in that oh-so-important signal-to-noise ratio specification in any part of your system, and you will hear it like a bag of snakes. A nothing noise becomes an irritating 'Pishhh!'

Especially as you need to drive the living daylight out of these speakers to get them to sing. At low levels they have an acceptable detail retrieval and can give you all the background fiddle-faddling you'll want from your soundtracks, but when they get cranked, something wonderful happens. They come to life.

The LS system is a bit like a huge Mercedes SL500 I once took for a test drive, which was always polite until it 'woke up' at 135mph and

AV/CV

Product: Beautifully presented pro-audio style speakers with refined horn technology for home use

Position: High/mid end. Above most of JBL's domestic speaker products but not as premium as its Synthesis range

Peers: Pioneer EX; Canton Vento; Tannoy Signature Revolution

seemed ready to really rock. These speakers took on another character at near-to-full levels of gain. As soon as I got to a certain point, the midband became fuller, the top mids crisper and all the soundstage melded into one glorious, hellacious mayhem of action, but with all the components of it discernible individually. These speakers absolutely love action movies.

Now let's play a little game I call 'testing speakers together.' *Cars* by digital animation kings Pixar (yes, another 'toon soundtrack – I just can't help it) opens with shiny hero Lightning McQueen giving himself a pep talk in his trailer, which is revealed to be parked at a heaving racetrack just before the off. If you turn the volume up loud enough, there's a whole layer of surround sound background hubbub, in every channel, in what you thought were the quiet reverie moments. It's 20dB or more down in the mix but it's there. I love the movie but had never played it through speakers with the resolution of this system, and had not heard this layer before – when I found it I was astonished and delighted. Beware, though. If you're hearing this level of detail, volume levels could be dangerous! McQueen's voice was quite loud but when the brief bursts of race action cut into his own blitherings, it took my face off, metaphorically speaking.

To my ears, this LS system is genuinely brilliant. Huge in scale and >



Wide open: JBL's Bi-radial compression driver and the 0.75in tweeter combine for serious high-frequency thrills

limitless in potency and attack. It may not be refined as, say, a Bowers & Wilkins or KEF 'mad-tweeter' technology soundstage, but it can work better under pressure than just about anything I have heard at the £4,000 price.

And, of course, that's the point. These things have the appearance of really expensive furniture and if you compared them to Bowers & Wilkins' 800 series (reviewed in *HCC* #159) at literally twice the price, you might wonder why the B&Ws are so much more costly. Also, whilst ultimate refinement might not be what these models are all about, **the sheer brio of this system made me grin like a nutter.**

Plug 'n' play

You get two sets of speaker connections on the back of each enclosure. All bar the centre speaker have wide-mouthed port tubes set into their behinds for deep breathing. The subwoofer is quite straightforward in operation – you get gain, crossover, a

switchable phase flipper and an override switch to use your own crossover if you'd prefer. I was able to overload the woofer, but in time found a setting that was able to cope with the levels offered it, even during the *Cars* sequence.

If anything, the enormous, professional playback-room grade output of these barely-disguised control monitors is so big as to make the job of bass a tough one. Yes, the woofer is big (it employs a 12in driver) but I reckon this array really needs two of them.

Let them rip

Overall, JBL's LS 5.1 system is a hoot to hear. The brand has been keeping a low profile in the UK for the last few years (a mean-spirited act that's deprived the brand of both the limelight and new fans). The good news is that this system is a joy to behold and great to pass off as hi-fi to the unsuspecting. That is until you decide to really let them rip, when their serious nature will be revealed... ●

→ Specifications

JBL LS60 (left & right)

Drive Units: 1 x 0.75in horn-loaded ultra-high frequency (UHF) tweeter; 1 x 2in Titanium dome compression driver with patented JBL Bi-Radial horn loading; 2 x 6.5in cast aluminium chassis low-frequency drivers
Enclosure type: Rear-ported
Frequency Response: 48Hz-38kHz
Sensitivity: 87dB
Power Handling: 300W
Dimensions: 1004(h) x 222(w) x 343(d)mm
Weight: 26.6Kg

JBL LS40 (rear surrounds)

Drive Units: 1 x 0.75in horn-loaded ultra-high frequency (UHF) tweeter; 1 x 2in Titanium dome compression driver with patented JBL Bi-Radial horn loading; 1 x 6.5in cast aluminium chassis low-frequency driver
Enclosure type: Rear-ported
Frequency Response: 50Hz-38kHz
Sensitivity: 87dB
Power Handling: 150W
Dimensions: 493(h) x 222(w) x 343(d)mm
Weight: 13.5Kg

JBL LS Center

Drive Units: 1 x 0.75in horn-loaded ultra-high frequency (UHF) tweeter; 1 x 2in Titanium dome compression driver with patented JBL Bi-Radial horn loading; 2 x 6.5in cast aluminium chassis low-frequency drivers
Enclosure type: Rear-ported
Frequency Response: 85Hz-38kHz
Sensitivity: 88dB
Power Handling: 150W
Dimensions: 217(h) x 672 (w) x 235(d)mm
Weight: 14.4Kg

JBL LS120P/230 Subwoofer

Drive Units: 1 x 12in heavy duty driver
Enclosure type: Tuned-port (vented)
Frequency Response: 25Hz to 150Hz
On Board Power: 400W RMS (Class D)
Dimensions: 487(h) x 375(w) x 425(d)mm
Weight: 25.8Kg



HCC VERDICT

JBL LS Series
 £4,100 Approx
Price check: www.techradar.com/467107
Highs: Astonishingly crisp high-end sound; lush design
Lows: Needs a strong amp to drive them due to low efficiency; will reveal all flaws in your system
Performance: 1 2 3 4 5
Design: 1 2 3 4 5
Features: 1 2 3 4 5

Overall: 1 2 3 4 5