

Definitive Technology PowerMonitor 700

“A godsend ... Hats off to it!”

Neil Gader Reviews the Definitive Technology PowerMonitor 700

What do I accomplish by playing Metallica’s “Nothing Else Matters” at 105+ dB? In the case of the Definitive Technology PowerMonitor 700 the answer is — just the fact that I *can*, all day long if I so desire. For a reviewer who is always concerned he’s going to smoke some gear with a spate of irrational exuberance, the 700 is a tonic.

One of a loudspeaker manufacturer’s most difficult challenges, I think we all agree, is providing full-range performance in a compact enclosure. For listeners with limited floor space or who cannot opt for a subwoofer, this speaker may be a godsend. Definitive Technology, a company ordinarily defined by its multi-channel/home-theater products, has taken up that challenge in its PowerMonitor line, the 500, the 900, and the PowerMonitor 700 reviewed here. The 700 is a three-way bass reflex design; the site-firing woofer is active (internally amplified). This has its advantages. Rather than going fully active (like a Meridian or an ATC) across the entire bandwidth and increasing the price accordingly, Definitive chooses to amplify only the woofer, thus controlling and optimizing the power-hungry lower frequencies. And not incidentally allowing audiophiles the latitude to assign the amp of their choice for the mids and highs. The design is clean, with piano-finish black laminate upper and lower panels and a fine frameless wraparound grille cloth. Connections are easy with the PowerMonitor; simply plug in

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each speaker with the provided 10-foot power cords, connect speaker cable to the single set of binding posts, and play music. Single LFE inputs are also provided. There is a gain setting for the woofer on the back of each speaker and I began listening with it set in the 12 o’clock position. I rolled it back slightly as I got accustomed to the speaker, and found a smoother balance at roughly 11 o’clock. Following Definitive’s recommendation, I positioned the 700s with the woofers facing each other. Experimentation is always encouraged, but in my small room, facing them to the outside gave no sonic advantage.

It was clear right away that the PowerMonitor was not going to be an ordinary listening experience. And odd it was to hear real low end kicking in from such a small box at 50 cycles, at 40 cycles, even 30. On Vaughn Williams’



Definitive Technology’s PowerMonitor 700

Antarctica [Bournemouth/Bakels; Naxos-8.550737], where organ accompaniment is meant to be felt as well as heard, the PM 700 filled the room with the pulsating rumble of authenticity. Hats off to it! In addition, you can throw out your natural reluctance to play a small speaker at high levels. Definitive obviously figured that a little two-channel Metallica would be child’s play after conquering the multi-channel mayhem in a soundtrack like *Gladiator*.

The overall character of the Definitive is rather dark and lush, partly because of its woofer extension and partly because a portion of the midrange is laid back from neutral by a couple of orchestra rows. These are no recessed mids, not by any means — merely a tiny bit subdued in that chest region where a singer like Tom Waits or Johnny Cash resonates with each exhalation. The sense of sonic completeness that the Definitive imparts in the lower frequencies is wonderful. You often don’t know you’re missing anything with a 40-50 Hz floor of bass response until you listen on a speaker, like the Definitive, that can handle the 30-cycle range. Then you acknowledge the past short fall! On large symphonic works like Mahler’s *Third*, the PowerMonitor 700 fleshes out the soundstage and adds the requisite weight to anchor this substantial symphony in a compelling fashion.

The treble ranges are quite clean but lack the air and bloom that signifies a higher priced speaker (this top-end air is expensive to design in). For example, the complex and electrifying interplay among fiddle, cello and string bass on "1A" [*Appalachian Journey*. SS66782 SACD] is full, with the growl of the bow against the bass strings and an extended and brilliant top end from violinist Mark O'Connor when he runs the length of the fingerboard. The integration of drivers here is excellent. There is very little overhang from the reflex nature of the cabinet. On a minor point: I felt at times that some of the resonant "body" of the violin or cello was less lively than I expected. This might be owing to some masking effects from the lower frequencies, but I think it is also partly an intrinsic tonal characteristic of the 700.

The duet for piano and trumpet between Eric Lewis and Clark Terry from *One on One* clearly sums up the PowerMonitor 700's prodigious strengths and rare lapses [Chesky JD 198]. "Liza, All the Clouds'll Roll" is played with graceful finesse and brick-laying attitude, and the 700s were more than up to the task of handling the drive of the Lewis piano, his slamming chords and popping single notes as well as the explosive blasts of Terry's close-miked trumpet. The 700 has dynamics to burn. Lightning-fast piano arpeggios were clean and defined if a bit clinical in the upper octaves.

In a perfect world I'd have liked a greater openness in the soundstage. The 700 never completely breaks the bonds of its enclosure, so soundstage width and depth are not as expansive as I've noted in my listening room. And as good as the bass extension is, there are some textural details that might be improved — the definition of, say, the snappier rhythmic pulse of an electric bass or the distinct full resonance of an acoustic bass might have been clearer. The woofer — perhaps in concert with the reflex nature of the cabinet — imposes its own character too greatly over the mid-bass octaves.

The PowerMonitor 700 is a speaker that meets many of the music lover's needs without filling much space. It's an exceptional performer that makes no serious missteps. I consider it quite an accomplishment.

Paul Seydor Comments

"how impressive these little wonders are."

I have little to add to Neil Gader's customary thorough observations. I, too, am amazed by the sheer low-end authority and punch that Definitive has managed to build into its diminutive giant killer. But what really floors me most about this speaker is its response from the lower midrange through the lower highs. The PowerMonitor 700 has one of the flattest, most neutral, and least colored midranges I have heard in any speaker at any price. Trust me when I tell you that 90 percent of the megabuck speakers that leave audiophiles and reviewers alike drooling don't have a midrange this accurate.

Outside the midrange, I have mostly nits to pick. The overall balance is, as NG suggests, a bit cool, mostly because in the warmth region the 700 sounds like it looks: slim and petite. In fact, I've found few small speakers or speakers with narrow baffles that are more than adequate in this part of the

range. Perhaps a larger baffle or some sort of EQ (à la the LS3/5a) is required before a truly natural-sounding upper bass can be projected. Fortunately, the Definitive is ahead of much of its competition owing to the bass-level control on the back. Don't be afraid to experiment. Like NG, I began at the

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12 o'clock position but in my room soon found a better balance at 2 o'clock. The 700 will never sound full, but that control does have some effect in the warmth region and its judicious application will reap the benefits of more natural reproduction. (It's so useful as a bass tone-control that I'd cheerfully pay more if Definitive could outfit it with a remote.)

The top end rises, less so than the Paradigm's, but enough to lend a little edge and glare to the proceedings when the going gets really loud. These characteristics are, however, in evidence mostly when the speaker is pushed hard. My room is over twice the volume of NG's (thus one reason for the differences in the bass settings), and I typically sit two or three

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times the distance he does from the speaker array, The Definitive can play quite loud, but in my room sustained listening to large-scale orchestral material, which this speaker handles remarkably well, could get fatiguing at high but not excessive levels. I do not particularly regard this as a flaw in the design, rather as simply the inevitable limitations of its size and power handling. Easing back on the level reduced or eliminated the glare. (Still, truth in reporting requires that I note there were numerous times I employed the Quad pre-amp's tilt control to knock back the high treble a tad.)

But my criticisms should in no way obliterate my overriding sense of how impressive these little wonders are. To give you some idea, I am currently researching cost-effective, compact speakers for surrounds in a multi-channel system built around my Quad 988s. If you've never experienced Quads, then you have no idea the frustration involved in trying to find something suitably uncolored to match them up with. Owing to the PowerMonitor 700's high neutrality and low coloration throughout most of its range, its small size, and its transparency, it is now at or near the top of my short list. That's how highly I think of it.

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