

Sherwood S-9 Soundbar with Opsodis 3D Technology

TV's nowadays are lightweight and super-flat but associated surround amps and speakers are still bulky and need lots of space. Here's a convenient solution that offers **BIG** sound from a single box, without scimping on features or connectivity. hifi-advice.com - info and reviews by Christiaan Punter - March 2013

Introduction

Soundbars aren't new, they have been around for a while but I've always associated them with inferior sound. Their sole purpose was to be minimalist-design and sound quality seemed not to be important. At best I felt they sounded small and tinny. On the other end of the scale there have been cost-no-object single box solutions like Pioneer's Digital Sound Projector which is hugely impressive but also obscenely expensive.

Enter the Sherwood S-9 Soundbar. Its dimensions (to me, at least) are pretty modest. With its 105cm it is slightly wider than the average 40 inch LDC TV. It is only 10cm deep however and because all connections are placed in a recessed cavity, it can be placed flat against the wall. In fact: fitting it to the wall is made very easy with flush screw-holes and the Soundbar can be mounted with just two screws in the wall.

Review sample kindly supplied by Sherwood America

Retail price 449 euro



Is it a loudspeaker with built in surround amp? Or is it a surround amp with built in speakers? It seems to be more of the latter, if connectivity is anything to go by. There are 3 HDMI inputs and one HDMI output, stereo analog in, toslink digital in, subwoofer output and an RF in for analog radio (with RDS). There's also a USB input but only for memory sticks. It doesn't work with iPods or iPhones. But if that's what you're after then that can be done very conveniently with Bluetooth. Naturally there's an IR remote control and a small yet informative FTL display. The power supply is an external compact 2.7A switching type.



There are six built in amps, according to the box totalling 150 Watts. Impressive though that sounds, this amount has been reached at by adding up all individual 25 watt amps. 25 Watts doesn't seem like a lot and strictly speaking adding up individual ratings doesn't make a 150 Watt speaker, but believe me: the S9 can play very loudly!



Main listening room

First thing I wanted to know was how the S9 would perform in my large listening room. I placed it disrespectfully on top of the [Levinson 390S](#) and decided to use that player as the source using analog cables. Upon switching on the S9 produces a soft hiss from all speakers,

probably from the signal processing. Ignoring this, as it was soft enough not to hear from a normal listening distance I hit play on the CD player. My first response was: WOW! There's a huge soundstage combined with excellent center image focus. Even when standing right in front of the unit there is this sensation of being surrounded by sound entirely. The sound isn't entirely neutral but very powerful and there really isn't more coloration than from, say, Blueroom Minipods.



Soundfield experiments

Listening thus far was using factory settings. The display read "3D stereo" so naturally I was curious to find out what the other settings would do. Regular "stereo" almost seems to be included only to show how impressive the Opsodis sound processing is, as by comparison it sounds flat and boxy. "3D stereo" has much deeper, and more powerful, bass and treble is more extended, and of course the soundstage is much more impressive. Going to the max, which is "3D surround mode", provides exactly what you'd expect: an even more enveloping soundstage and a true sensation of being surrounded by speakers, apparently even with a 2-channel analog source. For such a small enclosure the S9 produces impressively deep and powerful bass. The amplifiers never seem to run out of steam and if you try to get the unit to clip, this only happens at very loud levels. Remember: I have a very large listening room, but the S9 easily fills it with music. Speaking of loud levels: after I had fun trying to approach the limits of the system in terms of sound pressure, after pressing stop on the CD player I noticed that the level of hiss was very high. It turns out that it is related to the volume setting. If you listen very loudly, there is a modulated hiss that is audible from the listening position.

One other thing I noticed is that you shouldn't sit too close (less than 2 meters) or the sound beams too much and you'll have to sit precisely in the middle in order to have correct left-center-right balance. When sitting more than 2 meters away (in my main listening room it's actually 7 meters) the beaming is not that obvious and there is no need to sit perfectly on axis. However, it seems that the experience is only best for 1 person. If I sit in the extreme left or right position on the 3-person couch, the center image almost disappears and the surround effect diminishes. It seems to me that this is not a fault of the S9, but a natural phase-related phenomenon, inherently present in any small speaker system that has to fool the ears into perceiving surround sound.

Cinema room

Now it was time to see what the S9 could do in a more appropriate setting. I connected up the WDTV live using HDMI and looped it through to the TV. After trying the unit in my main listening room I was already impressed with the S9's spacious sound and very good bass given its small enclosure, but when set up in my very small 3x3 meter cinema room, the bass was nothing short of INSANE! There was this sheer amount of low frequency power that was quite simply staggering. It wasn't boomy or otherwise unnatural, but just right. I have two subwoofers but there really was no need for them, so powerful and deep was the S9's bass! Of course it is aided by room modes but still, the S9 is likely to be used in smallish rooms like mine and it really seems to be in its element now.

I tried all kinds of material: AC3, DTS and 2-track. All formats were always recognised and decoded correctly and always the sound was incredibly powerful and spacious. Again just like in the main listening room, the center image focus all but fell away when moving to the left or right side of the sofa, but as long as I was sitting in the sweet spot its center image focus was spot on, as was the illusion of sitting in a surround sound field. Some movies were conveyed so powerfully that I just forgot that I was listening to one small speaker instead of my usual Nautili surround system.

Intelligibility is certainly good but not on par with a good dedicated center speaker. Of course it isn't fair to compare to my usual 2300 euro HTM-1 but it does bring to light that the S9's sound processing can be a two-edged sword. On the one hand the S9 produces staggering bass and depth with low apparent coloration and in big action scenes it really excels. But when actors are mumbling and you try to understand what is said onscreen it becomes more obvious that voices are a little thickened and coloured. This in itself is fine and never very distracting, but it does sometimes take away a little intelligibility. If English is not your native language and you can't play a little louder, this can become a problem.

Bluetooth

Just for fun I tried the Bluetooth option with my iPhone. Connection is a snap: enter the correct mode on the S9 and the iPhone, enter a code, connect, and it's done. The connection is stable and works on a big distance. But what's more important: the quality is superb! I was once again amazed at the S9's powerful and deep delivery. It made the best of hard hitting dance tracks and produced precise focus in combination with a fully emersive soundstage. There was no apparent coloration, no shrill highs, no boomyness, no congestion: just powerful, highly exciting sound. In fact it played so powerfully that I didn't dare find its maximum! I played track after track on the iPhone and enjoyed every second of it.

CONCLUSION

Does the S9 render discrete speaker systems obsolete? Not really. But it does sound much, much better than I had anticipated. In not too large rooms it produces a wholly believable and very powerful sound with very deep bass. Its surround illusion is very convincing, only as long as you sit in the middle. The S9 wipes the floor with many mini-systems and is incomparably better than any TV's built in speakers. The perfect solution for anyone craving good sound but wary of their rooms being taken over by 5 or more speakers.

I have to admit that at this stage I still have no idea of the price. Let's look it up... Google: fill me in! Ah, 440 euro, I see. Wait, only 440 euro? Most decent surround amplifiers cost more than that! Need I say more?

hifi-advice.com