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## Hardware Spotlight -- RBH

### *RBH AC Speaker System*

By Mark Fleischmann

Surround systems anchored by floorstanding speakers in the front left and right positions combine the strengths of 5.1-channel sound with the old-fashioned virtues of stereo. But an optimum combination of livable size, placement flexibility and sonic performance usually carries a price, and customers on a tight budget often end up with speakers that don't look or sound very good.

That's why it was such a pleasure to pull the cartons off a pair of RBH's AC-5Ts; the speakers' curved enclosures immediately announced that they were something special. Nearly 40 inches tall, the AC-5T has a three-way design with four drivers. These include a 1-inch silk dome tweeter and a trio of 5.25-inch polypropylene mid/woofer drivers. One of these functions as a midrange driver (3,500 to 200 Hz), while the other two serve as woofers (below 200 Hz).

The AC-5T can be mated to a matching surround system with other members of the RBH AC Series, which all use tweeters and woofers of the same size. These include the AC-525 center speaker, which uses a fairly unusual arrangement of two tweeters flanked by two woofers. One tweeter and woofer adorn the baffle of the bookshelf-sized AC-51 rear-surrounds. The A-10S sub provides a downfiring 10-inch woofer and 150-watt amp in a rounded cabinet that visually echoes the other speakers. Slim and sleek, the speakers offer curves in a very small footprint.

The curves are more than cosmetic. Unlike conventional speaker boxes, RBH's curved enclosures provide the acoustic benefit of preventing standing waves from bouncing between parallel surfaces. Sound still bounces around inside the speakers, but in a more complex way, with a less dominant resonant frequency. The enclosures are a complex composite of medium-density fiberboard, fiberglass and other materials, with a smooth matte finish that's curiously pleasing to the touch.

For me, fabric tweeters tend to be a bit on the gentle side, I would feel positively about mating these speakers with a highly detailed receiver (think Onkyo or Yamaha). With my fairly neutral Rotel RSX1065, the RBHs seemed a little reticent on first listen, so I pulled off the grilles and left them off. Even without grilles, the speakers maintained their subdued elegance.

I applied my preferred 80-Hz sub crossover to the center and rear-surround speakers. However, I ran the front left/right speakers full-range ("large") to give the sub's bass response some reinforcement. This division of labor gave the system some extra bass definition, especially when movie soundtracks waxed explosive. It also provided more even mid-bass response when I walked around the room.

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My main signal source was an Integra DPS-8.3 combi player, which adroitly juggles DVD-Video, DVD-Audio and SACD formats. This set the stage for a round of high-res audio listening. The first thing I wanted to try was the DVD-A version of Fragile by Yes. That disc usually sounds more like the original vinyl than most DVD-As I own — brighter and more detailed, but, on some systems, a bit tinny. It still sounded bright on the RBHs (and therefore true to the source) but not at all abrasive.

Moving to the opposite extreme, I tried the DVD-A version of Neil Young's Harvest, and the mellow barn acoustics came through intact. RBH's 10-inch sub conveyed the thumping drum sound with a bit less slam than I experience with my usual 12-inch sub. However, the 10-inch's output was much tighter and more controlled than many larger subs, so the kick drum didn't bloat up and ruin the reflective mood of "Heart of Gold." The sub's downfiring driver gave the leading edge of percussive and explosive sounds a rounded feel.

Movies were also on the menu, of course, and the highlight was probably the final shoot-out scene of Blood Work, the latest Clint Eastwood flick. Some of its gunplay occurred inside a wrecked warship, complete with front-to-back whizzing bullets and the low metallic creaking of distressed metal. The center speaker did a reasonable job of conveying intelligible dialogue, and the sub didn't make male voices excessively chesty. Any cancellation effects from the dual woofers seemed to have been masked by the identical woofers in the front left and right channels.

Here's what to expect from RBH AC Series speakers: a gentle top end, a good midrange, commendable control in the upper and mid-bass, and good dynamics. What the system lacked was the highly resolved layering of higher-end speakers, and the take-no-prisoners thunder of larger subs.

For those qualities, turn to RBH's MC Series speakers and externally powered subwoofers. Needless to say, they cost a lot more. If your customer's emphasis is on saving space, consider the RBH Compact Theater 5.1 or 7.1 systems.

At \$699 per pair for the AC-5T floorstanding speakers, \$249 for the AC-525 center, \$299 per pair for the AC-51 bookshelf speakers and \$499 for the AC-10S sub, the system reviewed costs a total of \$1,746.

RBH's AC Series speakers shrewdly avoid the gross colorations and ear-shredding excesses of many similarly priced competitors. With slim baffles and modest footprints, they also manage to sound big without looking big. And their moderate pricing will leave some budgetary room for the other vital components of home theater, including a moderately priced receiver, a progressive-scan DVD player and a high-definition video display. For many people, the RBH AC Series will be an excellent choice.

#### **AT A GLANCE:**

RBH AC Speaker System  
\$1,746 (AC-5T floorstanding speakers; AC-525 center; AC-51 bookshelf speakers; AC-10s subwoofer)  
Small footprint  
Good bass definition  
[www.rbhsound.com](http://www.rbhsound.com)

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