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Earthquake Sound SuperNova MKIV-12P Subwoofer

I have a love/hate relationship with subwoofers. For years my preferred hi-fi setups were systems that absolutely did not reproduce deep bass -- such as my beloved Quad ESL-63s -- and I would dream of the day when I could add an accurate subwoofer and experience all of the music on my favorite records.

Nice thought.

Too bad there weren't any subwoofers at the time that were fast, transparent, and uncolored enough to match the Quads. That didn't stop bass junkies and subwoofer manufacturers from making some wild claims, however. After a while, I just gave up, convinced that getting the midrange right was a morally superior option to living with slow, colored, out-of-sync bass (yes, I was insufferable).

The thing is, subs got a lot better -- just like most loudspeakers. I began hearing subwoofers that were really musical *and* had phenomenally deep bass, such as Ken Kreisel's M&K MX-150 THX, and it was obvious that listeners no longer had to settle for boom boxes in the corners of their living rooms.

But old habits die hard, and I continued to begrudge subwoofers their floor space in my listening rooms. Of course, home theater changed all that. With really good HT systems, you've *got* to have a good subwoofer. Most of them, however, while better than the typical sub of yore, still leave a lot to be desired. In any case, most of the time, if you've got it set up correctly at least, you don't even notice a good subwoofer -- and when you do notice one of the truly great ones, you're likely to be struck speechless, which can be a problem for a reviewer.

Shortly after installing the Earthquake SuperNova MKIV subwoofer in my system, I decided to revisit the extended version of *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*. The minute the soundtrack announced the existence of Sauron, I was rendered completely inarticulate.

"*****"

"?????"

"|||||"

And I meant it in the best way.

Loud organs, his glory forth tell in deep tone

There are beautifully finished subwoofers out there with rare wood veneers and discretely hidden connections and controls, but the Earthquake SN MKIV ain't one of them. It's a 15" cube clad in black polyurethane, sporting two 12" speaker cones (one is passive) with honking *huge* surround rolls, and a massive control plate (the amplifier's backside, really) sporting speaker connections, crossover controls, and line-level inputs and outputs. It's not ugly, just a tad brutal looking -- which I found refreshingly honest. It has the "I'll get the job done" integrity of an old Ford pickup truck.

Let's start with that amp panel. It has a full complement of controls and inputs. It has a pair of speaker-level inputs and satellite speaker outputs, line-level inputs (use these if at all possible), a line-level 100Hz high-pass output, volume control, 24dB/octave continuously variable low-pass filter (50Hz to 150Hz), two-position phase switch, signal-sensing on/off switch, a power-indicating LED, and an IEC power-cable socket. There's also an input for an infrared remote sensor that allows you to control the sub's volume via remote -- a nice feature, if a somewhat thumpy one.

The amp itself is a class D unit rated at 580W, and it incorporates a nifty Optical Distortion Limiting circuit, which controls and limits the input, preventing it from distorting or overloading the amplifier. Details are sketchy, but whatever it does, it does not prevent the SuperNova MKIV-12P from putting out prodigiously powerful bass. The digital amp runs cool, too.

The SuperNova MKIV-12P features two drivers, the primary one being an active 12" MAGMA driver, which sports a cast basket; double-stacked, high-gauss magnets; three-inch high-temperature-capable copper-wound voice coils; and that massive one-inch polyether-foam surround. The end result of all that technology is that the driver is capable of extreme excursions without distortion.

Mounted behind the active driver is a passive unit, a seemingly identical 12" driver lacking a drive unit. This driver has a steel weight attached that gives it a resonant frequency of 17Hz -- which makes it possible for the SuperNova MKIV-12P to reproduce bass about an octave deeper than any 15" cube with a 12" driver *ought* to be able to create. (Earthquake claims this design -- which it calls Symmetrically Loaded Audio Passive System, or SLAPS -- offers the slam and speed of a sealed-box enclosure combined with the efficiency of a reflex-cabinet design.)

Blake knew how deep is Hell, and Heaven how high

Actually, the real reason I seldom give subwoofers the credit they deserve is that, however good they are, you're going to spend a lot of time setting them up to sound right -- and even if I am an audiophile, listening to music and films is a *lot* more fun than futzing around with gear.

In this regard, the SuperNova MKIV-12P was no more difficult to set up than any other sub, but positioning it is definitely an exercise in trading off bass extension for speed. In my 13' by 25' by 10' room, I had no problems with extension, so I opted for speed and pulled the unit away from the room boundaries, but somewhat close to the wall behind my [Stewart Filmscreen GrayHawk screen](#).

This position was not one that made manual adjustment simple, so I utilized the infrared sensor, which is convenient but not entirely free of problems. First, the sub produces an audible *thump* with each click of adjustment; there's also no easy way to determine the amount of adjustment you have dialed in (so maybe those *thumps* aren't a complete nuisance). As attractive as the remote option seemed in theory, I wound up setting the sub for "good enough" on both music and film and then leaving it be -- just like every other sub I've owned.

And darkness was upon the face of the deep

Except, the Earthquake *isn't* really like all the other subs I've owned -- it's better.

It goes deeper. Hard as it is to believe, I clocked it at over 100dB at 20Hz, which is *freaking loud*. Also deep. It is clear and, to my ears anyway, phenomenally accurate in its portrayal of special effects *and* music.

The underwater explosions in *Crimson Tide* weren't just loud, they were percussive. The sound smacked me in the chest, just as percussive blasts do in the open air. And those synthesized notes of doom and despair in *LOTR: FOTR* weren't just menacing, they played heck with my inner ear.

Lest you think I simply played the Earthquake too loud, I was careful to balance it to the sound of the Magnepan 3.6s that served as my RF and LF speakers. Most of the time, the sub wasn't audible at all, which is as it should be. But when there was deep bass, the MKIV-12P didn't mouth the words, it sang out with gusto.

When deep bass is properly reproduced, as it is with the MKIV-12P, it completely changes the way music's architecture is conveyed. Rautavaara's Eighth Symphony [Ondine 978] is a startlingly intense and massive work -- or perhaps I should say that it is a work of incandescent beauty, which achieves a sense of massive *rightness* in its sweep and in the massed brass choruses. It is emphatically not a heavy work, but it *is* a powerful one -- and the Maggies, coupled with the Earthquake, delivered it with weight and authority. No blurred lines, no weakened basses or lower brass; it was balanced and musical.

One deep calleth another

For the last year or so, Polk's \$780 PSW-650 has been the subwoofer champion in my home theater. Its clean output, modest price, and ease of use have made it my current subwoofer favorite.

Good as it is, however, its two 10" speakers and 250W amp simply don't put it in the same league as the Earthquake SuperNova MKIV-12P. The 'Quake went deeper, dug in harder, and reproduced subterranean tones with far greater authority -- on the Rautivarra, on my beloved Little Feat's *Waiting For Columbus* [Rhino 78274], and on films like *Apollo 13*. Of course, you can buy two PSW-650s for the Earthquake's \$1869 price tag, and two subs do load a room far better than one. On the other hand, the PSW-650 just won't put out 20Hz at all, no matter how many you pack in the room.

Not deep the Poet sees, but wide

No question about it, the Earthquake SuperNova MKIV-12P is the finest performing subwoofer I have yet auditioned. It plays louder and deeper -- and cleaner -- than anything else I have encountered. It certainly isn't the prettiest sub I've ever seen and it isn't inexpensive, but what *does* is beautiful, and if you can afford it, I certainly recommend it.

I personally wasn't completely impressed by its remote-control capabilities, but your reaction to them might be different -- and a somewhat effective remote-control option is certainly superior to a non-existent one. This is a quibble, however, and the unit is far too good to be pecked to death by petty complaints such as this one.

The (*ahem!*) bottom line is that the Earthquake SuperNova MKIV-12P was so good it rendered me speechless -- and that's my final word on the subject.

...Wes Phillips
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Earthquake Sound SuperNova MKIV-12P Subwoofer
Price: \$1869 USD.
Warranty: Two years parts and labor.

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