

Harman Kardon SB 16



CNET EDITORS' RATING



EXCELLENT

AVERAGE USER RATING



out of 3 user reviews

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QUICK SPECS

Speaker type: Speaker system

Dimensions (WxDxH) / Weight:

Two channel speaker . 36.2 in 3.5 in 4.3 in : 7.9 lbs

Subwoofer . 15 in 15 in 18.9 in : 33.1 lbs

Amplification Type: Active

EDITORS' REVIEW

CNET EDITORS' RATING



DESIGN:

8.0

FEATURES:

8.0

PERFORMANCE:

8.0

[Editors' rating explained](#)

The good: The Harman Kardon SB 16 has excellent sound quality for a sound bar. Its exterior design is also a cut above budget sound bars, and its two digital audio inputs should be enough for basic home theaters.

The bad: The subwoofer's giant footprint may be too much for some buyers. The SB 16 also relies on your TV's remote to adjust volume, which may result in annoying onscreen messages on some HDTVs. And \$1299 for a sound bar is more than many are willing to spend.



Reviewed by:

Matthew Moskovciak and Steve Guttenberg

Edited by:

John P. Falcone

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The bottom line: The Harman Kardon SB 16 features a premium price tag and some remote control quirks, but its excellent sound quality and exterior design make it worth the extra cash.

At first glance, the Harman Kardon SB 16 might seem like a hard sell. It's a \$1299 sound bar system, which is more expensive than many competitors, and it features a jumbo subwoofer that's sure to rankle those who believe "less is more" when it comes to speaker size. But those doubts are likely to fade away as soon as you take the SB 16 out of the box. Its exterior design and build quality are clearly a cut above the average budget sound bar, and that extra size isn't just for show, as it's a major factor in the Harman Kardon SB 16's excellent sound quality. It may not be for everyone, but the SB 16 is one of the best performance-oriented sound bars we've seen that that doesn't require an AV receiver.

The only factor holding us back from giving the SB 16 a whole-hearted recommendation is a quirk with how it accepts remote commands, which doesn't affect all buyers (more on this later). Still, the Harman Kardon SB 16 is a standout sound bar in terms of sound quality and design, so though it may cost more, you feel like you're getting your money's worth.

Design

The SB 16's sound bar is mostly made of plastic; however, it has a heft (8 pounds) that you just don't find on budget competitors like the [Sony HT-CT150](#) and the [Samsung HW-C450](#). It feels solidly built and we appreciated its muted design aesthetic that doesn't call attention to itself. There is no LCD display on the front panel and just a few buttons on the top. Though the lack of a display gives the SB 16 a cleaner look, the downside is that there's no visual indicator as to how loud the volume is and how much louder the system can go.

The most surprising thing about the SB 16 is the size of the subwoofer. It's huge by sound bar standards, coming in at 18.88 inches high, and 13.38 inches wide and deep, not to mention its 33-pound weight. The large footprint may be a downside for some buyers, especially since many who opt for a sound bar do so to cut down on the size of their home audio system. On the other hand, it's worth remembering that the subwoofer is wireless, so it's easy to position in the corner of a room where it's not so imposing on your decor.



Unlike many sound bar/subwoofer systems, the Harman Kardon SB 16's inputs are located on the back of the sound bar itself, not the subwoofer. That's fine, just be aware that it may increase wire clutter near the base of the TV.

As far as inputs go, there are three: one analog (red/white RCA jacks) and two digital (one optical, one coaxial). That means—if you have more than three audio sources, at least—you'll probably want to use your TV as an input switcher.

Using your own remote (and why that might be a problem)

The SB 16 has essentially one major design hiccup. There's no included remote, which means that the Harman instead relies on you programming the sound bar to respond to commands from your TV remote. The idea is that when you press "volume up" on your TV remote, the SB 16 responds—and the TV doesn't. While Harman's intent is admirable (simplifying to one remote), it doesn't work perfectly with every TV.



The problem is that in our tests, when the TV's internal speaker is deactivated (as Harman recommends) and it receives a volume command, some HDTVs display a message like "TV speaker disabled" on the screen. That means every time you adjust the volume of the SB 16—which may be often, if you like to ride the volume control during movies like we do—you'll see an annoying onscreen message.

We have many HDTVs in our testing facility, so we checked to see how many displayed a message; it wound up being about half. New HDTVs from Sony and Panasonic would display a message, whereas new Samsung TVs did not. (An older Samsung TV did display a message, however.) Luckily, you can easily check your own HDTV to see if it's going to be a problem. Just hop into the Setup menu, turn off the TV's speaker (or set to "external speaker"), and then try to adjust the volume. If you see an onscreen message, the SB 16 might not be the best choice for your system.



Thankfully, the SB 16 does have controls on the unit itself (power, volume, source switcher), so you're not stuck if you do have problems with the remote. That said, we would've preferred a small remote to be included, if only because it would make programming a learning remote (such as a Logitech Harmony) much easier.

Setup

The SB 16 doesn't have any speaker calibration setting requirements, but there are sound-tuning adjustments. First, there's a "Trim" switch that sets the input sensitivity in three steps. The unit is shipped with the Trim set to "1," which didn't allow the SB 16 to play loud enough for us, even when the volume control was set to max. Moving the Trim switch to the "2" setting increased the max volume enough so it was loud enough for us. The sound bar also has a "Wall-Table" EQ switch that tunes the speaker's tonal balance for wall or table mounting.

The subwoofer has another set of controls on its rear panel: Crossover, Volume, and a Phase Switch. The first two have a big effect on the perceived sound balance of the SB 16 system. We set the volume control knob three quarters of the way up, and the Crossover at approximately 125 Hertz (it has a range from 50-150 Hz). In any case, you make these adjustments "by ear," and try to produce the smoothest possible blend between the sub and sound bar. Harman recommends setting the Phase Switch to "0," which worked for us. The alternative position, "180," may produce a smoother blend in some rooms. Experiment and see for yourself which sounds better.

While Harman claims the wireless subwoofer can be placed "anywhere" in the room, we recommend placing the sub within 5 or 6 feet of the sound bar for best sound quality.

Performance

The SB 16 had a bigger and fuller tonal balance than any self-amplified (i.e., no AV receiver required) sound bar we've tested in quite some time. Obviously, the large subwoofer was primarily responsible for that, but we never felt the bass was overdone or that the subwoofer called attention to itself.

Putting the SB 16 through its paces with our reference "torture" discs like "Master and Commander" and "Black Hawk Down," we were impressed with the system's poise under pressure. The gunfire and explosions in large-scale battle scenes sounded cleaner and less distorted than what we've heard from most sound bars. Considering the size of the sub, the bass wasn't particularly powerful or deep, but the quality of the bass was excellent. Dialogue was natural, even when we listened to the SB 16 with its "3D Surround" processing turned on. That's rarely the case with stereo sound bar systems' faux surround effects. Harman Kardon's 3D Surround did not generate room-filling 3D surround effects, but it definitely spread the soundstage well beyond the edges of the sound bar.

The film "3:10 to Yuma" further demonstrated the level of the SB 16's sonic sophistication. When the bullets fly and bounce off the armored stagecoach in a holdup, the metallic pings and clangs sounded realistic, as did the rifle shots echoing off the mountains.

Music auditions started with singer-songwriter John Gorka's "The Gypsy Life" Blu-ray. The acoustic music's realistic timbre sounded natural, and the dynamic shadings of Gorka's vocal, piano and guitar, and the rest of the band were more nuanced than what we've heard from most sound bars. The SB 16's treble detail and "air" were also above average, which also played a part in producing a broad and deep soundstage. The SB 16 was nearly on par with what we expect to hear from a bona fide 2.1 channel system.

Rock music on CD revealed the limitations of the SB 16, which started to sound strained with the music turned up loud. Even so, the SB 16 was a little better than average. The SB 16's overall performance is excellent, and there's nothing better in its price class.

Conclusion

The Harman Kardon SB 16 features a premium price tag and some remote control quirks, but its excellent sound quality and exterior design make it worth the extra cash. That said, it's definitely worth checking out how your existing HDTV handles the remote issues we highlighted before you buy.

SPECIFICATIONS

General

Product Type	2.1-channel Speaker system
Dimensions (WxDxH) / Weight Details	Two channel speaker : 36.2 in x 3.5 in x 4.3 in / 7.9 lbs, Subwoofer : 15 in x 15 in x 18.9 in / 33.1 lbs

Speaker System

System Components	2 speakers, Subwoofer
Speaker Type	Active
Nominal Output Power (Total)	150 Watt
Response Bandwidth	50 - 20000 Hz
-3dB Frequency Response	50 - 20000 Hz
Crossover Frequency	50 - 150Hz
Magnetic Shield	Yes
Audio Amplifier	Integrated
Controls	Volume, Subwoofer cut frequency, Subwoofer phase, Subwoofer volume control
Additional Features	3D surround sound mode

Speaker System Details

Speakers Included	Sound bar - Indoor, 2 - 2-way - 25 Watt - 8 Ohm - Wall-mountable - Wired, 1 - 100 Watt - Wireless
Driver Details	Right/left channel speaker : 2 x Midrange driver - 3 in, Right/left channel speaker : 1 x Tweeter driver - 3/4 in
Driver Details	Subwoofer : 1 x Subwoofer driver - 10"

Connections

Connector Type	1 x Audio line-in (RCA phono x 2), 1 x SPDIF input (RCA phono), 1 x SPDIF input (TOSLINK)
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Miscellaneous

Cables Included	Audio (optical) cable - 5 ft, Audio cable - 6.6 ft
Included Accessories	Wall mounting brackets