



Artcoustic Spitfire Professional Home Cinema Loudspeaker System

There is a difference between a home theatre system and a home cinema system, characterized by the quality of the sound, picture, lighting, seating, room acoustics, and, of course, cost. A home cinema is a dedicated space designed solely for delivering a true cinematic experience in a home setting. A home theatre system is usually in a space shared with a living room or family room. I have a home theatre system, but if I were going to build a dedicated home cinema I know already which loudspeakers would be behind the curtains or the screen— Artcoustic Spitfire Professional Monitors and Subwoofers. The Spitfire system delivers the most realistic cinematic sound quality I've heard in a home setting and is equally well suited for music. In fact, the system exceeds the sound quality of loudspeakers I've heard in many movie theatres.

Artcoustic Loudspeakers is a Danish manufacturer known mostly for their floorstanding, on-wall, and in-wall art-camouflaged loudspeakers. They don't look like loudspeakers, they look like your favorite photograph or painting framed to complement your other fine furnishings. They're loudspeakers disguised as a personal artistic statement. Beneath their exterior is a fine loudspeaker with the sound characteristics demanded by movie enthusiasts and hard-to-please audiophiles. They become part of the room when silent, and the center of attention when played. The popularity of flat-panel televisions has, in part, driven the sales of Artcoustic on-wall loudspeakers. The installations are so unique, the company asks their dealers and system integrators to submit photos of the rooms in which they are installed and publishes them in a catalog. For a look at some of the installations, go to www.artcoustic.com.

On the other hand, the Artcoustic Spitfire Monitors are very industrial or utilitarian looking, not a loudspeaker that many people would choose for their living room. Instead, the Spitfires are designed for installations where sound quality is critical, but aesthetics are less important, such as a dedicated cinema system or a screening room where they would be installed behind curtains or a projection screen. They're also recommended as mid-field monitors in a recording studio, or for sound reinforcement in an auditorium, bar, or restaurant—even in commercial movie theatres. The Spitfires are based on the Artcoustic DF75-55 X2 home theatre loudspeakers and use the same complement of drivers packaged in a more durable utility enclosure. The Spitfire's shallow 6-inch depth is ideal for placement behind curtains or a screen in a cinema system. They are two-way, full-range, bi-wirable monitors with two 10-inch low-frequency drivers and two 1.5-inch high-frequency drivers and are sold as mirrored pairs for use as mid-field monitors. Each Monitor has a two-position high-frequency level control to set maximum SPL at 112 dB or 116 dB. The 10-inch woofers have rubber surrounds for long excursion, have aluminum voice coils for rugged operation, and can withstand high temperatures over extended periods of time. According to Artcoustic, dual tweeters help control dispersion and reduce comb filtering, important for clarity, especially in vocals and film dialogue.



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Two Spitfire Professional Subwoofers—a loudspeaker based on the Artcoustic DFS100-75 X—accompany the Monitors. They are passive subwoofers with four long-throw 10-inch bass drivers, each powered by a 1U-high rack-mountable PA-300 Professional Power Amplifier. A PA-300 amp is included in the price of the subwoofer and is capable of 150 watts (to two channels) or bridgeable for 300-watt monaural output. The PA-300 is also available as an option with the Spitfire Monitors. The

amplifier features balanced-line XLR and phone jack inputs and unbalanced RCA jack inputs and banana-plug loudspeaker outputs. The PA-300s have two input sensitivity controls rather than conventional gain or volume controls. The difference in performance and implementation is subtle, but generally an input sensitivity control is used to match the gain output of the device before it—the source—can maintain a higher signal-to-noise ratio than a volume control. Depending on how they are designed, an input sensitivity control can also increase the headroom and dynamic range of the entire system. The surround loudspeakers in this multichannel system are the Artcoustic Diablo Monitor X2 with one 5.5-inch low-frequency driver and two 1.5-inch high-frequency units, the same drivers used in the Spitfire Monitors. Although dwarfed by the Spitfires, the smaller Diablo Monitors have similar sound quality and timbre and would actually make a good choice for a more modest home theatre system when accompanied by a subwoofer. The Diablos are also designed as near-field studio monitors, or for sound reinforcement in smaller venues, even corporate presentation facilities.

Performance

Simply stated, the Artcoustic Spitfire loudspeaker system is a true cinema loudspeaker system for music and movies, and certainly one of the best I've heard. The sound characteristics of the Artcoustic loudspeakers are many, but let's start with bass, which sounded authoritative and visceral, the kind of bass you can feel as well as hear. It's not about bass quantity, but bass quality, depth, and extension. The bass didn't sound overpowering, it sounded strong, deep, and tight with the eight 10-inch drivers in the two subwoofers. The electric bass and the kick-drum in Boz Scagg's signature hit "Lowdown" from the Greatest Hits Live DVD (Coming Home Studios) sounded fast and quick, and hit me right in the chest like a live performance. It's likely that the 20 volt/millisecond slew rate and the damping factor of 150 at 8 ohms in the PA-300 amplifiers had a lot to do with the solid bass.

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Film sources demonstrate the real capabilities of the Spitfire system. In *The Contract* (Millennium Films), a suspenseful action-thriller starring Morgan Freeman and John Cusack, the thumping of the helicopters overhead combined with multiple gunshot scenes aptly showed the wide dynamic range potential of the system. Dialogue clarity and intelligibility remained clear when competing with the intense action on the screen. Even at high volume levels, the system sounded clean and robust, reason enough to stay home and watch a movie rather than go to the cinema.

These are great loudspeakers for band music—a military band. In “March From Midway,” from John Williams and the Boston Pops Orchestra (Philips), the tympani drum had bass depth and power that virtually shook the room. The theme from Peter Gunn sounded bold and strong in Ultimate Mancini (Concord Records) with excellent bass extension that reached the lowest octaves. The Spitfires produce a big sound image when played at high SPL levels with outstanding clarity but are equally enjoyable at lower volume levels. At low to medium volumes they have a detailed, open, and very neutral sound quality with no discernable coloration. The lead and backup vocals in Boz Scagg’s DVD had a very natural sound quality with outstanding clarity, easy to listen to for long periods of time. Following the tympani drums in “March From Midway,” the triangles sounded crisp and clean, enough to send a chill down my spine.

Summary

It can be shown that the primary source of sensory input in human beings is vision, followed by sound. Therefore, it follows that the picture is more important than the sound in a home theatre system. I would argue that unlike a video image, sound is a three-dimensional sensory experience that does more to create a sense of “being there” in a film or onstage at a concert. I appreciate a large, high definition video image as much as anyone, but it’s the sound that draws me into the action in a film or the thrill of a good concert. Many of us who have home theatre systems share the space with other purposes. But, for a brief period of time, my home theatre was transformed into a home cinema, minus the giant screen, custom theatre seating, lighting, and so on, but it’s the sound that really counts. When I hear a loudspeaker system like the Artcoustic Spitfire Monitors, I’m magically transported to the scene. The best home cinemas are designed and built to account for every detail, and the results can be awe-inspiring. Combined with the plush theatre seats, the fancy lighting, correct room acoustics, and a big screen, the Artcoustic Spitfire System is as close to re-creating a fine home cinema system as you’ll find.

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