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Compact Speaker Systems

Yamaha YSP-4000 Digital Sound Projector

By Kim Wilson • December, 2007

Is the age of the traditional loudspeaker almost over? Never before has there been so many alternatives to the typical monolith speaker, from in-walls that disappear into the décor to ultra-tiny speaker enclosures that sit on a shelf. A general aversion to complex and highly visible multichannel audio systems has left a good many consumers with only half the home theater experience. According to a September 2006 article from the Consumer Electronics Association, called "Home Theater Opportunities," 76% of all flat panel TV users are not using a separate audio system. As the article points out there are a good deal of opportunities for audio equipment manufacturers to develop alternate methods for delivering quality audio for high-definition TVs.



The Yamaha YSP-4000 Digital Sound Projector (\$1,799) is one of the simplest solutions this speaker-shy demographic could embrace. One could call the YSP-4000 the ultimate HTiB (Home Theater in a Box) because it contains speakers (or what Yamaha calls "sound beams"), amplification and complex signal processing that emulates surround sound, and video switching in a single enclosure.

What It Is

At 40w x 8h x 6d and weighing only 35 pounds, it's essentially the same size as many "sound bar" style speakers that only contain the front left, center, and right speakers. With those types of sound bars you still need rear channel speakers and an A/V Receiver for surround sound. The YSP-4000 can be placed underneath a cabinet, on a shelf, or on-wall using the optional SPM-K30 bracket (\$80).

The YSP-4000 does not use conventional speaker drivers, but is equipped with 40, 1.5-inch "beam" drivers and two 4.25-inch woofers. Each beam driver is precisely directed based on Yamaha's proprietary IntelliBeam auto calibration process, which optimizes the beam angle of each beam driver to match the individual listening room.

The YSP-4000's built-in amplification delivers 2-Watts per beam and an additional 20-Watts per woofer for a system total of 120-Watts. Using the multiple beam arrays to direct sound in specific directions, in conjunction with some fancy digital signal processing, the YSP-4000 is capable of replicating a pretty realistic multichannel surround experience from a single sound bar.

In addition to providing complete amplification for the internal speakers, the YSP-4000 provides all signal processing including surround sound decoding for Dolby Digital, DTS, Dolby Pro Logic II and DTS Neo: 6 compatibility. Seven Cinema DSP settings (three for movies, three for music and one for sports) are also provided, in addition to SRS Labs' TruBass enhancement technology.

Hooking Up

Despite its size, there are quite a few connection options available with the YSP-4000, but nothing like a full-featured A/V Receiver. That, however, is the point. The YSP-4000 is meant for simple systems with fast and easy setup and operation. There are two HDMI inputs with a single HDMI output, which are 1080p/24 and 1080p/60 compatible. Since both audio and video are transmitted via HDMI, it's not necessary to use separate audio hook-ups for your HDMI sources.

For the type of user who would gravitate to the YSP-4000, there is no question that the HDMI hook-up is the easiest way to go and if the system is super basic it might be all a person would ever need. In fact,

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the HDMI inputs are marked specifically for DVD and Sat/Cable boxes. For additional video sources there are two component inputs along with a set of component outputs. For digital audio inputs, the YSP-4000 provides two optical and two coax connections plus there are two sets of analog audio inputs.

The YSP-4000 does demonstrate some surprising sophistication with unconversion of analog video sources to HDMI. Sources using the composite or component inputs can be output via the single HDMI port, as well as upconverted to your choice of resolution--480p, 720p, or 1080i. As a result, no matter how many video sources you have, all that is needed for an output is a single HDMI cable from the YSP-4000 to the video display.

Sometimes in the quest to simplify it's possible to create greater confusion. And that is the case with the YSP-4000's component inputs, which are assigned specific digital audio inputs. For example, both my DirecTV satellite receiver and Toshiba HD-DVD player have only optical digital audio outputs. Only one of the component inputs on the YSP-4000 accepts an optical input, the other requires a coax input. This could cause frustration for users in the same predicament.

Three composite inputs are provided, along with a single composite output, but there are no S-Video connections. A special jack is provided for using one of Yamaha's recommended subwoofers, though there is a (RCA) LFE output for using a subwoofer of your choice (I used the YSP-400 with my SPB SubSeries 5i throughout this review). Connections for a XM mini-tuner and an iPod dock are also included.

The optional iPod dock [\$199] allows access to the iPod's menu via the on-screen display and is controlled with the YSP-4000 remote. I would have liked to see a more interesting GUI interface but it got the job done. All my playlists were there and I could scroll through them with the remote, playing songs at random. Other MP3 devices can be hooked into the YSP-4000 using the 3.5mm mini-jack on the front panel.

Beam Me Up

The YSP-4000's auto-calibration method could not be any easier. A cardboard stand places the supplied microphone at the main seating position. Select Auto Setup and the YSP-4000's proprietary IntelliBeam technology generates a series of test tones to measure speaker distances, levels and set room EQ. In less than three minutes you're ready to begin watching movies.


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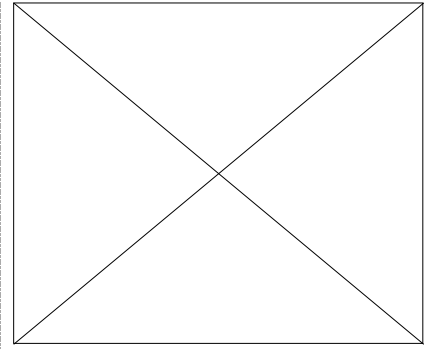
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While most people will probably "set it and forget it" with the auto setting, I had to tweak quite a few settings to create a more pleasing soundstage and frequency response. Fortunately, it's possible to save up to three IntelliBeam settings.

There are also four Beam modes on the YSP-4000 remote control. The performance of the Beam modes will vary depending on your overall settings. 5 Beam outputs sound beams for the front left, center and right array, in addition to the left and right surrounds. This is considered ideal for multichannel sources or playing two-channel sources in surround. Stereo + 3 Beam outputs the front left and right channels normally then uses sound beams to create the center and two surrounds. Yamaha recommends this for live recordings since vocals and instruments appear closer to the center and the surround effects replicate the venue's ambience. 3 Beam only outputs left, right and center without surrounds.

Performance

I started out my evaluation with "Nothing At All" from Santana's *Shaman* album and it was here I made quite a few manual adjustments. I began in the 5 Beam mode, and found it to be very spacious with a remarkably defined center. However, vocals were slightly subdued and lacked a distinctive punch.

Going into the manual setup I changed the focal length and center channel treble gain, which pulled the vocals out a bit more. I then switched to the Stereo + 3 Beam, which gave the vocals the presence and body I wanted.

The Auto Setup calculated the installation height at 3.5 ft., which seemed accurate, but I liked it better at 5 ft. because the sound distribution seemed closer to ear height, which is the most appropriate positioning for the front speaker array. This, in no small way, resulted in a far more satisfying spatial image across the front.

Also, the individual treble gain controls that are available for all five channels were extremely useful in fine-tuning the overall frequency response of the system. I fiddled with the settings for different sources and never found the perfect "leave it alone" setting, so the three IntelliBeam user settings came in handy.

And finally, there was an audible void between my PSB sub and the YSP-4000's midbass frequencies. After some judicious tuning of the bass tone controls and changing the auto-calibrated distance between the subwoofer and the main seating position, I was able to create a smoother, more cohesive blend.

The track "Enchanted Life" from Samantha James' *Rise* CD has a nice, laidback chill vibe with lots of ambience. However, when I threw it into the Stereo mode the image collapsed and I lost the wide soundfield. For this particular track I preferred the 5 Beam mode, which pulled the vocal back into the mix, creating a more pleasant blend from channel to channel while providing a realistic and immersive surround environment.

While I was in the middle of my evaluation, I received a new Melissa Etheridge DVD called *The Awakening Live*, which is a concert performance at the New York City Hard Rock. The YSP-4000 recreated a very effective and believable live setting, providing plenty of concert hall ambience. In the 5 Beam position vocals were well placed in the center with an excellent balance between the band and backing vocals.

Moving to movies, during the heavy storm scene from *The Perfect Storm* on HD DVD, several members of the crew and rescue copter are floundering in the water. During this scene dialog has to be strong or it will get lost among the sound of the thundering wind and crashing waves. I found the 3 Beam mode worked best because voices sounded weak in relation to the rest of the busy soundtrack.



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In Quentin Tarantino's quirky *Death Proof*, there is a bombastic drum soundtrack mingled with the sound of these souped-up muscle cars that totally drives the off-the-charts car chase in the movie's climax. The YSP-4000 delivered the depth to make this scene exciting and yet the dialog was clear and present.

Conclusion

If you object to having your music digitally poked, prodded and generally manipulated this is probably not the right product for you. However, for the MP3 generation, this was surely made for them. Add on the optional iPod dock, and the YSP-4000 turns into the ultimate iPod sound system and yeah, it plays everything else, too.

Between the auto-calibration, the additional manual adjustments and the Beam modes, the YSP-4000 offers plenty of adjustability for fine-tuning the system, more so than most simplified HTIB systems. Just by playing with the three key Beam modes you can find a sound palette that best suits your source. The \$1,799 manufacturer's list price is decidedly more than a wide range of available HTIBs, however, the performance capabilities of the YSP-4000 are far superior..

Ultimately, I liked the YSP-4000 probably more for its design and intent than its actual implementation. It didn't have the scale of dynamics or the sheer power of my reference system, but I still found it to be very convincing and I certainly recognize its obvious appeal. I was able to audition the YSP-4000 to several of my friends who I felt would be the right demographic for this product and they all loved the concept and thought it sounded great. And lest we forget, there is zero speaker wire clutter, and that alone will appeal to a lot of consumers

Highlights

- Contains all electronics, amplification and speakers for complete 5.1 surround system in a single enclosure
- Extremely fast Auto Setup and easy operation
- HDMI Switching, though limited by only two inputs

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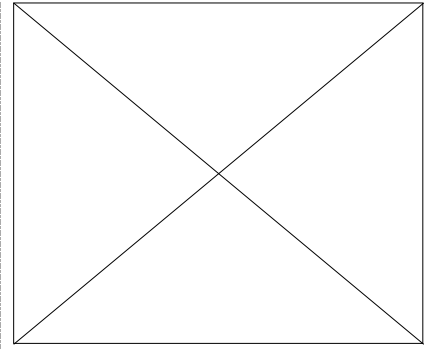
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Yamaha YSP-4000 Digital Sound Projector:
At A Glance

At a Glance

Yamaha YSP-4000 Digital Sound Projector
Drive Unit: 40 1.5-inch beam drivers, 2) 4.5-inch woofers

Power Rating: 120-Watts [system total]
 Audio Decoding: Dolby Digital, Dolby Pro Logic II, DTS, DTS Neo: 6
 Video inputs: Two HDMI, two component, three composite
 Video outputs: one each HDMI, component and composite
 Audio Inputs: Two HDMI, two each coaxial and Toslink digital audio, two analog stereo
 Audio outputs: Line level subwoofer output on RCAs
 Dimensions (WHD): 40" x 8" x 6"
 Weight: 35 lbs.

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