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YOUR A/V GUY

Sonic magic from Sherwood

By Kevin Hunt

Sherwood's new VR-670 might be the first under-\$400 home theater system inspired by someone other than Fisher-Price.

Sherwood credits Eero Saarinen, the Finnish architect whose works include the Gateway Arch in St. Louis and Dulles Airport in Washington, D.C., as the inspiration for VR-670's dramatically sculpted DVD receiver. The inverted half-moon design's silver top bleeds into a picture-window inset that looks down onto the spinning CD or DVD, illuminated by a soothing blue backlight and fluorescent display. It's a sultry centerpiece to this four-piece system.

A four-piece home theater? Well, yes. The VR-670 also owes something to Harry Potter, for it almost magically replicates a complete home theater using only two speakers and a subwoofer.

The VR-670, aside from its striking good looks, is an exceptional virtual-surround-sound system. This Hollywood-at-Home Virtual Theater System, as Sherwood (www.sherwoodamerica.com) calls it, uses Dolby Virtual Speaker technology from Dolby Laboratories that sounds uncannily like surround sound from two speakers.

With only two speakers and a subwoofer -- no center speaker and no rear-channel speakers -- the VR-670 requires fewer wires and much easier setup than prepackaged systems known as home theaters in a box. The DVD receiver includes decoding for Dolby Digital and DTS (Digital Theater System) soundtracks, an AM/FM tuner, a 25-watt-per-channel amplifier, progressive-scan DVD player and connections for two other sources.

More than a pretty face

The standard-issue speakers, pretty in their own angular way, are not quite 9 inches high and about 4 inches wide and deep. The subwoofer, meanwhile, makes the VR-670 more than a fashion statement. Where so many other packaged systems use a scrawny little box ill-equipped to reproduce so much as a baby's burp without convulsing, Sherwood outfits the VR-670 with a legitimate, if undersize, subwoofer. It has its own amplifier (50 watts), a 6-inch driver, an adjustable crossover frequency (more about that later) and a phase switch (which changes the phase of the output signal by 180 degrees) -- just like a grown-up subwoofer.

And it dazzles too. Like the DVD receiver, a tiny light on the subwoofer glows blue when the VR-670 is on, amber when in standby mode.

The crossover frequency, adjustable from 50 to 150 hertz, allows the user to alter the highest

frequency the subwoofer produces, ensuring it will blend naturally with the speakers. In the VR-670's case, the diminutive speakers can't go any lower than 140 hertz, so you'd set the subwoofer at 140 hertz and experiment, as necessary, until dialing in the best sound.

Without this type of subwoofer and the Virtual Speaker technology, the VR-670 would be no better off than the standard tin-can HTIB (home theater in a box). But the VR-670 can crank: The battle scene in "Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl" was loud, dynamic and very much like surround sound. It created a far more believable home-theater presentation than, say, the Niro 600 (\$749, www.niro1.com), a virtual-surround system with single five-speaker console and brick-thick subwoofer.

Virtual Speaker is the latest development in head-related transfer functions algorithms, the psychoacoustic technology used in other virtual-surround stereo formats like Virtual Dolby, SRS Circle Surround and Spatializer. These number-crunching formats deliver spatial cues to the ear, usually resulting in nothing more than a wider and slightly deeper soundfield. Virtual Speaker takes it wider and deeper.

The downside

Music exposes the VR-670's weakness, the front speakers. Where a movie soundtrack is usually either dialogue or bang-'em-up special effects, music reaches across a broader spectrum. When you ask a subwoofer to speak up at 140 hertz during a CD, you're asking for trouble. You'll get too much bass, distorting the balance between highs and lows.

Fortunately, the subwoofer has a volume control on its front panel.

Sherwood has two more Hollywood-at-Home virtual systems coming, the \$600 VR-700 with a bulked-up (400 watts) subwoofer and the \$250 VR-600, a more conventionally styled (as in: square) system. Both are due in August. The VR-670 is quite a sneak preview.