

The Perfect Vision

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AUDIO REVIEW | Gary Altunian

In-Wall Loudspeaker Survey: OEM Systems Preference K-5LCR

Consumers are the winners as in-wall speaker sound-quality continues to improve.

Increasingly, it seems consumers want music and home theater systems without large in-room loudspeakers. The solution: in-wall and in-ceiling speakers. As the popularity of in-wall and in-ceiling speakers grows, so does the variety of models offered at every price and performance level. In fact, it appears that almost every manufacturer is trying to capture a piece of this growing segment of the market. One thing is certain: consumers are definitely the winners as in-wall speaker manufacturers compete for market share and continue to improve sound quality.

In this review, we tested speaker systems at three distinctly different price points: the OEM Systems Preference K-5LCRs at \$229/each, the Definitive Technology Ultimate In-Wall RLS IIs priced at \$650/each, and the Inner Spirits at \$1147.50/each from Totem Acoustics.

OEM Systems Preference K-5LCR

OEM Systems is probably not the first name that comes to mind for in-wall speakers, but the two-way, three-driver Preference K-5LCR is likely to change that because of the performance and construction quality it offers. Immediately upon removing the K-5LCRs from the carton, I was struck by their solid construction and clever and robust mounting system. Each K-5LCR consists of a main speaker with



Preference K-5LCR

a rigid ABS baffle plus a separate, two-piece mounting frame, which OEM describes as a "Clamp-Ring Mounting System." The clamp-ring mount features a two-piece perimeter frame that attaches to the front and rear of the wall cutout for the speaker. Once the frame is secured to the wall, the baffle is inserted into the frame and attached with eight screws. It's a smart design that maximizes the speaker's contact with the wall, makes installation easier, and is a better alternative to the typical dogleg clamping system. The baffle has a knockout to add an infrared receiver for remote control of concealed components.

Following installation and a few hours of burn-in, I sat down for some listening. The K-5LCR speakers are very easy to listen to and exceeded my

expectations, especially considering their affordable price. They produce a surprising amount of bass, mostly mid-bass, but the two 5 1/4-inch Kevlar mid-bass drivers sounded full even without a subwoofer. In Vince Gill's "Pretty Little Adriana" from *High Lonesome Sound* [DTS Entertainment], downmixed to stereo, the mid-bass was full and well defined, even though the lowest bass notes could only be reached with a subwoofer. When combined with my two Morel IS-9A subs, the system sounded great. A back box or enclosure would probably improve the bass response, but overall the system sounded very balanced. While in the country music mood, I listened to the title track from George Strait's *One Step at a Time* [DTS Entertainment] and found the

IN-WALL LOUDSPEAKER SURVEY: PREFERENCE K-5LCR

The Last Word



- Sound quality rivals more expensive in-wall speakers
- Great value
- Excellent mounting system



- No enclosure or back box
- Good bass, but better with a sub

Specifications

Preference K-5LCR two-way, three-driver in-wall loudspeakers

- Driver complement: Two 5 1/4" Kevlar mid-bass drivers, 1" Teteron tweeter, all drivers magnetically shielded
- Frequency response: 45Hz-21kHz
- Sensitivity 90dB (1W/1m)
- Impedance: 8 ohms
- Power handling: 50-100 watts
- Dimensions: mounting flange 9" x 15 3/4"; cut-out 7 7/8" x 14 7/16" x 3 1/2"
- Weight: 15 lbs.
- Warranty: Limited lifetime warranty
- Price: \$229/each

Manufacturer Information

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acoustic guitar had a sharp attack with very good transient response. Similar characteristics were revealed in the Keith Jarrett composition "Prism" as performed by Carlos Franzetti and *The Jazz Kamerata* [Chesky Records], where Franzetti's piano passages had a concise, quick, lifelike attack. The K-5LCRs have a soft-dome tweeter made of Teteron, a DuPont material known for its light weight, which no doubt accounts for the speaker's superior transient response.

Solo female vocalists, always a good test for timbre, imaging and

soundstaging, sounded very natural and open on the K-5LCRs. On "Spanish Harlem" from Rebecca Pidgeon's *The Raven* [Chesky Records], for example, Pidgeon's voice had lifelike immediacy and presence, creating a clearly defined sonic image between the speakers. Soundstaging was very good, conveying a sense of the space in which the recording was made. Chesky recordings are known for this quality, but it takes a loudspeaker with good imaging and soundstaging characteristics to resolve the sense of three-dimensional acoustic space.

Each of the K-5LCR's two Kevlar mid-bass drivers incorporates a phase plug, a part of the driver's pole piece that extends in front of the cone, reducing unwanted phase distortion and improving midrange clarity. And midrange clarity was evident in all of the recordings I used to evaluate these speakers. Critics may argue about the importance of low phase distortion, or its critical counterpart, proper phase alignment, but I think they are audible and can contribute to a sense of focused and precise stereo imaging. You know good phase alignment when you hear it and these speakers have it. A good example is "This Woman's Work" from Rachel Z's *Grace* [Chesky Records], where the singer's voice sounds palpably present thanks to a rock-solid sonic image. The same focused imaging can be heard in Freddie Ravel's *Sol to Soul* [DTS Entertainment], where Anjani Thomas' delicate voice is presented

with superb airiness and detail, along with a tightly defined center image.

Off axis response is often a concern with in-wall speakers because they cannot be toed-in. To compensate for this, the K-5LCRs feature a pivoting tweeter, but even without moving the tweeter, off-axis response was very good. The speakers also have two baffle-mounted switches for midrange and high-frequency level intended to compensate for various room acoustic conditions. I preferred both switches in the +3dB position for additional presence and detail.

Summary

The performance of the OEM Systems Preference K-5LCR speakers belies their modest suggested retail price of \$229 each. Had I not known the price in advance, I would have guessed they sold for more, perhaps as much as \$400-\$500 each. They are a great value and their sound quality rivals that of speakers costing much more. They are easy to listen to for long periods without fatigue and their balanced sound makes them good for many different genres of music. I do not have the space to describe all of the features and technologies these speakers have to offer, so check out OEM's Web site for more information. OEM's Preference K-5LCR in-walls sound good, are well built and easy to install, and they won't break the bank. What more could you ask?

To read the full In-Wall Loudspeaker Survey, go to www.theperfectvision.com

Preference®