

JL Audio Fathom f112 and f113

Chris Martens

Powered Subwoofer

AUDIO REVIEW

Subwoofers of the Gods

Until recently, JL Audio was known primarily as a builder of ultra-robust, high-end car-fi components and for this reason I was at first skeptical when I learned the firm planned to enter the home audio marketplace with a series of high-performance subwoofers. My thought: Did I really want my listening room to sound like a tricked out Honda Civic Si "boom-booming" its way

down Main Street with neon running lights aglow? No, thanks.

But man was I wrong. As it happens, the JL Audio guys are serious audiophiles who have both the technical know-how and manufacturing wherewithal to build world-class subwoofers. In short, JL Audio strives to produce no-compromise subs that offer deeply extended bass response, high output levels, terrific transient speed and control, and very low levels of coloration.

Impressed, we decided to review JL Audio's smallest subwoofer,

FACTOID!

JL Audio holds eight patents on core woofer, amplifier, and enclosure technologies used in the Gotham/Fathom subs.

the Fathom f112, plus a pair of larger Fathom f113s, which were evaluated by *The Absolute Sound* Editor-in-Chief Robert Harley (It's good to be E-i-C).

About the f112 and f113

The Fathom f112 is a compact, 1500-watt powered subwoofer whose 12-inch woofer is capable of—picture this—three-inch excursions (by comparison, many woofers can move only fractions of an inch). The similarly-sized f113 sports a 2500-watt amplifier and a 13.5-inch woofer. Visually, the f112 and f113 are gems, albeit gems that weigh a staggering 115 and 130 pounds, respectively. Build quality and overall fit and finish are superb. But what's really impressive are the massive JL Audio bass drivers whose frames and motor structures look almost like they have been built to military standards. Both the f112 and f113 feature faceplate-mounted controls for master volume levels,



crossover frequencies and slopes, polarity, phase, extreme low frequency EQ trims, operating modes, and JL's Automatic Room Optimization (ARO) system. The ARO system includes a calibration mic and provides auto-test/EQ functions that help the woofers compensate for the primary resonance modes of listening rooms.

The f112 in Action

I sometimes advise TPV readers that modest woofers are "not the last word in low-frequency extension." Well, let me begin by saying that the Fathom f112 pretty much *is* the last word in low-frequency extension, offering substantial output down to 20Hz. I tried the woofer with a variety of

low-frequency test discs, and found the f112 went lower, with greater output and control, than any other subwoofer I have used. On "Regular Pleasures" from Patricia Barber's *Verse* [Blue

f112 caught the almost seismic pressure wave generated when the drum is struck, then the taut skin sound of the drum head resonating, and finally the shuddering, modulated rumble

Through the f112, bass guitars, low winds and brass, low percussion, bass synthesizers, and especially pipe organs had the majestic power and clarity that they do in real life.

Note], for example, there is a strong, recurrent concert bass drum theme, which the f112 reproduced with floor-shaking power and surprising textural subtlety. Many woofers produce a big, bloated, indistinct kerboom on this track, but in contrast the

heard as each note decays. Through the f112, low-frequency instruments of all kinds—bass guitars, low winds and brass, low percussion, bass synthesizers, and especially pipe organs—had the majestic power and clarity that they do in real life. The only

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catch, and I am not raising this point facetiously, is that that the f112 is so powerful that it can expose anything in the room that's prone to buzzing or vibration—including (gulp!) sheetrock panels not properly fastened to wall studs.

Film buffs sometimes ask if having true low-bass capabilities adds much to movie watching experiences, and the answer is that it does in both large and small ways. In the famous "Under Attack" scene from *Master and Commander*, for example, the f112 gave the cannons distinct "voices" with downright subterranean underpinnings. As a

Robert Harley on the JL Audio Fathom f113

I recently installed a pair of JL Audio's Fathom f113 subwoofers in my system and was absolutely blown away by their performance. This subwoofer delivers copious amounts of extremely tight and well-defined bass, with superb transient characteristics. Unlike most subwoofers that are sluggish and bloated, the Fathom f113 reproduced transient bass signals with explosive impact, and then stopped just as quickly, with no overhang or smearing. The result was a greater sense of power and definition. A good example from movies is the gate siege from *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*. An explosion blows up part of the castle

wall, and huge chunks of rock hit the ground with a thud. Through the pair of Fathom f113's the ground-shaking impact was literally ground-shaking in my theater room.

The Fathom's extremely taut, quick, and tuneful bass was evident on the concert performance of John Mayall and the Bluesbreakers on the occasion of Mayall's seventieth-birthday celebration. This long-running band has a rhythm section that's sharp as a tack. The Fathom not only didn't put a drag on the beat (as many subwoofers do), but fully conveyed the energy and excitement behind this band.

The Fathom f113 had a quality I rarely hear

from subwoofers, and one that greatly enhanced the music and home-theater experience—a sense of solidity, and of hearing the bottom end cleanly without the impression of a cone flapping back and forth. The Fathom makes other subs sound loose and sloppy by contrast.

Finally, I must comment on the Fathom's exceptional build quality, uncompromised execution, and extensive feature set.

The JL Audio Fathom is of reference quality, and a benchmark by which all other subwoofers can be judged. The fact that it's relatively compact, and not over-the-top-expensive, is icing on the cake.

The Last Word



- Seemingly bottomless bass extension
- Phenomenal output
- Bass clarity is a revelation
- ARO system really works



- Reveals everything in the room that buzzes or vibrates
- You may need two for bigger rooms
- Extremely heavy (ouch, my back)

Specifications

Fathom f112 powered subwoofer

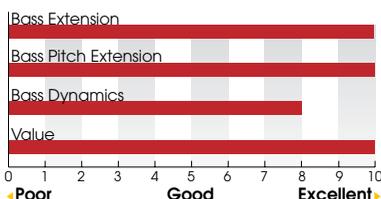
- Driver: 12" long-throw woofer
- Integral power amplifier: 1500 watts
- Dimensions: 18" x 15" x 18.63"
- Weight: 115 lbs.
- Price: \$2600-\$2700, depending on finish

Fathom f113 powered subwoofer

- Driver: 13.5" long-throw woofer
- Integral power amplifier: 2500 watts
- Dimensions: 19.5" x 16.5" x 19.75"
- Weight: 130 lbs.
- Price: \$3200-\$3300, depending on finish

JL Audio Fathom f112

(rated in comparison to cost-no-object subwoofers)





JL Audio's Fathom f112 and f113 subwoofers share these extensive, faceplate-mounted controls. We wish more subwoofers followed the same practice.

result, the cannon fire not only sounded deeper, but much more frightening and ominous. Yet not all of the benefits of the f112 involved big, spectacular scenes. Early on in *V for Vendetta*, for instance, the sound designer uses subtle low frequency effects to underscore the sound of V's boot heels echoing in passageways as he walks at night after curfew. Through most woofers the boots make an empty "click," but the f112 reveals an extra layer of low bass that makes V's footfalls sound more purposeful—and threatening.

INSIDERS TIP:

Follow JL Audio's woofer placement guidelines, and then use the ARO calibration process to fine-tune the f112's sound.

The bottom line is that JL Audio's Fathom f112 offers benchmark performance

in terms of bass extension, power, transient speed, and clarity. It is beautifully made, easy to use, and gives surefire results on music and movies. The only limiting factor involves output, where—depending on your room and listening tastes—you might need to use two or more f112s, or to step up to the larger Fathom f113 or Gotham g213. But setting aside questions of absolute output, the f112 is about as good as subwoofers get. **TPV**

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