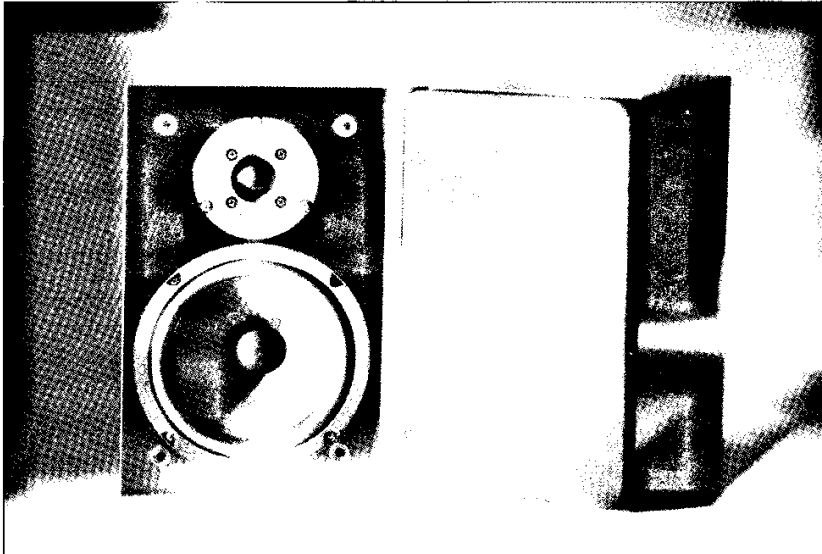


AURICLE

COREY GREENBERG

NHT SUPER ONE SPEAKER



ow many times have you come across something really cool, but you wished it were just a little more [____]? I mean, the Mazda Miata is a cute li'l sportster, but wouldn't it be great if it were *fast*, too? Snap 'em Pops (a.k.a party snappers) can generate startled chuckles a'plenty and then some, but what if they packed the power of industrial-grade blasting caps? And then there's li'l Kate and what's-her-face, the Olsen twins of TV's "Full House" fame—sure they're adorable as the dickens (nay, *more* adorable), but if they could knock back a bottle of whiskey each and belt "No Bread, No Meat," they'd *rule*! You could make one of 'em President and the other Senate Majority Leader, and you wouldn't hear a peep out of me except "Hail to the Olsen twins, Kate and what's-her-face!"

You can add the little SuperZero loudspeaker from NHT (Now Hear

This) to the list. In the five years since its birth, this amazingly cheap, amazingly good-sounding minispeaker has become a bona fide hi-fi classic. Inexpensive minispeakers existed before the SuperZeros, but precious few could be taken seriously as true high-end monitor speakers by hardcore audiophiles. Somehow, NHT was able to give the \$240/pair SuperZeros the kind of detail, imaging, and spaciousness you usually have to pay a couple of grand for, and thousands of budget-minded audiophiles the world over have given them a happy home since.

But with all of their strengths, the tiny SuperZeros have a whopping big asterisk: They've got no bass. With its 4-inch woofer, the SuperZero sounds wonderfully smooth and clear in the midrange and highs, but it's utterly bass-free. Lots of minispeakers are designed with a hump in their upper bass response so that they'll sound fuller even though nothing's really

happening below 80 Hz or so. But the SuperZero doesn't go in for that kind of carnival-grade flimflam; its woofer is very flat down to around 85 Hz, and then its response rolls off pretty quick below that.

Of course, none of this matters if you're using the little NHTs in a system that's got a subwoofer to handle the low end. But it makes recommending the SuperZeros on their own a lot more iffy for me when I know that the recommendee is a non-audiophile civilian who's just going to plop 'em on a bookshelf and expect to hear full-range sound. Because, solo, the SuperZeros sound very thin and kind of wispy-spacious, but squeaky.

Over the years, hardcore audio nuts have made an art out of blending the SuperZeros and NHT's own subwoofers by making their own crossovers and playing with trick wiring schemes. The results can be awesome when everything's right. But that leaves out the other 99% of the populace that just wants to buy a pair of speakers, hook 'em up to their hi-fi, and hear decently full-range sound.

You might think that all the SuperZero needs is a bigger woofer, maybe the 6½-inch job that so many other two-way bookshelf speakers have, but it's not that simple. One of the main reasons the SuperZero sounds so great is that its 4-inch paper-cone woofer is a very, *very* fine midrange transducer. All else being equal, it's lighter, faster, and more linear in the upper bass and midrange than a 6½-inch woofer. And because the 4-inch woofer is also less beamy at the top of its range, where it crosses over to the tweeter, the crossover can be more seamless and coherent than with a larger woofer, especially when it comes to off-axis response.

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Photo: Michael Groen

In fact, NHT already makes two bookshelf speakers that mate the SuperZero's 1-inch tweeter with a 6½-inch woofer, the \$480/pair plastic-woofered Model 1.3A and the \$380/pair paper-woofered Model 1.1. Both go much lower and play much louder than the SuperZero.

Except I like the SuperZero better than *either* of them! It's true: I've done head-to-head comparisons with both of NHT's larger bookshelf speakers, and I always come back to the SuperZeros. See, I'm a midrange nut, so the most important characteristic for me is how natural speakers sound with a recording of the human voice. And to my ears, NHT's 6½-inch two-ways have never sounded as good in the midrange as the SuperZeros.

Even NHT's Ken Kantor concedes that the SuperZeros "do" things in the midrange that his more expensive two-ways don't. That's what got him thinking about a new speaker, a sort of beefed-up SuperZero that would preserve all the little guy's good qualities while adding a real low end.

Well, it's finally here. It's the NHT SuperOne. Think of it as a SuperZero with another octave of real bass. Same tweeter, same crossover circuit, but a larger (6½-inch) paper-cone woofer and a larger (but still quite compact) cabinet. Like the SuperZero, the SuperOne is a two-way acoustic-suspension minispeaker that has full video shielding so you can plop it atop a direct-view TV without purpling the screen. Its designer says the SuperOne sounds identical to the SuperZero above 85 Hz while delivering clean bass down to 57 Hz. And for only 110 clams more per pair!

The biggest challenge in designing the new speaker, Kantor told me, was getting a 6½-inch woofer to "do" the same things in the midrange that the SuperZero's 4-inch paper-cone woofer does. But as luck would have it, he found the answer in a 6½-inch paper-cone woofer he'd already designed a few years ago for another small two-way speaker, the Acoustic Research 218V, which mated this woofer with an updated version of the classic ¾-inch AR dome tweeter.

When Kantor took the AR woofer and matched it up with the 1-inch NHT tweeter used in the SuperZero, he found a combination that preserved the SuperZero's best qualities but added another octave of bass. By keeping the crossover point at a

low 2.2 kHz instead of the 3 kHz or so used in most small two-ways, the larger driver is rolled off before becoming too beamy at the top of its range. The SuperOne's crossover duplicates the SuperZero's. It has the same first-order (6-dB/octave) high-pass network for the tweeter, while the woofer is rolled off above its passband with a second-order (12-dB/octave) network.

I swear, I almost feel as if NHT came out with the SuperOne just to prove to me that the company can make a two-way speaker with a 6½-inch woofer that sounds better

**THE SUPER ONES THREW UP
A HUGE SOUNDSTAGE,
WITH EXCELLENT
IMAGE FOCUS BETWEEN
AND FAR BEHIND THEM.**

than the SuperZero! I feel like I sort of goaded NHT into doing it. Kind of like the mean mom in that '70s Lance Kerwin made-for-TV movie about a bed-wetting high school track star. The kid ran so fast because his mom always hung his sheets out of his bedroom window to dry, and every day after school he would race home so he could pull 'em inside before the school bus drove by. Okay, so maybe the mom crossed the line between tough love and child abuse. But the kid went on to win an Olympic gold medal! So it all worked out in the end.

But I digress. I listened to the SuperOnes in two of my systems, the all-out he-man reference rig and my nappy-time bedroom system. The he-man rig comprises a Theta Digital Data III CD transport and DS Pro Generation V D/A converter, a Rega Planar 3 turntable with a Sumiko SHO cartridge and McCormack Audio Micro Phono Drive phono stage, a Citation 7.0 preamp, an Aragon 4004 Mk.II 200-watt power amp, Kimber PBJ interconnects and 4TC speaker cables, and Power Wedge AC line conditioners. The bedroom system: a Harman Kardon HD710 CD player, an NAD 314 integrated amp, Kimber PBJ interconnects, and Monster Cable XP speaker wire.

The first listening I did was actually in NHT's own listening room at its Benicia, California, factory. A level-matched demo

was set up to compare the sound of a pair of SuperZeros with a pair of SuperOnes that were equalized to roll off the bass below 85 Hz. A switcher enabled me to listen for differences in the speakers above 85 Hz.

Like I said, I'd always heard a big difference between the SuperZeros and NHT's larger two-ways; the bigger speakers always sounded chestier and more nasal on vocals than the SuperZeros. But the SuperOnes didn't sound that way at all. I was expecting them to sound a lot like the SuperZeros, but I was surprised to hear them sound *just* like the smaller speakers above 85 Hz! Even on pink noise, the SuperOnes sounded just like the SuperZeros.

To be completely honest, the SuperOnes didn't sound just like the SuperZeros above 85 Hz: They sounded noticeably better. The SuperOnes had the same degree of midrange naturalness and detail but were much cleaner at all levels, especially loud levels. It's no surprise that a 6½-inch woofer is working a lot less hard than a 4-inch woofer at any given output level, and this is something you hear immediately with the SuperOne. It's the classic SuperZero sound, but without the slight cloudiness that sets in when the volume is cranked up.

Now, the SuperOne's no air-raided siren. The lowish crossover point and the shallow first-order high-pass section mean that the SuperOne rides its tweeter a little harder than most two-ways. As with the SuperZeros, you hear the upper midrange get a little wiry and strained when you drive the SuperOnes past their limits. But I'm talking *very* loud here. Unless you listen to The Orb at Stupid-Approved levels, you probably won't ever exceed these speakers' limits.

With the SuperOnes on a pair of sand-filled, 24-inch metal stands in my he-man system, it was hard to believe I was listening to a \$350 pair of speakers. The SuperOnes threw up a *huge* soundstage, with excellent image focus between and far behind them. Although the SuperZeros can sound bright because of their deficient low end, the SuperOnes have a much more natural-sounding, full-range balance. And their 1-inch tweeter offers the same kind of transparent, detailed treble as speakers that sell for way more than \$350. Just like the SuperZeros, the SuperOnes deliver a level of sound quality that kills most "high-end"

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speakers selling for two, three, and even four times their price. In fact, the SuperOnes' midrange quality was easily on a par with that of the \$1,600/pair B&W Matrix 805 6½-inch two-ways I had on hand for comparison. There just aren't many \$350/pair speakers able to stake that kind of claim.

One that can is Paradigm's excellent Mini Mk.3, a 6½-inch, two-way vented design that I consider one of the best speakers I've heard in this price range. So I compared the Paradigms with the NHT SuperOnes. How'd they rate? I like both speakers, but I give the NHTs the edge. The Paradigms have an instantly likable, very clean and open sound, so they gave the SuperOnes a real run for their money. Being a ported design, the Paradigms go a bit lower in the bass and are about 2 to 3 dB more efficient than the NHTs, and they can play quite a bit louder without strain. But if I had to choose, I'd pick the SuperOne for its more accurate midrange, higher overall resolution, and treble purity. Both are excellent, no-brainer recommendations, but my tastes run more toward the SuperOne.

I've lived with SuperZeros in my various systems for about five years now, so I know what these speakers sound like in every possible permutation—with subwoofers and without, driven by budget gear and the most exotic, etc. So it was kind of startling to hear the SuperOnes do a Rich Little on them, only with a real low end that was much bigger and meatier than the size of these speakers begins to suggest. When I put the SuperOnes on stands and set them a few feet into the room, what I heard suggested SuperZeros plus a good subwoofer, except the midrange was even cleaner and there were none of the audible satellite/subwoofer integration problems I've run into in some rooms. Of course, the SuperOnes won't go as low as a good subwoofer, but they do fill in the bottom to such a large degree that I bet most people who buy them will live happily without a sub.

Finally, there's a budget NHT everyman speaker I can recommend to hardcore audiophile and civilian alike, knowing that both will get the best full-range sound that \$350 can currently buy. If you're one of the thousands who love the NHT SuperZero but wish it had more bass, the new SuperOne has answered your prayers. **A**