



Klipsch



HD THEATER 600 5.1 SPEAKER SYSTEM

\$599 BY DANIEL KUMIN

Pint-size speakers, hefty home theater sound.

EVERYBODY LOVES SMALL SPEAKERS, and why not? Smaller is — often — easier to afford, easier to schlep home, easier to place, and easier to live with. Smaller also has certain acoustical advantages in achieving smooth response and in yielding the broad, even spread of sound that favors good imaging and an open, believable tone color.

But how small is too small? Some say there's no limit, and at least one manufacturer (Bose) has had success with subwoofer/satellite designs whose sats are smaller than a pepper mill, let alone a breadbox. But as the front satellites of a speaker system become smaller, their ability to reproduce bass low enough to bridge effectively with the practical

FIRST TAKE

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upper limits of a single subwoofer, at around 150 Hz (and ideally lower), becomes questionable.

Klipsch thinks it has found the sweet spot with its HD Theater 600 system, whose four identical satellites are just about literally pint-and-a-half-size — the center speaker, with dual woofers, is about half again as long — and nicely finished in smooth black lacquer. Klipsch tells me that the 2.5-inch mid/bass driver in the 600 suite has been re-engineered to deliver better, more powerful, and slightly more extended bottom-range output, helping the diminutive speakers to blend effectively with the compact 8-inch sub that fills out the 600 system, at least as compared with the HD Theater 500 it supersedes.

SETUP

Klipsch designed some simple yet quite clever plastic mounting brackets for the 600 sats, allowing for easy wall-mounting with plenty of rotation of the round-backed speakers for as much “toe-in” as might be wished. Stick-on feet are included for stand or shelf placement. I set the L/R sats on standard speaker stands in my usual location on either side of my TV, with the horizontally arrayed center speaker on my low center stand just below its bottom edge. The surrounds went on my regular high-placed shelves, flanking the listening position, while the sub, which is fairly hefty for an 8-incher, went in my usual woofer home just to the right of the right-front speaker.

PERFORMANCE

On initial hearing, the Klipsch system posted up a big, broad stereo image, with surprisingly accurate tonal balance and an impressive sense of heft. Straight-ahead pop like the Shins’ “Girl Sailor,” from *Winning the Night Away*, sounded full and punchy, with solid bass that retained audible hollow-body color (woodier than the Fender Precision bass so ubiquitous on most amplified music) and a smooth, easy-to-listen-to top end. James Mercer’s voice sounded just a little more adenoidal than usual: I detected a hint of a cupped and slightly veiled mid-range. But I hasten to add that without direct A/Bs, or decades invested in comparative listening, you’d be unlikely to note either one on your steno pad.

More microscopic listening led me to a couple of issues. The HD Theater 600 is a slightly dark-sounding system: High-treble material is relaxed and a touch recessed. This can be a welcome relief with a lot of high-energy pop, especially where large quantities of distorted guitar sounds build up. But more delicate recordings may pay a price: “Walking My Baby Back Home,” from James Taylor’s *Hourglass*, features a chorus with (presumably) James whistling the tune over acoustic guitars and a subtle shimmer played, softly but audibly, on the ride cymbal. Heard via the HD Theater 600 system, the cymbal part was all but lost, along with some of the swinging ease it contributes to Taylor’s “solo.” Aiming the left/right satellites very carefully to the listening spot, both vertically and horizontally, helped appreciably — treble dispersion is tightly controlled by Klipsch’s 90-degree “Tractrix” horn. You may also want to remove the speaker grilles: I did my listening with the grilles on, and our extended measurements (available at soundandvisionmag.com) found that they reduce treble response by 1.5 to 2.5 dB below 10 kHz,

VERDICT

The HD Theater 600 system’s full, balanced sound makes it a much better-than-average-quality HTiB option, and a great value too.

PLUS

- Plays loud without audible distress
- Impressive output from Subwoofer
- Close tonal match between center and sats

MINUS

- Speaker grilles can obscure treble detail

KEY FEATURES



+ Satellite

2.5-in cone woofer, 0.75-in aluminum-dome horn-loaded tweeter; 6 x 3.9 x 3.6 in; 2 lb

+ Center

(2) 2.5-in cone woofers, 0.75-in aluminum-dome horn-loaded tweeter; 3.9 x 9 x 3.6 in; 2 lb

+ Subwoofer

vented enclosure; 8-inch (nominal) cone woofer; 100-watt amplifier; LFE line-level inputs; variable sub level and low-pass controls; sub phase and on/off switches; 13.9 x 12.5 x 12.5 in

and by as much as –6.3 dB at higher frequencies.

At the other end, however, things were unexpectedly easy to balance. The tiny Klipsches did indeed make a respectable blend with their companion sub, with my preamp’s crossover set to 120 Hz, when balanced up to a very circumspect level. Klipsch’s largely graphical, single-sheet manual suggests 150 Hz, but I found this setting too high. It induced too much and too noticeable low-midrange from the subwoofer: My compromise traded a slight loss in lower-male-vocal fullness and tenor-instrument warmth for relatively “quicker” bass and a reduced 80-Hz thud.

Thus, as I’ve found with countless other small-satellite systems, ultimate subwoofer level is critical. Set it too high, and woofer thump overwhelms the musical balance and bleed-through of the lower-mids betrays woofer position; set it too low, and male vocals and middle-range instruments lose body and deeper bass information recedes.

Happily, in the Klipsch system’s case, this balance was readily achieved and remained relatively stable over a range of listening material. Often with small sub/sat systems, I find myself goosing woofer level for movies to get some “big-theater” impact, only to roll it back on music to tame the boom. In this case, my empirically derived optimal setting proved reasonably satisfying in both modes.

A hyperactive soundtrack like that on the Blu-ray

TEST REPORTS / SPEAKERS

Disc of *The Amazing Spider-Man* proved the little Klipsches to be ingratiatingly able. There was enough spatial bloom to involve me in the action, and just enough bottom-end grunt to suggest a real cinematic experience.

For example, let's take Chapter 4 (in which Peter awakens to his new powers): The echoey soundtrack here is busy and heavy in all channels, yet the plinks of Peter climbing the fire escape still sounded clear and convincing, as did the dialogue in his encounter with the toughs. There's enough low-end oomph to conjure up real movie sound and, as long as you keep the sub level quite lean, a tolerable degree of midbass boom. (That said, the little Klipsch sub is no brute: Material like the famous cannons from *Master and Commander* was audibly bereft of bottom-octave underpinnings.)

Other factors, less glamorous but of at least equal importance: The Klipsch system's miniature center speaker made a surprisingly close match to its lateral mates, and held its tonal character well to substantially off-axis listening angles; it should answer



SMALL WONDER

The Klipsch sats proved "ingratiatingly able" when playing movie soundtracks. Their "easy-to-listen-to" top-end also worked for music.

nicely in most rational living-room setups even with fairly close-in seating. The surround-channel sats, identical to the main L/R pair, worked decently in this task, though the relatively modest dispersion of mids and highs, and the high crossover, tended to make them somewhat easier to localize by ear. The time-tested trick of aiming them toward the side walls to "wash" reflected sound into the listening space proved effective for film-sound ambience.

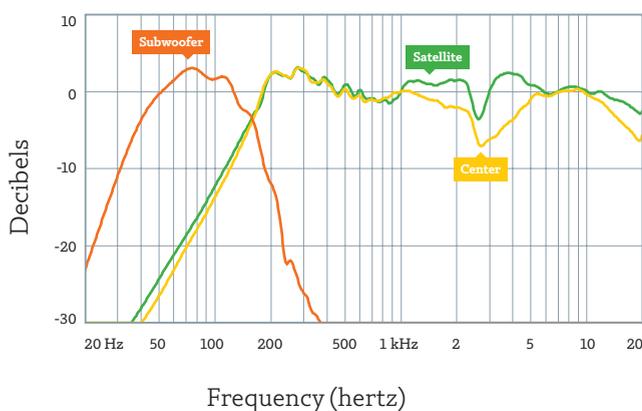
Klipsch lists the 8-inch sub's output as extending — unqualified — to 36 Hz, and while this may be so at low levels, I found the useful limit to be rather higher. Nevertheless, the little sub did a very good job to that point, which is effective for the vast majority of music. When pushed hard at the bottom of its range, the woofer did produce some fairly strong, impulsive port "chuffing" (it sounded almost like clacking), but this was nearly always obscured by high levels of full-range music at such loud settings. Otherwise, the sub's limiting circuitry worked well, keeping any audible distress from intruding even at ridiculous volume levels.

And speaking of level, the HD Theater 600 can deliver quite a bit. The tiny Klipsches play louder, clean, than I would have expected, and while some dynamic compression is clearly happening, given adequate power they will impress even experienced listeners with their sheer output.

BOTTOMLINE

The question that Klipsch's amiable theater-in-a-box system begs is this: What kind of listening do you intend to do? Music aficionados may glean slightly more refined and possibly even more extended reproduction by directing their \$600 toward a carefully chosen pair of larger bookshelf or even small-tower speakers — including several from Klipsch. (No knock on Klipsch: The same is true of most HTiB systems in this price range.) But it's a different matter if you seek general-purpose playback, and want "big sound" from very small boxes on movies and music alike. Honestly, the best way to approach Klipsch's HD Theater 600 one-box system may be to set it up, balance it carefully over a period of days (or weeks) on music, movies, and TV sound — and then forget it. Resist the temptation to constantly fiddle with subwoofer level, or satellite toe-in, or aiming. Let the little Klipsch system disappear, and you will enjoy surprisingly powerful movie sound and, by mass-market standards, eminently full, balanced, and dynamic musical playback. All for a very modest investment in both cash and floor space. **SV**

TEST BENCH / FREQUENCY RESPONSE



- **Satellite** 157 Hz to 20 kHz ±3.3 dB
- **Center** 162 Hz to 20 kHz ±5.0 dB
- **Subwoofer** 41 to 155 Hz ±3 dB

Both the satellite and the center speaker in the Klipsch HD Theater 600 measure nearly flat on-axis. The satellite's off-axis response is superb, but the center speaker shows major driver-interference dips between 1.5 and 3.3 kHz. Both have mild impedance curves and good sensitivity, so any receiver should be able to power them. For a sub included with an HTiB system, this one's a monster in miniature, averaging 114.7 dB in the low bass (40-63 Hz) octave and 97.2 dB in the ultra-low bass (20-31.5 Hz) octave. — Brent Butterworth

For more Klipsch lab data, go to soundandvisionmag.com