

The contenders

Speaker packages

Compact, professional-looking and, by the standards of this group,

an affordable package. There's been quite a buzz of late about Blue Sky's speakers – and it seems it was all justified

⇒ **Genelec HT206B/HTS3** **£6694**

Classy, wood-finished active system from Finland's masters of the studio monitor. They're compact and flexible for installation thanks to tone controls – overall, a mighty fine all-round choice

⇒ **PMC AML1/SB100/Bryston PP300** **£12,080**

Yup, you read that price right. This is the entry-level (!) PMC active system, and it goes as good as it looks. If you want a system that's a lot less home and a helluva lot more cinema, look no further

The Home Cinema Test: Active Speakers

Home cinema speakers? Big, stupid and ugly might be your first thought. Yes, they may ultimately make all the noise in your system, and (hopefully) do what the amplifier tells them, but if they're going to provide adequate power and extension chances are they'll take up an inordinate amount of space in your room and be a bit fussy about where you put them if they're to deliver the best results. And the worst thing of all? However sleek and sexy or macho and clever your DVD player and amplification may be, chances are the speakers that sound best in your room are going to be either pig-ugly or – if you're very lucky or very tolerant – look just about acceptable.

There's some striking speaker styling out there – think B&W Nautilus, with its spiralling shell-shaped enclosures and strange tubes streaking backwards, or those big flat panel electrostatics so beloved by some US high-end music enthusiasts – but such designs tend not to make great home cinema speakers. First, they can be a bit too refined and lacking in welly; and second, who wants speakers that make a strong visual statement when you really want to be concentrating on what's on the screen?.

So we're back again to simple big black boxes, basically unchanged from designs of half a decade ago. You get a couple of drive units in a box – one to handle the bass, the other for the high-frequency stuff – and terminals to connect that box to an amplifier, but that's your lot. On the scale of consumer product evolution, the average loudspeaker is on a level with cars that have starting handles and twin-tub washing machines.

As a result, choosing speakers is often as much about the practicalities – will they fit the room, and can the rest of the family put up with the looks? – as the technology. A lot more time and effort is likely to be spent considering the various modes and facilities of an AV receiver or a projector, while the speakers – the things that actually convert the electricity into sound – will get chosen last. It shouldn't be that way, but it's often the case, making speaker choice as relevant for some as the brand of tyres they have on their car.

However, there is an alternative to conventional loudspeakers driven by conventional power amplifiers, and it comes in the form of a technology most often used in professional monitoring applications. In a home cinema system, active systems – which have the power amplification built into the speakers themselves – make a lot of sense. The amplifiers can be tailored to the drivers, and rather than having to run high quality speaker cables around the room, all the cabling can be at line-level, using simple, slim cables to feed the speakers. Yes, each speaker also needs its own mains power, but

in an average modern home that shouldn't be too much of a problem.

The beauty of such a set-up is that things can be greatly simplified at the equipment-rack end of the cables. Rather than having a big, bulky receiver, or a processor and hefty power amp, you just need a processor with line-level outputs. No need for a power amp, as all the amplification is in the speakers.

To make life easy with these speaker packages, it would be useful if those line outputs were on balanced XLR connections, like the main inputs on the speakers in this test. A number of high-end processors offer such outputs – if not, it's possible to convert from phono outputs to suitable sockets for about £10 per channel using adapters. After that the connections are inexpensive and resistant to interference over long runs, as the cables are basically microphone cables, often used in situations where hum can be a major problem. As an example, and depending on the supplier, suitable cables will cost you less than £7 for each 6m length, or those handy with a soldering iron could

Skywalker Sound is now monitored on Blue Sky systems – the facility has more than 50 2.1-channel systems, and five 5.1 set-ups.

And the £3166 (£2695 plus VAT) package here is the same one used by Skywalker: the main speakers are Blue Sky's SAT 6.5 active satellites, while the subwoofer is the substantial SUB 12 active unit. Also provided in the package, which Blue Sky calls its Sky System One 5.1 system, is a Bass Management Controller, a full-width unit designed to integrate the speakers, and it comes with a wired studio-style control module. In the context of a home cinema system, this piece of kit is somewhat superfluous, as all the bass management can be done by the processor with which the speakers are being used, so you could specify a system without the BMC by buying the speakers and subwoofer separately, the total then coming to £2330 plus VAT, or £2737.

As will become clear, that shows just how competitively the Blue Sky speakers are priced: the individual SAT6.5s are £440, while the subwoofer is £535, so the

Blue Sky's Sky One 5.1 system; it's the most affordable package in this select group, and yet apparently the speaker of choice at George Lucas' Skywalker Sound

Blue Sky has built an impressive stable of pro users including Jon Bon Jovi, Roger Sanchez, the Rolling Stones and Skywalker/Lucas Arts

buy a 100m drum of cable for about £30 and a bunch of XLR connectors (say, a couple of pounds each), and custom-make all the cables required for a system like this.

The systems

When I started this test I was very aware of the buzz surrounding Blue Sky, despite the fact that the name would get a lot of blank responses from most people. I'd heard good things from a few sources about this US speaker manufacturer, but I didn't know much about the brand before I started massing the troops for this test.

Digging a bit deeper revealed an intriguing story: not only was the company started some three years back by former senior staff from M&K speakers (which has a notable reputation among the home cinema faithful), but one of the co-founders, Pascal Sijen, was formerly technical supervisor at Lucasfilm's THX division, and heavily involved in the THX cinema and studio design programs, as well as certification and testing. The design of the speakers is by Rich Walborn, who designed the majority of M&K's products up to 2001. Due to such impressive credentials, the company has built a stable of professional users, including Jon Bon Jovi, Roger Sanchez, the Rolling Stones and Skywalker Sound/Lucas Arts. In fact, the company says just about everything mixed at

upgrade to 6.1 or 7.1-speaker working would be pretty easy to do. Oh, and should you be thinking of buying a system, the company's UK distributor will let you try it at home before you buy, even delivering and collecting it for free.

The second package is from Genelec, a Finnish company with just over 25 years' experience with, like all the companies here, a strong reputation in the studio monitoring field, and a heavy investment in active speaker systems. The company has branched out into home cinema alongside the pro side of its operations – among many Genelec users worldwide is 20th Century Fox in Los Angeles – which explains the HT series speakers, part of an extensive range.

The HT206Bs provided for this test replaced the original HT206s, which ran from 1999 to last year – the new version took the established formula and added 12v trigger control and dip-switches to defeat the green power indicator LED, or it just showed overload and/or standby mode, the latter triggered either by the 12v control or a signal-sensing system. The speakers are the smallest in this group – helped no end by the lack of any heatsinking fins on the rear – and are available in a range of real wood finishes at £999 apiece, in gloss black lacquer at £1199 or in black paint at £749 for use in locations where the finish is unimportant.



The Genelec package looks the most conventional of the three, but its Finnish manufacturer has a very strong studio and pro-use heritage

Partnering the speakers is the £1699 HTS3 subwoofer, a relatively compact black-painted box which uses a single driver and two passive bass radiators. It's the smallest subwoofer here, but still promises fine integration with the speakers: you should be able to get the set-up just right with the tone and gain controls on the speakers (more on that later) and your processor's bass management. Genelec can also offer extra gain using its £699 D18A Active Balancer, which also converts from normal phono

heavier and much more expensive PMCs. The finish also has the effect of absorbing stray sound, thus giving the speakers better focus and imaging, while the cabinet is made of 2cm thick MDF with a 2.5cm front baffle. The drive units here are unusual, the bass unit having a dish-shaped 16.5cm mica-filled polypropylene cone with a voice coil almost 4cm in diameter for high power handling, while the 25cm tweeter is of a dual concentric design with an integral bullet-shaped waveguide to control dispersion.

control system, and the front panel LED can be set to stay on, only show when the speakers are in standby, or indicate overload conditions. With speakers like this, able to drive so hard while still sounding clean, overdriving is a very real possibility. There is also a gain adjustment on the back of the enclosure, with a +/-6dB range.

The subwoofer uses a 25cm driver and two similarly-sized passive radiators, giving good extension and control. The onboard amp is a 200w unit, and the sub is claimed to go down to 18Hz in-room, while delivering a healthy 114dB sound pressure level. Controls are provided for gain and crossover, but as with most subs the best policy here is to run the sub at full range, using the settings in your AV processor to adjust the bass to integrate with the satellite speakers.

The daddies of this test are the PMCs. Comfortably the most expensive speakers here – a pair of the AML1 satellites cost about the same as the entire Blue Sky system – they're also the largest, each of the five speakers standing 40cm tall, and the heaviest at 16kg apiece. The speakers come in a choice of blue or grey, their deep and massively built cabinets having a curved baffle in a matt finish, and the familiar PMC variation on transmission-line technology being used to boost the bass output. Here the line, which is folded up within to give an effective 1.7m length, exits through a punched metal grille at the base of the front panel, and adds to the speakers' macho looks.

Again the drive units are a little unusual: the 16.5cm bass unit has a flat piston-like diaphragm, formed from a carbon fibre/Nomex honeycomb, which allows long excursions without distortion, while the 32mm soft-dome tweeter has a punched metal protector over it. The claim from PMC is that the bass here extends down to 33Hz – pretty good going for a speaker this size – and the treble up to 22kHz.

Inside the box are a couple of amplifiers, a 100w unit for the mid/bass and an 80-watter for the treble, and controls under a flap on the top panel allow the user to set the gain, the treble and bass tilt, and the low-frequency roll-off.

The subwoofer is unusual in that, as I've already mentioned, it's a passive unit used with one of Bryston's compact power amps. Actually the PP300 is fairly substantial, but could be screwed to the wall beside or behind the SB100 sub, connecting to the speaker with a conventional pair of speaker cables supplied with the amp. Input to the amp is on XLR and phono connections, but while there's a choice of signal sensing or remote switching, there's no crossover here, so your processor's bass management will have to do all the work. The speaker

PMC has a serious presence in the pro studio monitoring business, and its speakers have just been chosen for European demos by DTS

connections from your processor to balanced operation. However, the speakers offer both single-ended phono hook-ups and XLRs, the latter the better choice for long cable runs.

The final package in the group is the biggest and the most expensive, as well as being the most unusual-looking. PMC – the Professional Monitoring Company – has a serious presence in the studio monitoring business, with speakers installed in many studios around the world for both music and movie mixing, so it was an obvious choice for the test. I'd decided on the company's all-in-one active AML1 speakers, at £3907 a pair – that's already £9770 for the speakers – but what to do about the sub? I asked Keith Tonge at PMC about using the company's SB100 passive sub with a 300w Bryston PP300 power amp strapped on to make it active, and got the nod with the warning that 'it won't half go!'. The total cost is £12,080: it'd *better* go for that money...

Specifications and facilities

●●● There are several elements of design common to all three packages here, apart from the simple facts of having built-in amplification and using a separate subwoofer. Each of the speaker designs is a two-way, with a tweeter to handle the treble and a woofer for the bass, and uses separate power amplifiers for each drive unit. That's what makes them truly active designs – they have an electronic crossover before the power amplification, so that each power amp can be dedicated to a specific task, and so relatively delicate treble signals aren't affected by the demands of heavy bass. This should give these speakers remarkable clarity and detail, and set them apart from the more usual amp and passive speaker brigade.

The Blue Sky speakers have an attractive rubberised front-baffle finish, giving them the same kind of 'pro' look as the bigger,

The twin amplifiers inside the enclosure deliver 100w apiece into the 4 ohm load of the drive units, and have an adjustable gain control, while the input is on the, by now familiar, XLR balanced input. As a final point, the speakers have mounting points for OmniMount type 100 brackets, allowing them to be used on walls if required.

The subwoofer combines another one of those dish-shape drivers – this time a 30cm unit – with a 200w amp of the same design as those used in the SAT 6.5s. The construction is the same as that of the satellites, and spiked feet are provided. Inputs are again on XLR connections, the sub being designed to be used between a preamp and the SAT 6.5s in a two-channel set-up, or as a dedicated LFE speaker in home theatre configuration.

The Genelecs are the most conventional-looking speakers in this group, especially in one of the range of wood finishes available, and while the drive units are also more normal, the way the 19mm metal-dome tweeter is deep in a wide horn shape is less common. Genelec calls the design 'Directivity Control Waveguide' technology, and it's used to improve the focus of the speaker both on and off-axis, as well as boosting the efficiency of the driver by anything up to 6dB.

The bass unit is a 17cm unit, and the drivers are powered by an amplification module on compliant mountings to the rear of the enclosure. This delivers 50w to the treble and 80w to the bass, both of these figures being short-term peak outputs, and the speakers offer a wide range of adjustments to take account of room effects, using dip-switches on the rear to control treble and bass frequency slopes (or tilt) and the point at which the bass rolls off.

Other similar switches select whether the speakers are always on, autostart when a signal is detected or respond to a control impulse from a 12v signal or another remote



The Home Cinema Test: Active Speakers

itself is a hefty bit of pro-kit, using a 25cm carbon fibre/Nomex flat driver loaded with a transmission line with an effective 2.8m length, which lets the sub go down to 25Hz and deliver a 116dB peak output. And while the company suggests amps of up to 250w are used with the speaker, it seems to thrive on the end of the 300w Bryston. And yes, Keith, it doesn't half go, thanks in no small part to 89dB/2.83v/m sensitivity and the sheer size of the enclosure. It may be only 35cm deep but it stands 51cm tall and 63cm wide, and will certainly make its presence felt.

Set-up

The good news is that these speakers are no harder to set up than conventional passive boxes. There's none of the worry about choosing speaker cables, deciding whether to biwire or not, and checking that you've got all the wiring in phase. But that doesn't mean you can just bung these speakers everywhere in the room and expect great results – it's well worth taking more care than that.

These speakers need to be used on good stands – PMC and Blue Sky make their own, but for the likes of the Atacama SE6s or anything else solid, rigid and heavy, I'd suggest two pairs, for the front and rear left/right, while a low stand would be good to place the centre speaker below screen level – for those of you with conventional TV sets, these speakers are really too heavy to sit atop the average plastic cabinet. I've had good results with the centre speaker on the floor, sitting on a single Mana speaker isolation platform, and with a couple of those rubber walking stick ferrules (find them in hardware shops or the DIY hangars) under the front corners of the speaker to give a little 'ten degrees up on the bow planes, number one'.

As already mentioned the Blue Sky speakers can be used on those OmniMount wall-brackets, for which fixing points are provided on the cabinets, but some care should be taken with this: the speakers weigh a not inconsiderable 12.25kg, so should only be fixed onto solid exterior walls.

Some care must also be taken about positioning of the speakers – the usual rules of avoiding corners and side walls apply, although some of the effects of such placement can be mitigated with the use of the tone controls on the Genelec and PMC speakers, particularly when it comes to taming any bass boom. But don't be tempted to crank up the tone controls on these speakers to get a more exciting presentation when you first install them: you'll soon find that the sound gets wearing, and anyway these speakers are more than exciting enough for most needs even when running 'flat'. After checking the speakers for position and

settings using the ETF software running on my laptop, it didn't take long to get a set-up where the frequency response was reasonably flat, and free from any room-effect nasties.

The subwoofers, too, need some care in positioning, not least because they're on the large side. After some experimentation I found that the Genelec worked well on the side wall just in front of one of the main speakers, while both the PMC and Blue Sky subs were happiest on the rear wall, behind and between the front array. In each case I used the subs running full range, and did the adjustment of bass roll-off using the settings on the AV processors I had to hand.

The Genelecs were used for some initial listening with my usual TAG McLaren AV32R DP processor, using phono connections, but after experimenting with phono/XLR adapters for the Blue Sky and PMC speakers, I borrowed a Bryston SP-1.7 processor, which has both balanced

I was worried that all the domestic upheaval, starting with a delivery of 19 boxes, wouldn't be worth it. I couldn't have been more wrong

and single-ended phono connections, and settled on running all three systems balanced. At around the £4000 mark the Bryston isn't cheap (though it's about the same price as the fully-loaded TAG processor), but bearing in mind you're not going to be forking out for conventional power amplification, I'd suggest that a processor at this level is the kind of thing you need. Look at it this way – at £7000 or so for the processor plus the Blue Sky speakers, an active system of this kind would stack up pretty favourably against a conventional high-end processor/power amp(s)/speakers/active subwoofer set-up.

Performance

Aside from several rave word-of-mouth comments about the Blue Sky system and that gleeful warning from PMC (not a company greatly given to hype, in my experience), I wasn't quite sure what to expect from these speaker packages. But I had high hopes: when you spend this kind of money on a system you have a right to expect greatness.

All the same I was a little worried that all the domestic upheaval involved in testing the speakers – it started with a 10am ring on the doorbell from a guy cheerily announcing, "I've got 19 boxes for you!" – wouldn't be worthwhile, and that, after all, I was going to hear just some more home cinema speakers.

Couldn't have been more wrong, really. First up to bat were the Blue Sky speakers, simply because I was intrigued by the good

stuff I'd heard about them. And it turns out the buzz is entirely justified: these are excellent little speakers, partnered with a hulking great subwoofer that's fully able to turn on the slam when required.

After a day or two of running, the SAT 6.5s were fully bedded in and amazing me with their crisp, clean delivery – agreed, they're not the most musical of speakers, being a little too analytical for some tastes (and many recordings) in a manner that reveals just how good they'd be as studio tools. But for movie soundtracks they're more than capable of raising an eyebrow, Roger Moore-style, with the levels of information and involvement they can deliver. These are fast, dynamic and exciting speakers and, as with all these active designs, the chances are you'll be amazed at how loud they can go with no sign of distress.

I ran the Blue Sky speakers with the crossovers on the Bryston processor set to the THX reference, where the bass is rolled

off to the sub at 80Hz, and this suited the little SAT 6.5s very well indeed. It allows them to create a beautifully integrated spread of sound around the room – clearly that unusual tweeter design works well, and hands over smoothly to the mid/bass driver. Dialogue has a clarity that amazes on first exposure, and the sheer punch with which explosions, gunfire and the like are delivered is also a revelation. Watching the opening sequence of *Saving Private Ryan* showed just how well the little speakers could handle the demands of a very 'busy' soundtrack, keeping the dialogue audible even against the explosions and carnage.

If there's a criticism it's that the Blue Sky package can sound a shade bright and brittle at times, but this is most often the case where soundtracks have been forced a bit to add some kind of extra excitement. But when it's good it's very, very good: the ambience in the first scene in the abandoned tube station between Pierce Brosnan and Dame Judi in *Die Another Day* has smile-inducing echoes and ambience, just like the way voices sound in empty tunnels. Subtle touches like that set a system apart from the merely adequate.

Next up to the plate were the Genelecs, and after some extensive experimentation with the speakers' dip-switches and the old faithful measurement software, I got some settings that would keep both me and the computer happy. Again I used the THX roll-off settings on the processor – having listened to the speakers with and without

The most expensive speakers in this test, the PMCs justify their cost with a sound that'll rearrange your world, and your perceptions of home cinema



PMC

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that 80Hz cut-off, it seemed the best balance was achieved when the Bryston saw them as 'small' speakers, diverting most of the bass to the HTS3 subwoofer.

A day or so of running and the speakers, which were previously-used demo samples, were ready for some serious listening, and again I was impressed with the sense of power and poise on offer. The Genelecs have an overall softer balance than the Blue Skies, with better all-round ability when it comes to delivering music in surround. There's not that sense of every detail of the recording being laid bare, studio monitor-style, but there is some prominence in the midband that does make the presentation easier to enjoy on a long-term basis. There are still high levels of information, but there's a richness and power that's as well suited to some vintage Roxy Music as it is to solo piano works and big orchestral warhorses.

Neither do the Genelecs lack any ability when it comes to delivering movie soundtracks. Having checked that the neighbours' car wasn't in its usual place, I cranked the speakers up to the point where the overload LEDs started to show, then backed off a smidge. We are talking loud loud LOUD here, and yet the little speakers retained their composure even with the engine screams, explosions and powering music of the big car-battle on ice from *Die Another Day*, while the aerial combat of *Top Gun* (I was clearly having something of a home cinema retro session) was similarly exciting, with a great sense of planes circling and swooping around the room. Coming bang up to date with David Mamet's *Spartan*, the Genelecs did a fine job with the muted dialogue, making even Val Kilmer's sometimes swallowed lines intelligible, while the black humour of *Bubba Ho-Tep* was served well by the revealing nature of the speakers and their internal amplification, making the throwaway lines as clear as the all-surrounding atmosphere.

And then I tried the PMCs. I use a PMC passive system for most of my listening: OB1s on the front left and right, the CB6 centre, GB1s and DB1s on the rear channels and a TLE1 subwoofer, but even this couldn't prepare me for what the AML1/SB100 system could do. It didn't half go – it just went, leaving the other two packages in its wake. OK, OK, so it's twice the price of the Genelec set-up, and you could almost buy four Blue Sky systems for the same money, but I'd defy anyone not to hear this little lot in action and not be totally smitten.

Having installed the speakers onto heavy, solid stands – PMC's own are good, or you can buy something that'll do the job for about £100-150 a pair – connecting the Bryston power amp to that big, very serious-looking

How they compare

All those numbers at a glance - plus our views on the strengths and weaknesses of each contenders in our active speaker showdown

	Blue Sky Sky One 5.1 £3166	Genelec HT206B/HTS3 £6694	PMC AML1/SB100 £12,080
Main speakers			
Tweeter	25mm dual concentric	19mm metal dome	32mm soft dome
Woofer	16.5cm hemispherical	17cm cone	16.5cm flat piston
HF amp power	100w	50w	80w
LF amp power	100w	80w	100w
Inputs	XLR	XLR/phono	XLR
Frequency range	80Hz-20kHz	55Hz-18kHz	33Hz-22kHz
Gain control	Yes	Yes	Yes
Tone controls	No	Yes	Yes
Price of extra speakers	£440 each	£999 each (wood)	£3907/pr
Finishes	Black	Black paint (£749); wood; black gloss (£1199)	Grey or blue
Dimensions (hxwx d)	31.1x20.3x30.1cm	31.2x20x24cm	40x20x31.6cm
Weight	12.3kg	7.6kg	16kg
Subwoofer			
Drive unit(s)	30cm hemispherical	25cm + 2x25cm ABRs	25cm flat piston
Amp power	200w	200w	300w (Bryston PP300)
Frequency range	30Hz-200Hz	18Hz-200Hz	25Hz-200Hz
Inputs	XLR	XLR/phono	XLR/phono
Gain control	Yes	Yes	No
Crossover control	Yes	Yes	No
Phase control	Yes	Yes	No
Dimensions (hxwx d)	45.7x42.5x56cm	32x61x34.5cm	51x63x35cm
Weight	28.2kg	26kg	40kg
Manufacturer/distributor contacts			
Tel	01525 840 400	020 8418 0778	0870 4441045
Website	www.abluesky.com	www.genelec.com	www.pmc-speakers.com

Our verdict

⇒ **Blue Sky Sky One 5.1**

Right for you if... You like the 'pro' look of the speakers, and want bang for your buck. Plus the price is very attractive

Wrong for you if... You listen to as much music as you do movies, and you find some speaker systems a bit too revealing of the deficiencies of some recordings. These are studio monitors, and they take no prisoners

The score

93%

⇒ **Genelec HT206B/HTS3**

Right for you if... You want more conventional looking speakers and you like a sound that's smooth and rich as well as dynamic

Wrong for you if... You want the most sound for your money with all those big action movies – the Blue Skies will do that just as well for half the price, and indeed bring out more detail from those complex soundtrack mixes

The score

86%

⇒ **PMC AML1/SB100**

Right for you if... You can afford them, and you want the most of everything

Wrong for you if... You're going to partner them with a £300 AV receiver's preouts and a bunch of adapters, and you've only got a 14in portable TV

Wrong for you if... You're going to partner them with a £300 AV receiver's preouts and a bunch of adapters, and you've only got a 14in portable TV

The score

96%

**HOME CINEMA
EDITOR'S
CHOICE**

sub, I was initially a little underwhelmed with the sound when running the speakers with a standard 80Hz cut-off, so I tried the 60Hz setting, but again to no avail. In the end I settled for running the AML1s at full range – they do, after all, go right down to 35Hz – and suddenly all hell was unleashed. In the nicest, rawest, most earthshaking way possible, you understand.

It's hard to describe quite how the PMCs deliver without resorting to reviewing clichés: cranking this system is like the first time you drive something with a really big engine and you discover what torque can do. There's just seemingly endless power on offer here, and if you ever approach the limits of what this system can do we really don't want to be in the same street as you, let alone the same room.

Here we have home cinema that doesn't just emulate the kind of sound you get in a top class cinema, but goes way beyond it. Playing the opening of *Top Gun* through this set-up gave me the same kind of frisson that first got me into home cinema all those years ago back in the VHS tape and Dolby Pro-Logic days, except magnified about a hundred times. From the moment the stars wrap around the Paramount mountain and Harold Faltermeyer's music starts that 'Boom-boom-chick-boom' synth percussion pattern, the chills start; the chords build, the titles roll, and then the PMC speakers simply explode into life with the first flying sequence. Just as it should be...

Yes, director Tony Scott unashamedly manipulates the emotions of those of us who still get excited by fast planes, but what the hell – through the PMCs the movie is a serious thrill-ride, from the rush of air to the roar of afterburners. The added dimension delivered by the PMC's mighty bass and spectacular dynamic ability was just as much of a revelation, as was the way the soundtrack wrapped around and enveloped me in the movie, perfectly matching the scale of the image on the big screen. With a total output of 1.2kw doing its stuff, that's hardly surprising, but the simple power figures only tell part of the story.

Remember, I'm talking about a nice little 5.1-channel system here; I dread to think how spectacular things would get with another £3000 spent on the system to bring it up to full eight-speaker working. For now, 5.1 will do very nicely, thank you.

Play a bang up-to-date soundtrack – such as *Master and Commander* or the remake of *The Italian Job* – and the PMCs show just how far things have come in almost 20 years since *Top Gun*: dialogue has better clarity and character, explosions and gunfire stunning impact and weight, and the use of surround effects is often more subtle. But then just

about everything you play through these speakers is a revelation, from SACD music to the most aggressive action mix, so the chances of disappointment are pretty slim. You would need to be unbelievably picky to find fault with this set-up.

Conclusion

●●●● This is a fairly tough one to call, as each of the speaker packages is remarkable in its own way. From the sensible end of serious home cinema to the stratospheric sector of the high end, each makes sense when you consider that you save all that money on weighty power amplification and exotic speaker cabling, as well as gaining all the benefits of active operation, which really brings out the best in any speaker designed for it.

The Sky One System 5.1 is most striking for what the company has achieved in terms of performance for the money. I get the impression that one of the reasons the company founders parted ways with M&K was a desire to make less expensive

the TAG McLaren, you're getting not only a complete set of speakers but all the power amplification, too. All you need do is add a suitable processor – and that could cost you as little as £900 for the NAD T163, as you'll see in this month's *Premiere* section.

The same applies to the Genelec speakers, although despite their smoother balance and thus better handling of music, in terms of long-term listenability, the HT206B/HTS3 package does look a little pricey alongside the Blue Skies. Certainly for pure home cinema use there's not much in it between them: the Genelecs do sound richer and slightly better with the timbres of voices, while that subwoofer with its twin auxiliary radiators offers some serious low-end power, though not as groundshaking as the 18Hz claim suggests, from a relatively compact box. However, the Blue Skies give nothing away when it comes to absolute impact, and the smoother sound of the Genelecs may have something to do with the fact the speakers run out of steam at 18kHz, whereas the others in this test go up to 20kHz or higher.

What we have with the PMCs is a home cinema system that doesn't just emulate the sound of a state-of-the-art cinema, but goes way beyond it

models which wasn't shared by their former employers, and they've certainly brought that wish to fruition in this system, with spectacular results.

The fact that the speakers are designed in the States but built for Blue Sky in China no doubt helps no end. The old idea that shipping speakers halfway round the world makes no economic sense has gone by the board, and these days many companies are taking advantage of the low costs and high quality available in manufacturing centres, such as Shenzhen, to make their speakers.

What we have here is a very high quality little monitor, capable of a sound much bigger than you'd expect, and at a price that's hard for others to match. It manages to look suitably 'pro' to appeal to those who like macho styling, while retaining domestic acceptability for those who like a more subtle look, and the levels of performance of which they're capable will redefine the thinking of many who think home cinema speakers have to be big, bad and ugly.

Think about the price of a good five-channel power amplifier – Bryston will charge you about £3700, the TAG McLaren 100x5r is £2650, and Rotel's RMB1075 is around £850. Beside all but the least expensive of these, the Blue Sky system makes a lot of sense: for less than the price of the Bryston, and only about £700 more than

And the PMC system? It's simply in a class of its own, and though the Blue Sky speakers may well be what the people at Skywalker use to monitor their movie mixes, the big PMC speakers and their hunky subwoofer partner – also widely used professionally – can turn on the action in the home in a manner I've only heard from the most massive systems. Total, world-rearranging power is what you get from these speakers, along with a sense of detail and integration that most other speaker systems I've used can only hint at.

As I was typing that last bit we just got to the triumphant final tower buzz in *Top Gun*, and the way the sonic boom just erupted from the rear speakers actually made me jump. Not just 'oh, that's good'; I actually jumped in my seat: that's the kind of physical, visceral way these speakers deliver soundtracks – just about anything you choose to play will come as a revelation. Plenty of those details you missed before will zing out of the mix, and the whole experience will draw you in as never before.

Partner these speakers with a good processor, hook up a fine DVD player and projector, and you're going to have a home cinema system almost without compromise. And all that without filling the room with massive towering floorstanding speakers – there's a lot to be said for these active speaker systems, isn't there?