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Bowers & Wilkins CT 700 Series Loudspeakers Reviewed



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It didn't take me long to realize that this wasn't going to be your normal product review. Not because the product, Bowers & Wilkins' new CT 700 series loudspeaker, is either bad or wholly unique, but because, unlike other traditional speaker reviews, I didn't use the CT 700s to simply play back audio. Instead, I used them to make and mix audio. Allow me to explain. I was in the middle of postproduction on my first feature film, April Showers, and my sound team and I were having a difficult time with our studio monitors. Our monitors were designed and built by a very reputable company and are found in countless recording studios and mixing stages around the world. However, every time the sound team would burn off a mix for me to take home and listen to in my theater, something was getting lost in the translation from studio to home. When we compensated and began mixing for my home theater, the studio sound became unbearable and vice-versa. It was frustrating, to say the least, and at times nerve-wracking, for sound is half the picture when it comes to movies.



From that moment, I began scouring the audiophile speaker scene in search of a loudspeaker that was tailored to bridging the gap between theatrical speakers and home theater. I looked at a number of offerings from many top-flight brands before settling on the CT 700 Series from Bowers & Wilkins. The CT series consists of three monitor-like speakers that can serve as LCRs in a 5.1 or 7.1 configuration, rounded out by two different subwoofers. **These proved to provide the ultimate balance between theatrical monitors and home theater speakers, as they exhibit the positive traits of each with few of the drawbacks.** Additionally, unlike the CT 800 Series, which are modeled after the 802Ds, the CT 700 Series fit nicely into our budget.

I placed a call to Bowers and Wilkins and ordered up a 5.1 system that consisted of three of their largest LCRs, the CT7.3 (\$1,500 each) and two CT7.5s (\$600 each), mated to a single CT SW12 (\$1,000) subwoofer, powered by an outboard or rack-mounted 1,000-watt external amplifier (\$1,500). The CT7.3s feature dual eight-inch paper/Kevlar bass drivers with a single seven-inch Kevlar midrange mated to a single one-inch Nautilus tube-loaded tweeter. The CT7.3 boasts a frequency response of 42Hz-22kHz/28 kHz, depending on various setup options. The CT7.3 has a sensitivity rating of 92dB into a stable eight-ohm load. The CT7.5s, which I used as the rear speakers, feature the same drivers as their larger siblings, but lack the dual bass drivers. Instead, the CT7.5 has a single seven-inch midrange driver, mated to a single tweeter. The CT7.5 has a reported frequency response of 55Hz-22kHz with the same sensitivity and impedance as its larger brother. All of the CT Series are finished in matte black, similar to many studio monitors out there today, and feature magnetic grilles, though the CT Series was designed to be installed into custom cabinetry or behind a screen/fabric wall. All of the LCR speakers in the CT 700 series feature single-wire connectivity capable of accepting bare banana and spade-terminated wire.

The CT SW12 is the largest sub in the CT 700 product range, with its 12-inch paper/Kevlar composite driver. The CT SW12 is powered by a 1,000-watt Class D outboard amplifier that is about the size of a traditional two-channel amp and sits nicely in a rack or cabinet, with all of the bass controls mounted on the face for easy room tuning and control. The nice thing about the SA 1000 amplifier is that it can power two CT SW subwoofers down to 16Hz simultaneously, which speaks to the CT Series' versatility and value. Like the CT LCRs, the CT SW12 is finished in the same matte black and features single-wire connection that allows it to be connected to the SA 1000 via a single run of speaker wire, which is more cost-effective than purchasing a twenty or thirty-foot run of LFE or subwoofer cable.

The Hookup

I installed the CT 700 Series in our newly-outfitted studio, with each of the CT7.3's tweeters resting at ear level and the smaller CT 7.5s doing the same in the rear. Due to their substantial weight and girth, all of the speakers were placed on stands that were custom-built to give them the surest footing and keep them at the right height. The CT SW12 was positioned just left of center, between the center and left front speaker, which proved to be the optimum placement for

proper bass in our studio. We use Outlaw Audio amplifiers in our studio and the entire system, speakers and electronics, was wired using Transparent Reference cable.

As for source material, we fed our Integra DTC 9.8 processor raw files straight out of ProTools via a Mac Pro, or sent the signal straight from the mixing board to the amps, depending on what environment we were trying to simulate. The whole system was able to be installed in less than a day and was run in for several days before we began our listening tests and mix-down.

Performance

Prior to beginning our final mix, my sound designer, along with our composer, got some face time with the sound gurus behind The Dark Knight, which included composer Hans Zimmer. They were demonstrating their post process to us, as well as some very expensive, new Meyer Sound studio speakers, which were breathtaking, to say the least. I bring this up because this test served as a benchmark for the CT 700 speakers, and us, which at first seems hugely unfair, but they were surprisingly up to the task.

I returned home from the demo with the experience forever etched into my skull (and I do mean etched), immediately grabbed my Blu-ray copy of The Dark Knight (Warner Home Video) and darted off to the studio. Within moments, I knew we had made the right choice, for the CT 700s captured the essence and scale of the sound design and score much in the same way the larger, costlier Meyer Sound speakers did. Dynamically, though not as loud due to the smaller space, the CT 700s were juggernauts, but unlike the Meyer speakers, they didn't shout at the extremes. The bass was about as visceral as I've ever experienced in a home/studio environment and possessed tremendous poise, composure and balance throughout. However, it was the midrange, specifically the upper midrange, which really bowled me over. The timbre, especially in the dialogue track, was spot-on and very natural, possessing all the weight of the actors' bodies and inflection while remaining extremely intelligible. The Nautilus tweeter was very good and had a refinement and smoothness to it that I really appreciated. I liked it far more than the horn-loaded Meyer Sound speakers. While the Meyer Sound speakers could play louder than the CT 700s, they didn't quite have the same composure and sweetness at the extremes.

Overall, with The Dark Knight test, the CT 700s proved to be very well versed and well-rounded speakers, clearly geared towards recreating the theater experience, though I could detect a hint of their audiophile heritage, which was a nice touch when it came time to mix our score. While I have viewed The Dark Knight ad nauseam by this point, listening to it through the CT 700 Series speakers was an all-together new experience.

A few days passed before my sound editor was able to make it into the studio to begin the final checks and mix of April Showers for the theatrical and home theater markets. While a lot of the pre-mix and mixing had been done on a myriad of other speakers, the CT 700 Series was the final step and litmus test for all that came before them. I have to admit I wasn't anticipating having to change as much as we did, but within five minutes, we began noticing subtle details that simply were not present when played back through other speakers. For instance, in one scene, we're in very tight quarters, a bedroom, with a large and noisy camera. We were unable to secure the actors for an ADR session to re-record and/or loop the dialogue, so we had to EQ and filter the camera noise out. Through other speakers, we thought we had achieved this, but through the CT 700 system, we noticed entire frequency bands of the camera's noise were still very much in the final mix. We were able to adjust accordingly and minimize the camera noise across the entire spectrum, thus preserving the actors' performances, which were captured and reproduced beautifully through the CT 700 speakers.

In the film, we stage elements of a school shooting, which we filmed largely without sound at the request of our sound designers. With the CT 700 speakers in play, we were able to further tune and dissect the hundreds of sound layers already in place and make them more harmonious and natural overall. Our previous studio speakers, despite our efforts to EQ it out, had a very prominent top end that would come at the expense of the upper midrange. Sharp sounds like rattling metal, straps, gun noises, etc., were all a bit too prominent for my taste, making our SWAT team sound a bit like knights wearing metal armor rather than cloth and Kevlar. Maybe it was the Kevlar on Kevlar pairing, but the CT 700 speakers allowed the sound team to dial down yet at the same time enhance the high frequencies, while retaining all of the natural cloth-rustling and body movements. Each SWAT team member's sonic demeanor was unique to the individual and was captured beautifully and naturally through the CT 700 speakers.

April Showers is much more a dramatic film than it is an action one, though for about fifteen minutes, we do take the audience through some scenes that have to feel real in order for the remaining drama to play out. Part of the effect is the initial jolt of going from quiet school day to war zone, which the sound team and I worked on for months before settling on a technique and style for accomplishing this. Needless to say, the film goes from very pedestrian to bombastic and violent at a drop of a hat. For this effect, one needs dynamics of every sort and the CT 700s had plenty on tap. The CT 7.3s, while large and incredibly full-range, have monitor-like focus with near-pinpoint accuracy and imaging, yet mate so beautifully with the CT SW12 that you don't notice the sonic gap between the two speakers. This allowed for all of the detail and macro dynamics to remain in this difficult sequence, yet when the time came to push the CT 700 system right to the point of clipping, yes, we took it all the way to 11, it didn't fall apart. For our purposes, in our studio, the CT 700 speakers didn't distort or do the ugly things associated with increases in volume, they simply played louder.

For the audiophile in us all, the CT 700s are surprising performers, something made all the more evident by my composer's reaction to hearing his score played back through the CT 7.3s acting as a simple stereo pair: "Where did you get these ... better yet, can I keep them when we're through?" You see, he had been mixing his score with a pair of notable, two-way studio monitors that are geared more towards total SPL output than musicality. "I sound good," he continued. The truth is, his score did sound good and had all of the separation and air you'd expect from a large concert hall or stage, except for the fact that the score was created and recorded in the composer's home. The bass was deep yet nimble enough to jump around with ease, without bloat or overpowering the midrange. The bulk of the film's score is piano and/or solo violin, which rest squarely on the shoulders of the CT 700's Kevlar midrange and Nautilus tweeter. They don't disappoint. The CT 700s were smooth, incredibly refined and emotionally sound when it came to the mixing and final playback of the film's score and final sound mix, which was far different than what we had experienced through other speakers. The final test came when we played the same final sound file in a true digital theater, one with 300-plus seats and a forty-foot screen. The only differences to the previous set-up were in relation to scale, not quality.

Low Points

While I thoroughly enjoyed the CT 700 speakers, there are a few details I noticed that I should point out to you. First, in a non-control room setting, where seeing large monitor speakers is common, the CT 700s are imposing and not wholly designed to sit front and center in a living room. They are without a doubt designed to be fit into custom cabinetry or behind a perforated screen. If you can integrate them into your home in this capacity, they will reward your ears like few others and do it for far less. I like the idea of magnetic grilles, but the CT 700s' grilles are bulky and cumbersome, which demonstrates further why I don't feel they were ever meant to be used.

While very efficient and capable of massive SPL output, the CT 700s do like a fair amount of power to sound their best. I've since used them with a variety of receivers and integrated amplifiers lying around the house and found them happiest when driven by a solid 75-100 watts per channel. Most higher-power modern receivers or even budget separates will do the trick, but if you can muster a bit more in terms of power and quality components, the CT 700s will thank you for it.

In terms of placement, I found it best to keep the Nautilus tweeters at ear level, yet when configuring the CT 7.3s in an LCR set-up, we found positioning the left and right speakers on their sides with the tweeters in provided a fuller, richer soundstage and performance. The reason I list this or any placement configuration in the low points is due to the fact that, if you're building the CT 700s into your wall, their size, shape and ultimate placement configuration is going to weigh heavily on your budget and construction costs. On their sides, though still deeper than some wall cavities, the CT 7.3s will fit between standard 16 on-center studs, whereas placing them horizontally will not.

Conclusion

What Bowers & Wilkins have done with their entire CT Series, specifically the CT 700s reviewed here, comes closer to bridging the gap between the filmmaker and the home viewer than any speaker I've encountered before them. They convincingly recreate a true movie theater experience for the home, provided you can accommodate their unique installation demands or don't mind their control room-chic look. Looking back on my time spent with the CT 700s, no other speakers, and we did use a number of various brands, got us closer and made us feel more comfortable going to the final stages of locking the sound than they did. Considering the overall system price (speakers only) of roughly \$8,000 for a complete 5.1 system, the CT 700s are an absolute steal and revelation. Four stars.

Keywords

B&W CT700 reviewed, Bowers and Wilkins, B&W Loudspeakers, B&W Home Theater, Home Theater Speakers, Multi-channel Audio, Movies, Trailers, Hollywood, B&W CT 700 Series Speakers, B&W CT Series, Nautilus, Kevlar, British Speakers, Abbey Road Studios, B&W 802D, Genelec, MA Audio, JBL

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