

# “GO AHEAD, HSU ME!” OR “HOW I LEARNED TO ASCEND TO MY 5.1 SWEET SPOT”

By Felix E. Martinez



A friend recently called me to confess he had spent a fortune on a 5.1 speaker system only to realize that it sounded like garbage. I rushed over to perform my usual pro bono multi-channel audio emergency service and discovered the poor soul had removed the speakers from their boxes only to place them in a surround sound Pandora's box. He had the wrong speakers, the wrong setup, and the wrong room. It was all kinds of bad wrapped up in buyer's re-

morse. Luckily, he was able to return the awful satellite speaker system and I was able to convince him to re-evaluate his multi-channel audio plans.

The home theater craze has brought the potential for stunning sound in our homes; nevertheless, there are quite a few nasty-sounding rooms filled with shiny, expensive gear out there. Let's try to bring the sweet spot into focus...

First things first: the listening space. While there are limitations in every household, the ideal scenario is the dedicated room. It doesn't need to have stadium seating. What we're looking for is isolation from the rest of the home. This can be a den, an unused bedroom, or even a converted garage. At the other end of the spectrum is the grand kitchen/dining/living room open space from hell. Even in the worst example, furniture placement can do wonders in containing the listening space and creating an environment suitable for proper speaker placement.

News flash: speakers should not be flying high in each of the four corners of the room, no matter how neat it is to point up to the roof with pride. The center speaker will also sound clearer once picture frames glorifying the fam-

ily pet are moved to the side. The surrounds should not be in the corners of the room behind the sweet spot. Rather, they should form the ends of a "U" shape surrounding the listener, which provides for better imaging between the front and rear channels. Each monitor should be at (or near) ear level. The subwoofer should be in a corner to achieve the widest dynamic range, lowest distortion, and deepest bass extension.

I'm a believer that one does not need monitors the size of the monolith from *2001: A Space Odyssey* in order to get phenomenal sound, and the Ascend Acoustics-Hsu Research 5.1 speaker system is an ideal package. Never heard of Ascend and Hsu? No, you won't find their products at Best Buy. Do yourself a favor and go to [www.ascendacoustics.com](http://www.ascendacoustics.com) and [www.hsuresearch.com](http://www.hsuresearch.com) and check them out. **In my opinion, the Ascend-Hsu combo is simply the best multi-channel speaker package under \$1,300.** This nexus of price, performance and compact size makes for a great case study in our quest for an ideal speaker configuration for multi-channel audio.

**For the main and surround monitors, we'll use Ascend stalwarts CBM-170s, and for the center channel, Ascend's new CMT 340c. The cube-like 170s may appear diminutive, but they pack**



a wallop. Imaging across these matched monitors is simply stunning. In fact, the word that comes to mind is “transparent.” Highs and mids are silky smooth, and mid-lows are well represented — even without a subwoofer.

However, we do have a sub: Hsu Research’s new STF-2, which reaches down to 25Hz with ease! The beauty of the Ascend-Hsu combo is that the Ascends can easily carry (and dip well below) the crucial mid-bass frequencies around 90-100Hz, while the Hsu sub



▲ The Hsu STF-2 subwoofer weighs in at 52 pounds, hefty for its compact size.

▲ The compact Ascend CBM-170 speakers and a CMT-340c center channel weigh 13 and 20 pounds, respectively.

provides clean bass energy in the nether-regions. I’ve found mid-bass frequencies in many bookshelf and satellite systems to be lacking, while a “boomy” sub is used to make up the difference. Not so here.

Dynamic film soundtracks can be impressive demo material, but we also need to listen to music. Problems in tone, imaging, and sound reflection can be uncovered quickly by listening to various styles of music in multi-channel surround. After breaking out a few reference DVD-Audio and SACD discs, the Ascend-Hsu speaker package again proves it can truly go the distance. Lead vocals through the CMT 340c center monitor are clear and natural, and are free of mid-range “honk” or thinness. The CBM-170s practically disappear, leaving in their space a snapshot of the recorded instruments. Musical material also requires subwoofers to have low distortion, flat extended bass, and good transient response. The STF-2 delivers in spades, with tight, dynamic, seamless low-end performance.

Now that we have the proper setup, let’s sit back, relax and enjoy this month’s hi-res multi-channel audio releases! Coming soon: more interviews, a look at the controversial world of bass management, and five-and-a-half steps to building a 5.1 mix. 🎧

**Ascend CBM-170 and Ascend CMT-340c**

Frequency Response: 69Hz-20kHz +/- 3dB and 55Hz-20kHz +/- 3dB

Nominal Impedance: 8 ohms (both)

Power Handling: 25-200 watts and 35-240 watts

Sensitivity 89dB and 92dB

Cabinet: Bass Reflex Via Rear Port (both)

Dimensions: 12”H x 9”W x 10”D (with grille)

and 7.5”H x 21”W x 10.5”D

Weight: 13 lbs. and 20 lbs.

Tweeter: (1) 1” soft dome (both)

Woofer(s): (1) 6.5” cone and

(2) 6.5” cones

Finish: Vacuum Formed Black Vinyl

Warranty: 5 Years (both)

**Hsu STF-2 Subwoofer**

Bass Extension: 25Hz +/- 2dB

Amp Power: 200 watts

Dimensions: 19”H x 14”W x 18”D

Weight: 52 lbs.

Woofer: (1) 10”

Finish: Vacuum Formed Black Vinyl

Warranty: 7 Years (woofer), 2 Years (electronics)

Free domestic ground shipping if purchased directly from Ascend Acoustics

**MSRP: Complete Package Pricing**  
**\$1,258**