

JBL CINEMA SB400

With Bluetooth and HDMI inputs making this a proper connection hub, the JBL provides solid sound for all your AV sources.



JBL
Cinema SB400
sound bar
Price: \$999

When soundbars first arrived, their principal aim was to trick the ears (well, the brain's auditory cortex actually) into believing that sound was being generated from all around the room, just like a conventional surround-sound speaker system.

Nowadays the game has changed somewhat. While many such soundbars still include promises of surround sound, there's a fresh focus on not so much audio trickery as simply doing your fancy flat-panel TV a favour and making it sound good. So while JBL's US website for the SB400 includes phrases like "surround yourself with great audio", the Australian distributor Convoy's page for the SB400 only plugs surround in a mention of Harman's 'Display Surround' setting. Otherwise it leads with a simple (and far preferable) promise of good new-fashioned performance — "pro sound comes home".

EQUIPMENT

JBL has been in the soundbar game for some time now, and currently offers four systems —

this one, the Cinema SB400, tops the range. It comes in two parts — firstly a slim 110cm-wide bar, designed to match screens around 46 to 50-inches in size. The bar's 110cm length offers two 25mm tweeters and four 57mm midrange drivers.

The second unit is a wireless subwoofer with an eight-inch driver and 200W of power. Being wireless, you can pop the subwoofer practically anywhere in the room, so long as there's a socket in the wall to give it power.

The system comes with a wall mount for the bar, a small remote control and basic cabling, although no HDMI cables are included.

All wired connections are made via the bar itself, which offers analogue in, optical digital and three HDMI inputs with proper internal Dolby Digital conversion (with an HDMI output through to your display). This is enough to make it a decent connection hub, and avoids relying on a TV's optical output (see introduction). The HDMI output also usefully includes the Audio Return Channel so the soundbar can receive your TV sound back down that cable anyway.

As with many soundbars the JBL can also learn the remote commands from your TV remote (volume up/down/mute) so you can carry on using your TV remote rather than adding the JBL mini remote to your lounge collection. As mentioned in our introduction, the use of this will hinge on whether your TV allows its internal speakers to be turned off.

JBL has included Bluetooth connectivity, but no other networking, so there's no AirPlay or DLNA streaming. As we see in this group of soundbar designs, they tend to include either all the connectivity bells and whistles or very few. This JBL simply falls into the latter category, though the Bluetooth is a significantly useful bonus.

Build quality and finish are both excellent. Although quite light, the bar feels substantial and the compact subwoofer is reassuringly weighty. Both are (thankfully) devoid of much high-gloss dust-attracting livery, the



subwoofer sporting just a touch around the front-firing bass reflex port). The remaining matt black finish is far easier to keep clean.

All up, the Cinema SB400 is a doddle to set up and use. We teamed the JBL with a Panasonic 3D plasma screen and Blu-ray player, and were quickly sitting back in our viewing position ready for some action. The sub and soundbar 'paired' immediately (with a button press on each), while our iPhone connected via Bluetooth without any dramas.

The system is also compatible with a couple of Harman Kardon iPhone and iPad applications — namely AmpUp and MusicFlow, both free and available for download from iTunes. AmpUp is a weather forecasting/wake-up call app that also integrates with the EQ modes of a variety of compatible JBL speaker/docking systems, while MusicFlow is a useful music library app that allows you to create playlists on the fly, effectively turning your iPhone or iPad into a digital jukebox.

Audio controls on the SB400 are kept to a minimum, with two equalisations settings (for either wall-mounting or free-standing positioning) plus a bass control for the sub, adjusting output, phase and frequency response. It pays to tinker a bit with these for best bass performance; we found the sub sounded best positioned fairly close to the soundbar with the crossover set at 200Hz and the phase switch to 0 degrees.

PERFORMANCE

Once happy with the set-up, we settled down to some serious listening. The first Blu-ray given a spin was 'Fool's Gold' — not exactly a cinematic masterpiece, but the soundtrack makes for an entertaining experience. The opening dive sequence and boat sinking played out well on the JBL, which quickly demonstrated that it can fill a good-sized room with substantial movie sound. It's a sad fact that as flat-panel TVs have become bigger, thinner and ever more affordable, their sound quality has generally become ever worse. So the upgrade here is huge. The extended width of the soundbar allows a decent spread of soundstaging, while the subwoofer adds ample substance, but not an overload of bass — the soundbar lends plenty of level for dialogue and



other centrally-placed effects, and does so with both clarity and authority.

Time for some real action — we popped on the ever-torturous 'Black Hawk Down' and nudged the volume upwards. This was more like it... the JBL delivered rapid gunfire and loud explosions without any sign of a struggle. We didn't detect any obvious distortion as the volume increased, the SB400 bar and sub both happy to let rip as the battle sequences hotted up. So if it's scale and presence you're after from your soundbar then, once again, this JBL won't disappoint. The film's aggressive audio score and action gave both bar and sub plenty to do, yet the more intense the on-screen drama became, the more this JBL duo relished serving it up, loud and proud.

While we noted that Convoy in Australia doesn't make too much of the surroundness of its bar, it does "decode film soundtracks in their native format" and incorporates that Harman Display Surround technology which "creates a virtual surround-sound experience while preserving the original audio mix in its timbre and special balance". As with pretty much all soundbars we've ever heard, we can't report a truly immersive surround soundfield to be delivered here; it most certainly delivers a wide and expansive soundstage, and even off-axis you still appreciate this combination's ability to fill a room with generous movie sound. We found such efforts to be most effective when we rejigged things to use solid side walls to reflect sound back into the room — very wide, but not really behind us.

What did impress us was its abilities to double as a nifty music player as well as TV soundbooster. Bluetoothin' some tunes from our iPhone was, as it should be, a doddle. We found that we preferred a little less output from the subwoofer when listening to music as opposed to movies, and once more the soundbar's width and ability to soundstage meant stereo music sounded bigger than you might expect from such a slim enclosure. The highs were smooth and never harsh, mids open and expressive; once you've tamed that bass, the whole was tight and punchy — this JBL has all the musical attributes of a conventional speaker system.

CONCLUSION

On the least expensive flat screens it's almost as though sound quality is an afterthought, so bad has it become. Thankfully, that's exactly where products like the JBL Cinema SB400 come in — taking up the minimum of living space but filling it with quality movie and music audio. Simple to set up and use, JBL's SB400 soundbar and wireless subwoofer offer room-filling movie sound and convincing stereo music performance in a neat, slim and discreet package. It doesn't mimic a true surround sound experience as well as some soundbars on the market, but then it doesn't make that a key claim, and we suspect it wasn't JBL's primary aim with this system. Rather the SB400 delivers solid sound along with some useful Bluetooth connectivity and enough inputs to cater for different wired sources. Nic Tatham —

VERDICT

JBL Cinema SB400 sound bar

Price: \$999

- Big sound from small boxes
- Bluetooth connectivity
- Simple to use
- Not exactly surround sound
- No built-in display
- No networking

SOUND BAR

INPUTS: HDMI x 3, Bluetooth, topical audio in, minijack auxiliary in
DRIVERS: 2 x 25mm tweeters; 4 x 57mm midrange drivers
QUOTED POWER: 120W
DIMENSIONS (whd): 110 x 95 x 64mm
WEIGHT: 3.3kg
QUOTED SYSTEM FREQUENCY RESPONSE (with sub): 38Hz-20kHz (-6dB)

SUBWOOFER

DRIVER: 8-inch (180mm) down-firing
QUOTED POWER: 200W
DIMENSIONS (whd): 329 x 355 x 320mm
WEIGHT: 10.5kg

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