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Bowers & Wilkins (Mini Theater) MT-50 System

By: Alex Lezcano, *September 24, 2012*

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HTR Product Rating

Performance	★★★★½
Value	★★★½☆
Overall	★★★★½

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Bowers & Wilkins is synonymous with high-end speakers and whenever I hear the manufacturer's name I get a certain tingly feeling; my ears quiver with anticipation of hearing something sweet. Known world wide as a high-end performance speaker company, Bowers & Wilkins have revamped their affordable Mini Theater system by updating the M-1 compact loudspeakers internally -making them the key component to both of their mini theater system offerings. Bowers & Wilkins offers two Mini Theater systems currently; the MT-50 for $1,750 and MT-60D for $2,950. The MT-50 replaces the MT-25 system and while the M-1, externally, looks the same, the insides have been updated. I'll be focusing on the MT-50 system with the ASW608 subwoofer for the duration of this review. We shall see if the updates prove to be a worthy cause for I plan on putting them to the test.

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- Explore subwoofers in our Subwoofer Review section.
- Compare the MT-50 to Orb Audio's Mod1 system.

The M-1 has a sleek look to them and they are quite nice to look at for bookshelf speakers. The Bowers & Wilkins MT-50 system arrived in the matte black finish but they do have a matte white option too. The matching grills are made of perforated steel. The M-1 allows for discreet wiring in the back of the table stand plinth, with the binding posts being spring-loaded. The M-1 is a two-way vented box system that weighs in at five pounds. The M-1 was updated internally with a one-inch, Nautilus tube loaded, aluminum dome

tweeter. The bass and mid-range is handled by a four-inch woven glass fiber cone driver, which features the anti-resonance plug that was first seen in **the sexy PM1**. The M-1 itself is sleek and exudes a feeling of absolute quality. The measurements are 10 inches tall by four and a half inches wide by six and a half inches deep when mounted on its included table stand.

The frequency range is -6dB at 55 Hz to 50 kHz and the frequency response 64 Hz to 23 kHz, ± 3dB on reference axis and that means the M-1's low-end easily surpasses its predecessor's 90 Hz. This will allow you to use the M-1 in a 2.0 or 2.1 system allowing it to perform at almost full range...not too shabby for a tiny speaker, but I wouldn't expect any less from this Bowers & Wilkins. The M-1has a nominal impedance of eight Ohms and with a sensitivity of 85dB can be driven by a minimum of 20 Watts all the way up to 100 Watts. Bowers & Wilkins recommends a maximum impedance of point one Ohms for your speaker cables.

The subwoofer, the ASW608, is unchanged but it does come in matte white to match the M-1. Conversely the MT-60D system does feature the PV1D subwoofer, which did receive an update. The ASW608 subwoofer sells for $500 while the PV1D sells for $1,700. I would have loved the opportunity to review the updated PV1D especially given its cool, new OLED display but alas it was not meant to be. Not to take away from the ASW608 for it was filled with many options to help in dialing in the perfect blend of low-end. The Bowers & Wilkins ASW608 is perfect for those who love to fine tune the sound and customize the low end to your listening preferences, surround sound or two channel. I followed the recommendations in the manual for home theater and stereo setup. For two-channel audio the manual states to set the volume or speaker level knob at nine o'clock, which is what I did, and I liked it there. Basically, I left the settings per Bowers & Wilkins recommendations. The Bowers & Wilkins ASW608 subwoofer has an eight-inch paper/Kevlar cone long throw driver active closed-box system that comes with line level and speaker level inputs as well as a 12-volt trigger. The ASW608 is fairly compact weighing in at less than 20 pounds and measuring 10 inches tall (not including feet) by 10 inches wide by 13 inched deep including the grill and controls on the rear. This makes the Bowers & Wilkins ASW608 a perfect mate for the M-1 in a small room. The Bowers & Wilkins ASW608 comes with four M6 metal floor spikes, four M6 rubber feet and four lock nuts. I went with the rubber feet since I have hardwood floors. You can use the spike feet on hardwood floors provided you use a metal disc or coin to protect your floors. Also, the subwoofer's grill can be removed if you prefer that aesthetic. The ASW608 has three control knobs on the back that are for the low-pass frequency, speaker and line level volume. There are also switches for the low-pass filter which has an

active fourth order, variable cut-off frequency, bass extension, equalization and phase.

The multitude of options allows you to deal with any room or placement quirkiness making integration into your home theater a simple process. The ASW608 is pretty eco friendly consuming half a Watt during standby and also comes with an On/Auto /Standby with an indicator that glows green when the subwoofer is active, red when inactive. The Auto option will shut off entering a "sleep" mode, causing the indicator to glow red, after not sensing an input signal after five minutes. **The subwoofer** has a frequency range of -6dB at 23 Hz and 25/140 Hz adjustable with the EQ (equalization) switch at position A. The equalization/EQ switch changes the bass roll-off alignment with switch A, my preference, being better suited for a corner subwoofer placement or highly resonant room per Bowers & Wilkins. The frequency response is ± 3dB, 32 Hz to 40/140 Hz adjustable with the equalization switch at position A. The bass extension switch has three positions; Position A is -6 dB at 23 Hz and offers the greatest extension while Position C is -6 dB at 36 Hz and offers the least extension making Position B, -6 dB at 28 Hz, a compromise of the two in extension. Unless you plan on using the system for super loud sound or in a large room you'll most likely keep the bass extension switch at A. If you plan on pushing the limits with the Bowers & Wilkins ASW608 subwoofer you may have to use bass extension position B or C to restrict its bass extension and to ensure the sub doesn't exceed its performance capabilities.

The Hookup

The M-1s arrived in individual boxes and were well packaged. The M-1 is ready for table top or bookshelf duty but also come with wall mounting hardware. Each M-1 compact loudspeaker has a rubber mat on the bottom of the table stand that allows you to peel it back to reveal a torx key. The torx key lets you change the orientation of the M-1 from portrait to landscape if you want to use it for traditional center channel duty or to remove the table top stand for wall mounting. I decided to use the torx key and change the orientation to landscape of one M-1 for center channel duty. All it took was removing three screws holding in the back cover, pulling out and rotating the cover and screwing it back in. Also, peeling back the rubber mat lets you see the cool technology that Bowers & Wilkins is using and exposes the speaker spring terminals. This was a really fast process. You can purchase optional stands for the M-1, but in my case, I lucked out, Bowers & Wilkins sent along two optional M-1 floor stands for me to use. Nicely packaged and very well made with cool technology integrated into the stands, not just a simple metal base with stand. These are really **nice floor stands** at $150 each and setup was quite easy. I got the chance to use the Torx key again because in order to use the floor stand you have to remove the tabletop stand that the M-1 comes with. You place the key into a cam-lock device and turn the cam-lock

counter clockwise to unlock the stem, which allows the stand to pull away with minimal effort. The stands come with a separate torx screw to connect their circular base with the pole the M-1 mounts on. The really cool part is how Bowers & Wilkins designed the stands connectors to work. The M-1's innovative cable management system really comes into its own when used with the floor stand. Cable enters via the stand (or table plinth or wall bracket) and the electrical signal is conducted to the speaker through the metal 'arm' that supports it. The arm itself forms the negative conductor, and a single, insulated wire running inside it provides the positive one. Keeping with the clean look the speaker wire is routed up the pole of the stand and connects to a terminal within the stand. This terminal plugs into the M-1 with a pin like connection removing any need to run speaker wire directly into the M-1.

I set up the MT-50 in my living room using the Emotiva XPA-5 multichannel amplifier as well as my PS3. I ran all of this through the Emotiva UMC-1 processor. I used raw speaker cable without terminations in order to fit them into the slots and spring loaded posts. For two-channel, Bowers & Wilkins recommends placing in the mains at 40 to 60 degree angle in order to avoid insufficient left to right separation or a "hole in the middle" effect. I placed them where my Aperion 6T's usually are which is about two feet from my 58-inch plasma. I placed the rear channels two feet above my ears per Bowers & Wilkins while choosing not to wall mount. Since we just had the walls repainted this was a wise choice. The ASW608 subwoofer found a home next to the front left M-1 close to corner placement and this seemed to work really well with my room acoustics. I love it when a plan comes together. I used the line level inputs for home theater use because Bowers & Wilkins noted the subwoofer was better for this application. The nice part is both line and speaker level inputs have volume controls so making adjustments on the fly is a piece of cake and you're never stuck with insufficient or overwhelming bass regardless of input method. I used my processor to handle the crossover settings which I set at 100 Hz for home theater so the M-1's don't have to work too hard in the lower end but when I listened in two channel audio I set my crossover to 70 Hz to provide some low end support or I didn't use the ASW608 subwoofer altogether especially. I didn't detect the subwoofer crossing over, which made for a seamless listening experience.

Performance

After getting everything dialed in I started with some music. I got out my SACD's and, using my PS3, put in Pink Floyd's Dark Side of the Moon (Capitol Records), in surround sound. Immediately, there was cohesion of sound with extremely accurate imaging and soundstage. There was crispness in the sound and I especially enjoyed listening to tracks Time and Money on the Bowers & Wilkins MT-50 system.

After the Dark Side of the Moon I wanted to try out another multi-channel SACD so I went with Dire Straits' Brothers in Arms 20th Anniversary Edition (Vertigo). This edition also has a stereo option so after listening to surround sounds SACD delight I decided I would give the two channel a go considering this is one of the reasons for the internal updates.... to provide a full-range like performance. This forced me, oh the pain, to listen to both versions but as much as I really enjoy two channel audio Brothers in Arms in 5.1 rocks.

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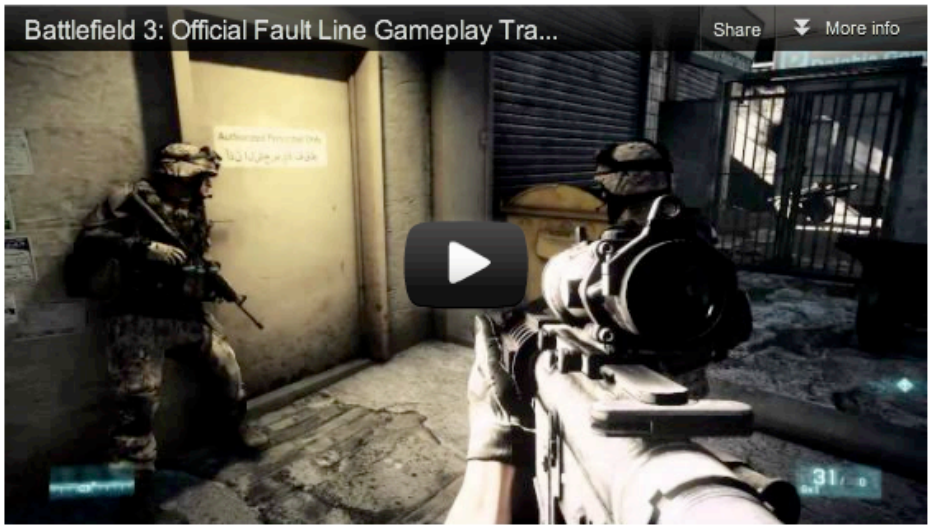
In goes Stan Getz and João Gilberto featuring Antonio Carlos Jobim (Verve), a stereo SACD, to create a jazzy, bossa-nova moment and one of audible delight. Stan Getz's saxophone in O Grande Amore was just delightful and intoxicating. The M-1's handled Gilberto's guitar with ease allowing the guitar strings to come through as if your right there. Talk about superb imaging and creating a much larger soundstage for such compact loudspeakers. Astrud Gilberto's female vocals in The Girl from Impanema were

vivid and lifelike. It just so happens that the song turned 50 years of age while I write this in July. Through the M-1s you can easily make out the location of the instruments. The MT-50 provided a lush sounding experience with a great soundstage and the imaging was spot on. I'm not surprised considering the lineage Bowers & Wilkins has. If you're interested in Super Audio compact discs take a look at Jerry Del Colliano's article, **The 10 Best Audiophile SACDs Ever - Many Are Out Of Print**, at audiophilereview.com.

Turning things over to the home theater side I was in a Sergio Leone, spaghetti western mood so I watched A Fistful of Dollars, For a Few Dollars More and The Good, The Bad and The Ugly (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer) also known as the Man with No Name Trilogy in Blu-ray starring Clint Eastwood. A classic and one of my all time favorite spaghetti westerns by Sergio Leone, the Blu-ray version is quite a treat with its **DTS-HD Master Audio** 5.1 soundtrack, originally these movies were in 2.0 and the Blu-ray comes with this option too. Via the M-1s I was able to make out the dialogue I had missed in earlier renditions and gunshots, bullets whizzing by were life-like and provided a great movie watching experience. Listening to Ennio Morricone's score throughout the trilogy was literally music to my ears. His famous main theme in The Good, The Bad and The Ugly is such a treat to hear and sounds great via the M-1s.

Now, satisfied with the rigors I've put this system through I decided to try a video game which I think can be a great test of surround sound and bass especially if you are playing a first person shooter such as Battlefield 3 (Electronic Arts) and the M-1 satellites produced an accurate and spacious surround sound 'image' throughout. You need to be able to detect where your enemies are coming from and with the Bowers & Wilkins MT-50 I could hear if someone was behind me, to right or left or even which way the bullets were coming from, something that made game play all the more fun. The subwoofer handled the explosions, grenades and heavy artillery like a ninja, never letting you know its there while being there the entire time. There's nothing better than playing a video game in surround sound and the MT-50 system proved this over and over again.



On a side note, for you soccer fans out there, I also had the opportunity to watch the UEFA's cup and with the MT-50 you feel completely immersed in the stadium action. The chants from the fans were life-like and reproduced well by the MT-50. One other thing, the Bowers & Wilkins MT-50 systems is very easy to keep clean and in black it really hides dog and cat fur. I say this because I'm a dog trainer by trade whom lives with three dogs and cat that make it really hard to keep the house and its occupants fur free.

The Downside

Connection options are limited with the M-1 as you will have to use either 12 to16 gauge wire due to the speaker's smaller binding posts. I suppose it's the price you pay in order to have a clutter free look and in this case it worth the effort. Given this minor grievance, I'm having a hard time finding any faults with this system.

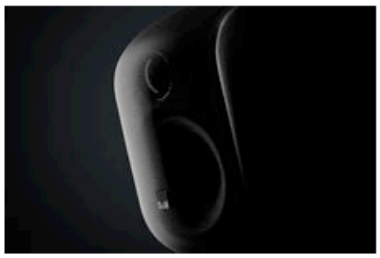
Aesthetically, it would be nice to have the option to remove the grills on the M-1's to show off the nice Nautilus tweeter although you are able to remove the subwoofer's. The ASW608 subwoofer is tailor made for small to medium rooms, but for those who prefer a bit more oomph Bowers & Wilkins has **several other subwoofers** to choose from.

Competition and Comparison

At $1,750 dollars the Bowers & Wilkins MT-50 isn't a steal, but for what you're getting I'd still consider it a real value. The **Paradigm 100 CT Compact Theater**, at $999 is a competitor and a true value at almost half the price, though the level of refinement for the Bowers & Wilkins MT-50 system is just a step above the Paradigm. There's also **Focal's Dome 5.1 Surround Sound Speaker System** but at $2,595 it is 50 percent more but I'm not sure you'll get a 50 percent improvement.

For more on these systems and others like them please visit **Home Theater Review's Bookshelf Speaker page**.

Conclusion



My bias is to go with the full range, tower speakers, but the Bowers & Wilkins MT-50 at $1,750 ($2,050 with optional floor stands) puts my bias in a quandary. Bowers & Wilkins has made some worthwhile updates to the M-1 compact loudspeaker and to their Mini Theater systems in general, which is very apparent during two-channel listening. The Bowers & Wilkins MT-50 system isn't a budget buy in the conventional sense, but it's truly great at music, home theater and gaming, which, to me, makes it a Swiss Army knife of home theater systems.

There's a level of audio refinement with the new Bowers & Wilkins MT-50 system that puts it in the keeper category and one I hope to hold onto for a long time.