

Plumbing the depths

HOME
CINEMA
Choice
Reference
Status



AV INFO

PRODUCT: No-compromise high-end home cinema subwoofer

POSITION: JL Audio has a more potent woofer – the Gotham G213 – which costs £12,000

PEERS: REL G1; Velodyne DD18+; Paradigm SUB2

Adam Rayner has waited years for JL Audio's home cinema subwoofers to surface in the UK. It was certainly worth it

THE AMERICAN BRAND JL Audio came to fame in the abstruse world of car audio sound quality competitions, where I've spent a large slice of my career. Contrary to what you may think, these tournaments aren't about 'whose is the loudest?' but more 'whose sounds most like real hi-fi?' JL Audio is therefore not really about achieving ultimate SPL – but that didn't stop it developing arguably the single best low-frequency transducer in human history. Called the W7, it makes the Peerless XXLS look like Marks & Spencer's food versus Heston Blumenthal's egg-and-bacon ice cream.

Tight, fast bass is how you win SQ contests and JL Audio is king. At one point you could not triumph without its products. And we've waited five years, since I first heard my colleague Steve May come back from the CES show in Las Vegas almost incoherent with how good these JL Audio home subs are, to get its domestic product in Europe.

The JL Audio home cinema range is now being distributed in the UK by AV Tech Solutions. We had planned to badger them for a review sample of the flagship Gotham G213. But, as that 2 x 13.5in, 3,800W beast weighs 160kg, we opted to look at the step-down Fathom F212 – a somewhat more manageable 100kg(!) woofer with a pair of 12in drivers. Call us wimps.

Despite its considerable size (it stands 81cm high), the F212 isn't just an ugly bass box. It's gorgeously finished in gloss black with smooth rounded edges. Very desirable.

Bass behemoth

There's no point beating around the bush. The performance of this sub is just incredible. Firstly, it is brain-numbingly loud if you want it to be. But secondly, it has the most controlled, tight, fast and accurate response, tied to a happy ability to move stupid amounts of air. The monstrous surrounds allow fully four inches of peak-to-peak excursion, yet the cones are gripped by a magnetic fist that wouldn't be out of place on a Marvel superhero. This driver is the result of literally millions of dollars in R&D and you can hear every dime spent. It is breath-taking. The main reason we've had to wait to get these subs in Blighty is because JL Audio couldn't make enough to sell outside the US. They're so special that demand has been huge.

The sub has phono and XLR connections to the rear and audio controls mounted at the top of its front panel. To get to these you'll need to remove the grille (which I actually blew off the

box during testing, with the cones...). As well as master level, crossover frequency (30Hz to 130Hz) and a sweepable phase knob, there is a control marked E.L.F. This is an acronym for Extreme Low Frequency, and is a -12dB to +3dB low-end equaliser set at 25Hz.

The F212 comes with a pro-grade setup microphone but no stand, which seems penny-pinching considering the £5,900 price tag. You use the mic in conjunction with the woofer's in-built Automatic Room Optimisation (ARO) tech to calibrate the system to your room, via a series of test tones. A button on the front turns the resulting room-adjusted EQ on and off so you can hear the difference it's made.

Limitless performance

Once setup, I played the DTS-HD Master Audio soundtrack of *Limitless* (Blu-ray), specifically the scene where Bradley Cooper's character is on the balcony while a Russian gangster smashes his way through his flat's front door. This is a sequence of bangs and crashes that easily beats *Master & Commander* in the massive bass stakes. I played it through a few times, testing the F212's mettle, and ended up at +5dB – enough to induce genuine but brief terror (just so you know, -20dB is loud in my room). As the last 'bang' hit, a flying toy fell off the shelves and my son's A-level results 'Congratulations!' balloon jumped in the air like it had been slapped.

Yet the JL Audio offers far more than merely a huge boom, or awesome control but no ultra-low presence – rather the F212 can do both, making it a sumptuous partner for your surround speakers. And it impresses at very low levels, too. Where other woofers won't wake up, the JL Audio will underpin in an almost magical way, so you can even have bass richness during late-night sessions (as long as anyone sleeping upstairs can't feel the floor tickle their toes).

With music material it proved its worth, too, but it comes alive most with Hollywood's LFE obsession.

I know a lot of the above is about power, but the F212's 3,000W amp is about sufficiency rather than lunacy. If you want real lunacy, the manual goes into great technical detail about how to set up the woofer in pairs, trios or even quartets in one room.

To sum up, the F212 is a reference-grade subwoofer with velvet-covered hammers in its face. I struggle to think of a better-sounding product. JL Audio is finally here. Be afraid, be very afraid ■

SPECIFICATIONS

DRIVE UNITS: 2 x 12in JL Audio proprietary W7 drivers, with 4in peak-to-peak excursion

ENCLOSURE: Sealed

FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 20Hz-97Hz +/1.5dB; -3dB @19Hz; -10dB @15Hz

ON-BOARD POWER: 3,000W RMS Class D power amplifier

REMOTE CONTROL: No

DIMENSIONS: 379(w) x 812(h) x 518(d)mm

WEIGHT: 100kg

FEATURES: Phono mono or stereo input; balanced stereo XLR inputs; balanced XLR output for feeding to slave units; master/slave switch; Automatic Room Optimisation; setup microphone; microphone case; microphone cable; white gloves

HCC VERDICT



JL Audio Fathom F212

→ £5,900 Approx → www.av-techsolutions.co.uk
→ Tel: 07974 735 998

HIGHS: Vast, crushing, bass with astonishing clarity, control and melody; premium design and build; auto EQ system

LOWS: Seriously expensive; seriously heavy; no mic stand supplied

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★