

JBL L42ms

Retro looks or not, JBL's beefy L42ms music system/soundbar hybrid serves up some blistering audio performance, enthuses

Martin Dew



AMERICAN AUDIO GIANT JBL recently introduced the L42ms Integrated Music System as a smaller alternative to its big-boned L75ms [HCC #330]. It's still chunky, but arguably better suited to the dual role of wireless music speaker and soundbar that its HDMI ARC connection allows.

The L42ms is one of JBL's Classic designs, distinguished from the many and various models in its Bluetooth, Party and Soundbar speaker categories. Viewed from above, it forms a part-trapezoid shape, and the overall look (including the Quadrex grille) is rooted firmly in a 1970s aesthetic, reminiscent of the days when bigger stereo systems used to mean better. Finish options are black or natural walnut veneer

As with the £1,499 L75ms, this unit has

woofer/tweeter pairs mounted on an angled baffle pointing outwards from a centre line to improve its sense of spaciousness and imaging – although this time there's no dead-centre mid-range driver. These four drivers are independently amplified by Class

AV INFO

PRODUCT:

Stereo wireless speaker/soundbar with HDMI ARC

POSITION:

Separate from JBL's range of soundbars

PEERS:

Naim Mu-so 2nd Generation; KEF LSX II

D-based onboard modules, claiming a plausible 75W to each 4in woofer and 25W to each tweeter.

There's an option to add a subwoofer, too, with JBL using an auto-sensing output to trigger an 80Hz high pass filter when doing so.

Between two bass ports on the rear is a neat panel with a good suite of connections. Alongside HDMI ARC there's an L/R line-level RCA input, 3.5mm auxiliary input, USB service port and Ethernet connection for hardwiring to your home network. A 'bass contour' -3/0dB toggle switch mitigates bass response if the L42ms is placed close to walls or crammed into an enclosed shelf.

If a wired connection doesn't suit, the Roon Ready L42ms offers Wi-Fi and Bluetooth 4.2 for streaming. Platforms for casting include Spotify Connect, Google Chromecast and Apple AirPlay 2. The in-built 96kHz/24-bit DAC enables hi-res playback, and file support includes FLAC, MQA and WAV.

Ace of bass

Glancing at the outer shell of the L42ms, you somehow know that the musical response is going to be as fat and chunky as the aesthetic. The speaker affords a cosy, rounded listen, softening hard edges but never compromising on muscle. Bass response, meanwhile, is forthright and grounded, yet never bloated or out of proportion.

JBL's heritage makes the L42ms scream out for a reckoning with American MOR rock. Journey's 'Girl Can't Help It' (Qobuz) from *Raised on Radio* elicits a rousing midrange response with a rich rhythm section. Steve Perry's impassioned vocals are forward and

SPECIFICATIONS

DRIVER: 2 x 4in pulp cone woofers; 2 x 0.75in aluminium dome tweeters **ONBOARD POWER (CLAIMED):** 200W **CONNECTIONS:** HDMI ARC; analogue stereo RCA in; analogue 3.5mm in; subwoofer output; Ethernet **DOLBY ATMOS/DTS:X:** No/No **REMOTE CONTROL:** Yes **DIMENSIONS:** 617(w) x 162(h) x 234(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 8.5kg

FEATURES: Claimed frequency response 55Hz -25kHz (-6 dB); boundary compensation; Bluetooth 4.2; JBL Premium Audio App control; Wi-Fi with Google Chromecast Built-in and Apple AirPlay 2; Roon Ready; black or walnut finish

JBL's Quadrex grille is curved to match the baffle behind

beguiling. The soundstage depth draws you in and doesn't let go, so the decision to keep listening is an easy one.

In Steven Wilson's 'What Life Brings' from *The Harmony Codex* (Qobuz), the drum and bass sounds are warm yet incisive. There's a stir of dynamics as the chorus enters and the vocal harmonies are discrete and natural. It feels as though the L42ms lets no frequency band go wanting. All the while, those outward-angled drivers push out an envelope which is expansive and never short on oxygen.

But how does it fare with movies? While you might forfeit the directional cues of multi-driver soundbars, the L42ms's rendition of dialogue could be the finest I've ever heard on a price-competitive system. Martin Sheen's narration in *Apocalypse Now* (Prime Video) was crystal-clear, resonant and bold. On this title and other movie sources, I had to pinch myself that voices were this good. And from screeching tanks to fierce explosions in the battle scenes of Coppola's masterpiece, sounds across the spectrum were always distinctive and keenly felt.

Retroactive

I can't imagine anyone setting up the L42ms and not wearing a smile on their face. This is an entertainment system for all occasions, whether serious listening, party high-jinks or kicking back for movie night. It dazzles with a bold and vigorous sound and will bring your music collection to life. The 'grandad's old stereo' look might be everyone's cup of tea, but that's down to you and your interior designer – a bigger concern might be finding the right location for the quirky shape if it's destined for AV duties under a TV ■

HCC VERDICT



JBL L42ms

→ £999 → uk.jbl.com

WE SAY: The styling might be a matter of taste and the dimensions awkward for TV duties, but JBL's L42ms steps up as a sonic *tour de force*.