Happy Returns

The name is different, but the speakers are basically the same. MK Sound’s resurrection of the classic 150THX speaker system delivers control-room sound to those seeking precision, clarity, and detail in their movie and music presentation.
**SS-150 Surround**

MK Sound’s Tripole surround speaker combines the diffuse presentation of a THX dipole with the pinpoint imaging of a direct radiator.

**S-150 LCR**

The performance of MK Sound’s LCR was characterized by precise imaging during stereo listening and effortlessly intelligible, well-integrated dialogue with movies.

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**KEY FEATURES**

- S-150THX LCR speaker ($1,499 each): (2) 5¾-in cone woofers; (3) 1-in fabric-dome tweeters; 129° x 129° x 104°; in; 21 lb
- SS-150THX surround speaker ($1,499/pair): 3¾-in cone woofer; 1-in fabric-dome tweeter; (2) 3¾-in cone mid/tweeters (dipole); 10½ x 6½ x 8 in wide; 10½ lb
- MX-350THX subwoofer ($2,399): vented/push-pull enclosure; (2) 12-in (nominal) cone woofers; 400-watt B.A.S.H. amplifier; variable sub level, low-pass controls; phase, EO, THX-low-pass, and LFE-fixed-level toggle switches; 23¾ x 20 x 15¼ in; 56 lb
- Price (as tested): $7,495

mksoundsystem.com

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**MK Sound**, which until recently was M&K Sound (the ampersand is important to this tale, so keep an eye on it), has its genesis in late-1960s southern California, when high-end audio dealer — arguably the first high-end audio dealer — Jonas Miller partnered with audio-design wunderkind Ken Kreisel to begin making custom speakers. Within a couple of years, the firm was a going concern, and M&K soon innovated the very first consumer subwoofer-satellite system, thereby laying an important foundation block for the home theater/multichannel revolution still a decade-plus away.

The ampersand-less MK Sound, however, is a new entity: a Danish outfit sprung from the former European importer of the old brand, which purchased the intellectual property and other assets of M&K when it closed its doors in 2007. But the MK Sound 150THX system seen here is the new firm’s reincarnation of a classic: The five-driver S-150THX left/center/right monitor and the SS-150THX “tripole” surround speaker have been used for monitoring in multichannel recording, mastering, and dubbing facilities as often as any other speakers. And despite their comparatively boxy, industrial look, they have long crossed over to the consumer world, particularly among serious home theater buffs unconcerned with swoopy cabinets or fine veneers. According to MK Sound, the current 150THX Series — which is now manufactured in China, like seemingly everything else today — is unchanged from the M&K originals except for some evolutionary tweeter enhancements, an upgraded cabinet structure, and improved finish quality.

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**SETUP**

Getting the MK Sound suite ready was a matter of simply unboxing and plunking onto stands. I suspected from previous experience that the S-150s would be fairly unforgiving of vertical alignment, and so I was at some pains to ensure that all three front monitors were carefully aimed toward seated-ear altitude. From a technical perspective, the system’s use of three identical vertical-array front speakers is by far the best solution, since it offers the most consistent tonality across the “front stage” as well as the broadest center-channel listening-angle coverage. But it also means that a below-screen center-channel setup like mine winds up pretty low indeed, so I compensated by uplighting the center S-150THX. (MK Sound provides no special tilting accessories, so I raided my decades-long accumulation of stick-on feet to make it so.)

The SS-150THX tripole surrounds went onto my usual high shelves flanking the listening position, for which they are ideally suited. (This tripole design combines a dual-face, dipolar-midrange speaker with a third, inward-facing face that’s in phase with the speaker side that radiates toward the screen.) Both MK Sound models include simple but effective wall-mounting hardware. However, since the 12¼-inch-deep S-150 isn’t an on-wall design, I can’t imagine it being very successful, either visually or acoustically, in that configuration.

MK Sound’s bottom end, the MX-350THX, is a big, heavy, brute-force subwoofer — despite the fact that the “new” version boasts a lighter-weight (and higher-power) B.A.S.H. amp. But let’s face it: Nothing the size (and weight!) of a small central-air compressor that houses dual, push-pull 12-inch drivers is likely to be subtle. Nonetheless, I successfully wrestled it into my well-established sub position, a little to the left of and behind the front-left speaker. Dialing it in proved quite unfussy to do (as should be the case when speakers and subs are designed together, and with the de facto standard 12-/24-dB-per-octave crossover slopes in mind) and yielded a tight, solidly integrated, massively able bottom end with minimal tweaking.

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**PERFORMANCE**

After several days of casual use and overnight mid-volume TV sound, I started out with full-range stereo music auditions and found the S-150THXs to sound much as I remembered: clean, tight, and free of either midrange or top-octave colorations. They also displayed modest bass extension and a precise but not very deep stereo soundstage. (That said, aural memory is notorious, so you may take these recollections for what they’re worth: nada.)

I quickly confirmed that the S-150s do indeed require careful setup. Without toe-in or uptilt, the sound was smooth, balanced, and midrange-accurate, but also a noticeable shade dull and dynamically polite. Careful aiming and tilting transformed things surprisingly, with material like the massed strings and percussive brass attacks of Elgar’s Symphony No. 1 (an HDtracks 96/24 download) now yielding a high-impact presentation: crisp, snappy, tightly imaged, and, given plenty of power.

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Thrillingly dynamic. Vocals were almost perfectly free of coloration, with just the barest touch of (pleasing) warmth added to the male-vocal octaves.

MK Sound’s new/old S-150THX breaks several “rules” of modern speaker design. Its baffle is nearly as wide as it is tall, risking ragged top-octave response from diffraction, while its three-tweeter array (on paper at least) is prone to “lobing” response bumps in its lower octaves. Yet with careful setup, the S-150s sounded terrific. Perhaps this proves the effectiveness of MK Sound’s engineering countermeasures (anti-diffraction foam between the tweeters; “Phase Focused” crossover design). Or perhaps it confirms my suspicion that even in our computer-aided era, good of amplitude-domain frequency response — and thus the ancient art of by-ear loudspeaker balancing — still trumps all.

Either way, the S-150s’ very precise stereo imaging yielded a fine example of what I call “control-room sound,” displaying the kind of clarity and detail that encourage the listener to pick out whatever sonic aspects catch the ear at any moment. The flip side of this is a relative paucity of some “audiophile” characteristics: comparatively little illusion of depth on stereo playback, virtually no imaging outboard of the physical speakers themselves, and no seeping up of top-octave “air” or sparkle. From an objective goal of pure accuracy, these qualities aren’t negatives (particularly for multichannel playback, where “space” and “air” are provided by the surround mix), but they may not match some expectations of what “high-end” speakers should sound like.

On to the movies. No Harry Potter film could be complete without its scene of “quittage” or “cribbage” or whatever that airborne broomstick game is called, and Half-Blood Prince is no exception. These sequences are matchless tests of surround cohesiveness and effects-panning integrity. On the MK system, the whooshings of the players swooping around were just about perfectly seamless and tonally unwavering from full-left to full-right, center, front, back, and everywhere between. Its performance in this regard was truly impressive. The center-channel S-150THX performed as perfectly as a center speaker can. It didn’t sound exactly identical to its flankers in situ — the reflective surface of an adjacent big screen always sees to that — but it came as close as you’re going to get and delivered effortlessly intelligible, well-integrated dialogue.

Out back, the SS-150THX surrounds were a valuable adjunct. Relative to typical two-way THX dipoles, MK Sound’s tripole array didn’t sound terribly different to my ear. This is good if you prefer natural, hard-to-localize surround spatiality and diffuse rearward effects. Given their abilities, the MK Sound surrounds are amazingly compact: No more than half the size of my everyday big Snell surrounds, they seemed to give up little other than extended sub-80-Hz capabilities.

The MX-350THX sub continued to impress me throughout its residence, delivering the effortlessly powerful and limitlessly extended, yet light-touched and detail-friendly, deep bass that’s characteristic of big, “overbuilt” woofers. And it didn’t take big explosions to demonstrate this: The sliding crypt door from the opening moments of the original Stargate was a third-octave or so more ominous than my everyday compact, sealed 12-inch sub manages.

Taken as a whole, this is one system that’ll play loud as hell. The 150THX layout absorbed every jule of my 5 x 150-watts-per-channel power amp, a seriously current-rich unit, without any audible shortcoming. During torture tests (well north of actual reference level), I sensed amp clipping before I heard anything unseemly originating in a speaker.

**BOTTOM LINE**

To those prepared to accommodate its setup needs and seating and layout demands, MK Sound’s 150THX speaker suite can bring no bull, no frills, no lie reference-theater sound. This MK grouping may be unlikely to appear in an Architectural Digest spread any time soon, but when the lights are out and the projector’s on, who’s gonna care? SV+