



zvox audio

315 Sound Console

as reviewed by Ed Kobesky



Little girl not included!

Does anyone remember the Cambridge SoundWorks TVWorks? That's probably because it was a great idea gone wrong. The TVWorks was a small amplified speaker designed to improve upon the sound of the average TV, but it was ahead of its time in concept and below par in execution, and it died a quick death. The ZVOX 315 Sound Console (\$200) is a more ambitious solution that couldn't have come at a better time. It aims to be a one-box, amplified home theater speaker system, and it comes close. It can also serve as an all-in-one sound system for your computer, iPod, or digital music player.

Housed in a lightweight, 17-inch-wide box is a 40-watt amplifier powering three 3.25-inch drivers and one 5.25-inch woofer in a bandpass enclosure. According to ZVOX, "The center speaker reproduces both channels. The outer two speakers play the left and right channels—but the sound is modified using patent-pending PhaseCue™ [simulated surround] technology." The results compare favorably to more expensive three-speaker systems like Bose's 3-2-1, but the 315 is smaller, more convenient, and costs much less, even after you add a DVD player. This will

ED KOBESKY'S SYSTEM

LOUDSPEAKERS
ProAc Tablette 2000

ELECTRONICS
NAD 3400 Monitor Series
integrated amplifier, Rotel RC-
980 preamplifier and Rotel RA-
970 amplifier, Denon DRA-395
stereo receiver.

SOURCES

SOURCES

Technics SL-1200Mk2 turntable, NAD C521i CD player, Phillips CDR-785 CD changer/recorder, Denon DVD-900 DVD player.

CABLES

Audioquest Diamondback (used to replace the pre-out/main-in jumpers on the NAD and also between the Rotel preamp and amp), MonsterCable Interlink 400MkII & 300MkII, and Audioquest Coral (to connect the digital sources), MonsterCable Z1 speaker cable, Grado 15' headphone extension cable.

ACCESSORIES

MonsterPower HTS2500 isolation transformer, Record Doctor II record cleaning machine with Disc Doctor brushes, Sennheiser HD580 headphones, Sony Professional MDR-7506 headphones, Audioquest MC cartridge demagnetizer.

be welcome news to those who want good sound for movies and TV broadcasts but are unwilling to make the esthetic compromises that accompany most home theater installations—namely wires and boxes galore.

Though relatively plain, the ZVOX 315 is a good-looking unit. It sports a rubberized finish in the buyer's choice of charcoal or silver, with a suede-like texture that not only feels nice, but helps prevent audible buzzes or vibration if you place a computer monitor or music player on top of it. The rear panel controls are smartly laid out and easy to access, though you'll rarely need to do so. (Deactivating the PhaseCue for music listening is a must, however.) A beefy external power supply is provided, along with all the cables you'll need. There's even an oversized, full-color hookup guide that is commendably thorough.

The 315 is magnetically shielded, so you can set it directly beneath your TV or computer monitor. (It makes one hell of a computer speaker system—the best I've heard, hands down.) Source components are connected via one of two mini-jacks, and adaptor cords are included with the unit. The back panel has adjustments for volume, Phase Cue, and bass output. You can connect your source components directly and use the 315's volume control, which yielded the best sound quality in my listening tests. However, the most convenient option is to connect the source to your TV, then use its variable output to feed the ZVOX so you can control the volume using your TV's remote control.

It took me a total of ten minutes to unpack and set up the unit. I put it in standby mode, so it would turn on when fed a signal and power down when idle—truly a set-it-and-forget-it unit. I set the Phase Cue and volume knobs to one o'clock, then sat back to watch some movies. All I can say is, "Wow." The 315 nearly equaled the sound quality (but not the volume) of the two-channel receiver and monitors I was previously using, a system that cost more than twice as much. Moreover, the Phase Cue simulated surround feature sounded less artificial than the SRS TruSurround processing circuit built into my DVD player.

ZVOX promises bass extension to 63Hz. In small- to medium-size rooms, that's more than enough to produce a rumble you can feel during explosions, car chases, and starship fly-bys on your favorite DVDs. Want more oomph? The ZVOX allows you to add a separate powered subwoofer. While it's not intended to replace separates, the ZVOX 315 will give any entry-level mass-market home-theater-in-a-box a run for its money in terms of articulation and finesse. Music lovers will appreciate how faithfully it reproduces their favorite concert DVDs.

Unlike systems like Bose's 3-2-1 and KEF's Instant Theater, the ZVOX 315 doesn't attempt to achieve 360-degree sound without the use of rear channels. This is a smart move. The 3-2-1, which I heard at a Bose retail store, is only partially successful in this regard, and people who have heard the KEF system say the same. Rather than compromise the 315's performance, its designers concentrated on producing the widest front soundstage possible, and they have succeeded.

The ZVOX 315's simulated surround effect reminded me of the cross-feed feature on HeadRoom headphone amps. There's some smearing of detail, but the spacious sound that results is worth the tradeoff. I watched at least six great concert DVDs and never pined for a full 5.1 system. Then again, I've never pined for a full 5.1 system.

I was unable to put the ZVOX 315 directly beneath the TV in my video rack, as it was a few millimeters too deep to clear the supports, but I was able to set it in a component bay to the left of my DVD player. I was worried that the soundstage would be skewed hopelessly to the side, but a liberal dollop of Phase Cue, together with some judicious tweaking of my TV's balance control, produced satisfying results. The only other problem I had with the ZVOX was its standby mode. Sometimes, late at night with the volume low, the ZVOX would go to sleep because there wasn't enough signal to activate it. That was easily cured by flipping its power switch to "on" rather than "standby."

Since Positive Feedback is about music, not movies, you're probably wondering how the ZVOX 315 works as a music system. The answer is, wonderfully. Don't expect

miracles for \$200, but you may be surprised. Fed a signal from my Sony CD Walkman, the ZVOX trounced my old Cambridge SoundWorks Model 88 table radio (which, unlike the ZVOX, is not magnetically shielded) in bass extension, soundstaging, and listenability. It is a must-audition if you're looking at high-priced table radios. Combine a ZVOX 315 with, say, Denon's \$199 DCM-280, a nice five-disc changer with built-in digital volume control, and for less than \$400 you will have a great system for the bedroom, basement, or cabin. If you are considering one of the new docking stations for your iPod and are more concerned with substance than style, this is also a must-audition.

I can't imagine a better package for \$200. The ZVOX 315 Sound Console does what it promises and then some. It's the easiest way I know to dramatically improve the sound of your TV, iPod, or portable music player without getting caught in a tangle of ugly wires. **Ed Kobesky**

315 Sound Console

Retail: \$200

ZVOX Audio

web address: www.zvoxaudio.com