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SVS Ultra Loudspeakers

Doug Blackburn

SVS has been a great supporter of *Widescreen Review* with review equipment provided regularly. We have now reviewed a subwoofer model from each series, the Prime loudspeakers, and now the SVS Ultra series loudspeakers. SVS' Prime series is certainly priced at what I would consider a very high "price-performance ratio". The flagship of the Prime series, the four-driver Prime Tower is priced at a penny less than \$500 each. The Ultra Tower, with its five drivers, is priced at one penny less than \$1,000 each. For that, you get dual 6.5-inch drivers and dual 8-inch drivers mounted on each side of the tower enclosure at the bottom, where the enclosure is deepest. And there is a single 1-inch aluminum dome tweeter. A 3.5-inch port on the back extends bass response, though, it can be plugged for smaller rooms or rooms with high bass gain. Opening the port provides more extended (deeper) bass, while closing the port provides tighter bass that may sound best with music, but less bottom end extension is delivered with the port plugged. Total weight is 75.4 pounds per Ultra Tower. Available finishes are real black-stained oak veneer or high-gloss piano black paint finish, with no difference in price between the two finish options.

The Tower's aluminum tweeter has an FEA optimized (finite element analysis) diffuser. The 6.5-inch midrange drivers have aluminum shorting rings (as do the 8-inch woofers) to reduce gap inductance and distortion. The cone material is glass fiber, and the basket is cast aluminum. The 8-inch and 6.5-inch drivers have vented voice coil formers to assist with cooling. Crossover points are at 2,000 Hz, 700 Hz, and 160 Hz. The cabinet's back is sloped so that the loudspeaker is much thinner at the top than it is at the bottom. The front vertical edges of the cabinet are angled to reduce diffraction effects from squared-off cabinet corners. Ultra models come with two sets of feet; elastomer (soft) and metal spikes. Frequency response is said to be 28 Hz to 32,000 Hz +/-3 dB, and the impedance is nominally 8 Ohms. Grille cloth frames come with the Ultra loudspeakers, but they look darn good without the grille cloth, so unless the spouse objects, you may want to leave the grilles off. The midrange driver's enclosure is isolated from the bass enclosure. Four multi-way binding posts support bi-wiring, but factory jumpers are provided for single-wire use. The lower midrange driver tapers off above 700 Hz, while the top midrange driver goes all the way to (and beyond at reduced output) 2,000 Hz, where the signal is handed off to the tweeter. Keeping higher frequencies out of the lower midrange driver stops the horizontal comb filtering that comes with D'Appolito driver arrangements (M-T-M or midrange-tweeter-midrange). Both midrange drivers cross over at 160 Hz to the 8-inch bass drivers.



The 8-inch woofers are the operating equivalent of about a single 12-inch woofer, but having two drivers per loudspeaker helps eliminate some of the room interactions you get with single larger drivers. Both of the 8-inch drivers move inward/outward together, creating a radiating hemisphere of bass. The simultaneous inward/outward motion of the two 8-inch drivers mechanically cancels any vibrations a single 8-inch woofer would create in the enclosure, adding to the clarity of sound over the entire operating range.

SVS sent the matching Ultra Center Channel priced at a penny less than \$700 with four drivers. The tweeter and midrange are stacked in the center to avoid combing artifacts from M-T-M driver arrays. The two woofers flank the tweeter and midrange. Dual sets of binding posts support bi-wiring. The 1-inch aluminum dome tweeter from the Ultra Tower is joined by a single 4-inch midrange driver and dual 6.5-inch woofers, as used in the Ultra Towers. There are two 1.7-inch ports on the back. Frequency response is said to be 45 Hz to 32,000 Hz +/-3 dB, and the Center weighs 31 pounds. Crossover frequencies for the center channel loudspeaker are 2,200 Hz and 500 Hz.

“The Ultra Towers Had Me Looking For Favorite Music Night After Night, Track After Track.”

SVS also provided a pair of Ultra Bookshelf models to use as side surrounds. The Bookshelf model combines the 1-inch aluminum dome tweeter with the 6.5-inch, glass fiber cone, and cast aluminum basket driver from the other models in the series. Priced at a penny less than \$500, the Ultra Bookshelf could be used in an all-Bookshelf surround system, plus a subwoofer, or used as here with Tower main loudspeakers and the Center model. As this is written, the Bookshelf model lists high-gloss piano white as a limited-time optional finish, while also having the black oak and high-gloss black finish options to match other models in the Ultra series. Two pairs of multi-way binding posts support bi-wiring, but jumpers are factory installed, so bi-wire cables aren't required, as with the other Ultra models.

The Ultra series has one other model not reviewed here, the Ultra Surround, with four drivers on two radiating surfaces, essentially making it two loudspeakers within a single enclosure. The Ultra Surround is wall-mounted with separate angled faces firing more forward and backward than directly into the room. These are most useful when loudspeakers are closer to the listener than usual so a nearby loudspeaker doesn't throw off the sonic image at nearby seats. My rule of thumb is that 4 feet or less distance from a listener should really be a dipole loudspeaker. Five to 6.5 feet is a gray area where you could use a dipole or direct radiator, and more than 6.5 feet is best with a direct radiator. There may be other considerations in some theatres that cause this rule to be broken. The Surround model uses a 5.5-inch version of the 6.5-inch mid-woofer used in other Ultra models. The crossover point is 2,000 Hz, and the tweeters are the same 1-inch aluminum dome used in the other models. Currently priced at just under \$500 on the SVS Web site, the normal list price is just under \$600. It has a trick you don't get with similar dipole surrounds from other manufacturers. The loudspeaker can be reconfigured to have it operate in three modes. Some other dipole surround models offer bipole and dipole modes, which the Ultra Surround also offers. But because the Ultra Surround has two separate crossovers, it can be connected to both side surround and rear surround channels and have side surround sound come out of the forward-firing “side” of the loudspeaker and rear surround coming out of the more-rear-firing side of the Ultra Surround. In bipole mode, the forward woofer moves forward, the rear woofer also moves in the same direction. The standard dipole mode has both woofers (and tweeters) moving in the same direction at the same time... so if the forward driver is moving outward, the corresponding rearward driver is also moving outward at the same time. SVS calls the modes dipole, bipole, and Duet modes. Weight is 18 pounds and frequency response is said to be 58 Hz to 32,000 Hz +/- 3 dB.

There is nothing about setup that was unexpected. There will be a lot of haggling about who carries the bottom and who carries the top of the Tower loudspeakers when you move them because the bottom feels at least twice as heavy as the top. All five loudspeakers occupied the same locations as other loudspeakers reviewed in the past. There were no unusual problems with setting

levels or with using Audyssey or Dirac Live room correction. I used bi-wire loudspeaker cables for the front L&R Tower loudspeakers and single-wire loudspeaker cables for the other channels. I used “manual” calibration performed with an SPL meter and tape measure for distance as well as Dirac Live and Audyssey room-correction measurements. As usual in this room, Audyssey MultEQ XT32 calibration didn't sound better than no room correction (nor did it sound worse, it was just different). Dirac Live calibration was the usual rousing success, as was the manual measurement method. Experimenting with toe-in revealed that the Ultra Towers sounded best with a little toe-in, but not too much. Aiming the Ultra Towers at the listener's ears produced sound that was a bit unbalanced. Aiming the Ultra Towers straight ahead produced more vague sonic images. On carpet, the metal spike feet that pierce the carpet to contact the concrete slab beneath produced tighter and better-defined bass. On hardwood, the elastomer feet protected the floor and retained most of the tightness in the bass produced by the metal spike feet. Without the spike feet and just resting the bottom of the Ultra Tower loudspeakers on the carpet, bass quality was looser and less well defined, and I kept having mental images of “wooly bass”... a term I haven't heard much since the early days of high-end audio in the 1970s. Something good happens to the quality of bass when you have spike feet under the Ultra Towers on carpet (and to other loudspeakers as well).

Measuring the in-room response of the SVS Ultra loudspeakers produced results close enough to the factory specs that I have no issue with SVS' frequency-response specs. The only significant deviation I found was that the Towers didn't get to -3 dB until 26 Hz in this room, a not-surprising result since this room appears to have a gentle rise in bass response starting just above 30 Hz.

These aren't notably efficient/sensitive loudspeakers at 87 dB or 88 dB for 2.83 volts input depending on model. That's about average for 2018. An AVR killed most of the thrill of the Ultra system. Dynamics took a dump, and the sound closed in significantly, indicating the AVR couldn't deliver the current the loudspeakers wanted. I would strongly suggest using the SVS Ultra loudspeakers with a capable outboard amplifier like the 7-channel AudioControl Savoy G3 amplifier that's sold by installers/integrators who carry AudioControl products. There's no MSRP per se, but it probably sells in the \$3,000 to \$3,500 range. Certainly, you can pay more for a multi-channel amplifier, but you won't get much for the extra cost unless you spend a lot more. I used a Savoy G3 amplifier to drive the SVS Ultra system for this review. This is a Class H amplifier that produces little heat and only weighs around 45 pounds for seven channels at over 200 Watts per channel. This is the sort of amplifier that makes these loudspeakers come to life.

Listening—Music

Music reveals a lot about loudspeaker performance that you may never notice while watching movies. I listened to music extensively with the Ultra Tower loudspeakers. There were times when I

thought treble was a little recessed or rough around the edges. But as I listened to more and more music content, I realized the rough-around-the-edges treble was in the recordings, because other recordings with prominent treble (Lorde's single "Royals," the entire self-titled *Brian Wilson* album, particularly the 2000 Rhino remaster, and Taylor Swift's *1989* album that sounded borderline too bright on some other loudspeakers), sounded just right with the Ultra Towers. The roughness heard on some albums I thought I knew really well was actually in the recording... learned by substituting other loudspeakers and listening immediately to the same content again.

The upper bass and lower midrange are fantastic on the Towers. I heard an entire cello line in the "Melt Away" track on the self-titled *Brian Wilson* album (first released in 1988) that I have no recollection of hearing on a conscious level in previous listens, which must be over 100 plays of "Melt Away." The cello line was subtle and part of a very complex mix. But it was very clearly delineated and could be followed easily with the Prime Towers. Why have I never noticed this cello line before? Why could I hear it better with the Towers than with other loudspeakers? I don't know. It's almost like other loudspeakers reproduce it, but somehow hide or mask it, while the Ultra Towers bring it along and keep it audible without making it too prominent in the mix. In trying to find out if the treble was not up to the standards of some expensive loudspeakers, I searched through lots of recordings, trying to find passages I recall as being especially "pretty" in the high frequencies and kept finding treble I'd thought was pretty actually had some "junk" riding along with it that made it less pretty than I thought. Then I started hitting some of the newer recordings with excellent production values, and I found that well-recorded pretty sounds do indeed sound pretty through the Ultra Towers, but I also found out that some other loudspeakers were making treble sound prettier than it was recorded. Some people will like that, others will recoil at the thought. I wouldn't put the Ultra Towers in the "ultra-revealing" category of loudspeakers, but they certainly reveal more than some pretty-expensive loudspeakers.

Be prepared for surprises with the Ultra Towers. Justin Timberlake's 2014 album (*The 20/20 Experience*) is revealed to be a pretty low-quality affair from a sound-quality point of view while Taylor Swift's *1989* sounds very professionally recorded, if a bit over-produced. I tend to love loudspeakers that make me go back and listen to everything I've listened to in the past, just to hear the new spin on favorite music. The Ultra Towers had me looking for favorite music night after night, track after track. Another thing the Ultra Towers do very well is "scale" the music. Cat Stevens' ("Yusuf Islam") title track from *Tea For The Tillerman* starts out with Cat Stevens singing plaintively, as usual, but near the end an entire choir joins in and the sound gets B—I—G in size and scope. It was quite gratifying and almost electrifying to hear the Ultra Towers, fairly "acquirable" loudspeakers at \$2,000 per pair, revealing so much about the quality and content of so many diverse recordings. The dynamic capabilities of these beauties aid and abet the resolution, adding just the right amount of "pop" to snapped or hammered bass strings, making a choir sound huge, but not overly loud... until they are supposed to be loud and fill the room.

The Tower Ultras aren't necessarily "the best" at anything, though, if I had to pick something these loudspeakers do that's special, I'd probably give the nod to that incredible ability to delineate detail and dynamics within the top two bass octaves and the

SVS Ultra Loudspeakers

Features

- 1-inch aluminum dome tweeter in all models
- 6.5-inch (or 5.5 inch or 4-inch) midrange-woofer with cast basket, vented voice coil former, and glass fiber cone
- Tower—dual side firing 8-inch woofers
- Tower—angled back surface to reduce internal standing waves/resonances
- CNC machined cabinet panels with extensive bracing and blocking for stiffness and low resonance
- SoundMatch crossover networks with premium components including air-core inductors
- Four multi-way loudspeaker binding posts on all Ultra models
- 45-Day Risk-Free home trial with free return shipping
- Price protection for 60 days from purchase
- 90-day defective loudspeaker replacement policy
- 1-year "no lemon" guarantee
- Lifetime SVS tech support, 7 days a week
- 1 year of free performance updates (if any)
- 1 year of full purchase price credits towards trade-up loudspeaker models
- 5-year unconditional warranty
- Pre-purchase expert advice
- Available online from SVS (and elsewhere) and from retail dealers with or without brick & mortar stores
- All models available with black oak woodgrain veneer finish or high-gloss black paint
- Designed: United States
- Manufactured: China

Manufactured by:

SVS
260 Victoria Road
Youngstown, Ohio 44515
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Email: custservice@SVS.com

lower midrange. If you ever get a chance to listen to these loudspeakers with music content that's familiar to you and you feel like the treble octaves just aren't pretty enough, don't be too quick to blame the Ultra Towers. They could very well be revealing that the true quality of a recording was not as good as you once thought.

Listening—Movies

The first thing I noticed about movie sound was how much better than usual the drums sounded during the 20th Century Fox logo/intro. The next thing I noticed was how good the drums sounded at the beginning of *Avatar*. Next, the quality of orchestral soundtracks was quite engaging. Even without a subwoofer, the 5.0 Ultra system was surprisingly adept at conveying the sounds of air and ground vehicles with appropriately powerful underpinnings that reflect the size of the vehicle in question. Dialogue was really well presented, very articulate, with excellent intelligibility. The inspirational music timed with major "reveals" like the floating mountains/islands, the waterfall (while flying), the first view of the home tree, the journey to bond with an ikran... those moments, and others, flow out and expand into the room, producing even more of a feeling of wonder than you may have experienced before. It was quite a thing to experience the music bringing me even closer to a movie I've seen many times and used portions of

Specifications

Tower

Frequency Response: 28-32,000Hz (+/- 3 dB)
Sensitivity: 88 dB (2.83 V at 1 meter, 300-3,000 Hz)
Recommended Amplifier Power: 20-300 (Watts)
Nominal Impedance: 8 (Ohms)
Dimensions (WHD In Inches): 13.8 x 45 x 16.25
Weight (In Pounds): 75.4
Warranty: 5 years unconditional
MSRP: \$999.99 each in black oak woodgrain or high-gloss black; shipping included in price

Center

Frequency Response: 45-32,000Hz (+/- 3 dB)
Sensitivity: 87 dB (2.83 V at 1 meter, 300-3,000 Hz)
Recommended Amplifier Power: 20-225 (Watts)
Nominal Impedance: 8 (Ohms)
Dimensions (WHD In Inches): 8 x 22 x 10
Weight (In Pounds): 31
Warranty: 5 years unconditional
MSRP: \$699.99 each in black oak woodgrain or high-gloss black; shipping included in price

Bookshelf

Frequency Response: 28-32,000Hz (+/- 3 dB)
Sensitivity: 87 dB (2.83 V at 1 meter, 300-3,000 Hz)
Recommended Amplifier Power: 20-150 (Watts)
Nominal Impedance: 8 (Ohms)
Dimensions (WHD In Inches): 14.9 x 8.5 x 10
Weight (In Pounds): 19
Warranty: 5 years unconditional
MSRP: \$499.99 each in black oak woodgrain or high-gloss black; shipping included in price

system or that it is "the best" at anything in particular. But hearing the Ultra system really makes you question whether it is necessary to spend more, even if you wanted to.

With action movies like *Kingsman: The Golden Circle*, *Kong: Skull Island*, *Ready Player One*, and *Spider-Man: Homecoming*, I don't get quite same sense of soundtrack grandeur that I got with *Avatar*. Everything is handled well, but those soundtracks were just good movie soundtracks and not much more—though *Ready Player One* has some interesting soundtrack details. There is something different about how the music was recorded for *Avatar*, and the Ultra system reveals the sonic difference, though, it didn't reveal to me the "how" of making the *Avatar* soundtrack so compelling. Dynamics are wonderful for gunshots and other mayhem.

Conclusion

The SVS Ultra system performs incredibly well. I'm not even going to say "considering the modest cost" because it performs incredibly well compared to considerably pricier systems. I can't tell you it's a no-brainer; you should hear the Ultra system for yourself. And you can with SVS's 45-day free audition with free return shipping. Don't bother auditioning the Ultra system if you are going to use an AVR for the audition, because you're doomed to *not* hearing what these loudspeakers are capable of delivering with a properly powerful amplifier unless you listen at low-volume levels... not a good situation. While you may not decide these are the best loudspeakers in the world, you may very well decide you don't need to spend more money than this on loudspeakers to have your system sound fabulous and engaging. Highly recommended. **WSR**

as references even more times. I'm not even entirely certain how to describe this effect.

I've used *Avatar* with every loudspeaker system reviewed since *Avatar* was released on disc in 2010. I don't get the same feeling about the soundtrack with those other loudspeakers that I get with the Ultra system. Does that mean the Ultra system outperformed systems costing many times the \$3,700 (almost) cost of this 5.0 system? Without a couple of those previous systems here at the same time, it would be impossible to say that. While I enjoyed the performance of the Ultra system, I'm having a hard time grappling with how a \$3,700 loudspeaker system (not including subwoofer) could compete with another recent system with a retail price closer to \$30,000. When I say compete, I mean by making it difficult to choose, which loudspeakers you'd rather listen to for the next 5 or 10 years if price was no concern. There is an incredible psychological barrier to break down when you know one system is \$30K or over while the other system you might consider is less than \$4,000. I can't say if the Ultra system is worse, better, or equal-but-different, compared to that hypothetical \$30,000 system. But whatever the Ultra system is, it is *not* wildly outclassed by loudspeakers costing a lot more. I'm not saying it's "the best" under \$4,000

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