

Refined rocker

By LAM SENG FATT

Model: JBL XTi20 loudspeaker

Price: RM2,480

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WHEN you are hanging out in a disco or moving to the beat in a rave party at a club, take a look at the bank of speakers – chances are, they will have the JBL label on them. When you are attending a rock concert, look at the huge speakers. What do you see? Very likely, three letters – JBL.

The American speaker manufacturer has become synonymous with rock music, not without reason. Many audiophiles in America (and Malaysia too) started out owning JBL speakers (I recall the Decades from, er, decades ago). Many studios used JBL monitors when recording rock songs.

Thus it is no wonder that JBL has always been known as a rock speaker-sort of manufacturer. How many times have you heard this advice; if you are tired of the polite nature of British speakers and need some oomph and punch to the music, switch to JBLs. Simple as that. There is nothing like rock played through JBL speakers. If you listen to rock music more than classical stuff and don't mind some brashness, some lack of refinement and focus, some colouration and tizz, then JBLs are for you.

Well, when I received the JBL XTi20 for review, I knew what to expect. And like it so often happens in hi-fi these days, I was proven wrong and had to erase all my preconceptions of JBL, the brand and its speakers.

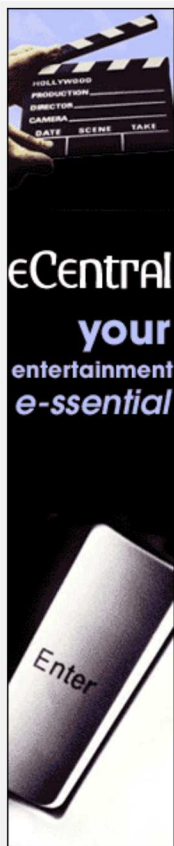
Six sides – a sound concept

The JBL XTi20 is from a family of products meant for home theatre. Included in the range are the XTi10c centre speaker, the XTi40/60/80 and 100, and completing the range is a subwoofer. Normally, the bookshelf-sized XTi20 is packaged with the floorstanding XTi40s and the centre speaker for HT needs.

All the speakers have hexagonal cabinets. This is not really a new concept – some years ago, Tannoy had a range of speakers with six-sided cabinets. The idea was to reduce the standing waves inside the cabinet and cut down on distortion. The idea worked quite well and I remember the Tannoys receiving good reviews, but I don't know why the



HEAR ME OUT ... the JBL XTi20 loudspeakers have a unique shape, sound great and promise loads of fun.



British manufacturer ceased working with hexagonal cabinets.

The JBL XTi20, manufactured in Denmark, is very well made and the real wood veneer has a luxurious feel. My missus liked them very much and thought the hexagonal shape was "cool."

Measuring 382mm x 227mm x 300mm (h/w/d), the speaker is smallish. The strange thing is that the pair came with rubber studs and spikes. To make it even stranger, there are no threaded inserts for the spikes and the rubber studs could not be detached. Was it supposed to be a mini floorstander or what?

So I took out a pair of 18-inch stands and luckily the top plate was just small enough to fit the base of the speakers without the rubber studs getting in the way. I think the studs are for placing the speakers on bookshelves. But what about the spikes? That mystery has yet to be solved.



TWO TO TANGO ... biwiring option on the JBL Xti20 loudspeakers will double the fun factor.

The manufacturer claims a frequency response of 60Hz-27kHz, a sensitivity of 87dB and impedance of six ohms.

The speaker uses a 16.5cm woofer with a vented pole piece and a 25mm titanium dome tweeter. Both units are flush mounted and across the tweeter are two vertical bridges, possibly for protecting the delicate dome. At the rear is a largish flared port and terminals for biwiring.

Workmanship was of first-class quality, and the speakers sounded pretty solid when knocked.

JBL recommends using amps from 25-100 watts with the XTi20, and

suggests placing the speakers about 75cm from the rear wall and 75-100cm from the sidewalls, with a run-in time of 8-12 hours.

Surprise, surprise

I hooked up the speakers to the resident hi-fi system – comprising the usual Marantz CD 63 KI CD player, Audiolab 8000A integrated amp, with Alphacore Micropurl Silver interconnects and Goertz MI2 Veracity speaker cables – and slipped in the usual test CDs and sipped some green tea.

Instead of the bright, boomy and brash sound that I expected from JBL, I heard a kind of sonic refinement that normally would be associated with British speakers. The JBLs were not as polite as many British speakers, but they had a classier, elegant poise not usually associated with loud, forward Americans.

Some amount of sibilance and reticence in the upper bass, mid and upper mids could be detected, but things improved with time and after some warming up, the speakers let their hair down and had great fun.

When I replaced the Alphacore with a pair of Analysis-Plus Oval One interconnects (review to come), things started moving on to an enhanced pace.

The prized component in these JBLs is the titanium tweeter, which could create a very clean, precise sound. Cymbals, trumpets, saxophones and violins were reproduced accurately without any hint of colouration. Notes started and stopped without hesitation; JBL has made one of the best-sounding tweeters around.

The images were thrown backwards in a natural way and the soundstage was surprisingly wide with some instruments being "placed" way beyond the box sideways. Depth was quite good, imaging was quite stable but vertical height of the soundstage could be better.

Lacking somewhat in oomph was the bass and looking at the frequency response, it is easy to see why since the bottom end goes down to only 60Hz. Whatever bass available, however, had a lively character and this

somewhat makes up for the rolled off bottom octaves.

I played a Michael Crawford album, and the JBLs handled that very well. Granted, there was orchestral accompaniment, but it wasn't really classical music, though having said that if the speakers can handle orchestral works, then classical should not be a problem. I played The Cranberries and The Corrs and the JBLs didn't work up a sweat. They could rock, dance and yet behave themselves in refined company.

A new view

Having been surprised by the impressive performance of these JBLs, I have learnt never to judge speakers by their past reputation.

Being perfectly capable performers, the JBL XTi20 can take on many other rivals, even in its price range despite the fact that it is essentially a HT type of speaker.


While you are auditioning these bookshelf speakers, you might as well check out the floorstanding XTi40s. They could be even more surprising.


Pros: *Very clean-sounding top end; wide soundstage; refined sound a surprise, given the JBL rock pedigree.*

Cons: *Lack of deep bass; what are the rubber studs doing there, and where do I fit in the spikes?*

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