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Performance at a reasonable price

By HELP DESK

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A General Motors executive observed recently that building a \$75,000 sports car was relatively easy; the hard thing is doing one you could sell for \$20,000. It is a point that holds for consumer electronics as well. Consider the JBL products made by Harman Multimedia.

Bose, which I wrote about a few months ago, sells at a high price point for which users rightly can expect high-end performance. JBL aims for more affordable prices, but still delivers high-quality performance. That's a neat trick.

The company's Duet 2-speaker system for personal computers has a street price under \$38 — and a sound that would shame units costing many times more. The design is marked by stylish curves that make them pleasant to look at as well as to listen to. They come in white, silver and aluminum finishes to go with your computer's color scheme.

Duets are lacking in bass, as you would expect with a two-speaker system with no subwoofer. The midrange and highs are good, and the sound is nicely defined. As a jazz and classical listener, they suited my tastes. They are a good choice if you are tight on space or want to hook up external speakers to your notebook or music player.

The Encounter is a "2.1" system, meaning that there are two speakers plus a subwoofer for bass. The system, which sells for \$90, is another in JBL's whimsical series of UFO-themed designs. The two speakers that go on your desk resemble the stereotypical space alien faces seen in hundreds of comic books and B movies; the conical white subwoofer looks like a spacecraft poised for takeoff.

Sound quality is just amazing for this price point. Again, a clear, clean rendition of your music. Rock fans may wish for more thumping bass, but as someone who is tired of the overdone bass typical in music systems today, it was refreshing to be able to actually hear high notes.

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If Encounter has a flaw, it's that the design does create placement difficulties. The two satellite speakers can be a little too easy to knock over while the curves of the subwoofer make it hard to lay it on its side if you want to put it somewhere (under a table, for example) where you don't have the room to stand it upright.

When I was looking for a unit that would be a suitable companion for my notebook, an intrepid Harman PR person recommended that in addition to the Duets, I should give a listen to the battery-powered OnTour unit (\$71). I had thought of it as a companion for music players, but as she noted, the miniplug input can go into a laptop as well. Good suggestion.

OnTour is an arched narrow rectangle that folds up compactly for travel (it comes with a carry bag and air-conditioning adapter) and snaps open for listening. It was marketed originally as an iPod accessory that could be used just as easily with other players. The compact size means OnTour's sound is not quite as rich as JBL's desktop units, but it is good for the purpose. It won't shake the walls of your hotel room, which probably will be good for maintaining good will on the road.

I like the idea of being able to go on the road with my notebook and an iPod and having a speaker system with me that works with both.

A new release this fall is JBL's OnStage II system for iPod. Like the original, Version II is a large white doughnut with a cradle for your iPod that both gets the audio feed and recharges it. The new wrinkle is the addition of a remote control.

OnStage II is air conditioning only, but small enough to take with you traveling if you don't need battery-powered speakers. It does a perfectly good job of letting you listen to your iPod without headphones. It does not match the room-filling sound of Bose's iPod SoundDock, but OnStage sells for about one-third the price. If you don't have unlimited discretionary income or simply don't need an elaborate iPod speaker system, this will do the job very nicely.

Al Gordon is a Massachusetts-based media and political consultant who also writes about technology. You can read more of his articles at www.algordon.com/techblog.html and e-mail him at eagle@algordon.com.

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