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audioengine

B 2 P o w e r e d B l u e t o o t h S p
a s r e v i e w e d b y T o m G i b b s



My listening room is in my basement, and although you can easily open the door to the downstairs and hear the music from the big system in all its glory, sometimes it would be really nice to have a secondary system elsewhere in the house. And preferably one that would allow reasonably easy access to all the music on my computer's server setup. I'm currently using JRiver Media Center for much of my listening, which makes it super easy to access everything on the server via an app on my Android tablet. However, whenever we have friends over, there's inevitably a constant flow of people back and forth from the garage (where the fridge containing all the adult beverages resides), which means that the open basement door is constantly being closed for garage access. No big deal, but someone always ends up leaving the door closed, which reduces the overall volume level of the music. Probably no one really cares all that much, but I do, dammit! This is the point where having a secondary system on the main level of our house would be a real bonus, but based on our use of the living space, there's really no good place to put one—quite the quandary. Fortunately for me (and just prior to the holidays!), Brady Bargaquist from audioengine contacted me to let me know that he had an available review unit of their new B2 Powered Bluetooth Speaker available, a potentially elegant solution to my ongoing problem.



The B2 gets two thumbs-up from a WAF standpoint!



When the package with the B2 arrived, I was somewhat taken aback by its diminutive size. Upon unboxing, my wife's first response was "It's so cute!" I was expecting something somewhat larger, despite the unit's relatively substantial heft. The B2 is built like a tank, but very, very pretty to look at—the genuine walnut case is impeccably manufactured, and the fit and finish is top-notch, which came as quite a surprise to me; I was expecting something much more generic in the B2's modest price range. But the quality goes beyond having just a pretty face; removing the unit's magnetized front grill reveals a pair of 2.75-inch Kevlar woofers, alongside twin 3/4-inch silk dome tweeters. Dual front panel ports help extend the unit's bass response down to around 65Hz, and the robust built-in amplifier offers 30 watts of peak class AB power per channel with a THD spec of less than .05%. The unit also includes a built-in Texas Instruments PCM5102A DAC, which upconverts the signal to 24 bits; while this may not be the most "purist" approach to music playback, the B2 offers the potential for impressive sound in a really compact package, which makes unobtrusive placement a real dream!





Exceptional sound and world class design!



Set up couldn't have been easier—the B2 arrives in a really nice microfiber drawstring bag; while I don't necessarily view the unit as a portable, it's not entirely out of the question. There's a detachable power cord and a Bluetooth antenna that easily attaches to the back of the unit, which also features a power switch and volume control. The B2 features an auto-standby mode; after sitting for a bit without any signal, it essentially goes to sleep until it senses the signal again. Having no previous experience with a Bluetooth product, I was pretty pumped to get right to hearing some music, but hold on just a moment—there's a bit of a learning curve to getting Bluetooth enabled devices to play effortlessly. My Samsung smart phone was handy, and I have the JRiver app loaded, but I found that getting the phone paired with the B2 was a little tricky, and then if I didn't have line-of-sight with the B2, I'd easily lose the signal. The sound was pretty good, but right out of the gate, I was more than a little bit underwhelmed by the ergonomic experience.



I started taking a look at a host of internet information regarding Bluetooth music transmission, as well as taking another look at audioengine's website to check out detailed specifications on the B2. All with the hope of getting a little insight into making the B2 perform more closely to my expectations. One thing that jumped out at me was that the B2 is "aptX" enabled, which means that it's capable of receiving and playing CD-quality signals; previous versions of Bluetooth that were not enabled with the aptX codec could only playback at barely better than MP3 quality. An obligatory trip to the aptX website soon revealed that none of the Android devices in my home were equipped with the aptX technology. Bummer! Not to worry, though—within a couple of weeks, Santa Claus came to the rescue, with a new ASUS Android tablet that is aptX enabled—hooray!! The new tablet works miraculously well with the B2—solving any and every concern with Bluetooth I might have had. Once paired to the B2, I no longer needed line-of-sight to maintain the signal as long as I was within a reasonable distance from the speaker.

Listening results

When paired with the ASUS tablet, I'm now able to move from room to room with no loss of signal, and the sound quality is *amazing!* When using the B2 in either a bookshelf or table-top setting, it delivers impressively good sound with surprising bass response and smooth, if not terribly extended treble. The quality of this unit is obvious in every aspect of playback performance; audioengine either manufactures their own drivers, or has them custom built to their demanding specifications, and everything is custom-tuned for the B2's heavily-braced enclosure. The amplifier performance is also truly exemplary; even with the volume set to full power, there's never a trace of distortion, and while I didn't drag out the SPL meter, I'm convinced that it reaches into the 90dB region. With every aspect of the B2's construction obviously so carefully considered, it's no wonder that the small unit plays so seemingly far out of its league. Of course, you're not going to get full-tilt metal or orchestral music rendered accurately at full volume, but I was truly amazed by the B2's ability to play most jazz, pop, vocals and chamber music with surprising realism.

TOM GIBB'S SYSTEM

LOUDSPEAKERS

Zu Audio Omens (Dirty Weekend Edition); Magneplanar MMGs, modded with custom-built stands and Peter Gunn's (of Audio Asylum fame) outboard crossover mods; REL T1 Powered Subwoofer; Definitive Technologies Powerfield 1500 Subwoofer.

ELECTRONICS

Emotiva XPA-2 amplifier; Acurus RL-11 preamplifier; Rolls Bellari VP130 tube phono preamp, used interchangeably with Mullard new production, JJ Electronic and Sovtek 12AX7 tubes (depending on my mood).

SOURCES

Digital: Sony BDPs-780 BluRay/SACD player; Custom-built PC (Intel platform); Windows 7/64-bit, 2 TB hard drive, 8 GB RAM, 1 TB Seagate external drive for storage, using JRiver Media Center 17 as my music player, via the High Resolution Technologies Music Streamer II+ USB DAC.

Analogue: Rega P2 turntable, with RB 250 arm, modded with Michell Technoweight and stub and glass platter upgrade; Ortofon 2M Blue cartridge.

CABLES

Interconnects: Audioquest Topaz, Blue Jeans Cable LC-1's, Monster 400i's Speaker cables: Monster M1. USB: DH Labs Silver Sonic.

ACCESSORIES

Bright Star Audio Big Rock turntable base; Tiptoes and various isolation devices; ASC Tube Trap panels; GIK Acoustics bass traps; Custom-built acoustic panels; Target stands; Disc Doctor and LAST record cleaning supplies.



I have a backyard pool, which is a frequent scene of summer get-togethers—another situation where the B2 would likely excel. Even though it's winter, we have a lot of moderately warm days here in the deep south, so I took the B2 out onto the poolside deck to see how it would respond to a marginally longer distance from my computer setup—no sweat whatsoever. The wireless signal was plenty strong for my tablet, and while the B2 is most definitely a step up from a boombox or transistor radio, it's ideally more well suited to an indoor situation, where it can use the reinforcement properties of the room to improve its bass response.

Conclusion

I was truly blown away by the B2; its incredible build and sound quality, and remarkable ease of use (even to a Bluetooth novice) made it an absolute pleasure to use. Most guests having heard it for the first time were totally boggled that the impressively well-balanced sound wasn't coming from the basement system. In a world filled with cheap plastic Bluetooth junk, it's really gratifying to experience a perfectionist product which really delivers the goods on every level imaginable. And 90-plus clean decibels is more than overkill for the average get-together, and if anyone wants to really kick out the jams, we can always head down to the basement. **Tom Gibbs**

B2 Bluetooth Speaker

Retail: \$299

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