



Mark Craven falls in love with an ultra-compact speaker package that punches well above its weight

5.1 with DX appeal

Someone once suggested the only things we can be certain of in this world are 'death and taxes'. To that I might venture you can add 'kick-ass compact speakers from Wharfedale', because the UK-born marque, when getting down to the business of delivering fine sounds from small boxes, never seems to put a foot wrong.

On test here is its new DX-3 HCP ('Home Cinema Package'), and it is both in name and general appearance a descendant of the DX-2 system [HCC #283]. That was an absolute bargain 5.1 bundle, as was the DX-1 before it.

Just from the outer packaging (the system arrives in one box) you get the impression the speakers are small, because the box looks big enough for the subwoofer and not much else. And, yes, the four DX-3 Satellite speakers, which handle front and surround L/R channels, are as diminutive as ever – just 12cm wide and 19cm high. I put one next to a 'regular' standmount speaker and was reminded of the film *Twins*...

But their ultra-compact nature is a feature, not a bug. The DX-3 HCP, says Wharfedale, is specifically designed for those 'limited on space or budget'. Speaking of which, the system price is a very agreeable £499, while a pair of the DX-3 Satellites will set you back just £149.

In addition to the four dinky satellite models, the system comes with the DX-3 Centre, which is a touch more portly at 30cm wide but still easy to house, and a subwoofer. This is an active, sealed design with a front-facing 8in woofer, and a roughly 30cm cubed cabinet. The specification appears unchanged from the bassmaker that accompanied the DX-2 HCP – it uses a 70W-rated amplifier, has stereo/LFE RCA inputs, and offers rear-panel controls for phase, volume and crossover, plus a switch to instigate its 'auto-sense' mode.

Diamond heist

For this third iteration of its entry-level 5.1 set, Wharfedale has turned to some of the design elements of its costlier Diamond 12 speakers. The DX-3 cabinets are said to be more effectively braced than before, thanks in part to an additional panel to strengthen the front baffle, while the enclosure shape and driver surrounds are Diamond 12-influenced too.

The 19mm silk dome tweeter found on the five passive speakers has also been modelled on the HF unit of the Diamond 12s. This sits below a single 3in woven polypropylene bass/mid driver on the DX-3 Satellites, and in-between a pair on the DX-3 Centre. The speakers' two-way crossovers have also undergone revision for a 'more seamless blend'.

The DX-3 Satellites' frequency response is down to a suggested 100Hz (-6dB), while the centre drops a little deeper. With this in mind, don't plump for a more typical 80Hz crossover between speakers and subwoofer, and don't let your AVR try to run the DX-3s as 'large'.

Outside of this, installation is a breeze. The satellites are easily tucked away on a bookshelf or practically any available flat surface, and wall-mounting is easy thanks to rear keyhole fixings and their 2kg weight (the inset speaker terminals aren't suited to really chunky cables, though). Shifting the subwoofer around also isn't a back-breaking task. You'll be up and running in minutes.

Finish options for the DX-3 HCP are black or walnut, both using wood veneers. This makes a change from the design of the DX-2 HCP, which gave the cabinets a leatherette wrap that my colleague Ed Selley was a bit miffed by. In truth, I'm not particularly enamoured of the

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DX-3 cabinets in their new clothes either, but the important issue here is that they are pleasingly small and solidly built, and not really how glamorous (or not) they look.

Budget brilliance

Setup with the subwoofer positioned on the front wall and taking over from 100Hz, and with the speakers juiced by a price-commensurate Marantz NR1710 receiver [HCC #305], listening to Wharfedale's DX-3 HCP was a joyful experience. This six-pack outperforms its price tag, steering clear of 'budget' pitfalls and delivering robust, detailed and immersive sonics.

True, the performance is limited by the very nature of the cabinets and the price that's been hit – the subwoofer doesn't slam like a premium model and the satellites and centre don't have the rich, musical bent of more expensive speakers. But the DX-3 HCP actually surprises in the way its small cabinets and sub combine to create a big sound, >

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
Compact, affordable 5.1 speaker pack

POSITION:
Wharfedale's entry-level multichannel system

PEERS:
Monitor Audio Mass Gen2; Polk Monitor XT15AV

1. The DX-3 Satellites measure just 12cm wide – enough space for their 3in bass/mid drivers



and the manner in which it captures the enveloping nature of multichannel mixes.

Starting off with *Cocaine Bear* (Sky Cinema), this Wharfedale set extracts plenty of information from the core of the Atmos soundtrack, so that the film's forest locations sound large and naturalistic. The speakers' small dome tweeters are by no means the most incisive I've heard, but there's no sense either of the system being tuned to dial down the HF in favour of softness.

When the drug-crazed, CGI-designed bear launches its attack on park ranger Liz and wildlife expert Peter, the ensuing action is rendered with sharp, quick-fire effects.

'A punchy, dramatic and impressively immersive performer – this is affordable home cinema done right'

The sound of Liz's gun has plenty of crisp impact, while the snuffling and grunting of the titular killer is suitably animalistic – and both are well-bolstered by the system's no-nonsense sub.

There's some fun sound design in this sequence too, as our POV changes with the characters and the sounds of the bear flip between front and back of the soundstage. The four identical satellite speakers give a uniformity to the performance here that adds to the onscreen tension.

Loud and clear

The system is equally at home with the splooshy, underwater sounds of *The Meg* (Sky Cinema), and the varied dialogue tones of its wide cast of characters. When Jason Statham utters the immortal line, 'My god – it's a megalodon!', he comes through loud and clear via the DX-3 Centre, just as the frantic yelps of the soon-to-be-eaten beach-goers in the film's final act reach high without sounding thin or weedy.

SPECIFICATIONS

DX-3 Satellite

DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 0.75in soft dome tweeter; 3in woven polypropylene bass/mid driver
ENCLOSURE: Sealed **FREQUENCY RESPONSE (CLAIMED):** 100Hz-22kHz **SENSITIVITY (CLAIMED):** 86dB **IMPEDANCE (CLAIMED):** 4ohm (nominal) **POWER HANDLING (CLAIMED):** 100W **DIMENSIONS:** 120(w) x 190(h) x 122(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 2kg

DX-3 Centre

DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 0.75in soft dome tweeter; 2 x 3in woven polypropylene bass/mid drivers **ENCLOSURE:** Sealed **FREQUENCY RESPONSE (CLAIMED):** 80Hz-22kHz **SENSITIVITY (CLAIMED):** 87dB **IMPEDANCE (CLAIMED):** 4ohm (nominal) **POWER HANDLING (CLAIMED):** 100W **DIMENSIONS:** 310mm(w) x 120(h) x 122(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 2.7kg

DX-3 Subwoofer

DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 8in front-firing woven polypropylene woofer **ENCLOSURE:** Sealed **FREQUENCY RESPONSE (CLAIMED):** 40Hz-120Hz **ONBOARD POWER (CLAIMED):** 70W **REMOTE CONTROL:** No **DIMENSIONS (INCLUDING FEET/GRILLE):** 268(w) x 328(h) x 322(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 7.8kg **FEATURES:** Stereo RCA input/LFE input; crossover control; 0/180-degree phase switch; volume; auto sense (on/off)

TESTED WITH



COCAINE BEAR: A much more successful 'does what it says on the tin' flick than *Snakes on a Plane*, Elizabeth Banks' laugh-out-loud *Cocaine Bear* brings a level of A-grade swagger to its B-movie premise. The 4K Blu-ray release sticks to a DTS-HD MA 5.1 soundtrack, but it streams in Dolby Atmos via Sky Cinema.

The string-centric elements of Harry Gregson-Williams' score for *The Meg* reveal the DX-3 HCP's weaker side, namely a lack of nuance at times through the midband. But this is only a criticism when compared to speakers costing plenty more, and at other times, when the music shifts down a register or two and goes full on 'action movie!', the package seems right at home.

I was left in no doubt of this system's sonic chops when spinning The Rock's earthquake disaster movie *San Andreas* (Blu-ray). As Los Angeles starts to fall apart and Carla Gugino cowers in a high-rise restaurant, the layers of the sound design – from falling masonry and smashing glass to the Rock's over-the-phone dialogue and the background score – were fired at me with a dynamic flourish and plenty of attack. Soon after, the camera flies through the collapsing skyscrapers and the DX-3 Subwoofer unleashes impressively deep swells, while the surround channels pop with effects. It's fantastic fun.

Welcome back

I'd begun to wonder if Wharfedale would ever upgrade its bargain-priced 5.1 proposition, as the market for such systems clearly isn't what it once was. I'm therefore immensely glad it's returned to the fold with the DX-3 HCP. Compact, easy to install and a punchy, dramatic and impressively immersive performer, this is affordable home cinema done right ■

3. Around the back of the DX-3 Subwoofer, you'll find simple controls and LFE/stereo RCA inputs

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HCC VERDICT



Wharfedale DX-3 HCP

→ £499 → www.wharfedale.co.uk

WE SAY: Don't be fooled by this system's dinky dimensions – with all six cabinets in play the resulting multichannel sound is fun and energetic. Criticisms? None at this price.