

\$3,098 / JBL.COM / 516-496-3400



# JBL

## Studio L Series Home Theater Speaker System

Speaker maker JBL is just one part of the Harman International family, but for a brand that makes up only a single slice of a large pie, it has an incredibly diverse product mix. Along with home theater speakers, JBL makes systems for music-recording and film sound-mixing studios, movie theaters, concert halls, computers, and cars. So many different speakers coming out of one lab is bound to lead to some crossbreeding — a theory that helps explain the Studio L series.

JBL's newest creation takes the robust build quality of its professional studio monitors and mixes it with the flat-TV-friendly installation options we've come to expect from home theater speakers. The result is an unusually rugged wall-mountable system — one that makes other recent entries into the field look fussy and feminine in comparison.

The exceptionally sturdy cabinets — JBL ensures maximum rigidity by using 1-inch-thick MDF for the front baffles — make Studio L speakers heavier than most. Good thing, too: the testosterone rush I worked up by heaving them out of their boxes put me in the right frame of mind to appreciate the blunt, unembellished design. The slab-like L820 and L810 left/right satellites and LC2 center speaker have rounded edges and are surprisingly

### WHAT WE THINK

*The Studio L successfully combines powerful sound with a compact, no-nonsense package.*

slim (5½ inches deep with the grilles on) given their overall heft.

The L8400P subwoofer echoes the look of the sats, although its silvery, molded-plastic feet add a slight flourish. If your domestic partner is a Martha Stewart-like design fascist, you might want to check out some of the sleeker, sexier options on the market. But if your normal scene consists of buddies, brews, and a networked PlayStation alongside the home theater gear, this rig's for you.

**SETUP** Each woodgrain-finished JBL sat has keyhole mounts for a wall installation. Not wanting to break out the drill, I placed the L820s on 24-inch-high speaker stands at either side of my plasma TV and the L810s on higher stands slightly behind and at either end of my couch. The LC2 is one of the biggest center speakers I've ever tested — its higher-than-normal cabinet makes it a better candidate for wall-mounting than TV-stand installation. On the plus side, the LC2's dual 6-inch woofers make it an excellent sonic match for the L820, which sports a similar array of drivers. Fortunately, JBL also offers the matching LC1 (\$499), a conventional horizontal center speaker that will fit the shelves of most TV stands.

Like the larger L820, the L810 that I used for the surround channels is a substantial, direct-radiating satellite speaker with better-than-average bass. After listening to the pair's focused, muscular delivery on a few multichannel tracks, I decided to angle them back about 45°, bouncing the sound off my rear wall for a more diffuse, dipole-like presentation.

The L8400P, like most subwoofers, did its best work placed in the right front corner of my room. An LFE (low-frequency effects) setting on the sub's back panel let me bypass its internal crossover to avoid overlap with the one in my preamp/processor, which could muddy the bass. The L820's specified 55-Hz bass rolloff meant that

I could have used a lower than normal crossover, but the system sounded fine with the standard 80-Hz THX cutoff, so I ran with it.

### MUSIC PERFORMANCE

One notable feature of all JBL Studio L series speakers is a horn-loaded "supertweeter" that is said to extend response out to 40 kHz. Human hearing cuts off at half that frequency (or less), so it can be reasonably argued that supertweeters are better suited for dogs and other animals with more sensitive ears than our own. JBL, however, says the feature lets you derive the full benefit of high-resolution audio formats like SACD.

Thinking along those lines, I pulled out a Sony SACD of Bach: *The Four Great Toccatas and Fugues* performed by E. Power Biggs — a truly awesome name for a concert organist. Derived from master tapes used to produce a quadrasonic recording back in 1974, it features Biggs playing a four-organ setup controlled by a central console in Germany's Freiberg cathedral — an ideal environment for a surround sound recording.

I can't say with absolute certainty that the L series sats' extended highs made much difference in this case. What I can say is that when I listened to the *Dorian* toccata and fugue in D Minor, the diverse ranges of the four organs sounded distinct, and I could clearly hear the textures of the keyed notes. But clarity didn't come at the expense of other attributes: each instrument had an exceptionally smooth, airy sound, and there was a spaciousness and warmth that helped convey the cathedral's vast interior. But the most striking thing about listening to this performance on the JBL speaker system was the sense of being seated in a continuous, completely seamless, space. There was also a smooth transition between the low and high organ notes as Biggs made his virtuosic runs across the keyboard.

The JBLs also revealed loads of

detail on acoustic folk songs like "John Wayne Gacy" from Sufjan Stevens's *Illinois* — possibly the prettiest song ever written about a serial killer. The speakers easily captured the raw, intimate tone of Stevens's voice. And the piano — also recorded in a church — had a wonderfully liquid and spacious sound coming from the front L/R pair of L820s. On a more rousing track, "A History of Lovers" from the Iron & Wine/Calexico collaboration *In the Reins*, the JBLs did a fine job of capturing the slamming, up-front sound of the drum kit while also clearly rendering the multiple layers of acoustic and pedal-steel guitar. And when a horn section kicked in midtrack, the Studio L system's effortless delivery proved it could rock just as hard as other JBL setups I've heard.

### MOVIE PERFORMANCE

It's not the Freiberg Cathedral, but in the movie *Batman Begins*, the Batcave serves as a sacred space of sorts. I especially like a chapter from the DVD where Bruce Wayne (Christian Bale) rediscovers an old well leading to an underground cave — the site of a childhood trauma — and crawls down to confront his primal fear by standing amidst a cloud of swirling, shrieking bats. The JBLs did an excellent job of conveying this scene in all its unsettling detail. The L810 surrounds gave a realistic sense of envelopment, from the initial echo of water droplets in the damp, cavernous space to the swarm of flapping, beating batwings that gradually engulf Wayne. And in a scene where the sinister Dr. Crane talks to Carmine Falcone, the LC2 center clearly delivered the clipped, icy tone of Crane's voice and the crime boss's heavy (and unconvincing) Brooklyn accent, with only a slight variation of tone at off-center seats.

### BOTTOM LINE

The "studio" tag on the Studio L speakers is well earned. This system's robust build quality surpasses that of many speakers in its price range and makes a strong connection to JBL's professional line. The same can also be said for its clean, uncolored sound and impressive dynamics. While the satellites' extended highs didn't exactly make me stand up and say "Aha!," the system's performance with top-notch SACD recordings was nothing short of stunning. You can easily buy a better-looking system for several hundred dollars less, and it will make a more elegant design statement alongside your new flat-panel TV. But if performance is more important to you than the fussy stuff, you'll be well served by JBL's Studio Ls.

S&V

## PLUS

Clean, uncolored sound.  
Very good dynamics.  
Excellent build quality.  
Shallow cabinets permit wall mounting.

## MINUS

Blunt, unembellished looks.



The JBL Studio L front satellites are designed for mounting around a flat TV.

### key features

- **L820 front left/right** (\$750 a pair) ¾-in supertweeter, 1-in tweeter, 4-in midrange, 6-in woofer; 12¼ in high; 19 lbs
- **LC2 center** (\$599) ¾-in supertweeter, 1-in tweeter, 4-in midrange, two 6-in woofers; 12¼ in high; 29 lbs
- **L810 surround** (\$650 a pair) ¾-in supertweeter, 1-in tweeter, 5¼-in woofer; 14¼ in wide; 14 lbs
- **L8400P subwoofer** (\$1,099) 12-in driver; 600-watt amplifier; crossover-bypass switch; 15½ x 16½ x 15½ in, 58 lbs
- Finished in black ash, beech, or cherry vinyl woodgrain
- **SYSTEM TOTAL** \$3,098

### test bench

JBL's Studio L series main speakers all had uniform directivity in the horizontal plane and matched timbre, though there was some roughness in response above 1 kHz. The L8400P subwoofer could reach 109 to 112 dB at 2 meters from 50 to 62 Hz, but output fell at nearly 16 dB per octave below 50 Hz, meaning it's not a deep-bass powerhouse. Nominal impedance for the L820 and LC2 measured unusually low at 4.3 and 4.4 ohms, respectively — something to note when matching them with an amplifier or receiver. — Tom Noursaine

Full lab results on S&V Web site