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PRODUCT REVIEW: RSL COMPRESSION GUIDE SPEAKERS

January 14, 2011 By [Home Entertainment Editorial Staff](#)

AFTER TWO DECADES, THE NEW RSL CG SPEAKERS COME WITH A SURPRISE IN EVERY BOX

Back in the 70s and 80s, Southern California audio fans were familiar with RSL Speaker Systems, designed by Howard Rodgers and sold exclusively at Rogersound Labs' audio/video stores throughout the area. RSL speakers were known for their quality as well as their tremendous value, being available at factory-direct prices. The RSL Studio Monitors were a familiar sight in many of L.A.'s recording studios and radio stations and were owned by many of LA's top musicians. They still have a loyal following.

When asked why he decided to launch a new speaker line in today's crowded market, Rodgers said: "There are dozens of really fine speaker brands available today. The world doesn't need another brand, unless it has something unique to offer. We will be offering speaker sound quality that we're certain will impress picky audiophiles, at prices much lower than those found currently in the audiophile market." The premise is credible; RSL speakers were one of the best-selling lines back when Hi-Fi shops were crammed with dozens of brands.

For the past 3 years, Howard Rodgers and his son Joseph have been developing a new line of home theater speakers and studio monitors based upon RSL's patented Compression Guide (CG) technology. According to Rodgers, CG technology is a different approach to speaker tuning. "Without the boxy quality caused by cabinet resonance, the sound seems to break free of the enclosure and images in the room. The clarity of the voices and instruments is dramatically improved, as well as the soundstage. It also results in significant bass extension without the boominess and overhang." RSL's slogan is, "Hear Outside the Box". I was about to test RSL's premise.

Test Material and Perspective

On that note, I arranged for my second listening session. This reviewer comes with some particular advantages. First, as a musician and producer with many hours in the studio, I brought my performer's ears, focusing on the inner worlds of solo instruments and vocalists as well as presentation of small combos and large orchestral panoramas. Next, as an analytical listener and retailer of high-end audio gear, I also took my skeptic's ears along. I wasn't sure what I heard at that first audition would hold up to a second challenging session. Except for one test for the deepest bass using a tone generator, I didn't listen to frequency sweeps. People who would buy the RSL's would not be listening to boops and beeps coming from test equipment.

The first stop was the lab - a comfortable listening environment but not tricked out. The playback system included well-respected 2-channel components: an Audio Research SP14 preamp, a CD2 player, a Classic 60 hybrid tube-transistor amplifier. More costly electronics would have skewed the results.

RSL CG4

We first listened to a pair of production, piano black-gloss CG4 satellite speakers, mounted on stands. The CG4s incorporate a single 4" mid driver and a 1" silk dome high frequency driver, both with ferrite magnets. The handheld remote that comes with the Speedwoofer 10 allowed me to vary the crossover frequency and attenuate volume from the built-in 375 watt Class A/B analog amplifier. I used source material that represented solid, unvarnished production values with instruments and vocals as they are known to sound in a live performance.

Upon first blush, I was not bowled over. I wasn't supposed to be. Speakers shouldn't add their own tonality. The first cut was a tasty Michael Franks song. At a moderate volume through the CG4s, I was able to pick up subtleties I had not previously heard. There was Larry Carlton's thin, hollow-body electric guitar responding to his string bending and vibrato skills - small expressions that would normally get lost in the mix but didn't. If speakers are windows into the music, these windows were squeaky-clean.

Next, a higher volume test: James Taylor's "New Moon Shine". The CG4s presented depth-of-field and left-right sound stage that is typically found only larger format speakers. The subtle accents of the drummers were clear and distinct. The cymbals didn't spit; the tom-toms and kick drum didn't thump - they had actual tone, just like live. I altered the crossover point on the Speedwoofer 10 from 170Hz to 100Hz with no noticeable deterioration in bass or lower mid-range. The subwoofer electronics responded to my remote control change in volume with a civilized ramp up - gradual enough to land pinpoint settings without being sluggish. The piano was percussive and lyrical sounding (not a Steinway, maybe a Yamaha grand). The fiddle was smoky-sweet and plaintively Appalachian.

The vocal range is always tricky for a speaker to reproduce: Fundamental frequencies must blend with the harmonics, giving singers their recognizable tones. James Taylor was present in the room with his characteristic vocal insinuations, accents and humor intact... outside the box.

I was ready to throw some curve balls. How did the RSL CG4s handle production-challenged recordings? We played an early multi-track record: Danish guitarist Jorgen Ingmann's great 1961 hit "Apache", complete with multi-layer tape hiss. Through the noise, I detected the unmistakable tone of a fat, hollow-body jazz electric guitar. Old photos confirmed it. Each overdubbed track on "Apache" was distinctive; one was thumb-strummed, one was picked and one was clearly causing the recording amp to distort. But what did I expect? With a Studio Monitor as its grandfather, the RSL CG4 / Speedwoofer 10 combo lived up to its pedigree.

RSL CG24 Studio Monitor / Center Channel

The CG24 Studio Monitor, big brother to the GG4, uses two poly cone 4" drivers and a center position 1" silk dome tweeter in a larger cabinet than the CG4. Specs reveal a 15Hz extension at the bottom. I would expect the CG24 to image larger than the CG4s, even more "outside the box". I decided to throw a low-hanging slider. One of the analytical tools of true audiophiles is that they often listen at very low volume to test the speakers' integrity. We ran through several cuts from acoustic guitarist Pierre Bensusan. I could hear not only the musical notes but also the sound of the instrument being played - impossible fretboard gymnastics, triplets, fingernails scraping on strings, the resonance of Bensusan's Lowden S22 guitar and the ambience of the studio environment (ceiling height, overall size). Most important, the expression of the performance was preserved.

For me, music has always been emotional. A Studio Monitor, by definition, needs to reveal all nuances and take the listener inside the performance. I played a variety of music that would test the CG24s. From John Hiatt's gritty voice to Patti Cathcart's (Tuck & Patti) silky-and-soulful vocals, I could determine each singer's proximity to the microphone. Santana's lyrical solos told their stories of love and pain. I heard emotional expression for days.

Taking the theme a step further, I presented the CG24s with the following challenge. It is generally agreed that a great speaker should give you a front-row seat to experience the performers' musical expression as they relate to each other. Although I don't think you can measure this somewhat ethereal component with a specification, you can feel and hear it when it's there. This adds a completely new element to instrument placement, both left-to-right and front-to-back. It is revealed, for example, when the drummer makes a musical statement, which is followed by a percussive response from the bass player. So, as you listen to a Miles Davis quartet, an excellent speaker will take you into their world; musicians playing with, and against, each other. Listening to such inner detail and depth-of-field, it's clear that with the RSL CG24 Studio Monitor, the ground rules of performance versus price are about to change.

RSL Speedwoofer 10

The specifications of the Speedwoofer 10 include frequency range of 24Hz-180Hz +/- 3db and system resonance of 18Hz. The 10" driver uses a cast aluminum frame, rubber surround and a massive ferrite magnet structure. The built-in 375-watt amplifier is Class A/B analog. Volume and crossover frequency: 40-170Hz are variable by wireless remote control.

The perennial question about a subwoofer is "How low does it really go?" We plugged in a frequency generator to find out. Since bass frequencies are long waves, one can often hear the tone clearer at a distance long enough for the wave to develop. This is why you can hear that pimped-out Escalade two car lengths behind you on the road. The trick is to have the tone at an audible level without wiping out the amplifier. At a nominal music listening level, I clearly heard 32Hz (low C on a pipe organ). During a previous test, the Speedwoofer 10 produced a 30Hz tone at close to its amp's clipping point for thirty minutes with only a minor change in operating temperature from 30 to 38°C.

Upon our descent into the lower bass range, 26Hz was audible but had dropped between 1-2 db. It was clearly discernable ten feet away from the listening area. And the 24Hz performance at -3db was confirmed.

Upon further listening to actual music, the Speedwoofer 10 lived up to its name, producing quick kick drum and tympani transients. Other bass instruments, like upright acoustic bass and electric bass were fulfilled as they would be in a live environment - rounded and somewhat slow. Slap electric bass was defined, partly due to the system preserving the edgy, upper harmonics. All in all, this was pretty amazing performance from a \$750 subwoofer.

Home Theater Listening

Howard Rodgers' retro 50's Sci-Fi theme theater includes a ten foot-wide screen, recessed on the rear wall of an approximately four foot deep stage. Racked components and the projector are located in an isolated booth behind the rear wall. In no way are the electronics expensive or exotic. The speaker array includes two RSL GG4s for left and right front channels, mounted below the stage at shin level when seated in the front row. (keep this in mind). An RSL CG24 Studio Monitor is mounted on its side for the center channel. The subwoofers are prototype RSL Speedwoofer 10s but powered by beefier outboard Dayton 980-watt amps. Two pairs of CG4s are discretely wall-mounted for side channels and one pair is mounted on the back wall for rear effects.

After throwing pretty much every challenge I could muster in the lab for all of the individual models, I had one remaining test for the complete RSL CG system in the theater. I selected "The Last Samurai" DVD with a basic Dolby Digital 5.1 format. Why? I knew that

the scenes I wanted to hear presented some truly daunting, complex audio soundtrack. If the CG system could deliver this soundtrack, I knew it could handle anything.

Here is what I clearly heard during the final battle scenes: howitzers and Gatling guns; ringing, clashing swords; choruses of men in the throes of fighting; arrows flying; horses galloping with earth-shaking thunder; flags flapping in the wind, the wind, well-defined orchestra at high volume; the main characters speaking - from quiet, intimate conversation to battle commands. At no time was the sound fatiguing nor was there any smear or lack of definition among all those layered sounds coming from the CG system.

I promised a surprise. Here it is. Recall the CG4s and the CG24 center were mounted at shin level. The system not only imaged horizontally, left-to-right, even offscreen, but it imaged vertically. How could small format speakers image across the center of the screen, which was five feet above them? How could I possibly hear sounds mid-screen as if the LCRs were mounted behind a perforated screen? So this is what Howard Rodgers meant by his slogan "Hear Outside the Box". This was Compression Guide technology at work. The system imaged wider than anyone had a right to expect, including vertically.

Considering the challenges I threw at the RSL CG4s, CG24s, Speedwoofer 10, individually as well as an entire home theater the system, it's clear that the Rogersound Labs Compression Guide speakers represent the same outstanding value and performance that they did decades earlier. Lightning has indeed struck twice.

Factory-Direct Pricing:

RSL CG4: \$250 ea

RSL CG24 Monitor: \$325 ea

RSL Speedwoofer 10: \$750 ea

5.1 RSL Compression Guide System:

\$2,175 includes 4 RSL CG4, 1 RSL CG24 Monitor (center channel), 1 RSL Speedwoofer 10.

7.1 RSL Compression Guide System:

\$2,725 includes 6 RSL CG4, 1 RSL CG24 Monitor (center channel), 1 RSL Speedwoofer 10.

Terms:

Free shipping. 5 year warranty on speakers, 2 years on electronics, 30 day money back guarantee (full refund for shipping). RSL Speaker Systems, a Division of Rogersound Labs, LLC

Speakers can be purchased online only at <http://www.rslspeakers.com/>. Please note: no money or free product changed hands, nor were any special favors procured as a result of the writing of this review. Well, maybe a Po'Boy sandwich at King's Fish House to discuss the project. But that's it. I swear.

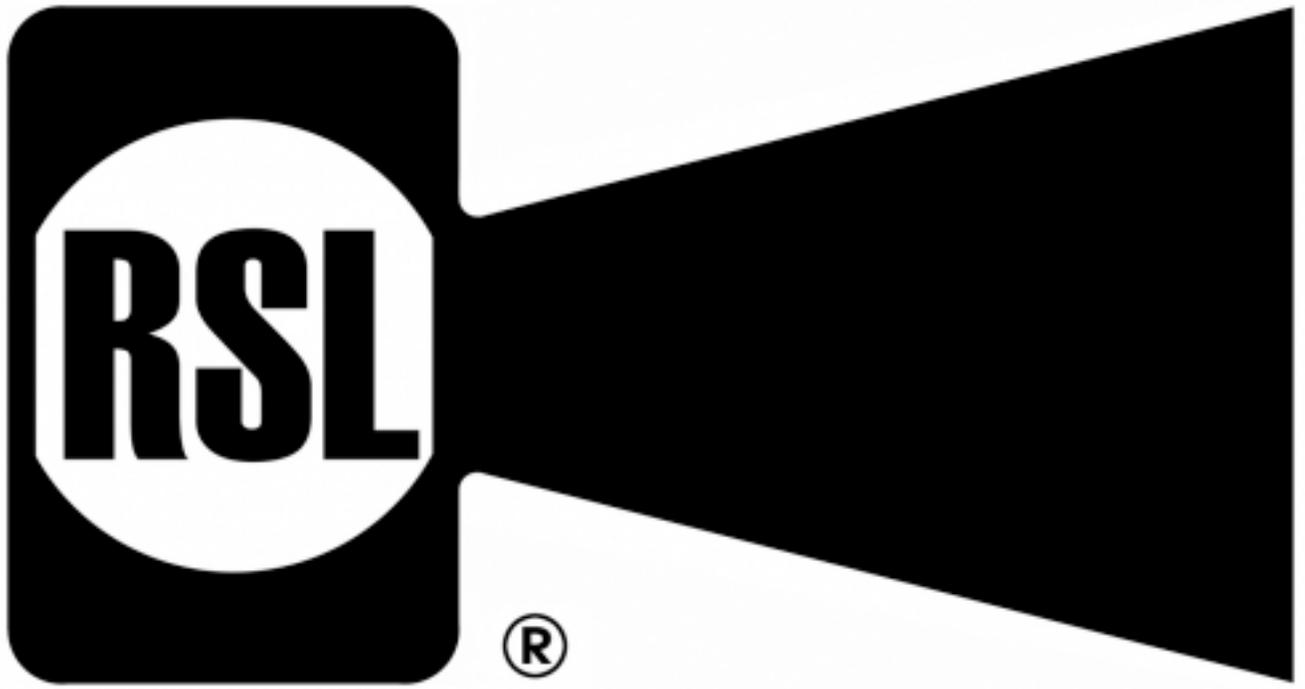
Launch date: on or prior to Wednesday, January 19. [Click here for updated launch date](#)













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