

A Little Goes a Long Way

athena TECHNOLOGIES
proves that it's
OK to expect more
for less.

by Adrienne Maxwell

I'll never forget
the day I hooked up my
first 5.1-channel audio
system. The first DVD I





Athena Point 5 Speaker System

popped in was an MGM/UA title, so the first sound I heard was their standard opening clip in which audio pans around all five channels and then a nice, deep bass note kicks in. I tell you, I was downright giddy. I absolutely loved my little speaker system.

Now I'm a jaded reviewer with a big TV, bigger tower speakers, and a behemoth subwoofer. Sure, my friends love me, but it's really way more system than I need for my apartment. In truth, those tiny satellites performed just fine. Of course, those tiny satellites cost over \$2,000—not exactly a cheap thrill. The question is, would my experience have been any less positive if my speaker system had cost about \$1,200 less? Back then, absolutely. Nowadays, not necessarily, as the number of concessions you're forced to make when you take the sub/sat route is dropping as quickly as the system prices themselves.

As with companies like Infinity and B&W, Athena has embraced the idea of incorporating higher-end technology into their entry-level system, but Athena has gone one up on their competition by lowering the price a few hundred dollars. The complete Point 5 system costs only \$800, but you could also build a system in installments: Start with two

\$175/pair S.5 satellites and the \$275 P.5 subwoofer, then add the \$175 C.5 center channel and two more S.5s when you have the means.

The two-way S.5 mates a 1-inch Teteron dome tweeter with a 4-inch injection-molded polypropylene cone woofer in a rear-vented MDF enclosure. The cabinet measures 8.5 inches high by 5.75 wide by 6.25 deep and weighs just 6 pounds. My review samples sported silver baffles and a stylish high-gloss-black finish, but the S.5 is also available in a cherry or high-gloss-black finish with black baffles. Athena also offers a matching stand for \$90/pair.

The C.5 uses the same rear-vented MDF cabinet construction and 1-inch tweeter as the S.5 but adds another 4-inch woofer in a horizontal D'Appolito array. Measuring just 5.625 inches high by 15 wide by 6.25 deep and weighing 9.5 pounds, the C.5 will fit comfortably atop most TVs (somehow I doubt anyone purchasing this system plans to incorporate it into a front-projector setup) and is available in the same finishes as

the S.5. Both models are magnetically shielded and use gold-plated five-way binding posts, and the S.5 sports a nifty, flexible wall-mounting bracket.

The Point 5 system's kicker, both literally and figuratively, is the P.5 subwoofer. It's a wee-little

HIGHLIGHTS

- Seamless soundstage
- Well-defined bass
- Plays loud for such a small system

thing: an 8-inch, down-firing, injection-molded polypropylene cone woofer and 75-watt MOSFET amplifier in a front-vented cabinet that measures 13.25 inches high by 10 wide by 13.5 deep and weighs—check this out—15 pounds. Spouse-friendly is certainly an adequate description, but I can hear the skeptics now: “Where’s the bass?” Stay with me, as the P.5 has a few tricks up its sleeve.

Trick number one is that Athena has kindly incorporated the System Creation Technology (SCT) mode switch found on their higher-end designs into the P.5. SCT is essentially a preset equalization system that's designed to help simplify the task of blending the P.5 sub and S.5 sats. When you set the sub's mode switch to S.5, the SCT mode bypasses the subwoofer's

- A. The S.5 sounds bigger than its tiny frame would suggest, and that 4-inch woofer puts out more bass than you might think.**
- B. Even though the C.5 adds another woofer to the mix, its small stature sometimes hinders its mid-range performance.**
- C. The P.5's 8-inch woofer and 75-watt amp rest in an enclosure that weighs only 15 pounds.**





CHEAP THRILLS

Athena Point 5 Speaker System

frequency-range controls and internally blends the two components, which eases the already-simple setup process by eliminating the trial and error that's often involved in integrating a sub/sat system. Should you opt to use different satellites, switching to the P.5's Sub mode allows you to manually adjust the sub's crossover from 50 to 150 hertz. An interesting side effect of the SCT technology is that you need to set your receiver's speaker settings to large, despite the S.5's diminutive stature.

D. The P.5's back panel offers high- and low-level connections, plus the all-important SCT mode switch.

Trick number two is that the P.5 also sports an A/V switch that allows you to tailor the sub's performance to suit audio or video

material. The audio mode produces a flatter response, while the video mode bumps up bass response to provide a bit more boom with soundtracks. The difference is subtle but effective. The P.5 also offers power and level controls, as well as low- and high-level connections, and it comes in a black vinyl enclosure with cloth side panels.

For my listening tests, I mated the Point 5 system with Sony's SCD-CE775 SACD player, DVP-C650D DVD player, and STR-DA3ES receiver. At \$800, the STR-DA3ES is a bit pricier than the type of receiver most people would use with this system, but the 8-ohm Point 5 speakers aren't terribly tough to drive. Athena claims that any amp that offers between 20 and 100 watts of power per channel should suffice. I also tried the ensemble at home with my Parasound AVC-1800 pre/pro and HCA-855A amp, which is a much pricier setup but also the one I'm most familiar with.

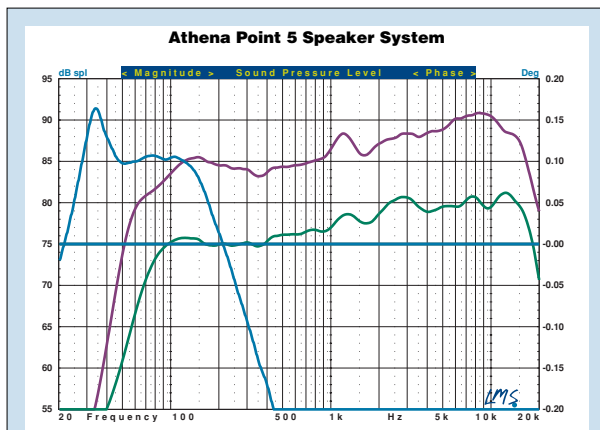
I began with two-channel music and was immediately impressed by how big two tiny S.5s could sound in our listening room. They were spunky, to say the least—creating a deep, full soundstage. Imaging was spot-on, which further eases the setup process. I was particularly impressed by the amount of bass I got from two 4-inch drivers. I auditioned stereo music both with and without the P.5 sub, and there wasn't as much difference in bass output as you'd expect. Rated down to 80 Hz, the S.5s are solid performers in their own

right, serving up quick, defined bass with all sorts of music—from Miles Davis to Tchaikovsky to Rage Against the Machine.

That said, I ultimately preferred using the sub with two-channel music—not to get more bass but to create more midrange presence. As is the case with many smaller speakers, the

S.5s are somewhat bright, but I never felt that they crossed over into the shrill realm—not as long as I kept my receiver's speaker settings on large, that is. When I switched over to the small setting, the speakers sounded quite harsh. Athena's SCT technology clearly transforms the S.5 into a more-well-rounded performer than its size and price would lead you to believe, and adding the P.5 did help create a fuller midrange. Overall, the S.5's dynamic demeanor and its clarity with both treble and bass material made my two-channel demo an enjoyable one.

That clarity served the S.5s well during my high-resolution-music demo, as did having a complete set of timbre-matched speakers. The bass notes on Bucky Pizzarelli's *Swing Live* SACD were tight, and there was nice definition between the various instruments. Likewise with "The Generals" from the *Film Music of Jerry Goldsmith* SACD. The S.5s and C.5 produced a dynamic, cohesive soundstage in which I was very aware of what was going on in the rear speakers.



HT Labs Measures: Athena Point 5 Speaker System

This graph shows the quasi-anechoic (employing close-miking of all woofers) frequency response of the S.5 satellite (purple trace), P.5 subwoofer (blue trace), and C.5 center channel (green trace). All passive loudspeakers were measured at a distance of 1 meter with a 2.83-volt input and scaled for display purposes.

The S.5's listening-window response (a five-point average of axial and +/-15-degree horizontal and vertical responses) measures +5.35/-2.30 decibels from 200 hertz to 10 kilohertz. The -3dB point is at 89 Hz, and the -6dB point is at 61 Hz. Impedance reaches a minimum of 3.54 ohms at 247 Hz and a phase angle of -62.30 degrees at 136 Hz. Sensitivity averages 85.5 dB from 500 Hz to 2 kHz.

The C.5's listening-window response measures +3.23/-2.79 dB from 200 Hz to 10 kHz. An average of axial and +/-15 degree horizontal responses measures +3.50/-2.86 dB from 200 Hz to 10 kHz. The -3dB point is at 90 Hz, and the -6dB point is at 73 Hz. Impedance reaches a minimum of 6.30 ohms at 247 Hz and a phase angle of -65.37 degrees at 129 Hz. Sensitivity averages 87.5 dB from 500 Hz to 2 kHz.

The P.5's close-miked response in audio mode, normalized to the average level from 40 to 80 Hz, indicates that the lower -3dB point is at 26 Hz and the -6dB point is at 24 Hz. There is an unfortunate +6.18-dB peak at 34 Hz, however. The upper -3dB point is at 156 Hz with the bass-range control set to maximum.—AJ



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As I'm a fan of localizable surrounds, I enjoyed this quite a bit. If I choose to listen to multichannel music, I want to hear what distinguishes it from two-channel, and the S.5s' revealing, direct nature produced a lively rear soundfield.

If the system has a weak link, it's that tiny center channel, which just doesn't have the real estate to produce a flushed-out, spacious midrange under every circumstance. Such is the nature of the sub/sat beast, though, and the C.5's performance was generally solid. The midrange gap is only really noticeable in material that involves a lot of complex instrumentation going on at the same time, such as Telarc's wonderful SACD of pianist Lang Lang performing Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 3 with the St. Petersburg Philharmonic. When both Lang and the orchestra were going full-steam, the Point 5 ensemble couldn't bring out all of the piece's various flavors and instead emphasized the high end, but again never in a harsh way. Obviously, speakers this size aren't going to convince you that you're in a room with a grand piano and it's unrealistic to expect them to, but the Point 5 system more than held its own with complex musical material.

To audition soundtracks, I switched the P.5 to its video mode and waited to see if this baby sub could knock my socks off. While

the socks stayed firmly in place, the P.5 put out a fairly impressive amount of low-end rumble. After some experimentation with the level control, I found a pleasing blend between oomph and accuracy at about the 4 o'clock setting. No, my chest didn't feel the weight of the depth-charge explosions in *U-571*, but the low-frequency bursts were quick, controlled, and deep enough for my tastes. With a few tweaks of the level control, you could easily get more boom if you wished. My downstairs neighbor probably appreciates that I'm not a boomer. If you're a considerate apartment-dweller like me, I suspect that the Point 5 will supply you with all of the bass you need. It's well-defined bass, to boot.

As with multichannel music, the Point 5 system creates a cohesive soundfield with soundtracks. The S.5 is as direct as they come; so, if you prefer a diffusive rear stage, I recommend that you look elsewhere. I liked the precise, lively way in which the pods raced from speaker to speaker in *The Phantom Menace* and the consistency of the approaching helicopter panning around the room in chapter 1 of *Apocalypse Now Redux*. I found it more involving. I also liked the clarity of high-frequency effects, which is particularly noticeable in a bullet-riddled film like *The Matrix*. The fact that this tiny system can play pretty darn loud certainly ups the involvement quotient, too.

As the C.5 plays an even bigger role with soundtracks than it does with multichannel music, you'll run into the same midrange gap in scenes where there's a lot going on. During the helicopter explosion in *The Matrix* and the Wagner attack sequence in *Apocalypse Now Redux*, some of the midrange effects got buried under the higher frequencies, which made the soundtracks a bit top-heavy. Of course,

Point 5 Speaker System	\$800
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these kinds of scenes make up about 2 percent of the average viewer's home theater experience. I watched *A Beautiful Mind* in its entirety and never found myself wishing for a larger center channel—or a larger system in general. I just sat back and enjoyed the movie-watching experience, which is the goal of any speaker system. Should you audition this ensemble and find that the center channel is too boxy for your tastes, you might audition Athena's larger SCT C1 or AS-C1 center speaker. The company has kindly timbre-matched all of its speakers, so you can mix and match or upgrade at will.

The Point 5 doesn't live down to its entry-level expectations. Instead, it aspires to be bigger than it has any right to be and performs as well as or perhaps even better than many sub/sat setups that cost several hundred dollars more. If you're ready to have your first surround sound moment, the Point 5 is ready to make it a good one. 📢

