

Sub-bass superstar

This woofer is both big and clever. Unlike Adam Rayner, who literally wrestled with it after not reading the manual...



AV INFO

PRODUCT: Dual driver sub with onboard room EQ

POSITION: Top of JL Audio's Fathom line

PEERS: REL G1; Paradigm SUB 1; Velodyne DD18+



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REFERENCE STATUS

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JL AUDIO'S FATHOM f212v2 home cinema subwoofer system arrives in a double carton of immense strength that sits atop four puffy, plastic bagel-like feet. This is so that a forklift can be used to shift it, as the sub weighs sixteen stones. And that doesn't count the hefty carton assembly. I got help to get it into my room but thought, with Rayner-sized arrogance, that I could position it easily enough. I have carpet, the device has four rubber feet. So what happened? I nearly broke my back 'walking' the thing into position. After doing this I examined the accessories pack to find not just white gloves but ones with grippy finger tips, plus four slippery plastic cups that go under the rubber feet and allow you to skate the monolithic thing into place. I felt like Bugs Bunny when he grows donkey ears...

This is a mighty product, yet JL Audio blithely suggests that you will want to use two, three or best of all four, which at UK import prices will be £25,996. Yep, that's £6,499 per subwoofer.

We previously reviewed the Fathom f212 (HCC #214). This is an upgrade of that model. JL Audio likes to evolve its hardware, appending 'v2' to the product name. It has got to v3 with some other lines, and only embarks on a whole new name when it has reason to.

Ch-ch-ch-changes

The f212v2 is a big black box – standing 80cm high – with two 12in drivers in its front face. It uses massive amplification along with sophisticated control electronics. Styling is much the same as the first. However, the room optimisation processing is now immensely more sophisticated than before, with eighteen bands of digital equalisation being applied during the D.A.R.O. (Digital Automatic Room Optimization) process.

Best of all, perhaps – and not actually seeming to have cost you any more, as the £600 price shift from v1 to v2 is I think down to currency exchange rate changes since we looked at the first one – is the power upgrade. JL Audio has added amplifier power to take the f212v2 from 1,500W RMS per driver to 1,800W RMS per driver. Yes, the 'upgrade' is to add more power than most woofers come with. It also adds another two kilos of weight.

The 12in transducers are covered by eight different patents concerned with enabling them to run cool and travel an hysterically long way in and out (in excess of 3in). These remain the indoors version of the W7 woofer JL Audio makes for the car industry, without having to worry about automotive moisture issues. If any changes have been made to these drivers over the previous f212 they're being kept under wraps.

To set up, I plugged in the microphone – a neat, specific-to-this-system device – and pressed the D.A.R.O button on the front control panel. Quite unlike other room optimisation systems, this did not run descending tones but rather three minutes of what's described in the manual as 'hashy static'. Then, it was showtime.

First, I played some rich, dynamic bass-heavy music by Yello, the Euro electronic duo who have been the darlings of the hi-fi trade in their time with *The Race* being played to death at shows. It was clear that my reference B&W 800 series floorstanders 'liked' the support. There was no gap, no swelling, no overly boisterous feel to the bass, but there was a sheer scale that grasps you by the sternum.

I bought *The Force Awakens* on Blu-ray especially for playback with this new woofer. Now I will show off here and brag about my chum 'Big' Mick who does Metallica's live

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SPECIFICATIONS

DRIVE UNITS: 2 x 12in proprietary long-excursion woofers **ENCLOSURE:** Sealed box **FREQUENCY RESPONSE:** 20Hz-97Hz (+/-1.5dB); -3dB at 19Hz and 110Hz; -10dB at 15Hz and 157Hz **ONBOARD POWER:** 3,600W RMS Class D amplifier **REMOTE CONTROL:** No **DIMENSIONS:** 379(w) x 812(h) x 518(d)mm (including feet and rear fins) **WEIGHT:** 102kg **CONNECTIONS:** Phono inputs (paired, stereo or mono use); balanced XLR inputs and XLR slave output socket; front microphone socket for onboard Digital Automatic Room Optimization system

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sound. He requested that Glastonbury management have his thrice-normal sub-bass PA system for the band at the festival in 2014. Why? Because of scale. More bass makes all of a soundfield feel bigger and richer. With the *Star Wars* disc, it meant that first brass stab of John Williams' score sounded huge and actually gave me goosebumps.

Like a new car with a big engine, I played with the obvious, enjoying major scale events for the fulsome power of the f212v2. The basso rumble as the very opening sequence in JJ Abrams' flick unfolds was epic in its depth and size. I had to turn the control down from 0dB on setup so as not to overwhelm my speaker array. I am a fader pusher, not puller, in engineer-speak.

When we meet The Scavenger we feel the weight of the tired engines of that wheelfree, hovering motorcycle. And when Kylo Ren indulges in a little torture, there's a low-end throb that dug deep into my bones. Likewise, a crashing First Order fighter in the Badlands, or the Millennium Falcon taking off, both offer major excitement. The Fathom's feel for these LFE moments is so good that you get wrapped up in the action.

Meanwhile, with the beginning of *Limitless* (one of my go-to demo platters), the breaking-down-the-door sequence was like being kicked in the belly, hard and with unerring accuracy.

Yet this is to be expected. Perhaps the real sign of this sub's class was experienced in the *Star Wars* scene with Snoke. All that DSP cleverness bears fruit, with the taut accuracy of the abyssal lows making the space feel more cavernous than a cathedral. You can literally feel the size of the space the characters are in, in a way that defies simple description but gives acoustic agoraphobia.

In short, this is a wonderful device fully deserving of its v2 label. It's suited to largescale home cinema, but also means you could have smaller speakers than floorstanders and still enjoy reference-grade audio. I loved it to bits, except for having to move it around ■

HCC VERDICT

★★★★★

JL Audio Fathom f212v2
→ £6,500 → www.av-techsolutions.co.uk

WE SAY: This high-end woofer offers astonishing bass power with supreme control. As well as massive scale, it can create epic 'space'. Drawbacks are the price point and size of the thing...

1. The front panel houses controls and the mic input for the D.A.R.O EQ system

2. There are balanced XLR ports, in addition to phono inputs, for use with compatible AV hardware

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