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Atlantic Technology 8200e 5.1 Speaker System

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Introduction



Having grown up a big fan of the Star Wars films, as many of us home theater enthusiasts did, the label THX has always had an air of gear-head royalty due to its origins. The Lucasfilm spin off has long represented a certain standard of excellence when it comes to home theater equipment, designating the products that carry its moniker as fit to deliver theater-quality sound in the confines of your personal cinema.

Thus, when I was given the opportunity to review a set of Atlantic Technology THX Ultra2 certified speakers, I jumped at it. Atlantic Technology has been making THX certified speakers and subwoofers for awhile now, and have been lauded for their efforts. A good old American built speaker system would make a perfect match for my newly installed THX Ultra2 receiver, and I was quite excited to get going.

The 8200e system builds upon the original 8200 series, with a few changes for the better. From the styling, to the sound, **everything about these speakers screams of a very high quality product.** Being a THX Ultra2 certified system, the 8200e system is designed for medium to large rooms, which is also evident by their size.

Actually, the L/C/Rs are 10" shorter, the crossovers have been re-designed, and the side panels are permanently attached. Because of their more compact size, they fit room decor all the better and the tweeter is now at ear height for the listening position.

Unboxing the speakers was a project unto itself, but I appreciated the care with which they were packaged. Each speaker and stand are wrapped very carefully to protect from any possible scratching.

The Design

The 8200e series are nondescript yet beautiful speakers. Unlike the previous 8200 series, the side panels of each front speaker are not detachable. Instead, they feature a wonderful glossy piano black surface, while the remaining surface is a textured black veneer. Also included are smoked glass panels to attach to the tops of the front speakers.

They feature a three-way design, including two graphite loaded homopolymer (GLH) 8" woofers, two GLH 5.25" midrange drivers, and a 1" Ferrofluid™ cooled silk dome tweeter.

The center channel is one of the largest I have seen. It continues the side panel motif, and includes the same compliment of drivers as the front left and right speakers, but arranged horizontally. The center channel has a curved piece on the bottom that allows it to

fit into the base stand, which also lets you tilt it up and down. Doing so will allow you to point the speaker directly at the listening position.

The triangular shaped surround speakers are creatively capable of both dipole or bipole functionality. Each of the two outward-facing sides contain one each of the 5.25" GLH midrange driver and 1" silk dome tweeter. There is a switch which allows you to convert them between dipole and bipole. This can be useful if you listen to a lot of multi-channel music and prefer the in-phase firing of a bipole speaker for your surround channels, as you can simply flip this switch. All of the speakers include curved metal grilles that attach very simply by way of special neodymium magnets located along the edges of the speaker.

The final piece of the system is the 642e subwoofer. This THX Select certified, front-firing sub has a custom 300 watt amplifier tuned precisely for the 12" driver. Its design includes the same side panels as the fronts and center. It is capable of using its internal crossover, which is selectable between 40 and 150 Hz, or having it bypassed completely if using the LFE channel out of a surround processor or receiver. It has a standby mode which keeps the power off when no signal is detected.

Setup

I placed the speakers in a standard 5.1 arrangement. The front speakers were all fairly close together, as my room is not huge. Although they come with very attractive and perfectly matched stands (that no longer contain a subwoofer as the previous version of this system did), I put them on lower stands I already had, toeing them in slightly. The subwoofer went against the right wall, slightly down from the corner. I found this to be the perfect spot to have smooth bass without excessive boom. I also set the sub to bypass its internal low pass filter, as I was feeding it only the LFE channel from my receiver.

For the surround speakers, I did make use of the included stands, which raise the speakers up about three feet off the floor (you can also mount them on the wall with an included bracket). I placed each speaker directly to the side of my primary listening position. Next, I ran my receiver's Audyssey configuration setup. This set the correct distances and levels for the system. I did have to go back and change the crossovers for the surround and center channels, and set the left and right speakers to Small, but other than that, it did a great job of configuring everything else.

The 8200e system has a few extra settings on the speakers themselves to adjust for various environmental and configuration nuances of your room. First, there is an HFE setting, short for High Frequency Energy. This switch can be set for a reverberant room, a damped room, or an average room. As I have a mixture of carpeting and bare walls, I chose the THX/Average setting. Next, is the location switch. The choices here are Behind Screen or THX/Normal. I set this to the latter, but for those who place these speakers behind an acoustically transparent screen, this setting compensates for the reduction in upper midrange frequencies due to the perforated screen.

Continuing on, there is a setting labeled Boundary Compensation, which can be set to On or Off. Turning this on adjusts the lower midrange to "compensate for the typical sound colorations caused by placing the speaker(s) close to the TV screen or building them into a wall unit or cabinet". I left this setting to Off as well. Finally, on the surround channels, I set them to Dipole to begin with. Further testing showed that multi-channel music did sound slightly better when setting these speakers to Bipole, so I appreciated this aforementioned ability to do so easily.



The Sound

After a nice long break-in period (the speakers came directly to me from the manufacturing floor, so they needed this), I eased into the critical listening sessions with some CDs to test the two-channel stereo performance. I began with Radiohead's excellent Hail to the Thief. "Go To Sleep" is one of my favorite tracks as it incorporates a bit of acoustic guitar with synth effects to create a wonderfully juxtaposed sound. The 8200e's blew me away with this track. I replayed it several times at both soft and very loud volumes, yet the detail remained throughout.

The stereo imaging was truly fantastic, although I would like to digress for one moment before continuing the review. In order to get the absolute best imaging and sound reproduction from these speakers, I found it critical that the speakers be placed correctly for my room, more so than with the average speaker. Since I do not have a huge amount of space to spread the front channel speakers apart, I chose to toe in the left and right speakers to point directly at my main listening position. I tested this a few times to make sure I had the best configuration, and once I found it, I really enjoyed sitting in the sweet spot and being enveloped in the sound. This is not to say that the speakers sounded bad when placed otherwise, rather that when you do place them perfectly, you will thank yourself for taking the extra time to do so.

Moving on, I selected a hip hop album to give the subwoofer and midrange drivers some work. I chose "The Bizness" from De La Soul's Stakes is High since it features alternating bass drum hits and low bass keyboard notes. Alternating between these two gave me a good indication of how musical the 642e subwoofer could be in relation to its boominess. If you have read any of my previous speaker reviews, then you will know that I prefer a subwoofer that can reproduce low bass music over a sub that is strictly there for the rumble of space cruiser or the thunder of an explosion. Don't get me wrong, I love a good earth shaking sub for movies as well, but I want one that can also handle music with aplomb. The 642e did not disappoint one bit. It effortlessly switched back and forth throughout the track. The left and right speakers seemed to push the vocals forward, creating a 3D sound field that I enjoyed very much.

Next I went for a classic rock and roll album, Led Zeppelin III. There is a good mix of styles on this record, from the hard rock sound of the opening number "Immigrant Song", to the bluesy jams of "Since I've Been Loving You", to the folk feel of "Bron-Y-Aur Stomp". On the latter, my room came alive with the beat of the bass drum, while hand claps really came through beautifully. The twang of the guitars on "Friends" was palatable with the entire track having a wonderful airy sound as the haunting strings play.

As this system is a THX Ultra2 5.1 system, I did a large chunk of listening with 5.1 sourced movies, and let me just preface this by saying that this is what these speakers were born to do! I recently upgraded my system to include both Blu-Ray and HD-DVD capabilities, so I can enjoy not only the visual beauty of a high definition transfer, but also to have the ability to experience the full effect of a high resolution multi-channel audio track. Not to worry if you don't have one of these formats just yet, I also watched several standard DVDs., which is where I will begin.

I pulled out an old favorite that I hadn't seen in a while, M. Night Shyamalan's The Sixth Sense. Chapter 11 begins with young Cole fearing his trip to the bathroom in the middle of the night. As the camera moves towards him from behind, I was jolted out of my seat by the sudden orchestral boom accompanying the movement of a ghost across the screen. The sudden change in volume definitely shocked me and came through quite effectively. At the climactic end of the film, during the big reveal (I will spare those five of you who haven't seen the film from further spoilers), the surround channels fill with the wonderful and haunting music, which sounded excellent on the dipoles.

Next, I popped in my favorite of the Harry Potter movies currently available on DVD, Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban. The 8200e's did high justice to the detailed beauty of the John Williams score, sometimes giving me chills. Effects sounded less like effects, and more like the real thing. When they lock down Hogwarts Castle by closing and locking the huge front doors, I felt the magnitude of the structure. The Dementor's chilling scenes were augmented by the pristine detail of the surround effects.

Finally, it came time to feed the speakers their surf and turf of sound, HD-DVD and Blu-Ray. I pulled out my very first disc of either new format, a film that I had put off seeing until I could see it in high definition: Serenity. Continuing the story told in the prematurely-canceled TV series Firefly, the film features plenty of scenes containing wonderful demo material. The disc uses Dolby

SPECIFICATIONS

L/C/R

- Design: Three-way Sealed
- Drivers: One 1" Silk Dome Tweeter, Two 5.25" Midrange, Two 8" Woofers
- MFR: 60 Hz - 20 kHz \pm 2 dB
- Sensitivity: 90 dB
- Dimensions: 31.1" H x 10.6" W x 11.9" D (Front Left/Right); 16" H x 28.5" W x 11" D (Center)
- Weight: 53 Pounds/Each (Front), 55 Pounds (Center)
- MSRP: \$1,650/Each USA (Front Left/Right); \$1,750 USA (Center)

Surrounds

- Design: Two-way Sealed
- Drivers: One 1" Silk Dome Tweeter, Two 5.25" Mid/Woofers
- MFR: 80 Hz - 20 kHz
- Sensitivity: 90 dB
- Switchable Between Dipole and Bipole
- Dimensions: 15.3" H x 10.8" W x 7.8" D
- Weight: 20 Pounds/Each
- MSRP: \$1,400/Pair USA

642e Subwoofer

- Design: Sealed
- Drivers: One 12"
- Amplifier: 300 Watts RMS
- MFR: 25 Hz - 300 Hz \pm 3 dB
- Sensitivity: 90 dB
- Dimensions: 21" H x 19" W x 20" D
- Weight: 65 Pounds
- MSRP: \$1,000 USA

Digital Plus for its premier multi-channel audio track, and the results are excellent. The chase scene in which the heroes are tailed by the cannibalistic and terrifying Reavers showcased the 642e sub's fantastic LFE reproduction. This was another example of how great the deep bass was, yet maintaining sonic clarity. The system conveyed the intensity of the scene to perfection.

During the final sequence when River fends off the same gruesome creatures all by herself, the camera slowly spins around her as she fights, and the surround field matches up beautifully.

I then fired up a couple of tracks from The Last Waltz on Blu-Ray disc. The classic music found here is encoded as uncompressed PCM, making it as pure and wonderful as can be. This takes "putting you there at the concert" to a whole new level. At first I was listening to the standard Dolby Digital track, and that was very good. Later, when I switched to the uncompressed PCM track, it was like a veil had been lifted from my ears. The 8200e's came alive and transformed into stage stacks right there in my living room. About midway through the film, a young Eric Clapton graces the stage with a rousing rendition of "Further Up on the Road". His magical licks back and forth with Robbie Robertson play with the finest of detail. Later, Joni Mitchell comes on to sing, and her amazing range comes through clearly and beautifully from the 8200e's.

Finally, I put in the pièce de résistance: The Fifth Element on Blu-Ray. I had been waiting for the newly remastered version that cleaned up the video, and finally had the disc in hand. I loaded it up, and instantly went to my favorite demo track, which is likely favored by many a reviewer. Of course, I am referring to the Opera-Fight scene on the cruise over Floston Paradise. As the Diva takes the stage and the music begins, I was again transported into the theater. This scene illustrates perfectly my contention that the 8200e's are truly a system, and not just a bunch of matched speakers that were bundled together for sales. Working together, they create a depth and realism of enveloping sound that is truly amazing. As the opera moves into the more "futuristic" portion and is interspersed with the fight between the Warriors and Lelu, I got a wonderful mixture of music and effects.

Conclusions

This is the kind of performance I had hoped to hear from the Atlantics, and they certainly delivered in spades. Together, these six speakers time and time again transformed my room into another place, transporting me to another world with their capabilities. The best teams are made up of members who all know their roles, and contribute in their own way to make the group more than the sum of its parts. This statement applies perfectly to the 8200e system. It is only through their collaboration that you get such a wonderful 360 degree field of sound that will keep you happy every time you sit down to enjoy a movie or an album.