

# PSB Synchrony Home Theater Speaker System

By Daniel Kumin • November 2007



In the 30 years of its existence, PSB Speakers has, by my count, introduced a new flagship line only three or four times. So the debut of the Canadian company's Synchrony line is an event of some moment — at least in the world of hi-fi, where PSB founder Paul Barton enjoys something akin to celebrity status. It's also an event up north, where he's well known as a speaker designer, re-searcher, and supporter of the excellent acoustics facilities of Canada's National Research Council, used extensively by PSB and others (such as Axiom, whose Epic 80/500 system is [reviewed here](#)).

PSB sent us the cream of its new line, which also includes several smaller models. The Synchrony One tower speaker and its fellows look quite conventional but embody enough new developments for the company to call this its most significant introduction in a decade. Barton's 3 years of developmental work is said to have yielded improvements in the back and front ends of all drivers, among them a new titanium dome tweeter and cones of a re-engineered laminate. Crossovers have been refined from previous designs, too, as have the cabinets, which feature curved aluminum and wood-laminate construction that is both rigid and more manufacturing-efficient than anything PSB has done in the past. All three Synchronys we received were handsomely finished in dark cherry; black ash is also available.

## Setup

Despite the Synchrony Ones' promise of substantial bass extension and oomph, PSB also included its HD10, a subwoofer of the vogueish subcompact breed. This went in my well-established sub position (left of the left-front speaker), and the other PSBs in similarly well-proven locations. I set all five to "large" (full-range), leaving the HD10 as a strictly LFE-channel supplement, and located the towers flanking my 52-inch Samsung LCD, with the center on a low stand and the surrounds on high side-wall shelves. The Synchrony S surround is a double two-way design pitched as a "tri-mode" capable of dipole, bipole, or monopole radiation, depending on how you connect it. For dipole response, I cross-jumpered its dual inputs. Setting up a new speaker system usually entails a good bit of pushing and pulling the main pair to and from the front wall for the most balanced bass, so I felt fortunate when the Ones sounded excellently even and extended right where I plopped them, about 30 inches from the wall. They sounded almost as good 40 inches out, too, and 20 as well. No, they weren't completely impervious to placement, but they were substantially less touchy than most other towers. And it's by design: Each of the three woofers has a separate subenclosure and port, all with different dimensions to the floor and ceiling, as well as independent crossover characteristics. This is said to help mitigate floor-bounce interference and thus improve real-world in-room response and integration.

Full disclosure: I've known PSB founder Paul Barton professionally for some 20 years. And his notions of good sound happen to agree with mine. Same goes for his ideas on where to make the inevitable compromises in any speaker design. Over those 20 years, I've never heard any bad PSBs — nor any as good as the Synchrony One towers. The Ones are rubbing elbows with Good As It Gets — granted, for a hefty stack of Benjamins, but a shorter one than that for any similar speakers I can think of. Stereo listening revealed even, smooth, and extended response stretching from nearly the lowest octave to audibility's highest limits and beyond. The towers' bass octaves were powerful, well-supported, and free of gaps or peaky "wolf notes" in a way that very few one-piece speakers can match — going a long way toward conjuring up the excitement of live music in a hall, where big dimensions eliminate the hi-fi "tell" of room-induced bass bumps.

A tour of familiar vocal checkpoints showed the Synchrony Ones to be equally accurate through the remaining octaves, too. Even the most low/midrange-sensitive voices, such as Mark Knopfler's, proved utterly free of colorations such as "hoo," "honk," "chestiness," or "cupped" or muffled sound. Treble was very extended and ruthlessly even, which on the one hand eliminates any hint of "tizz" or splatter but on the other will do nothing whatsoever to mitigate recordings (or rooms) that tend too far toward hardness or brightness.

With a nod to Barton's first career as a professional violinist, I cued up a CD of Itzhak Perlman playing the Stravinsky Violin Concerto — and was rewarded with riveting, crystalline sound. The Synchrony towers produced a phantom, centered violinist so solid and dimensional, I had to restrain myself from confirming that the center speaker wasn't somehow playing (it wasn't). Every nuance of Perlman's lusty bowing was electrifyingly defined. As for stereo imaging, well, it gets no better: On the first movement's fugal episode in the strings, each section was wonderfully defined in space, clearly demarcating the seating divisions from the first fiddles to the seconds, the violas, and then the cellos.

Rock and jazz were just as impressive. Brushwork on hi-hat and cymbals was particularly noteworthy: airy, crisp, spacious, and mesmerizingly clear. The 2002 film *Hero* might have been conceived purely as a home theater spectacular. From the opening sequence, thundering hooves, wind-whipped pennants, and clanging swords swirl around the audience with gloriously dynamic, dimensional movement. The PSB Synchrony home theater speaker system conveyed every one with energy and grace.

The Synchrony One C center speaker produced a perfect tonal match to the towers, with voices sounding identical in timbre to the same played monaurally via the towers (save the inevitable spatial effects of a spaced pair instead of a point source). Off-axis center sound was nearly as exact: I heard a very slight bit of "lobing" peaks-and-dips from the paired woofers, but only deeply off-axis and mostly below the critical vocal range in frequency.

The Synchrony S surround speakers were equally adept in their dipole connection. *Hero's* falling-leaves fight scene (Chapter 6) is a tremendous test for surround-bubble integrity, but I heard very nearly zero discontinuity from center to fronts to surrounds, which approaches the finest performance I've encountered. Although the One towers could certainly handle fairly serious home theater unaided — and the full system could play loud as hell, given enough watts — the little PSB HD10 subwoofer added distinctly to my setup. The Kodo drumming that's prominent in the opening minutes of Tan Dun's *Hero* score gained weight and slam with the sub onboard. Still, if I were assembling a flat-out theater, I'd probably look to more (bigger) woofage to do justice to the Synchrony line.

#### Bottom Line

I tried manfully to find some Synchrony flaws to cite. The speakers are of but average sensitivity and are nominal 4-ohm loads, so some competent amplification will be required. The PSBs' real-wood finish, though rich and handsome, wasn't as glassy-smooth as that of some other expensive speakers I've seen. And though I fully understand the decision not to rely on a potentially signal-sapping switch, cross-jumpering the surrounds for dipole playback makes it difficult to switch modes on the fly for surround music and movies.

Otherwise, according to my value system for loudspeakers — honest octave-to-octave balance, precise imaging, expansive spatial accuracy, freedom from dynamic compression, and absence of coloration — PSB's Synchronys are among the best loudspeakers I've auditioned in my studio in several years. You could easily spend substantially more and do no better, or not as well. Synchrony was definitely worth the wait.

The Short Form
Price \$10,000 (as tested) / <a href="http://psbspeakers.com">psbspeakers.com</a> / 905-831-6555
Snapshot
PSB's new flagship delivers true high-end performance from top to bottom.
Plus
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Benchmark sonic performance</li> <li>•Genuinely full-range towers will please two-channel purists</li> <li>•Smooth, slim, handsome looks</li> </ul>
Minus
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Wood-finish quality merely very good</li> <li>•Switching surrounds can be awkward</li> </ul>
Key Features
<p><b>Synchrony One (\$4,500/pair)</b>            •(3) 6.5-in woofers; 4-in midrange; 1-in titanium dome tweeter; 43 in high; 61 lb</p> <p><b>Synchrony One C (\$2,000)</b>            •(2) 5.25-in woofers; 4-in midrange; 1-in titanium dome tweeter; 24.3 in wide; 37 lb</p> <p><b>Synchrony S (\$2,000/pair)</b>            •(2) 6.5-in woofers; (2) 1-in titanium dome tweeters; 13.3 in high; 20 lb</p> <p><b>HD10 (\$1,500)</b>            •10-in woofer; (2) 10-in passive radiators; 750-watt amplifier; 12 x 13 x 13 in (w/drivers, feet, and connectors); 38 lb</p>
Test Bench
The Synchrony One exhibited excellent low-frequency extension, followed by a 250-Hz floor-bounce notch and other modest irregularities up through its operating range. A large tweeter peak at 18 kHz is shared by the One C and S as well. The C showed no off-axis lobing, while the S showed the interference patterns typical of di/bipole speakers. The sub hit 110 dB max SPL at 62 Hz, but its output capability fell off at nearly 30 dB/octave below 50 Hz. — <i>Tom Nousaine</i>