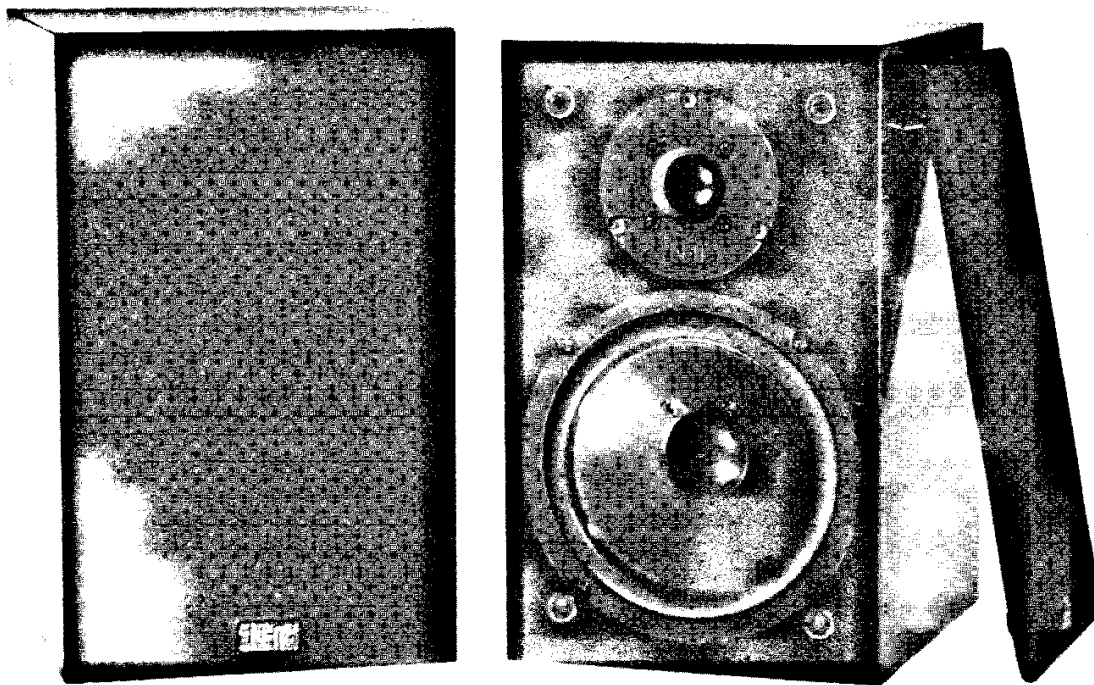


# The NHT SuperOne: The-Little-Speakers-That-Can

by Gene Santoro



With products like the NHT SuperOnes, the audio industry has the chance to woo back listeners like me—potential mid-level consumers who got lost or turned off during the cosmic high-end audio chase of the go-go '80s.

Let's get it out of the way up front: I am *Fi*'s staff-non-audiophile. I don't have the audio dollar equivalent of a midsized country's GDP glowing serenely in my listening room. It's not exactly that I don't like the stuff and/or can't afford it—although mostly, in fact, I don't/can't. But it's also that with all my listening experience, I don't get the point of spending 20-50 times what I can spend at any walk-in electronics place to get maybe twice the performance—and often enough, less than that. Sometimes less than zero.

So imagine last year's Hi-Fi '96 exhibition, where I was slipstreaming behind

Jonathan Valin, Intrepid Audiophile. Like most of the breed, JV alternates between self-incrimination and serenely introspective bliss. Mostly, he was less than ecstatic. The two of us had cruised through rooms stuffed with speakers that looked like coffins fit for a Pharaoh or a pair of Plymouth Neons dismembered by a horrible accident. Sound, it often seemed, was provided by Oleo Eargazms of Beirut.

The show was...educational.

Then we strolled into the NHT setup. Two bread-loaf-sized speakers (okay, a hefty loaf for a chuckwagon full of cowpokes) sat on their stands, unobtrusive and nearly invisible to our glazed eyes, which had been strafed beyond endurance. And they sounded nearly as good as the best I'd heard that long long day, and better than most. And they were gonna list for \$175 each. In other words, a fraction of the freight for

95% of their coexhibits.

Finally, I thought, a neighborhood I recognize.

So I got a pair to test-drive, just like a Real Audio Reviewer. I looked forward to the drill with the same anticipation as my dentist's. I got set to hunker down, to spend a lot of diverse listening time with my new SuperOnes in different setups to cross-check my reactions. And, over the last few months, that's what I did.

In a nutshell, I still think they're great. I've just finessed my judgment.

I started by putting the NHTs in my 12-by-16-foot Manhattan living room—which, like most Manhattan living rooms not inhabited by Donald Trump, is made to order for NHTs or something like them.

"They don't have the Ohms' sexy bottom," is how my wife reacted to hearing me A/B some faves through the SuperOnes

## NHT SuperOne

against my ten-year-old Ohm Walsh 2s. The albums—Bob Marley and the Wailers' *Natty Dread* [Island], the Neville Brothers' *Brothers' Keeper* [A&M], Toots and the Maytals' *In Memphis* [Mango]—were meant to highlight low-to-midrange response, but were also chosen for their top-flight but diverse production approaches. Now, she was right: playing the NHTs against the Ohms did clearly demonstrate that physics-plus-budget still defines the area in which a speaker will function. But after noting the soundfield's clear definition and presence, and checking that with the even denser mixes of albums like the Pretenders' *Learning To Crawl* [WEA/Sire] and R.E.M.'s *Green* [Warner Bros.], I felt the NHT SuperOnes had successfully pushed the envelope on that equation. And if they won't knock you over physically, they deliver a tight, solidly differentiated bass line, without boom or distortion, and with more presence than anyone has any right to expect from their size and cost.

Switching musical (and sonic) gears over the next few weeks, I reached for classical music, to check its very different overtones and textures. First, for its demanding ambiance (and because I really love it) came chamber music: Bach's *Sonatas for Viola da Gamba & Harpsichord* by Yo-Yo Ma and Kenneth Cooper [CBS Masterworks], Mozart's *String Quartets Nos. 3 and 4* by the Artis Quartet [Sony Classical], and Brahms' *Violin Sonatas* by Itzhak Perlman and Daniel Barenboim [Sony Classical]. Here the little-speakers-that-can shone gloriously. Fine details of bowing and keyboard attack, for instance, were conveyed but not inflated. Contrapuntal lines were distinct but not disconnected. The rich tonal gradations of the various string instruments were evident without exaggeration. This assessment also continued to hold true during orchestral works, like Beethoven's *Eroica* Symphony by Roger Norrington and the London Classical Players [EMI].

Finally, I shifted to jazz albums I especially love. There was the *Beauty Is A Rare Thing* [Rhino/Atlantic], a box set of Ornette Coleman's Atlantic recordings, for its warm-yet-sharp remastered intimacy. There was Charles Mingus' *Mingus Ah Um* [Columbia] for its richly emotional instrumental textures. There was Miles Davis' *E.S.P.* [Columbia] for the blend. There was Henry Threadgill's *Spirit of Nuff...Nuff* [Black Saint] for its ultra-demanding tuba-fied density. And there was Cassandra Wilson's

*New Moon Daughter* [Blue Note] for its slyly consuming mix of airiness and thickness and depth.

This trial segment brought out another comparative limitation of the NHTs versus my aged, beloved Ohms. "They sound more enclosed," observed my older daughter. She was right. The littler guys didn't sound as expansive as what she's used to overhearing when her father (who doubles as the *New York Daily News*' jazz columnist/music critic) tries to pare down his mountain of reviewer-copy CDs. That's only to be expected. Walsh drivers, as you may recall, were designed to spread sound out, hopefully without losing too much of either definition or imaging. Their success, at least to my non-audiophile ears, is a major reason I've depended on my Ohms (and been rewarded by them) in less-than-palatial Manhattan living rooms: they recall the listening spaces that I've grown accustomed to over the last fifteen years as a New York critic prowling the live scene.

But while the NHTs once again were playing against a stacked deck, the overmatch revealed, as it did for low-end situations, their strengths as well. Imaging is precise without being prissy: instruments blend but keep their distinctive places in the ambient field, which is well represented, and their own characteristic timbres. Cranking the volume changes nothing, except the volume.

There was one last Santoro family test. I put them in the family room of our upstate-New York house, along with the 27-inch Sony TV and video paraphernalia and computer games. There they work with typical aplomb as part of my typically downscale home-theater system. With a pair of Realistic TKs for the back channels, the NHTs have roared their way through the laser-disc soundtracks for *Apocalypse Now*, *Jurassic Park*, *Outbreak*, *In the Line of Fire*, *Robocop*, *Terminator*, and other techno-action flicks with high-octane soundtracks. Their attack is clean and crisp, and doesn't lag the on-screen images; and their dynamic range, crisp and impressive as it is with music, is rendered even more vivid when they pump out the hefty soundtracks that accompany these frenetic movies.

The only complaint: everyone else was overcranking the volume when watching. It's hard to avoid when the soundscape gets as present and embracing as a Dolbyized, multispeaked theater—which the NHTs make it.

What else can I say?

I'm buying a pair. ■

### MANUFACTURER

NHT  
535 Getty Court  
Benicia, CA 94510  
Tel: 800-NHT-9993  
Fax: 707-747-1252  
www.nhtifi.com

Price: \$175 each

Warranty: 5 Years

### SPECIFICATIONS

System Type: 2-way acoustic suspension  
Drivers: 6.5" long-throw woofer, 1" fluid-cooled soft dome tweeter, video shielded drivers  
Crossover: 2.2 kHz; 6 dB HP, 12 dB LP  
Frequency Response: 57 Hz- 25 kHz  $\pm$  3 dB  
Sensitivity: 86 dB at 1 m, 2.83 V  
Impedance 8  $\Omega$  nominal, 6  $\Omega$  minimum  
Power: 25 W/channel minimum, 150 W/channel maximum

Dimensions: 11.65" H x 7.25" W x 8.5" D

Weight: 10 lbs. each

Finish: High Gloss Black or White Laminate

### ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Rotel RA9708X Receiver, Rotel RCD975 CD Player, Ohm Walsh 2s, Denon DP 35B turntable, Adcom cartridge, MlTerminator 5 speaker cable



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