



PSB Imagine home theater speaker system

Test report



By Brent Butterworth
 December 2008

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The success of PSB's Imagine speaker system hinges on whether Paul Barton has more in common with Phil Collins than with Peter Dinklage. Phil Collins is the former prog-rock drummer who transformed himself into a much-loved pop star. Peter Dinklage is the bassist/singer who helped remodel the once-edgy band Chicago into a pabulum factory. And Paul Barton is the founder and chief engineer at PSB [Speakers](#), which just broke character by launching a stylish new speaker system.

Barton's speakers are renowned for technical excellence — but until recently, they've been renowned only for that. Last year, Barton adopted a new philosophy when he created Synchrony, a line of speakers designed for both visual beauty and sonic perfection. The new Imagine speakers make the Synchrony available at more affordable prices.

Obviously, Barton is responding to the demands of the market, just as the aforementioned rock stars did. But will he, like Collins, be able to carry over his core aesthetic values into a more commercially viable product? Or will he abandon everything he once stood for and just go for the money, as Dinklage did?

The new line consists of the Imagine T tower speaker, the Imagine B [bookshelf speaker](#), the Imagine C center speaker, and the Imagine S surround speaker. For this review, the company sent two towers, one center, and two surrounds.

The industrial design grabs you at first glance. The cabinets couldn't be less boxy. Except for every speaker's bottom and the tops of the [surround speakers](#), they have no flat sides. The curves stiffen the cabinets and minimize acoustic resonances inside. Stout construction further reinforces the cabinets. The front baffles are made from 1/2-inch-thick medium-density fiberboard (MDF), and seven laminated layers of 3mm-thick MDF form the sides, tops, and bottoms.

All of the Imagine speakers have a 1-inch titanium-dome tweeter and a 5/4-inch woofer with a mineral-filled polypropylene cone woofer. Rubber trim rings hide the speaker fasteners. With each Imagine T, C, and B, PSB provides a rubber bass port plug that lets you tune the response to suit your room or your taste.

On the Imagine S surround speaker, PSB provides separate speaker terminals for the front- and rear-facing halves. By removing the jumpers and connecting each half separately, you can create a seven-channel system using only five speakers.

SETUP

PSB designs its speakers so that the sound off-axis nearly matches the sound on-axis, which makes them less sensitive to placement and acoustics. Getting good sound from the Imagine T tower speakers was as simple as plopping them in place about a foot and a half from the wall behind them and pointing them straight at my listening position. I preferred the sound with the rubber port plugs inserted (which left one port open in each Imagine T and no ports open in the C). The bass wasn't as full with the plugs in, but it was more precise. I suspect, though, that fans of Collins and Dinklage alike will greatly prefer the no-plugs sound.

Since the Imagine C has a curved bottom, PSB supplies a rubber wedge that holds the speaker in

The Short Form

\$4,000 (as tested) / [PSBSPEAKERS.COM](#) / 905-831-6555

Snapshot

An impeccably engineered and beautifully designed midsize speaker system that's not cheap but couldn't be much easier to set up, listen to, or live with

Plus

- Clear, super-neutral sound
- Slick industrial design
- Just plop 'em down and plug 'em in

Minus

- Expensive for their size
- Home theater use demands addition of a subwoofer

Key Features

- Imagine T (\$2,000 a pair): 1-inch tweeter, (2) 5 1/4-inch woofers; 37 1/4 in high, 41 lb
- Imagine C (\$800): 1-inch tweeter, (2) 5 1/4-inch woofers; 20 1/2 in wide, 41 lb
- Imagine S (\$1,200 per pair): (2) 1-inch tweeters, (2) 5 1/4-inch woofers; 12 5/8 in high, 16 lb

place and tilts it up or down. Here's the only place where I encountered setup difficulty. The wedge is too large to allow the Imagine C to sit flat — it has to tilt up or down — so I tossed the wedge aside and used big blobs of Blu-Tack reusable adhesive to secure the speaker in a flat position atop my stand.

No such problems with the flat-bottomed Imagine S surround speakers. They can hang on the wall from the supplied brackets or sit stably on stands or shelves.

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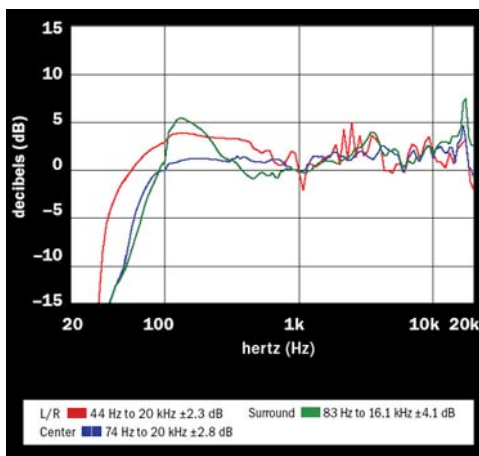
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The Imagine T speaker's response curve is basically flat across a 20° listening window, with superb off-axis response. The Imagine C is exceptionally flat averaged across the same 20° window, although its response dips about 7 dB at 20° off-axis in the range between about 1 and 2.3 kHz. Response of the Imagine S surround speaker, measured on-axis from one side in its 7.1 configuration, is a little rougher but still impressive given its cabinet shape; it's also surprisingly smooth in bipolar mode. The Imagine T's peak bass output is 106.8 dB at 63 Hz; average output at 10% distortion or lower between 45 and 80 Hz is 104 dB.

MUSIC & MOVIE PERFORMANCE

The Imagine T isn't the kind of speaker that impresses upon first listen. There's nothing dazzling or showy about the sound. But after a few hours, you start to realize that even if the Imagine T seldom inspires a "wow!" reaction, it also never inspires the thought that something's amiss.

I especially loved the way it presents simple material, such as Herbie Hancock's solo rendition of "On Green Dolphin Street" from his CD *The Piano*. This is as pure a presentation of the piano as you'll ever find — a straightforward recording of a beautiful-sounding Steinway at CBS Studios in Tokyo — and the Imagine T presents it faithfully, in a manner similar to what I expect the recording engineers heard through the studio monitors.

In fact, the studio-monitor analogy seems perfect. Few of the dozens of studio monitoring systems I've heard deliver the spectacular, broad soundstaging that many audiophile speakers produce. They just tell you what's on the recording, and that's what the Imagine T does, too. I started to think of it as being more like an amplifier or cable than like most speakers. When I then added the Imagine C center speaker and two Imagine S [surround speakers](#) to the system, I assumed I'd react with the same quiet respect. But as Peter Cetera himself once sang, "Baby, what a big surprise!"

Every time I played a DVD or a [Blu-ray](#) Disc, I got the feeling that this was how the disc was supposed to sound. The Imagine speakers' superb tonal accuracy and nearly perfect speaker-to-speaker match made hyperactive surround-sound mixes seem especially realistic. Even "heard 'em a million times before" standbys like *The Fifth Element* took on new excitement.

The Dolby TrueHD soundtrack on the *Iron Man* Blu-ray Disc told me just about everything I needed to know about the Imagine speakers. Every one of the myriad voices — from the growls of the stereotypically swarthy terrorists to Gwyneth Paltrow's lilt — sounded lifelike and natural. The bullets that whizzed around Tony Stark (Robert Downey Jr.) in the scene where he escapes from the terrorists' cave seemed to fill my room, not merely emanate from speakers.

The escape scene also revealed these speakers' one real weakness: The Imagine T plays deep, and it plays loud, but it can't play deep and loud at the same time. The pounding of Stark's metal-encased feet as he emerged from the cave pushed the Imagine T's little woofers well beyond their limits. I had to lunge for the volume control for fear I might damage the speakers. Few music tracks reveal this limitation, but the low-frequency effects (LFE) tracks in many action movies are just too much for the Imagine T. Adding a [subwoofer](#) and setting my receiver to deliver only the LFE track to the sub solved the problem.

I figured the split-sided surround speakers couldn't deliver enough separation to make 7.1 worth the bother. But comparing the Dolby TrueHD 7.1 soundtrack of *The Nightmare Before Christmas*

with the speakers wired in 7.1 and in 5.1 revealed a significantly more enveloping sound from the 7.1 rig — as long as you're sitting with your head right between the two surround speakers. It's not like having rear surrounds, but it's better than having just the normal side surrounds.

BOTTOM LINE

The Imagine speakers' slick design and studio-quality sound are sure to please the masses, even if those same masses might consider \$2,000 per pair an awful lot to spend for a small pair of tower speakers. I can't recall another speaker system of this size and configuration that I like so much. Some audio enthusiasts might think that by making his speakers look as good as they sound, Paul Barton is selling out. But even if he is, I'm buying in.
