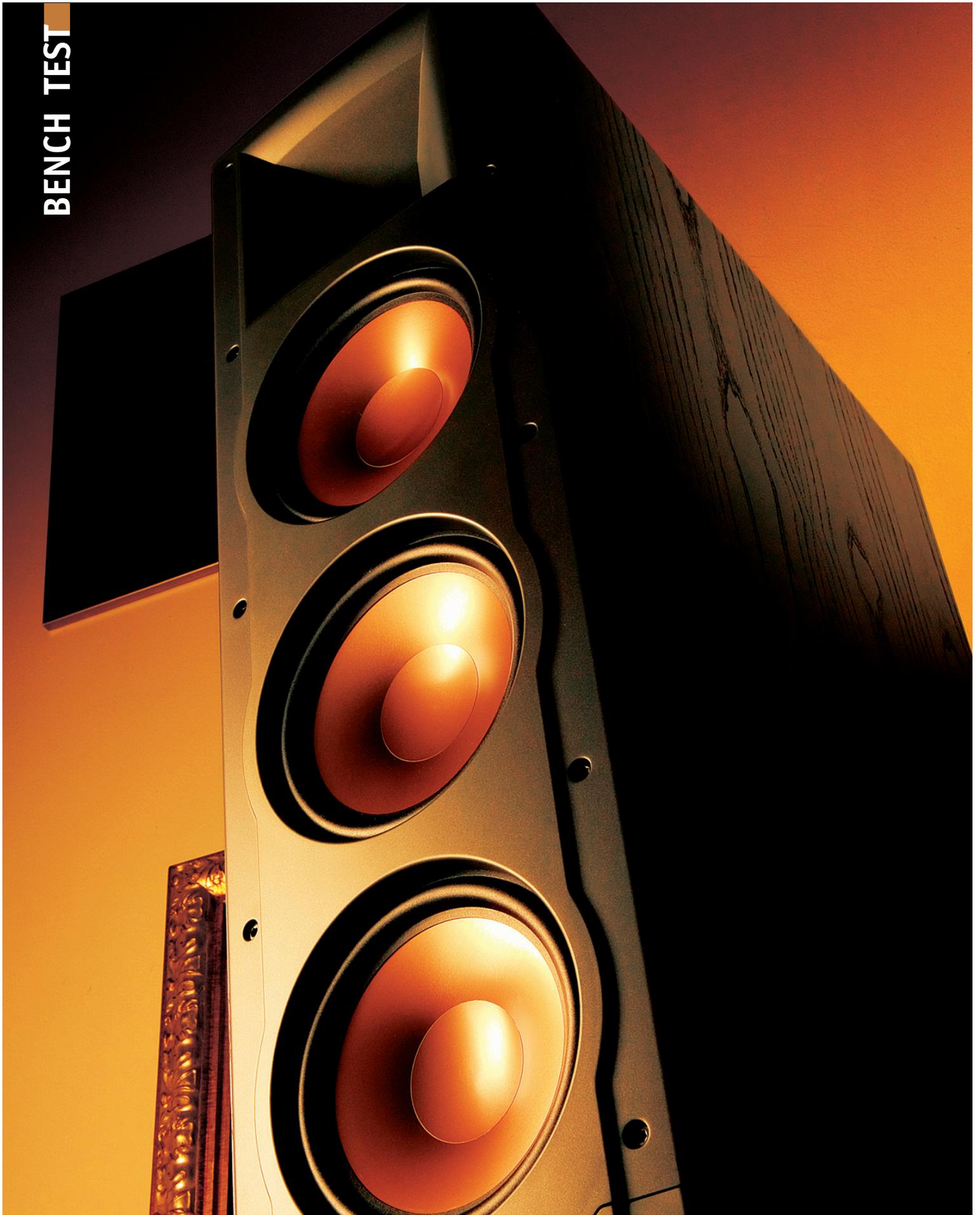


BENCH TEST



Klipsch Reference Speakers



A perfect storm of decibels



WALTER WLODARSKI

Keeping you up to date on the very latest industry trends is something we take seriously. From among the dozens of audio-visual products that hit the market every season, we want to help you pick out those which are most likely to satisfy you, both from the standpoint of technology and from that of pure sensory experience. Over the last few months our non-stop prospecting has often unearthed systems on the edges of the traditional audio-visual market and we have let you know about them.

However, we don't want to lose touch with our audiophile roots. That's why this time around we have come back to so-called conventional audio. Away we go – time to inspect some high-end Klipsch speakers with Claude Latour, Klipsch's Quebec rep as our guide. Claude is a real connoisseur, not only of the Klipsch brand, but also of the whole audio-visual industry. In his own home he has set up a not too shabby listening room. And the fact that he has chosen only Klipsch Reference series speakers tells you a lot about their quality. The Klipsch brand was crying out for some hands-on testing, so we obliged. What follows is our report to you, our readers.

THE VISIT

So there we were, my editor-in-chief and I, on a suffocating summer's day knocking at Claude's front door. He welcomed us into his air-conditioned home with open arms, sparkling eyes and a contagious smile – a cool beginning. I don't quite know why, but the conversation immediately turned to a rather curious picture hanging over the fireplace in the library. It was an aerial photograph showing an estate with a strange neo-gothic tower, the Magdal Tower, located in Rennes-le-Château in the department of Aude in the south of France. Claude told us that the estate in the picture was the Abbey of Béranger Saunière ... the very one that inspired Dan Brown, author of the now ubiquitous *Da Vinci Code*. Claude admitted that he's passionate about the subject ... which places him the select company of several million other readers' world over. I knew we were straying from our subject, but the digression allowed us to cool down and get our bearings after the heat outside. Once refreshed, we were ready to get on with the real reason for our visit: an inspection of the famous Klipsch speakers. We proceeded downstairs where we found them, in all their majesty, holding court in a windowless room, completely cut off from

the outside world: an nearly ideal home theatre. The only intruder was a slightly noisy air conditioning unit that we unfortunately had to leave running, unless we want two shelves crammed with precious electronic gear to do an instant meltdown before our very eyes – they generate that much heat. After mulling it over, Claude decided that, for purposes of our bench test, the Klipsch speakers would be best served by a Denon DVD-3910 player running through a Denon AVR-5805 surround receiver and BIS AUDIO cables.. all perfectly calibrated to work together.

PHYSICAL ATTRIBUTES

The guided tour began by an overview of cabinet anatomy. The cabinets are manufactured entirely of solid particle-board in order to reduce any unwelcome resonance. Internal cross bracing makes the structure even more rigid and helps anchor the components. Three rear-firing ports give the RF-63's generous breathing room. As well, they benefit from a new configuration with three 165mm Cerametallic cones, maximizing the travel and producing bass that is always under control even at high volume. Cerametallic is a patented, specially treated aluminum, anodized with copper-coloured ceramic dust on both outer surfaces. I noted that the manufacturer has not skimped on the quality of the materials and has clearly aimed at ease of movement. The components are fixed to an elastomer flange in order to move with considerable amplitude. "The concave dome in the middle of each speaker has been specially designed to be both stiff and lightweight," Mr. Latour told us. This is a straightforward, efficient technology with interesting absorption qualities.

TRACTRIX HORNS

Next he drew our attention to the tweeter horns. From time immemorial people have cupped their hands around their mouths in order to be heard at a distance. In fact, strictly speaking, this is not amplification at all. Rather, it is a mechanical way of projecting sound waves instead of letting them spill out willy-nilly in all directions. Klipsch takes this very traditional passive horn technology and adds know-how and modern technique. The shape of the horns has been engineered to maximize projection towards the listener. Klipsch wanted the sound to be projected horizontally rather than vertically (90 degrees by 60 degrees) in order to

sweep the listening room more completely. The result is a horn with a rectangular opening and rounded walls. This noticeable improvement in efficiency also brings about improved speaker expression. There is less reflection off the walls, especially in those first rebounds which can add grungy colours to the audible spectrum. "You'll hear it right away. It's very perceptible," concludes Mr. Latour, who is delighted at the prospect of showing us what his system can do. "But first, look at the subwoofer. It's really something. I've got two of them – enough to stir up the emotions of even the most insensitive listener," he says proudly.

RW-12D SUBWOOFER

Here too the ports are large-sized. The company has improved on the principle of Bass Reflex configuration with a sort of cannon tube placed at an angle of 45 degrees to the ground. They call this tube the Corner Port. Because it's oblique it can be long without taking up too much room. The air stream is less subject to port noise and distortion and the air gets off to a better start before shooting forward and rebounding off the ground. This way, the enclosure can handle notes that are lower than those reproduced by other products of the same dimensions. The cabinet is relatively compact, measuring 49 cm (19.2 in) high by 37 cm (14.6 in) wide with a depth of 53 cm (21 in). The cone has a 12-inch (30 cm) diameter and, at 22kg (almost 50 lbs), the unit is surprisingly heavy. One important design feature is the bevelled port corners. This looks unimportant but it avoids a lot of acoustic problems. In fact, all of the other speakers in the Klipsch Reference family have the same kind of chamfer.

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The magnetically attached grilles which protect the cones from dust have a low-diffraction cloth. But what stands out on the subwoofer is the glowing blue screen which displays the operating parameters of the unit. A digital circuit drives the speaker. You can adapt the sound to a number of musical styles and listening situations. For example, there's a compressor that can dampen the punches if you want to listen to a film in the evening without rattling the whole household. As well, there are three equalisation modes : one to accent the punches, one for maximum depth from recordings that are a bit flat and another neutral mode. This is the one we chose to get a balanced idea of the natural talents of these speakers.

The cabinet is finished in a black wood grain ... beach I think. Okay, so much for the overview. What do we listen to?

DIVING RIGHT IN

We were twitching with impatience. It didn't really matter to us what CD or video Claude would pull off the shelf, we

just wanted to hear what this daring set-up with two subwoofers could put out. Since we couldn't make up our minds, Claude chose for us. He got things underway by putting on some demo discs, the kind you hear at trade shows. I have to admit, we weren't very impressed by the first listen. The effects were bland and the recordings pretty flat. However, things got better when he put a classical music DVD into the player. Stravinsky I think. A full-sized orchestra started playing. Each instrument came through with remarkable clarity. The snare drum hits especially went right to the gut. I felt stirred right to the depths of my being. The Klipsch speakers have the rare ability to be able to rocket people into ecstasy. These are really powerful speakers. Their force is breathtaking. We found ourselves caught up in an orgy of decibels. Never raw or vulgar. Rather, delicate brush strokes on an enormous canvas. As impressive as a summer storm. A build-up of raindrops that turns into an overpowering torrent. We had the wind knocked out of us. It took us several seconds to understand what was happening here. Amazing !

Later, after other samples from other discs, I was still thunderstruck, mesmerized, not knowing quite what the cause was. Was it the dual subwoofers? Or was it the other speakers that were casting a spell on us? I tried to fake out the other speakers with a recording I knew to be defective: a copy of *The Healer* by bluesman John Lee Hooker which I've hauled around in my gear for ages and which, by chance, had a couple of damaged tracks. Most sound systems either skip over the defects or make them worse, especially in the high register. To my astonishment the Klipsch speakers did neither. They reproduced the recording as is: flat in the flat parts, scratchy in the scratched parts. The sensitivity of the front RF-63's is phenomenal. No imperfections make it past. Everything is reproduced faithfully – you get the naked truth. Claude jumped in here to underscore an important point: This speaker sensitivity cuts both ways. If the take is impeccable, the Klipsch will hand you an unforgettable experience. However, if it's under par, your ears will hear every little flaw.

Moving along to an album that I know is very good – a sampler called *Asia Lounge* (AudioPharm, 2001) that I have often used as a reference for my tests. The seventh track on disc two plunges us into the strange ambience of an airport corridor which gradually morphs into an Arab tune played on an oboe. Synthesizers accompany the traditional Arab instruments. Many speakers have a tough time keeping the sounds straight. But with the Klipsch, the natural tone colours stay natural and the artificial ones stay artificial. After several bars, the music sort of hung in the air and the airport noise resonated in the distance. Then BOOM! A shockwave blew us away. Powerful bass notes shook the room. Once again the subwoofers worked their magic, but this time the other speakers kept on amazing us by their precision and their clarity in the mids and highs. Finally, for the first time, I heard the surround speakers add delicious details here and there. We were in heaven. Give me more! Jolly Mukherjee's tablas and his Madras Cinematic



The sub woofer on this picture is the model RT-10d

Orchestra wafted us away into the poignant and intense world of the Near-East. Synthesized violins created a feeling of urgency at a rhythm that became more and more breakneck. We heard the sparkle of tambourines as the music went forward in two tempi, smooth and quick at the same time. The Klipsch speakers not only mirrored the rhythms, they also widened the soundscape.

Lastly, we finished off our listening session with large dollops of the most recent double DVD *Pulse* from Pink Floyd recorded live. You guessed it: we were treated to the same intensity and the same emotions.

WHEN ALL IS SAID AND DONE

In order to let the dust settle, I decided to write my conclusion several days after our evening with Claude Latour. My impressions are still just as intense after this cooling-off period. Claude’s surround system was made up of a pair of RF-63’s in front, a central RF-64 with a pair of surround RS-62 speakers, a rear pair of RB-51’s for support and the two RW-12d subwoofers. It really shook us up. I have no qualms whatsoever in recommending this configuration, not only

for home theatre setups – that’s obvious – but also for installations that aim only at listening. Music lovers will find excellent reasons to expand their collection of DVD audio and will get pleasure from live show recordings, while movie fans will no doubt find themselves simply listening to more and more music. The Klipsch speakers are the missing link between these two worlds.

But, hold on a moment. There’s a catch. Poor recordings just won’t stand up under the intense scrutiny of Klipsch speakers. As well, and this is my personal taste, their wood grain veneer finish and their square lines seem to give them a heavy look. I say, “seem to give them” because that was my impression before I heard their vigorous and agile reproduction of the most minute sonic details. Some people will brush them off because they only look at appearances. That’s too bad. Give them a listen and you’ll drop these superficial impressions. You’ll be more than pleasantly surprised.

Note: The listening session was carried out with an extra RW-12d subwoofer. This brings the system’s total value to \$7,626 before taxes.



The evaluation chart is based on products in the same price category.

Manufacturer’s suggested retail price:	
RC-64 (central)	\$1,260 each
2x RF-63 (front)	\$2,520 pair
2x RS-62 (surround)	\$1,396 pair
2x RB-51 (rear)	\$490 pair
RW-12d (subwoofer)	\$980 each
www.klipsch.ca – 1-800-554-7724	