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Product Review: B&W Panorama soundbar



Product Name: B&W Panorama soundbar
Product Type: Soundbar
Price: \$2999
Reviewed By: Jez Ford
Magazine: Geare
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The soundbar concept has been with us a good few years now, pioneered by Polk and Yamaha in particular, but becoming more widespread as people realise that they like the idea of surround sound, but not the sometimes impractical requirements of five, six, seven or more speaker boxes stuffing every corner of the lounge with drivers. And the cables, don't start. Of course you can hide speakers and cable in walls, subwoofers in corners. But how much better if you could get a result without them.

The worst of the soundbar breed are just big speakers which certainly give you a boost in level and impact over TV speakers, but may not even use the real surround soundtracks to generate your audio. The best of the breed use genuine multichannel signals and incorporate cunning processing to create a solid centre, powerful left/right channels, and an attempt at producing surround sound from angled drivers, usually making use of side walls to 'bounce' the sound around you.

We're delighted to say that the Panorama is not only one of the 'proper' soundbar designs — it is a quite spectacular one.

Equipment

The Panorama is remarkable for its visual presentation alone. Regular readers may remember B&W's Zeppelin, an iPod dock that shocked the audio world not only because of its price, but by the way it justified its tag with thrilling design, all curves and chrome, not to mention a pretty darned fine sound from your choice of poddage. The Panorama soundbar has clearly come from the same team, sharing a stainless steel backside punctuated by a rubber-covered connection bay and twin down-angled bass ports that use B&W's dimple-covered Flowport design, which aims to minimise air turbulence by the use of golf-ball style dimpling. From the front the Panorama presents as a sleek 110cm-long lozenge of smiling black-steel speaker grille, beneath which lie just one 25mm metal-domed tweeter, a pair of 75mm midrange woofers, and four more 75mm woofers for surround. Finally there's a pair of 90mm "subwoofers"; those get an unspecified (but hopefully hi-fi, being B&W) 50W, with another 5 x 25W internal amplification for the other, er, seven drive units.

The richness in presentation extends to the supplied cabling, with the box including not one but two optical cables, a coax digital cable, a normal analogue RCA pair, plus a wall-mounting kit. We found the figure-of-eight mains cable a fiddle to get in — it needed child-sized fingers to push it home — but everything else was a breeze so sweet that anyone accustomed to connecting home cinema equipment may pass out with joy at the simplicity of it. We ran one digital optical cable direct from a PlayStation 3, and one from the back of our TV, clicked them home through a little cable-tidying system on the Panorama connections bay and — oh, that was it.

You could equally connect an AV receiver, but since this is designed to replace the complexity of such a system, that's a less likely configuration. More likely you would connect one or two separate sources, and take the rest from the back of your telly. The Panorama doesn't extend to decoding of the latest lossless surround formats from Blu-ray, but Dolby Digital, DTS and Dolby Pro-Logic II are all covered.

Performance

Kaboom. One of the first things we played was one of the best soundtracks around, Wall-E on Blu-ray, and even before the movie began, the Disney Blu-ray ident launched its fireworks so forcefully and fully that we physically fell backwards. Good start!



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The Panorama has three modes — 'stereo', 'wide', and 'surround'. Comparison between them makes it immediately obvious that when you select 'surround' on your little black'n'steel egg remote (specially designed to slip perfectly down the back of a sofa), a whole extra level of bass is engaged compared with either 'stereo' or 'wide' modes, while centre-channel speech has excellent clarity. (You can peak this up a bit using a 'voice' button for extra clarity, but we never needed it.)

If you're watching a well-made movie, surround is the mode you'll want. With Wall-E the Panorama instantly picked up the DTS surround soundtrack and presented a deliciously rich presentation of this finest of created soundscapes, with impeccable detail and width of soundstaging, from the filigreed HF clattering of Wall-E's cockroach friend to the slamming gutsy impact of Eva's pot-shots during their first encounter. It is possible to run a subwoofer off the Panorama, but we'd suggest not, unless you prefer to be more shaken than stirred; there's plenty here for the medium-sized rooms in which the Panorama is likely to be used. (B&W quotes a $\pm 6\text{dB}$ response from 36Hz to a skyhigh 50kHz.)

The real treat comes as you advance the volume. Up. And up. By the time we hit 30 on the 40-high scale, the audio was genuinely cinematic, and we praise also the Panorama's ability to throw effects sideways — no fake phasing here, the sounds really do get behind you. It's not an accurate organic placement, mind you — give it a walk-around-the-room dem track and things are fairly vague. But bring in a jet from rear left, or put some atmospheric computer noises back right, and the success rate is high, especially when you're running at what professionals would term 'reference-level' volumes (or "neighbour trembling" in the vernacular).

As with most 'surround bars', the best surround results come when the bar can fire its angled surround speakers to bounce off parallel side walls, or from one corner to a listening position in an opposite corner. If you have, say, a wall on the left and open space on the right, inevitably there's a slight pulling to the left. Set-up on the Panorama allows some tweekage of this, including settings for hard and soft walls (brick vs curtains, say), and even when we put it in some pretty unfriendly situations things sounded good, if not absolutely optimal.

How about the stereo setting? As we noted earlier, there's a huge drop in the low-end when you switch back to stereo — so much so that we contacted B&W's distributor here, Convoy International, to ask what was going on. The reply came from Krestian Pedersen in the UK (described by Convoy as "the Panorama guru").

"A lot of people have noticed the obvious change in tonal balance between the different sound modes," he told us. "These are all very deliberately chosen. Surround mode is tuned for film watching, and therefore needs to be as impressive and explosive as possible and with a lot of surround effects. Therefore the bass has been boosted lots, almost as a loudness function, and furthermore the DSP is working full bore on creating a surround sound sensation.

"Stereo mode however, has been tuned to sound as natural as possible. There's no bass boost, no DSP enhancement, and no centre channel running, just pure unprocessed stereo replication. This sound mode is obviously not as impressive as the surround mode, but in the long run when listening to music it is much less offensive. Listening to music in surround mode is over the top."

And that's spot on. Play stereo music in surround mode and the bass thumps overindulgently and ultimately it gets tiring. Indeed, this can also be true of many TV shows where sound mixes have been roughly hewn. Survivor, with its high production values, sounded great in surround mode, while The Amazing Race came through with its background soundtrack rather too pumped and thumpy. Ad breaks can be downright offensive, but hopefully you have a PVR and don't have to watch them any more.

Switch to stereo for a music source, then, and it sounds bass light at first. But you get used to it, and the louder you play it (20 upwards from our digital source) the better it sounds, perfectly enjoyable — quite like the Zeppelin in fact — with reasonable bass content and nothing to criticise other than it being quite a way from what a good stereo system at this price could deliver. Krestian suggested a compromise in the 'wide' setting, which brings back the centre channel and uses some DSP enhancement, but to us this seemed to remove air and shimmer at the top end and muddle up the midrange, though it did add a little bass. Of course if you're a dance fan who loves a bit of thump, hey, feel free to play music in the surround mode. User preference; your call.

Conclusion

Ultimately, though, this isn't for stereo — on the manual B&W subtitles it an "Integrated A/V Sound System", and that's where it achieves quite superb results, bringing high-impact high-detail cinematic sound without the box count. If your family is likely to say "Ooh, turn it down", it's probably not for you. B&W's Panorama just loves you to crank stuff up. High five. Us too.

THE TECH

Drivers: 2 x 90mm, 2 x 75mm, 4 x 75mm (surround), 1 x 25mm metal-domed tweeter
Internal power: 1 x 50W, 5 x 25W
Inputs: 2 x optical digital, 1 x electrical digital RCA, 2 x analogue RCA phono; 1 x minijack stereo, RS232 service connector
Outputs: subwoofer preout (12-150Hz)

Dimensions: 1100 x 125 x 181mm
Weight: 14.1kg
Warranty: Two years

GOOD:
Beautiful thing
Massive movie impact
Genuine surround effects

BAD:
Only price

MYM: [Convoy International](#)