

SVS Prime Pinnacle

Better known for its high-value, high-performance subs, SVS is now turning its attention to audiophile speakers

Review: **Mark Craven** Lab: **Keith Howard**

If there was ever a speaker that seemed, on specification alone, to warrant the phrase 'bang for your buck', it's SVS's Prime Pinnacle. For less than £2000 a pair, this US audio brand [and subwoofer specialist – see boxout, p59] is offering a three-way floorstander with bespoke midrange unit, an unusual-at-this-price trio of woofers, and the promise of a 'world-class performance'. Even accepting the latter as marketing hyperbole, it's impossible not to view the Prime Pinnacle as potentially superb value for money.

The name denotes this speaker's position at the top of SVS's Prime range, but it isn't the brand's flagship. That honour goes to the Tower model from its slightly costlier Ultra Series that kicks-off at £2200 per pair, depending on finish. That speaker is a curious-looking trapezoidal three-way floorstander with twin side-firing 200mm woofers.

The Prime Pinnacle, with its more conventional form factor and driver layout, seems designed to have greater domestic appeal, and carries a more affordable price tag to boot. Below it in the Prime Series is another floorstander, the Prime Tower, plus Bookshelf, Satellite, Centre and Elevation options, the latter two designed for home cinema system builders.

BEYOND THE CURVE

Standing 104x35cm (hw), these are not super-sized, but still vaguely recall the monoliths from Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Bucking current trends, there's not a curved edge in sight, and they're available only in either Black Ash (£1795) or Gloss Black (£1995) finishes. SVS, throughout its more than 20-year history, has remained uninterested in the more exotic designs of its rivals.

Although the Black Gloss livery is surely worth the price premium over the prosaic Black Ash, and a smidgeon of style comes from the tapered front baffle, these are hardly speakers that will make visitors to

your listening room stop and stare. Grilles, which cover roughly three quarters of the face, are clip-in rather than magnetic, and indicate that this speaker has been built to hit a price point. Elastomer feet are fitted as standard, but can be swapped for supplied threaded spikes.

HISTORY IN THE MAKING

SVS says the Prime Pinnacle has benefited from a more extensive voicing programme than any other model in its history. This, explains Director of Product Management Smith Freeman, was necessitated by its deployment of a new midrange driver, and adoption of three woofers.

'During the development of the Prime Pinnacle', he says 'we explored numerous acoustic alignments, which included

various system tunings and driver designs for both the bass and the midrange.'

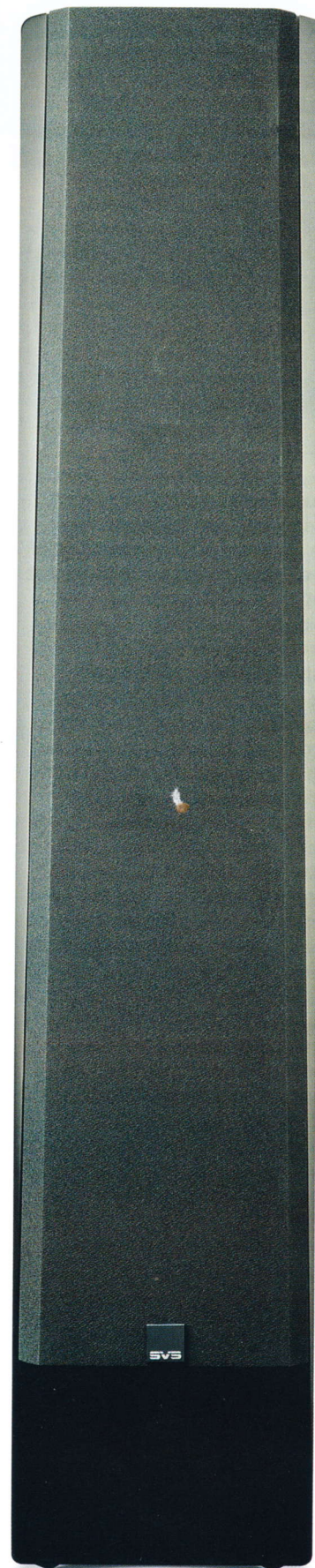
These experiments, adds Freeman, included alternating the position of the mid unit below and above the tweeter. Eventually the latter

placement was chosen. 'Key parts of this design were balancing out the tweeter height relative to typical listener position, as well as controlling diffraction from both the tweeter and midrange. The best performance objectively and subjectively won, and that's the design you have here.'

For the mid unit, SVS opted for a 135mm glass-fibre cone, a change from the other models in the Pinnacle range, which all use either 115mm or 90mm drivers hewn from polypropylene. This driver is a trickle-down design from the 165mm glass-fibre cones used in SVS's premium Ultra Tower speaker, suggesting Prime Pinnacle buyers are getting something a cut above the rest of the lineup.

RIGHT: Available in Black Ash and Gloss Black finishes, the cabinet houses a 25mm alloy dome tweeter, 135mm composite fibre-glass mid unit and three 165mm polypropylene woofers, all working into their own acoustic spaces

'This '70s
Southern rock
fits the Pinnacle
like a glove'





BRING ON THE BASS

The Ohio, US-based company SVS has, since its launch in the late 1990s, been chiefly recognised for its subwoofers, and its stable of 'bass boxes' has expanded over the years to now include multiple options at prices from £500 to £3000. Regardless of model, however, it adheres to some basic design principles: all current ranges, from the entry-level 1000 series to premium 16-Ultra series, offer sealed and ported variants, use 'Sledge' Class D amplifier modules, and are based around a single driver (the smallest employed still a sizeable 12in). More recent SVS sub innovations include a Bluetooth app-based control/parametric EQ system, plus wireless transmission platform, for easier integration into stereo and multichannel systems. The company's mission to 'challenge the status quo of over-priced, underperforming' audio products now encompasses not just its subwoofers, but its Prime and Ultra passive speakers, and the active Prime Wireless.

With this mid unit mounted up top, next in line is the 25mm aluminium dome tweeter with FEA-optimised diffuser to deliver, says SVS, 'a wide dispersion and accurate on-axis and off-axis delivery'. Beneath this sits the triple stack of bass drivers, all 165mm in diameter and again made from polypropylene, a material chosen for its stiff-but-light properties. By opting for these relatively small low-frequency units as opposed to a pair of larger drivers, speaker width has been kept to a minimum, maintaining the fit-for-any-environment ethos of the Prime Series.

Each bass driver works out of a rear 50mm-wide port and each is individually tuned. The MDF cabinet – 25mm-thick at the front – features four separate internal enclosures, plus rigid bracing, in a bid to combat unwanted resonances.

BIG AND BOLD

Consider the sub-£2000 price tag, and trio of front-firing bass drivers, and you might think SVS's floorstander is all about bass brutality. But while low-frequency handling is an obvious plus point – and a trait that brand fans will no doubt be expecting – it's neither overblown nor unrefined, while mids and highs aren't relegated to second fiddle. And the Prime Pinnacle's natural talent for the low-end creates a sound that's as big and bold as they come at this price.

The title track from Michael Jackson's *Bad* [EPC 504423 2] gives this pair a chance to strut its stuff. It's a performance that's not quite as slick as Jacko moonwalking in his slip-on shoes, but is undoubtedly infectious: full-range, propulsive and large in scale. The ascendant bassline that underpins each verse is delivered evenly and fluidly, and is subjectively uncoloured. Atop this, the electronic percussion (this was

1987, after all), hand-claps and Jackson's breathy vocals have a crisp edge and believable tonality. You can close your eyes and imagine you're in that parking lot, about to have a dance off...

AC/DC's 'Thunderstruck' [*The Razor's Edge*; EPC 510771 2] is one of the Aussie rockers' more thoughtfully mixed recordings, striving to create the scale of a live stadium performance from the confines of the studio. A key component is the repetitive slam of drummer Chris Slade's tom-tom, which through the Prime Pinnacle sounds delightfully taut and immediate, and forward in the mix. Switch to the synthetic bass notes of London Grammar's 'Hey Now' [*If You Wait*; MADART1], and the speaker shows its ability to drop deep while maintaining a tight grip. The company's expertise in subs certainly seems to pay dividends.

A quieter, more considered track, such as Alice In Chains' semi-acoustic 'No Excuses' from the *Jar Of Flies* EP [Tidal Hi-Fi download; 44kHz/16-bit], finds the Prime Pinnacle in fine voice for what is arguably an affordable floorstander. Jerry Cantrell and Layne Staley's twin-tracked vocals are clearly delineated, and the low-key percussion, which blends hi-hats and rapid snares with high-pitched toms into a syncopated rhythm, finds its space within the soundstage. And again, the sheer body given to the bassline, and the Pinnacle's ability to resolve low frequencies without coming across as sluggish or boomy, is remarkable.

Rear-ported and full-range, the Prime Pinnacle naturally warrants placement out from a wall to avoid excessive boundary gain, but you don't have to venture too far for the sound to be direct and unclouded, a benefit perhaps of SVS's triple-port design. I found the recommended placement of 30° L/R, with a slight toe-in, a sensible starting

SVS PRIME PINNACLE

LEFT: Three 50mm-wide flared rear-firing ports are tuned and optimised for three separate woofer enclosures. The three-way, 2nd-order crossover (300Hz and 2.1kHz) terminates in a single set of 4mm binding posts

EMI 50999 028944 2 3] sounds a little shy, Dave Gilmour's axe not so much cleaving through the instrumentation as gliding across it.

This is hardly a blot on the copybook for, as well as being nuanced, authoritative and weighty with bass, these SVS's floorstanders are very effective at creating soundstage depth and width.

PURE PLEASURE

This was obvious in the precise placement of Brad Wilk's drum kit in Black Sabbath's 'The End Of The Beginning' [13; Vertigo 3735426], and the widely thrown guitar and flutes in 'Can't You See' from The Marshall Tucker Band's self-titled debut [Tidal Hi-Fi download; 44kHz/16-bit FLAC]. This languid slice of 1970s Southern rock fits the Prime Pinnacle like a glove.

SVS's voicing here favours smoothness and warmth, as opposed to the attacking sound you might expect from a company with one foot firmly in the home theatre camp, and the result is pure listening pleasure, as the track layers on instruments (piano, acoustic guitar, a gently distorted Les Paul) and gradually builds to its crescendo. Doug Gray's plaintive vocals also get the grit and texture they deserve. So if you crave a warm and a full-bodied sound, the Prime Pinnacle will have your system glowing. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Just svelte enough to slip into all but the smallest rooms, and undemanding when it comes to placement, these floorstanders have clear all-round appeal, matched by a big, crowd-pleasing performance. Music driven by bass and percussion is their bread and butter, but there's a sweeter side that makes them more than competitive. In the middle of the price/performance Venn diagram, you'll find the Prime Pinnacle.

Sound Quality: 85%

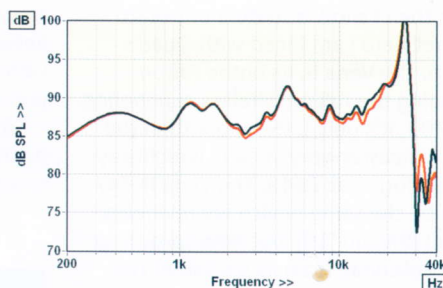
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point, although removing that toe-in – for practical and aesthetic reasons – didn't weaken image integrity.

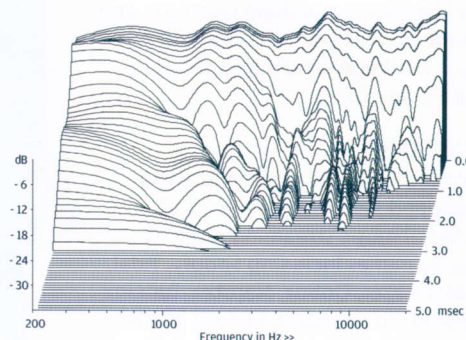
So where's the trade-off that the Prime Pinnacle's price tag implies? Sure, there's a sense that treble definition could be sharper, which robs tracks of that top layer of incisiveness, and the superb driving nature of its low-end isn't matched by the same forcefulness higher up the frequency band. As such, the astonishing lead solo in Pink Floyd's 'Comfortably Numb' [The Wall;

SVS may be better known for its subwoofers but the Prime Pinnacle gives every indication of being a carefully designed and, mostly, accurately specified loudspeaker. The one obvious exception to the latter is the quoted 8ohm nominal impedance which – as is all too often the case with modern speakers – is not borne out by our measurements. We recorded the minimum modulus to be 2.8ohm, which means that even a 4ohm nominal figure would be a stretch. (Conventionally, impedance should not fall below 80% of the nominal rating.) And once impedance phase is taken into account, the EPDR (equivalent peak dissipation resistance) falls to a low of 1.4ohm, albeit at a high 3.3kHz. It dips again to 1.6ohm at 79Hz, so all told the Prime Pinnacle is a harder than average load to drive. The beneficiary of this low impedance is sensitivity. SVS quotes a figure of 88dB and our measurements show that to be right on the money, with pink noise and music figures both being 88.2dB.

Forward responses were measured at 1m on the midrange driver axis as this accords most closely with the typical seated ear height. The response trend is uptilted slightly towards high frequencies and fairly uneven [see Graph 1, below], but response errors of ± 3.3 dB and ± 3.6 dB (300Hz–20kHz) are fair, and the ± 0.8 dB pair matching error over the same frequency range is good and becomes an excellent ± 0.5 dB below 13kHz. Our diffraction-corrected nearfield bass response measurement suggested some peaking at 70Hz but, once again, a bass extension of 45Hz (–6dB re. 200Hz) is fair. The cumulative spectral decay waterfall [Graph 2, below] reveals a few treble resonances above 3kHz but they are quite low in level. KH



ABOVE: Forward response shows a boosted presence and treble peak at 26kHz, but pair matching is good



ABOVE: Cabinet modes are mild as are the sequence of, presumably, mid driver resonances at 3-8kHz

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL/1m/2.83V – Mean/IEC/Music)	89.0dB/88.2dB/88.2dB
Impedance modulus: minimum & maximum (20Hz–20kHz)	2.8ohm @ 4.1kHz 14.6ohm @ 22Hz
Impedance phase: minimum & maximum (20Hz–20kHz)	–51° @ 2.6kHz 29° @ 10.3kHz
Pair matching/Resp. error (300Hz–20kHz)	± 0.8 dB / ± 3.3 dB/ ± 3.6 dB
LF/HF extension (–6dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	–45Hz / 30.7kHz/31.8kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m)	0.1% / 0.1% / 0.1%
Dimensions (HWD) / Weight (each)	1029x203x340mm / 26kg