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Surround Sound in a Box

Zvox Model 315 Sound Console

By Rich Warren

Photo by Tony Cordoza

October 2004

What can you get from a single box not much larger than a DVD player with three small drivers firing forward and a woofer port firing rearward? If the box is the Zvox 315 Sound Console, you get more sound than you might think — full, wide stereo and a surprising amount of surround sound. The Zvox 315 can turn almost any sound source — from a portable CD player to a satellite receiver — into a complete music system usable nearly anywhere. You can place it beneath a computer monitor, atop a TV, on a desk, or even (thanks to its 12-volt input) on your car's tailgate.



The \$200 Zvox doesn't need an instruction manual — a single sheet of paper accompanies the unassuming gray, vinyl-covered box. The only controls are three small knobs and a power switch on the rear. There's a stereo minijack input and a dual-purpose minijack input/output that can either feed an external powered subwoofer or serve as a second, mixing input, with volume controlled at the source. For example, while you work at your desk listening to your iPod, you could have sounds from your PC mixed in with the music.

The three knobs are labeled Main Volume, Subwoofer Level, and PhaseCue. The first two do what you might expect (Subwoofer Level is a bass control). PhaseCue controls Zvox's proprietary circuit for creating what it calls "out of box"

The Short Form

DIMENSIONS (WxHxD) 17 x 4 1/2 x 14 3/4 inches

PRICE \$200

MANUFACTURER Zvox Audio, www.zvoxaudio.com, 866-367-9869

KEY FEATURES

- Compact, single-box stereo sound
- PhaseCue circuit for "out-of-box" sound
- Easily accepts wide range of audio sources

PLUS

- Very good stereo and quasi-surround sound
- Very easy to operate
- Same width as standard components

MINUS

- Input overloads easily
- No input switching
- Volume control on rear



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sound, which is accomplished by feeding left-plus right-channel sound to the center driver, the left minus the right channel to the left driver, and the right minus the left channel to the right driver. Got that? Furthermore, a tube connects the left and right enclosures within the box, which Zvox says produces "infinite compliance," allowing bigger sound from a smaller cabinet. The bass channel has its own equalization and a soft-clipping circuit to reduce the chances of audible overload and distortion.

Plain and simple, it works. The Model 315 Sound Console lives up to Zvox's claims and then some. To start out, I placed the box directly in front of my 42-inch rear-projection TV, centered just below the screen on a short speaker stand, and watched what has become my standard reference DVD, the audio/video extravaganza *Moulin Rouge*.

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Surround Sound in a Box

continued

PERFORMANCE The soundtrack explodes with musical fireworks, and not only did the Zvox playback have impressive dynamic range, natural tonal balance, and ample volume, but it gave me far more than a stereo sound field. The sound spread behind the Console and far out to the sides, even wrapping a bit so that the side effects seemed to come from slightly in front of the screen as well. As the camera careened around the dance floor, the sonic illusion kept pace.

I followed that up with A Mighty Wind, folk music's mockumentary answer to This Is Spinal Tap. I was surprised to hear some ambient sounds that I hadn't noticed during earlier viewings, especially during the outdoor interviews. During the model-train sequence in Mickey's basement, the train sounded like it was circling the TV.

Zvox suggests trying the system with the virtual surround processing offered in many DVD players. Engaging my Rotel player's surround setting wrapped the sound further to the sides and rear, but at the expense of some hollowness and thinness in front.

Finally I turned to music, including the new Mary Chapin Carpenter CD, Between Here and Gone. The stereo image amazed me, especially when she played piano. I also spun a live recording I made at a Chicago folk-music venue and was impressed by how well the Zvox reproduced the room ambience.

There's no remote, and since the volume control is on the rear panel, the Zvox sound system works best with a source component that has a volume control. (I soon tired of shuttling back and forth from my couch to the rear of the Zvox to adjust the volume when I used it with my DVD player.) If your bedroom TV has a variable line-level output, the Zvox is an excellent way to get better sound from it, short of installing a six- or seven-piece surround sound system.

With the Zvox 315 Sound Console, good simple sound is no longer an oxymoron. It's a bargain to boot.

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