



Atlantic Technology System 20 THX In-Wall Speaker System

More than just a pretty face.

By Darryl Wilkinson

If there's one speaker company this magazine has consistently raved about, it's Atlantic Technology. With good reason, too. The company has designed and built some of the finest home theater speaker packages to inhabit the reasonably affordable range.

A. The system 20 LCR main in-wall is not small, measuring 19.09 by 10.63 by 3.625 inches.

B. The LCR has a D'Appolito-style mid/tweet baffle that can be angled five degrees up or down.



Now, with their System 20 THX in-wall speaker system, Atlantic Technology is taking a step outside of their dominant area of expertise and into the strange and wonderful world of in-walls. Along with lots of other manufacturers, they've realized that the world will beat a path to the door of the company that makes a better in-wall mousetrap.

Building a good in-wall speaker takes more than just ripping the drivers out of your favorite bookshelf or floorstanding speaker and jamming them into a wall. After all, most speaker makers want you to move their speakers away from the walls. Among other

things, an in-wall speaker designer has to take into consideration the fact that the walls in most homes are only as thick as the standard two-by-four stud. Aesthetics are also important. A speaker engineer once told me that he could easily make the best-sounding in-wall speaker I'd ever heard...but it'd have to take up almost 9 square feet of

wall space! Thankfully, that project never left the drawing board.

Complicating matters entirely for the person who wants great sound with no visible wires or boxes is the chilling fact that in-wall speakers are a lot like icebergs. What you see is only a tiny part of the entire package. It's what you don't see that can either sink the sound of a system or make it spectacular. The dirty little secret of the custom-installation business is that most customers don't audition in-wall speakers, so it's easy for less-than-scrupulous salespeople/installers to hide highly profitable but poorly built speakers in your walls. If you don't want to or simply can't audition in-wall speakers, that's just one more reason to go to a dealer/installer you really know and trust.

So, is Atlantic Technology hiding cheesy parts and low-ball design behind a pretty grille? The first clue that this is more than your ordinary in-wall system comes when you open the box and remove the instruction manual. That's right, an honest-to-God instruction manual. With most other in-walls, you're lucky to get a Post-it note with some hand-scribbled directions next to drippings from a sandwich the guy who packed the speaker had for lunch. The System 20 THX instruction manual is eight neatly laid-out 8 1/2- by 11-inch pages. And it's full of great stuff, too—not only about the speakers

themselves but also about important considerations like choice of mounting location, horizontal or vertical orientation, and the benefits of tilting (the drivers, not at windmills). Proper placement of the surround speakers is also carefully explained. Just by looking at the instruction manual, it's

obvious that something very serious is going on beneath the surface here.

Unwrapping the speakers confirms this suspicion of substance. The System 20 LCR main speakers are not small by any means, measuring 19.09 inches tall by

10.63 inches wide by a measly 3.625 inches deep. (You wouldn't want the back of the speaker poking out into the adjacent room, would you?) As large as they seem in your hands, the LCRs easily mount vertically in any standard two-by-four, 16 inch on-center wall construction. The top half of the speaker consists of a baffle containing two 3.5-inch midrange drivers and a single 1-inch silk-dome tweeter in a D'Appolito array. This half of the speaker sits in its own enclosure on the mounting flange. On high-end in-wall speakers, it's becoming common to see tweeters with adjustable mountings to help compensate for less-than-optimum placement. The LCRs go one better than this. The entire D'Appolito array can be angled about five degrees up or down by removing a leveling spacer located





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C. The SR surround in-wall is designed to be used as a flush-mounted dipole...

D. ...but a switch behind the grille lets you convert it to a bipole, if necessary.



beneath the baffle. It's a simple process that takes fewer than five minutes to do, and it can make a big difference when you're not able to install the speakers at ear level.

As a testament to their dedication to details, Atlantic Technology even includes a strip of self-adhesive acoustic foam to attach to the flat section of the woofer baffle or bezel assembly, which becomes exposed when you tilt the mid/tweet baffle. Nice touch!

Below the mid/tweet baffle is an 8-inch long-throw woofer. It's just about as big as the mid/tweet assembly itself, which accounts for the overall height of the speaker. Unlike the mid/tweet section, the woofer is open in back, using the wall space as its enclosure. If you're building a

new home or remodeling, Atlantic makes an optional rear enclosure for the LCRs, which provides an ideal cavity volume of 1 cubic foot and isolates the adjacent room from the back wave coming off the woofer. I used rear enclosures on each of the LCRs in this review. If you don't have 19 inches in height, you can rotate the mid/tweet baffle 90 degrees using almost the same procedure used to change the tilt. You now have a speaker that's ready to be mounted horizontally—of course, you'll now need 19 inches in width (the cut-out opening is actually just under 18 inches). You'll probably have to modify the studs in your wall for this type of mounting;

however, if that's the only way to make it fit, it's worth it.

Two small switches that sit to the left of the tweeter behind the grille allow for a 2-decibel increase or decrease from the normal/THX output in the mid and high frequencies. It's quite valuable to be able to adjust the sonic characteristics of the speakers once they've been installed in your home. Because in-walls aren't easily accessible once the grilles are installed, you'll definitely want to take some



time and listen to a variety of musical selections and movies to find the setting that's most appropriate for the various types of source material you listen to.

There's an additional surprise on the back of the LCRs: heavy-duty, spring-loaded connectors that will accept 8-gauge speaker wire, as well as banana plugs and pins. This is another area where costs could've been cut, but Atlantic Technology refused to give in to the temptation.

The System 20 SR surround speaker is designed to be used as a stealthy, flush-mounted, dipole in-wall. Two 5.25-inch woofers and two 0.75-inch tweeters are mounted on opposite sides of an angled baffle. Above 200 hertz, the speaker acts like a standard dipole, with the null facing straight out from the speaker at a 90-degree angle to the wall. Below 200 Hz, only one woofer operates, resulting in consistent output at the lower frequencies around the listening area. A switch behind the grille allows for instant conversion to bipolar operation for those

installations where placement isn't appropriate for dipoles.

It's easy to see the quality and effort that went in to making this system. Peter Tribeman, president of Atlantic Technology, claims that his engineers and designers have over 200 years of collective experience in high-performance

sound reproduction. I don't know if that's lots and lots of young kids just out of college or just a couple of really old farts, but it

doesn't matter. They obviously know their stuff.

The real test, though, is what the system sounds like in an average home. So, one dry-wall saw and lots of gypsum dust later, I found myself listening to the usual suspects: Bond, *The Fifth Element*, and

HIGHLIGHTS

- Tilt-and-swivel baffle offers multiple install options
- Mid/high frequency adjustment for fine-tuning the sound
- Surround speakers can play in either bipole or dipole mode

Apollo 13. They all sounded good. Of course, after all the installation work, I was almost disappointed with how unassuming the system is. I thought there ought to be some sort of pizzazz—some little spark that catches my attention.

I was wrong. The beauties of this system are its very lack of pretense and its neutrality. I didn't realize this until I put in a copy of *The Red Violin*. The sound of the violin, without any artifice or unnatural



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coloration, leapt out of the background to become a character as vital as the actors themselves. The depth and emotional impact of the fated violin came through effortlessly, while the dialogue remained crisp and clear. Thunder and rain in a later scene filled the surrounds and flowed seamlessly from back to front.

Going back to the first couple of movies, the only thing really missing was the heavy-duty bass below about 60 Hz. And that's the way it should be because, in a full THX system, there'd be a separate woofer to fill in the bottom end. I was actually amazed at just how much bass the LCRs could produce. Listening to two-channel

music (everything from Lyle Lovett to the Red Elvises), I never once wished for a subwoofer. It's really quite a feat that Atlantic has built a set of in-walls this good.

I was expecting sizzle, but Atlantic Technology gave me steak: prime USDA choice. Although these in-walls are slightly bigger than most, the payoff in sound is exponentially larger than the difference in size. Bring on the floor-standing and high-end bookshelf speakers. The System 20 THX

will leave them in the dust and still let you have space in your living room for, well, living.

System 20THX LCR Speaker	\$799
System 20THX SR Speaker	\$1,199/pair
Atlantic Technology (781) 762-6300 www.atlantictechnology.com Dealer Locator Code ATL	

Atlantic Technology has definitely succeeded in offering more sound in less space. 

