



Cheers for the minibar!

Well this is getting ridiculous. We reviewed the larger of the two new soundbars from Yamaha a few months ago — and when we say larger, that’s in relative terms: the SR-B20A soundbar was hardly huge at 91cm wide and just 5cm high. It weighed just 3.2kg, and came with no subwoofer to fill out the bass. Yet it was such an enjoyable performer within its limits that we bestowed upon it a Sound+Image award for Soundbar of the Year under \$500.

Now we have Yamaha’s most junior soundbar of all, being both its newest and also its smallest soundbar. Again no subwoofer, so all the noise here comes from just this small lozenge of a soundbar, weighing just 1.8kg, measuring just 60cm wide (that’s 5cm less than a Sonos Beam). It was dwarfed by the 75-inch 8K TV to which we connected it.

Can a soundbar so small, so alone, and costing just \$299, deliver anything useful in sonic terms?

Equipment

The bar itself is a curved lozenge, neatly covered with fabric from base to back, where an indented bay for the inputs (see overleaf) hosts just one HDMI socket, which is an output to connect to your TV, ideally an ARC-equipped input which will then play all your sound back down the HDMI cable. But there are also two optical digital inputs, and an analogue minijack too (which you don’t get on the wider B20A model, though it is \$30 more). There’s a USB-A slot, too, but this is only for applying firmware updates.

The driver configuration confused us at first. There are two small active drivers at the ends of the front-facing surface,

quoted at 46mm and handling everything north of 230Hz. Then in the specifications there is one other driver, described as a 75mm passive radiator, yet receiving either 30W (user manual) or 60W (website) of power, which clearly makes it active, not passive. Furthermore, the bass was emerging from two points on top of the bar, each measuring around 10cm long. Yamaha’s Australian team helpfully clarified — there’s an active 75mm driver at top left, pushing also a pair of passive radiators, one top right, and one underneath. So this is effectively a two-channel configuration which one might charitably call 2.1.

In the compact box with the bar comes a small remote control (pictured), along with the power pack, a wall-mounting template and screws, and a bonus optical cable, although we used the HDMI ARC option for connection, plugging a cable between the Yamaha’s output and the TV’s ARC-labelled input (eARC, indeed, on the Samsung TV in use).

The remote control follows Yamaha’s common practise of having two sets of volume controls — one for overall volume, but a second pair of buttons for subwoofer volume. Of course there’s no real subwoofer here, so these instead just increase the output to that mono bass driver. In this context these additional buttons work more as a simple bass tone control. And we do appreciate easy access to such on-the-fly tone control on a soundbar, to allow quick adjustment for the variable bass content found in TV shows and movies, and also in music.

The remote further offers input selection, buttons for Clear Voice and a bass-boosting Bass Ext., plus four sound ‘modes’: Stereo, Standard, Movie and

Yamaha SR-C20A soundbar

So small in size, and without a subwoofer, Yamaha’s soundbar might not be expected to much improve on a TV’s own internal sound. But no, it delivers almost physics-defying performance...

SUMMARY

Yamaha SR-C20A soundbar

Price: \$299

- + Remarkable sound for the size
- + Very clear dialogue
- + Bluetooth streaming
- Only passable with music
- Deepest bass is absent



audio-visual

soundbar

Game. The manual indicates that with the last three of these, “Surround playback is performed”, and that “Dolby Pro Logic II is enabled automatically when 2-channel stereo signals are played in surround”. Yet the speaker complement is so very basically stereo, it’s hard to see what Yamaha might be attempting here, other than the kind of fake surround processing we generally dislike very much. But let’s not prejudge things...

Performance

This was one of the fastest soundbar set-ups ever, given no subwoofer to position, and just two cables to attach — power, and the HDMI cable to our TV’s ARC-equipped socket. We have a poor record with getting ARC to work, finding compatibility less than universal and often having to use optical instead. But in this case we were rewarded with instant sound.

And remarkably full sound from a bar this size, given no subwoofer support. We left the ‘Bass Ext.’ selected, with the ‘subwoofer’ level on one (out of four), which ensured natural-sounding voices with neither bloat nor thinness. We had it running for a week on casual TV duties, and it never put a foot wrong. The missus didn’t even realise we weren’t listening through the main speakers.

We played *Tron: Legacy* (see classic soundtracks p81) on Disney+, the audio reaching the soundbar as Dolby Digital (the ‘info’ button can confirm this by illuminating the various indicator LEDs as detailed in the User Guide, though this is not supplied with the product). And we pretty much marvelled at how the dinky Yamaha could deliver such an enormous soundtrack, whether the crowds and effects of disc battles, the electronic whining of light cycles, the pulsing and racing of Daft Punk’s music, or simply the thrilling richness and depth of Jeff Bridges’ voice.

We experimented here with the sound modes, and were surprised to find them significantly differentiated. The three options with surround processing did open up the soundstage, most certainly beyond the bar’s modest dimensions, so that a significantly greater atmosphere was created whenever

all-encompassing effects were in play. The price for this expansion is an out-of-phase feel to the music, strings in particular, and just a slight tempering of the ‘Stereo’ setting’s easy intelligibility of dialogue. On the whole we preferred the ‘Stereo’ setting, but we couldn’t help popping on the ‘Movie’ setting at key moments to enjoy the bonus bigness — an easy switch using the button on the remote.

While there’s that size of sound, there’s no miraculous simulated surround here. Yet that doesn’t mean that well-recorded effects can’t spread the soundstage wide. At the start of a hunting scene 22 minutes into episode 3 of *Parade’s End* on BritBox, there are two duck quacks followed by a gunshot. The second duck sounded so wide that it was sheer left of the listening position, while the gunshot was full and powerful — perhaps neither as dynamic nor sharp-edged as when played through hi-fi speakers, but nevertheless a remarkable performance, well serving the 75-inch TV on which we were viewing, yet coming from a bar which occupied only about a third of its screen width. There was no sense of undersized sound: quite the reverse, indeed, once we turned the Yamaha up to the level where all four volume LEDs were illuminated.

We were pleased to be able to see those LEDs from the sofa. That other Yamaha soundbar had its lights much further back on the top, making them invisible when benched, though visible when wall-hanging, where it is flipped to be vertical. This bar keeps its orientation whatever its position, so the problem doesn’t occur. If you do wall-mount it, the bar can change its sound to match by holding down the Bass Boost button for five seconds. You can also alter the brightness of the lights using the ‘Dim’ button on top or on the remote.

A number of other operations also require holding down buttons for five seconds to invoke them — child lock, Bluetooth standby (streaming will then wake the bar automatically), auto-standby for the whole bar, switching off HDMI control functions, and finally a three-level selection of dynamic range compression, which reduces

the difference between loud and quiet sounds, potentially useful when listening quietly, though we prefer things kept as natural as possible, even in a tiny soundbar like this!

An alternate way to make such changes, and certainly an easier way to see status, is provided by Yamaha’s Soundbar Remote app for iOS and Android (the Apple version requires iOS13, so an iPhone 6S, iPhone 6S Plus, iPhone SE or later). Since there’s no networking here, this connects via Bluetooth, and shows what’s been selected very clearly on its pane-like screen (below).

Finally we used Bluetooth to play music to the little Yamaha over a number of days. Remarkably, this too was enjoyable enough that we weren’t overly itching to return to the hi-fi system alongside. Here we were torn between turning off ‘Bass Ext.’ and upping the subwoofer to full, which kept the bass tight, or going back to our TV/movie settings of ‘Bass Ext.’ on and subwoofer at just one, which filled out the sound more but was just a tad woofy, especially on DJ chat and podcasts. The Movie and Game modes did too much of the phasey thing to music, but Standard did open things up over the basic Stereo without that deleterious effect. It was less impressive than its TV/movie performance, and it’s not going to shake the room for parties, but like we said, it’s impressive it’s acceptable at all.

Conclusion

We do wish we hadn’t returned that wider (though less deep) SR-B20A bar, which is just \$30 more, so that we could have heard them side by side. We liked that bar very much (we gave it an award), but we think the SR-C20A is even more impressive, especially its talent at never skipping a beat on dialogue, and its remarkably high levels of full sound — not the very bottom octave, of course, but all the rest, and sounding balanced too. Indeed it makes the likes of the Sonos Beam look wildly expensive, notwithstanding that unit’s access to the smarts of the wider Sonos ecosystem. For its primary purpose of TV and movie sound, and priced at just \$299, we do think the Yamaha SR-C20A a little miracle. +



Inputs

There are two optical inputs, one analogue minijack, and the HDMI out which can bring audio in from a TV’s ARC-equipped input.

App

Yamaha’s Soundbar Remote app shows status and enables changes more easily than the remote or bar’s own buttons.



SPECS

Yamaha SR-C20A

\$299

Drivers: 2 x 46mm, 1 x 75mm with twin passive radiators

Connections: 1 x HDMI ARC out, 2 x optical digital in, 1 x analogue minijack in; USB-A (updates only)

Dimensions: 600 x 64 x 94mm; 600 x 64 x 102mm on wall with spacers

Weight: 1.8kg

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