



Mirage

UNI-Theater Speaker System

The ingenuity of loudspeaker designers never ceases to amaze me. It seems like a simple enough proposition — mount a speaker in a box, then field as many boxes as you have channels. Simple, but 6.1 = 7 is a lot of boxes, even for the most fanatical audiophile's spouse. Thus, designers have sought ways to integrate more channels into fewer boxes. Example A: Mirage's UNI-Theater, which crams three channels (left/center/right) into one long, slender cabinet. Though the benefits of such a system are obvious, I wondered: What are the drawbacks?

SETUP

The appropriately named UNI-Theater is about a yard wide and a few inches high and deep. Its brushed aluminum cabinet and punched metal grille are distinctly modern-looking, providing both nice techno styling and unobtrusiveness. Impressively arrayed across its length are nine cones and three tweeters. These comprise three independent channels, each containing one active woofer, two passive radiators, and a tweeter, the lat-

ter placed coaxially over a woofer using a saucer-shaped deflector that aids dispersion. Speakers-galore "wow" factor aside, the UNI-Theater is a fairly simple two-way design. Tech notes: As you might expect, the interior of the enclosure is subdivided into three compartments, one for each channel. And, unlike some fancy all-in-one speakers that use digital signal processing to throw sound around the room, the UNI-Theater is passive, and uses only deflectors and angled tweeters.

The UNI-Theater is accompanied by enough hardware to start your own Ace franchise. Specifically, you can wall-mount it or place it on a shelf with its very slick glass base. Depending on your mounting choice, you flick a switch to either "wall" or "stand" position; this controls a boundary compensation circuit that adjusts frequency response accordingly. For my tests, I used the speaker in both positions (substituting "close to the wall" for actual wall mounting). Wiring the UNI-Theater is typical, except that six binding posts are all on one cabinet. Mirage recommends using 10 to 100 watts per channel; I cau-

tiously pushed the limit to 120 watts with no ill effects.

I suppose that many customers will use a UNI-Theater as an all-in-one home theater solution. But, after a moment's thought (and another one-grand purchasing decision) it's clear that a UNI-Theater can be used in the back for surround channels, too. So, I placed another UNI-Theater directly behind my listening position and about 8 feet back to create, with the aid of a subwoofer, a 6.1-channel system. The front UNI-Theater was below my Samsung DLP, positioned so the tweeters were pointing upward. Following Mirage's suggestion, I mounted the rear UNI-Theater higher (above 6 feet) and flipped it over, with the tweeters pointing down.

To round out the low end, I relied on an OMNI S10 subwoofer. This is one of Mirage's bestsellers, housing a front-firing 10-inch driver, two down-firing ports, and a 200-watt RMS amplifier in a quasi-cube measuring under 1½ feet per side.

MUSIC PERFORMANCE

To begin my music audition, I listened to the stereo orchestral score for the film *The Illusionist*, composed by Philip Glass and featuring his trademark repeated motifs; this time quietly misterioso. I first focused on essential timbral fidelity, and was well satisfied. The woofers displayed a reasonably warm sound on piano and

The Short Form

Snapshot

Three channels masterfully squeezed into one horizontal cabinet handle both front and surround duties in this minimalist's dream system.

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L/R/Center/Surround 150 Hz to 10.3 kHz \pm 7.3 dB
Subwoofer 29 Hz to 106 kHz \pm 2.5 dB

The UNI-Theater has essentially omnidirectional response: results of every measured trace were virtually identical except for small variations. The basic shape is downsloping as frequency increases with a fair degree of roughness across the bandwidth. The subwoofer has excellent extension and bandwidth uniformity but only average overall dynamic capability, hitting max SPL of 106 dB at 50 Hz and 83 dB at 20 Hz with less than 10% distortion. — Tom Nussaine

strings, with enough low-frequency lower-bass extension to merge with the sub. The tweeters (crossing over at 2.7 kHz) were quite smooth on harp and percussion and had good high-frequency extension. On some particularly energetic violin passages, the tweeters were just a bit edgy, but that was a small tradeoff for what was otherwise a refreshingly crisp sonic character. Each speaker channel occupies only a small volume inside the shared cabinet, but their sound output was as loud, clean and balanced as that from many larger bookshelf speakers. The sub, although not stressed by this score, was highly musical when crossed over at 70 Hz, and nicely covered the top half of the bottom octave.

I next focused on spatial fidelity. Did the three-channel sound seem to squirt from one point? No. Was the panorama as wide as from cabinets spread apart? No. The sound field fell in between — relatively smaller than what you're probably used to with fully separated front speakers, but quite spacious. In fact, the more I listened, the more I liked it. The consolidated panorama of the UNI-Theater, combined with terrific timbral matching of the channels, produced a very listenable on-axis front soundstage. The downside, however, was a smaller sweet spot. Move more than a few feet off-axis and you're in the cheap seats.

Switching gears, and adding more channels, I listened to Porcupine Tree's *In Absentia*. This DVD-Audio recording has a terrific surround mix, my favorite being "Collapse

the Light into Earth." First, I found the essential sound quality was very good; the beautifully reproduced close-miked solo vocals and piano convinced me to "thumbs-up" the UNI-Theater's fidelity, and the clearly audible receding vocal delays demonstrated great clarity. The strings and heavily reverberated and delayed vocals and piano in the rear channels which, although not conveyed with the same spaciousness that standard speakers (or dipoles) can provide, were more than sufficiently pleasing. I think the effect was particularly good because my rear UNI-Theater was mounted high up. Unless you are a spatial-fidelity snob, these small cabinets will provide a very pleasant and musical sound field.

MOVIE PERFORMANCE

To check out movie performance, I screened *Minority Report*, a suitably creepy Spielberg murder mystery set in the near-future of 2054. The opening montage projection of the precognitives' predictions puts the sound field right to work. Accompanied by Schubert's Eighth Symphony, effects smartly slide to and fro. The width of the soundstage conveyed by the UNI-Theater was perfectly suited for this, placing the effects at locations corresponding to the size of the onscreen projection. This is contrasted to live scenes of the murder-to-be, where the onscreen events occur in larger spaces. Here, although the sound field was more narrow than is optimal, it was still adequately airy.

The rear UNI-Theater was pretty good at conveying surround effects. When Tom Cruise walks through a mall and is retina-scanned, displays call out his name as he walks by. In an alley fight scene, jet-pack equipped police fly around like mutant fairies and crash through numerous building partitions. And in the chase through a Lexus factory, Cruise is harassed by laser beams, robot arms, and all manner of industrial technology. Throughout, the UNI-Theater had good front-rear sound distribution but, not surprisingly, lacked convincing side fields. How costly is that drawback? It depends on how much you value complete immersion. Estimating that the field was 80% of that of discrete speakers, I was satisfied.

The center speaker delivered good dialogue intelligibility. It also accurately revealed a few subtle (and documented) equalization flaws in the dialogue tracks.

For a relatively compact 10-inch sub, the OMNI S10 was a genuine heavy hitter. It pounded out chase and factory low-frequency effects with real gusto. When the cops unleash their stun guns, they punch out a real sonic jolt — an ass-kicking thump in the sub. No issues here.

BOTTOM LINE

Can you convey 6.1 channels from 2.1 cabinets? I was skeptical, but soon grew impressed (then, almost blown away) by this innovative design. Sure, you sacrifice some sound field, but for many installations, these will do just fine, and they'll mate beautifully with many a flat-panel TV. Whether part of a 3.1, 5.1, or 6.1 system, the UNI-Theater single-handedly holds its own against many trios. **S&V**

Key Features

UNI-Theater

:: (\$999): 3/4-in tweeter, 3-in woofer, (2) 3-in passive radiators per channel; 36 3/4 in wide, 18 lb

OMNI-S10

:: (\$499): 10-in subwoofer; 200 watts RMS; 14 1/2 x 17 x 18 1/2 in (WHD); 41 lb

:: Finish: UNI-Theater — aluminum black or silver; OMNI-S10 — black

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