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*Gerri Allen*

# Hsu Ventriloquist VT-12 Surround System and STF-2 Subwoofer



Mike Driscoll

**M**ANY YEARS AGO, when TV was in mono and dinosaurs roamed the earth, I wired a low-level RCA jack into the audio section of my TV so I could enjoy programs such as PBS's "Austin City Limits" through my stereo system in glorious monaural. Today, of course, monaural TV is passé, home theaters are commonplace, and the sound is in surround from both broadcast sources and DVDs. Audio-only media are also now in surround sound, with the advent of SACD and DVD-A, so many audiophiles are either setting up separate surround systems or converting their main audio systems to surround.

The problem for a great number of folks, however, is the cost, as always seems to be the case with high quality goods of any sort. For a full surround system, you will need at least six channels of amplification, a decent quality source, or sources, and, of course, loudspeakers. Also, for the average person, if fitting one pair of high-end loudspeakers into a domestically acceptable system can be difficult, six could be well nigh impossible.

The Ventriloquist VT-12 speaker system from Hsu Research, in conjunction with their STF-2 subwoofer, would seem to be a logical solution to these problems, because the result is a full-scale, surround-sound speaker system that is both small (and unobtrusive) and reasonable in price. The Ventriloquist system consists of five satellites and one front-center speaker. That's right, FIVE sats, one of which is configured differently from the others to act as a center-rear speaker. The "Ventriloquist" front-center speaker incorporates a pair of 4x6-inch drivers and one 2½-inch mid-high driver.

The rear of the center speaker has an array of connections that require some explanation. In addition to the single pair of center-channel inputs, there are front-left and front-right inputs and outputs. All three front outputs from the surround receiver or amplifier(s) are connected to the center speaker, and then the left-front and right-front speakers are connected to the center. A switch on the back of the center speaker can enable or disable the "Ventriloquist" effect. This tends to give the sound a bit more "weight" than it might have otherwise, making the satellites sound a bit larger than their modest (6-1/8 by 4-1/16 by 3-1/8 Inches) size would indicate.

The rear-center speaker, which is the same diminutive size as the other sats, is different in configuration. There are two sets of connections on this speaker, which is designed to connect to both the left and right surround speakers. This is said to "create a matrixed six-channel surround sound on five-channel systems." It sounded to me like a variation on the old Dynaco "Hafler hookup." In the case where your receiver has a rear-center output, the two positive terminals on the speaker are connected together, as are the negatives.

The VT-12 system has a claimed frequency response of 80 Hz to 20 kHz, so it doesn't provide what anyone would call earthshaking bass, but that, of course, is what the STF-2 sub is for. Indeed, good and cost-effective subs are where Dr. Hsu (he's from MIT) made his reputation. The sub's built-in amplifier is rated at 200 watts, and the driver is a single 10-inch woofer connected to a low-pass crossover with a 24 dB-per-octave

slope. Crossover frequency is adjustable from 30 to 90 Hz, and the crossover may be bypassed, if you desire. The STF-2 is claimed to go down to 25 Hz, and has a phase reversal switch, if needed, to smooth out the response in the crossover region. The sub measures 19 by 14 by 18 inches and weighs a substantial 52 pounds.

I used the Ventriloquist STF-2 speaker system in concert with Harman-Kardon's AVR-60 audio-video receiver, as well as with my reference system, both in stereo and surround. Set up was fairly simple with this speaker system; I just put the satellites on Sanus systems stands in the positions recommended by Hsu. The only "fiddling" I had to do was to move the sub around a bit to get the smoothest response in my room. I found that leaving the phase switch at 0 degrees sounded best to me, so that is where I left it for the balance of the review period.

To start off with, I tried using the VT-12's without the STF-2 sub, in order to see what difference the Ventriloquist circuitry had on the low-frequency part of the music. I played several selections with the switch in the "On," then again with it in the "Off" position. The bass in classical pieces, like Prokofiev's "Symphony # 5" (Mercury 432 753-2), sounded positively anemic when played without the sub or when I left the Ventriloquist effect turned "Off," as one might expect from such small drivers and cabinets. With the Ventriloquist circuitry "On," the bottom-end sound did indeed become a bit fuller, not by a huge amount, but noticeably. Adding the sub to the mix, as expected, brought even more of the low end, but also added a lot in terms of the sense of space on the Prokofiev CD.

Integrating the sub with the sats was rather easy. I ended up crossing to the sub at 80 Hz, and setting the level control about half way, with 0-degrees phase. The bass sounded best with the sub against a sidewall, about three feet in front of the listener. The sub and sats, when used together, make up a system that is as full range as anyone could want, except maybe for fans of pipe organ.

Man, however, does not live by bass alone (discounting, of course, those who are Hip-Hop fans or who have massive woofers and amplifiers in their cars). There must also be midrange and highs. The Hsu system performed very well here. On the SACD *Blue Country Heart* by Jorma Kaukonen (Columbia CS86394), the Dobro of Jerry Douglas was reproduced with all the delicacy and metallic twang of a live Dobro. Microdynamics and the attack and decay of the individual notes showed that the Hsu Ventriloquist is one very capable loudspeaker system. *Harp, Steel, and Guts* by The Blue Rider Trio (Mapleshade 06932) again emphasized the delicacy, dynamic shadings, and life-like staging this system can achieve.

Of course, most people interested in purchasing a speaker system of this surround type will probably be using it, at least part of the time, in a home-theater set-up. So I set up the Hsu Ventriloquist and subwoofer with a Harman/Kardon AVR630 home-theater receiver, using Denon's DVA2900 universal disc player as the program source.

I must say immediately that the Hsu speakers performed admirably in producing the "bangs" and "booms" that home-theater types relish. With movies like *Amadeus*, however, the musicality of the Hsu's allowed the feeling and emotion of Mozart's work to



come through. The classic film *A Clockwork Orange* by director Stanley Kubrick features a soundtrack by Walter (Wendy) Carlos, and this was reproduced by the Hsu system in all its menacing glory. I was particularly struck by the synthesizer-laden title sequence. The plot and action of this film is tied intimately to the music on the soundtrack, and the quality of the sound system can make or break one's enjoyment of the film. The audio system by Harmon/Kardon, Denon, and the Hsu reviewed here, plus my Phillips 16x9 high-definition video monitor, made this performance quite enjoyable, indeed.

All in all, I enjoyed the time I spent with the Hsu VT-12 and STF-2 system. It can provide high-quality sound, for both home-theater and audio use while taking up very little space, and thus preserving domestic tranquility. The "Ventriloquist effect" is a neat trick, but I really wouldn't use the VT-12s without a decent quality sub like the STF-2, as there just isn't enough low end. With the addition of any of the Hsu subwoofers, though, the VT-12 becomes a full-range system that won't break the bank.

## NOTES

**Hsu Ventriloquist VT-12 and STF-2 subwoofer,** \$299.00 and \$399.00, respectively, factory direct; \$100.00 discount if purchased together. Hsu Research, 3160 E. La Palma Ave., #D, Anaheim, CA 92806; phone 714/666-9260, fax 714/666-9261, e-mail drhsu@hsuresearch.com, website www.hsuresearch.com.

### Associated Equipment

Mirage M3si loudspeakers, Sound Valves VTA70 tube amplifier, Jolida JD 202a integrated tube amplifier, ODL HT-2 solid-state amplifier, Audible Illusions Modulus and B+K Pro10mc pre-amps, Denon DVD2900 universal disc player, Pioneer DV45a universal disc transport, Sony SCD CE775 CD/SACD player, Margules Audio Magenta ADE24 analog-digital enhancer, VPI HW19jr turntable, AQ PT6 tonearm, Sumiko Blue Point Special cartridge, and assorted tweaks, cones, and footings from commercial and home-brew sources.