testreport

NHT SuperOne/SuperTwo Speaker System

DAVID RANADA, TECHNICAL EDITOR

Building on the sonic and commercial success of its small SuperOne speaker, NHT has introduced the SuperTwo, which can be thought of as a SuperOne with a built-in, downward-firing "subwoofer." Both models can be used together in a home-theater setup, with a pair of SuperTwos at the front left and right, and three SuperOnes doing double duty as center and surround speakers. I evaluated the SuperTwo operating as a two-channel stereo speaker as well as in a five-speaker SuperOne/Two surround system as shown above.

The "subwoofer" of the SuperTwo is a 6½-inch driver mounted on the bottom of the vented enclosure. The driver is said to be capable of a 14-millimeter (0.55-inch) peak-to-peak excursion, justifying NHT's "long-throw" appellation. This is a passive "subwoofer," with no internal power amplifier, and it cannot be separately driven since there is only one set of binding-post inputs. So the SuperTwo is actually just a full-range tower speaker — albeit one that can indeed, as claimed in the manual, produce substantial output at 35 Hz.

Screw-on spiked feet are supplied with each SuperTwo pair. The spikes *must* be used because they elevate the speaker about half an inch off the floor so that sound coming from the bottom driver isn't muffled. If you have a carpeted listening area, make sure the depth of the carpet won't completely cut off the bottom driver's output (only a small clearance is necessary).

At 120 Hz, the SuperTwo's "subwoofer" crosses over to a 6½-inch "midwoofer" located on the front of the cabinet behind the grille. The midwoofer, in turn, crosses over at 2.2 kHz to a 1-inch, fluid-cooled, soft-dome tweeter. These two "upper" drivers are magnetically shielded, permitting you to locate the speaker close to a video monitor without disturbing the picture. Rated impedance is 8 ohms, or 3.8 ohms minimum. Sensitivity is given as 87 dB sound-pressure level (SPL) at 1 meter with a 2.8-volt input.

The SuperOne has the same two magnetically shielded drivers and 2.2-kHz crossover as the top half of the SuperTwo, but the lower 6½-inch driver is just called a "woofer" and operates in an acoustic-suspension enclosure. As it was originally designed as a "normal" stereo speaker, the radiation pattern of the SuperOne is also "normal," with neither the limited vertical directivity of some center-channel speakers nor the dipolar emission of many surrounds.

While the rated impedance of the SuperOne is the same as the SuperTwo's (8 ohms), its minimum impedance is higher (6 ohms) and its rated sensitivity 1 dB lower (86 dB). My measurements confirmed the ratings for both models. The rear of the SuperOne enclosure has screw holes for NHT's optional One-Bracket wall-mounting device ($90 a pair).

NHT recommends that "the distance between the listener and the center of the speaker plane [be] 1.5 times the distance between the two [SuperTwo] speakers" (a diagram is provided). The company also recommends placing each SuperTwo at least 8 inches away from the wall behind it and at least 2 feet from the side wall.

These requirements are approximated by our normal listening setup, which partly explains why I obtained quite excellent sound quality from the SuperTwos with little of the usual trial-and-error repositioning. But what little speaker moving I had to do was made

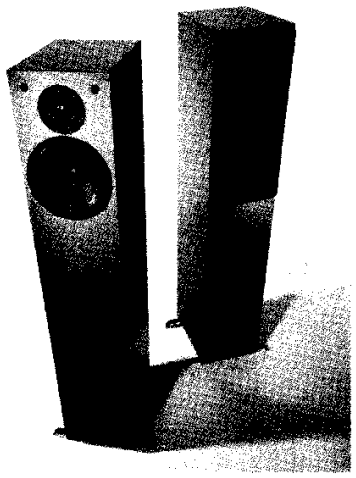
FAST FACTS

DIMENSIONS SuperTwo, 39 inches high, 7¼ inches wide, 10 inches deep; SuperOne, 11⅝ inches high, 7¼ inches wide, 8½ inches deep
WEIGHT SuperTwo, 39 pounds; SuperOne, 10 pounds
FINISH SuperTwo, high-gloss black laminate; SuperOne, high-gloss black or white laminate
PRICES SuperTwo, $750 a pair; SuperOne, $175 each
MANUFACTURER Now Hear This, Dept. SR, 535 Getty Court, Benicia, CA 94510; phone, 800-648-9993; Web, www.nhthifi.com

PHOTOS BY DAVE SLAGLE

more tedious by the spikes' tendency to tear up our room's carpeting — use the supplied antiscratch "spike caps."

The SuperTwo's sonic excellence was immediately evident with cleanly recorded vocal material such as opera, classical song recitals, and jazz vocals as well as movie-soundtrack dialogue. Unless they were poorly recorded or overprocessed to begin with (as is all too common), vocals played through the SuperTwos had a noticeable lack of coloration compared with other speakers I've reviewed lately. During comparative listening to several recordings of Schumann's *Dichterliebe* song cycle, I could safely attribute any nasality or sibilance I heard to the singers, not the SuperTwos.



The NHT SuperTwo's spiked feet elevate it enough for the bottom-mounted "subwoofer" to operate correctly.

Similarly, I had the opportunity to compare the SuperTwos' reproduction of Simon Rattle's live recording of Mahler's Seventh Symphony (on EMI) with my memory of a live performance of the same work by the same performers that I heard the night before in Lincoln Center's Avery Fisher Hall. (Now that's live vs. recorded!) Played through the SuperTwos, the recording proved to be a stunning souvenir of what I had heard in the hall, and it provided as much stage depth and bass impact as the live experience.

Let me back up a bit. At first hearing in our listening room, the NHT SuperTwo speakers sounded a bit bass-shy on wide-range material compared with others I've evaluated. They might also seem so in your own listening room, a difficulty easily curable with a conventional bass control. But the sonic balance of the SuperOnes also sounded much like that of my reference Etymotic Research ear-plug/headphones, which I know produce a very flat bass response in my ears. And the Mahler symphony live-vs.-recorded comparison would not have come out so well if the speakers were truly bass-deficient.

I've concluded that the fault was with the other speakers. Not only do the SuperTwos have all that it takes to reproduce pipe-organ music at live levels, as well as all manner of low-frequency soundtrack pandemonium (such as the landing of the pyramid in *Stargate*), but they measured unusually flat.

A one-third-octave spectrum analysis at the listening position produced a response flat to within ±3.5 dB from 50 Hz to 20 kHz, a measurement that includes the influence of our room. Our quasi-anechoic listening-window measurement was flat to within ±2 dB from 20 kHz down to our present measurement limit of 1 kHz. The absence of the typical deep "crossover dip" between 1 and 3 kHz was significant. The SuperOnes also cleanly reproduced our bass tone bursts down to 63 Hz at a drive level equivalent to 100 dB SPL, which is quite good considering the size of the speaker. Sine waves were usably audible down to 35 Hz.

In the five-speaker surround setup, I adjusted the system to roll off the SuperOnes' response below 100 Hz and redirect the bass to the SuperTwos. The close sonic match between the SuperOne and SuperTwo paid dividends in the accuracy and stability of front-channel (left, center, right) imaging with all surround-encoded material. The SuperOne was less successful as a surround speaker, however. Its monopolar radiation caused it to image too well, and it lacked the kind of diffuse radiation necessary for smooth sonic envelopment with surround material, although switching in THX decorrelation helped. While the SuperOne is a very good small speaker, I would recommend dipole surrounds instead for a home theater.

Considering its overall sonic neutrality, reasonable price, and handsome styling, the NHT SuperTwo is an excellent speaker for all types of music and listening rooms. Team a pair with a SuperOne in the center and a pair of dipole surrounds, and you'd enjoy a very fine home-theater sound. This is a speaker for all tastes. □