

## TEST REPORT

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## Artison

## Portrait Home Theater Speakers

**A**rtison is a new speaker company with more going for it than just a clever name. It also boasts an impeccable pedigree (creator Cary Christie was a founder of industry pillar Infinity), some classy, smart industrial design, and a well-considered answer to the puzzle of how to mate plasma TVs with serious home theater speakers.

And a puzzle it is, because anyone seeking synergy by keeping the speakers flat and sleek-looking will encounter two problems. First, conventional speakers are *not* designed to sound their best up against a wall. Second, placing a center speaker above or below your spiffy new wall-mounted screen *wrecks* the flat-panel aesthetic — at least in the eyes of budget-dictating spouses and designers.

Enter Artison's Portrait system, which

consists of two small, quasi-dipole surround speakers and a pair of front-channel speakers with a few tricks up their sleeves. That's right, a pair — there is no dedicated center speaker. Each Portrait LCR front speaker has two woofer/tweeter arrays stacked in a single, bazoooka-slim cabinet, plus a third, side-firing tweeter. The lower pair directs left- or right-channel sound straight ahead, with the side tweeter widening the perceived soundstage. The upper woofer/tweeter array is angled inward to reproduce the center channel (in conjunction with the corresponding woofer/tweeter in the LCR on the opposite side of the screen).

The Portrait system's oth-

er big hook is how it's installed. Rather than supplying the kind of generic wall-mounts or stands most other flattish speakers come with, Artison delivers the Portrait LCRs with brackets and grilles that are specifically designed to match your partic-



ular brand and model of plasma or LCD TV. The brackets actually attach the speakers to the TV, forming a single, visually united whole.

For our test system, this meant a pair of brackets fashioned to bolt up to a 50-inch Fujitsu P50XHA30 plasma panel. The brackets attached to the existing holes in the back left and right edges of the Fujitsu's bezel (no drilling required) with supplied, heavy-duty machine screws. The brackets themselves are adjustable so you can align each LCR's top, bottom, and front with the edges of the TV. The result was a sleek, factory-installed look — no one would suspect that these speakers weren't part of the TV itself.

Of course, the Artison LCR pillars are acoustically engineered to take into account the effects that the wall and screen would have on any flush-mounted speaker. For my tests, I simulated wall-mounting as close as possible (without messing up my wall) by placing the TV with the attached LCRs on the provided tabletop stand, then placing that on a low plinth directly against the wall. This put the backs of the speakers about an inch from the wall — essentially the same as if they were mounted on it.

Artison's LRS surround speakers went on my usual high shelves along the side walls, flanking the main listening position. Artison doesn't make a subwoofer, but the company teamed up with Velodyne to sup-

ply subs for the Portrait system, from either the Digital Drive Series or the SPL Series II. For a big room like mine, Velodyne recommended the DD-12, a super-compact 12-incher with tremendous power and an on-board room-correction equalization system. As with other subs in the Digital Drive series, the DD-12's crossover can be custom set for the Portrait system via a software download. Of course, you are free to use other subwoofers from other manufacturers as well.

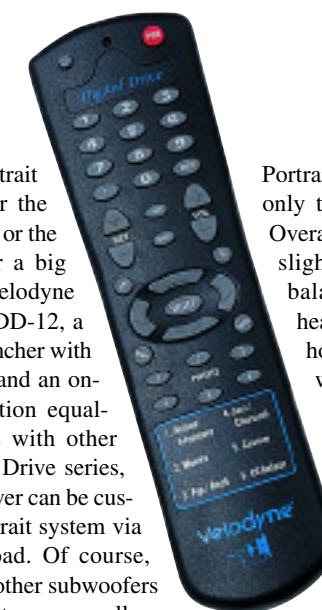
Setting all this up was easier than describing it. I had the Portrait LCRs bracketed to the TV and in place within about 15 minutes. With the DD-12 in my proven subwoofer location a few feet left of the screen and the LRS surrounds on the side walls, I fired up the Artison array and balanced each channel using my preamp's set-up screens. Throwing on a DVD — *Dances with Wolves* — I was instantly struck by the size of the front sonic image I heard, considering that it came from just two speakers barely 4 feet apart. The film's sweeping musical score and wide-open-spaces soundtrack really did sound as if it originated from three front speakers placed substantially farther apart.

Moving on to stereo music, I found the

Portrait LCRs impressively capable with only their lower driver arrays operating. Overall balance was very even, perhaps slightly warm, with unusually natural, balanced, and uncolored vocals — I heard none of the midbass lumpiness or hollowness that unfaillingly show up when you mount conventional speakers on the wall. As with multichannel playback, the Portrait LCRs put up a surprisingly wide image, materially enhanced by the side-firing tweeters, which you can turn off if you decide to mount the LCRs inside a wall or cabinet. (My advice? *Don't.*)

With the support of the Velodyne DD-12 sub, the Portrait LCRs were able to play surprisingly loud. In fact, the louder they played, the more dynamic they sounded. Thanks to the DD-12's digital-domain EQ and crossover controls, I was able to blend the LCRs with the sub perfectly. I won't say much more about the DD-12 — this is an Artison report, after all — except to note that it's one hell of a subwoofer. (Of course, for \$3,000 it ought to be.)

The "phantom" center speaker sounded as good as the front left/right channels, which is not surprising since the upper L/R driver arrays used to create it are identical to the lower arrays used for the L/R channels themselves. Each LCR's upper array has a three-position Presence switch marked 0, -, and +. In my setup, the + setting yielded impressively seamless tonality across the front. From my usual middle seating position, dialogue and TV announcers both sounded centered, clear, and intelligible, with ample dynamic range and punch. The spatial sweet spot was narrow, however, and when I sat on the ends of the couch, the sound's point of origin shifted noticeably toward the near-side screen edge.



## fast facts

	Portrait LCR (L/R/C front)	Portrait LRS (surround)	Velodyne DD-12 (subwoofer)
<b>TWEETER</b>	three 1-inch domes	two 1-inch domes	—
<b>WOOFER</b>	two 4½-inch cones	4½-inch cone	12-inch cone
<b>ENCLOSURE</b>	ported	ported; quasi-dipole	sealed
<b>POWER</b>	—	—	1,250 watts
<b>INPUTS, OUTPUTS, AND CONTROLS</b>	dual metal push-clamp terminals (upper and lower driver arrays wired separately); defeat switch for side-firing tweeter	metal push-clamp terminals	stereo RCA line-level input; binding-post speaker-level input; XLR-balanced LFE input; mike input; stereo RCA test-signal outputs; composite- and S-video outputs for onscreen display; RS-232 in/out; volume control; extensive EQ/crossover adjustments via onscreen menus
<b>DIMENSIONS (WxHxD) and WEIGHT</b>	6 x 24 x 3½ inches; 15½ pounds	9½ x 9 x 3 inches; 6¼ pounds	14 x 14½ x 15½ inches; 67 pounds
<b>FINISH</b>	aluminum or satin black cabinet; grille color-matched to TV	matte white or black	black gloss, cherry, or maple
<b>PRICE</b>	\$1,650 a pair	\$499 a pair	\$3,000
Total: \$5,149; \$2,149 without subwoofer			
<b>MANUFACTURER</b> Artison, www.artisonusa.com, 775-833-4344			



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though slightly less than it did with a phantom-center setup using two conventional left/right speakers.

The Artison system hit its stride with movie soundtracks. I watched snippets of a dozen films, a couple of HDTV ball games and TV dramas, plus several movies in full, and everything I heard told me I was listening to a high-end surround system.

*Narc* is a terrific, highly atmospheric movie that at first glance doesn't seem to depend much on sound. Yet its close, claustrophobic interiors, occasional shocking bursts of violence, and subtle ambient effects — like the tiny, discreet echoes in the bathroom scene between Jason Patric and Krista Bridges in Chapter 19 — could easily be undermined by poor sound reproduction. But the Portrait system reliably provided a transparent, spatially natural window on the filmmakers' careful and artistic production.

Multichannel music, too, sounded very good, particularly natural-acoustic material like saxophonist James Carter's Billie Holiday tribute, *Gardenias for Lady Day*, on SACD. Artison's compact LRS sur-

**PLUS**  
Elegant integration with flat-panel TVs.  
Excellent tonal balance,  
free of coloration.  
Wide, believable front image.

**MINUS**  
Narrow spatial sweet spot for  
center channel.

round speakers produced a big, enveloping ambience, but they still sounded solid on discrete instruments or voices and played loud without complaint.

In sum, Artison's Portrait system does a great job at mimicking the visual style of flat-panel TVs while aurally impersonating a suite of big, boxy home theater speakers. If looks, elegance, and a svelte layout are as important to you as sonics, I'd recommend looking at — and listening to — the Portrait system in a New York minute. Artison's powerful solution to the appearance vs. performance dilemma could be just what you're looking (and listening) for. **SW**

### in the lab

**Sensitivity** (SPL at 1 meter with 2.8 volts of pink-noise input)

front left/right	86 dB
center	85 dB
surround	73 dB

**Impedance** (minimum/nominal)

front left	3.8/6 ohms
center	6.5/11 ohms
surround	3.7/6 ohms

**Bass limits** (lowest frequency and maximum SPL with limit of 10% distortion at 2 meters in a large room)

front left/right	80 Hz at 84 dB SPL
center	80 Hz at 83 dB SPL
surround	100 Hz at 72 dB SPL
subwoofer	22 Hz at 78 dB SPL

104 dB average SPL from 25 to 62 Hz  
109 dB maximum SPL at 62 Hz  
Bandwidth uniformity 95%

All of the response curves in the graph are weighted to reflect how sound arrives at a listener's ears with normal speaker placement. The curves for the LCR front speaker and the LRS surround speaker share the same basic shape, with limited low-frequency extension and an elevation of 4 to 5 dB over the three octaves between 300 Hz and 3 kHz. The phantom center had more extended response in the treble, and the surround had an octave-wide depression centered at 3 kHz. The surround also had significantly lower sensitivity.

With the side-firing tweeter on, front-channel output was similar but 1 dB higher above 1 kHz. The center-channel Presence control increased or decreased response by 3 dB above 10 kHz in the + and - positions, respectively.

The bass limits for the Velodyne DD-12 subwoofer were measured with it set to maximum bandwidth and placed in the optimal corner of a 7,500-cubic-foot room. In a smaller room, users can expect 2 to 3 Hz deeper extension and up to 3 dB higher sound-pressure level (SPL). The subwoofer had very good extension

and output. The room-EQ function worked perfectly for the optimal listening position in my room, as shown by the curve in the graph, which was taken at that position. With the crossover set for the Portrait system via downloadable software, the programmed 70-Hz cutoff was spot-on. The sub's antialiasing circuits made it nearly impossible to drive it into audible distortion.

— Tom Nousaine

