BLUESOUND PULSE CINEMA SOUNDBAR

SOUNDBARS ARE THE GO-TO FOR MOST HOME AUDIO SETUPS AND IT CAN BE HARD TO DIFFERENTIATE EACH SOLUTION. MYKE IRELAND CHECKS OUT THE LATEST FROM BLUESOUND TO SEE HOW IT STACKS UP.



As far back as the 80s, the only home audio market category to experience a more rapid adoption than the soundbar was the CD player. With a global market now hovering around $20 billion and a steady 5% year-on-year growth since their inception in the early 2000s, the black bar under the telly has evolved from a niche convenience to a household staple.

Today, it's rarer to find a living room without a soundbar than one with a traditional component stack. And whilst soundbars have made home life more aesthetically pleasing, they've also ushered in an entirely new class of home cinematic experience at a price point you simply cannot wrangle with a classic system.

However, the widely appreciated trade-offs of a soundbar or "lifestyle" system mean the device has to double down on the promise of ease of use and seamless integration with daily life. A premium soundbar can't just sound good and win the chocolates; it needs an aesthetic that complements the home, a physical footprint that respects modern cabinetry, and needs to integrate instantly with the digital ecosystems we already inhabit.

So, with the arrival of the Bluesound PULSE CINEMA soundbar, Bluesound is betting that you don't have to sacrifice that high-end pedigree for the sake of living-room logic.

OUT OF THE BOX

Unboxing the soundbar feels less like handling a piece of consumer electronics and more like the opening frames of Kubrick's 2001: A Space Odyssey (1968). As I cleared the packaging, I felt like one of the hominids in the Dawn of Man sequence, stumbling across the Monolith in the desert, standing back in a mixture of confusion and genuine awe at its sheer, imposing scale.

At a full 1.2m wide and 140mm deep, "monolithic" is definitely an accurate description. Fortunately, in high-fidelity audio, size is relatively synonymous with capability; you simply cannot move air or produce grumbling bass without volume-based displacement.

Wrapped in premium acoustic cloth with a piano-black interactive display, the PULSE CINEMA carries a design simplicity that means it's never visually out of place.

Side note: if your home, like mine, is a proverbial black hole of dust and Golden Retriever hair, cloth coverings can be a little more upkeep, but when compared to a full plastic chassis, the sonic results are night and day.

Around the back, connectivity is all business: HDMI eARC, optical and even an analogue RCA input for those that still have a soft spot for legacy analogue gear.

Lastly, a slimline wall mount bracket is included in the box. Big win.

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THE ECOSYSTEM

You can't talk about any piece of Bluesound hardware without appreciating the power of the ecosystem that sits behind it. And if you're going to talk about the ecosystem, then the BluOS app is the central nervous system of that game.

Having used Bluesound before, I still think its simplicity is unmatched: open the app, it finds the bar, connects it to your network and you're integrated. No exaggeration, it's a 30-second process from whoa to go.

The fact that the app replaces the remote is a win in terms of UX and carbon footprint, but it's also a portal to high-resolution, lossless platforms like Tidal integrated directly into the system. Bluesound have made the market very aware that their aim isn't to compete with the everyday wireless lifestyle options, if you're in their space, it's because you already know the difference between average and premium streaming services.

On the power front, the bar advertises itself as dividing a massive 500W of output power across 5 x 38W tweeters, 5 x 38W midrange drivers, 2 x 65W woofers and an additional 4 x 4" passive radiators in a 3.2.2 configuration.

SPECIFICATIONS: BLUESOUND PULSE CINEMA SOUNDBAR

AUDIO	
SUPPORTED MULTI-CHANNEL AUDIO FORMATS:	Dolby Digital, Dolby Atmos, Dolby Digital Plus, Dolby TrueHD, LPCM
NATIVE SAMPLING RATES:	up to 192KHz
BIT DEPTH:	16-24
DISTORTION:	THD+N, 0.030%
RATED POWER OUTPUT:	500W total system power, 38W x 5 tweeter, 38W x 5 midrange, 65W x 2 woofer
SPEAKERS:	0.75" tweeter x 5; 1.5" x 3" midrange x 5; 4" woofer x 2; 4" passive radiator x 4
SPEAKER CONFIGURATION:	3.2.2
SOFTWARE	
OPERATING SYSTEM:	BluOS
APP CONTROLLER OPERATING SYSTEM:	iOS, Android, Windows, macOS
PROCESSOR:	ARM Cortex -A53, Quad-Core, 1.8GHz per core
THIRD-PARTY INTEGRATIONS:	AirPlay 2, Spotify Connect (also support for Spotify Lossless), Tidal Connect, Qobuz Connect, Roon Ready
CONTROL SYSTEM INTEGRATIONS:	Creston, Control4, RTI, Nice, URC, Lutron
PHYSICAL	
DIMENSIONS:	Table: 1,200 x 74 x 140mm, wall mounted: 1,200 x 140 x 84.5mm
WEIGHT:	6.69kg
POWER SUPPLY:	Universal two-pin AC cord input (100-240AC)
OPERATING ENVIRONMENT:	0°C to 40°C

INSTALLATION AND CONFIGURATION

The PULSE CINEMA offers two distinct physical personalities: tabletop or wall-mounted. Conveniently, the unit features an internal accelerometer which allows it to understand under which orientation it's being used. The software then re-calibrates the DSP to compensate for any bass-loading from the wall and re-aligns the phase of the up-firing Dolby Atmos drivers.

Without this step, you'd lose the precision of the height channels. It's a brilliant bit of engineering that ensures the bar sounds consistent regardless of whether it's sitting on a credenza or hovering under your panel.

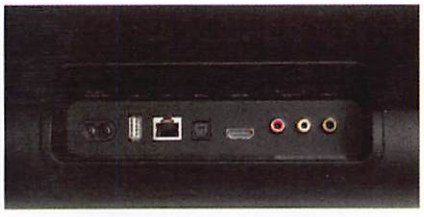
Beyond simple playback, the software allows for significant app-managed virtualisation and the PULSE CINEMA uses its 16-driver array to maximise the soundstage in every direction. You can engage a software upscaler of sorts, which effectively reimagines standard two-channel audio into a simulated Atmos environment. For the user, this means you can take a standard sitcom or an old stereo recording and expand it to fill the room, which means you aren't solely at the mercy of the source material.

The PULSE CINEMA is also compatible with formats like AirPlay 2, Spotify Connect and a few others, so if streaming from your preferred app is what you love, then that's all taken care of too.

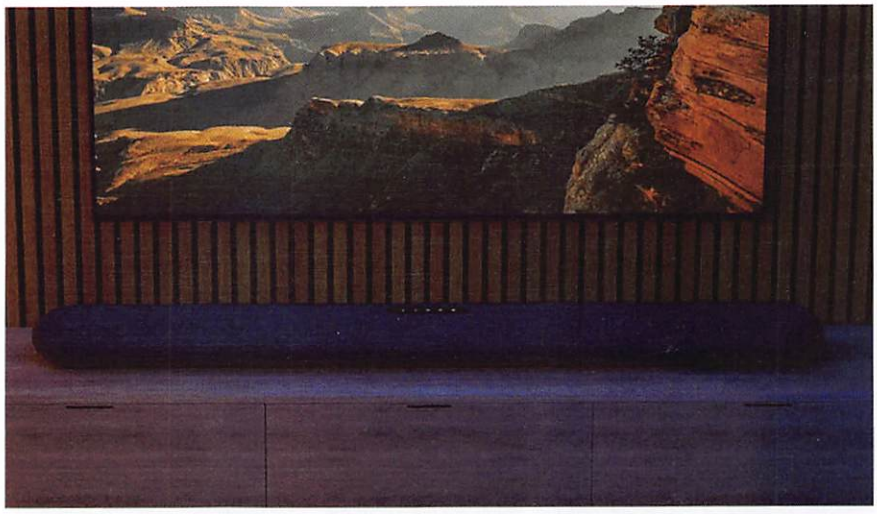
SONIC PERFORMANCE

Sonically, the soundstage dwarfs the bar's physical size, tenfold. Testing with 4K Blu-ray via PS5 and high-res Tidal tracks, the midrange is the star. The vocal area, guitars, cymbals, backing vocals are all remarkably present and tactile. You can almost reach out and touch separate instruments in a spatial mix.

Cinematic content is obviously the star of the show, and experiencing Atmos through any soundbar, let alone the PULSE CINEMA, is a lesson in psychoacoustics and phase manipulation. With that, Bluesound seem to have their algorithm dialled in to an almost uncanny level of accuracy.



With built-in amplification and Dolby Atmos decoding, there's no need for a separate receiver, just HDMI eARC.



With 16 drivers, including dedicated upfiring and centre channels, the PULSE CINEMA creates a wide 3.2.2 Dolby Atmos soundstage from a single soundbar.

It never ceases to amaze me that a soundbar sat in front of me can fool my brain to the point where I'm turning my head to hear the sounds coming from behind me. But this soundbar, at times, had me convinced it'd somehow paired with my existing rear speakers; that's how accurate the rear placement was.

However, the sonic laws of low-end physics still remain. While the low-end is certainly impressive and very breathy, it does lack some of the chest punch you get with a dedicated sub. Don't get me wrong, bass is there, and it's intelligible, but it's not the sofa-shaking experience you want in those fast-action, high-impact movie scenes.

Fortunately, the recently released (and redesigned) PULSE SUB is built for this exact gap. With ultra-low-latency wireless speed, it's intended to marry deep, low transients with the bar's crisp mids and upper range. As a standalone solution, the bar itself provides great surgical detail and rich colourful sonics. Paired with the Sub, I can only assume that same level of clarity extends down into the boom zone.

FINAL THOUGHTS

In a soundbar market flooded with hundreds of offerings, most of which deliver a variation of the same experience, the real purchasing decision boils down to a simple choice: are you settling for everyday media consumption, or are you demanding a premium result that respects the trade-offs of a lifestyle system?

If you belong to the second camp, Bluesound is the logical place to begin your search. The PULSE CINEMA is, quite literally, the tip of the spear in this sector. It succeeds by not compromising on the fundamentals; it looks architectural, it integrates with a level of digital maturity that others lack and it adds an atmospheric depth that transforms a standard living room into a legitimate cinema space.

Whether you are pushing the limits of 4K Blu-ray audio or streaming high-resolution MQA files, it delivers a level of precision that smaller, plastic-shelled competitors simply cannot replicate.

Going all out and matching the PULSE CINEMA with some PULSE FLEXs and a subwoofer might even give you bragging rights over that mate who dropped $50,000 on a full home theatre system. Even if it doesn't, there's still no way I know of to replicate such a convincing, detailed and accurate example of lifestyle cinema at such an attainable price point. ■

Manufacturer:
Bluesound
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