On The Road With The

B&W MASS CAR SPEAKERS

by Christopher Greenleaf

THE Modular Automobile Sound System (MASS) from B&W is a line of eleven electrically and aesthetically matched speaker components. Designed to facilitate a building-block approach to car stereo, these modules combine to form speaker arrays that range from the simple to the sophisticated. The MASS joins rather than replaces B&W's first venture into autosound, the LM 1 speaker. While the LM1 can be either panel-mounted (as in most autosound applications) or used with its heavy zinc-alloy enclosure at home or on the road, the MASS modules are aimed primarily at the mobile listener. As with other panel-mount speaker systems, though, installation in walls and other home enclosures is an intended secondary use of this line.

The speakers, crossovers, and mounting accessories in the MASS line are all styled to present a unified and unobtrusive appearance. Only the tiny red, white, and black B&W logo injects a spot of color into the self-effacing black semi-matte lacquer finishes. With the exception of one tweeter, the sturdy speaker grilles are visually enhanced by circular reliefs over the drivers. The two crossover modules have no grilles, of course, but their design nicely matches that of the speaker modules.

There is a choice of two modules to handle bass and midrange frequencies. By itself, each is rated to handle the frequency range from 45 to 15,000 Hz. B&W calls the simpler of the two, the LM50 ($239 per pair), "the basis from which the simplest or most ambitious installation can be developed." It has a single 4¾-inch Kevlar cone driver and a passive equalizer, and it also comes in a version without the protective housing (the LD50, $189 per pair) that can be invisibly installed behind cloth screening. The 6 x 9-inch LM60 ($299 per pair) has two 4-inch Kevlar drivers. Both speakers can be used alone but benefit from the addition of a tweeter, with or without a crossover module.

The LS20 subwoofer ($269 per pair) extends the bass response a good half-octave below that of the two bass/midrange modules. Its rated frequency response is 30 to 2,000 Hz. The 8-inch cone is bonded to a high-temperature voice coil and also benefits from the lightness and stiffness of Kevlar construction.

Three high-frequency modules are in the MASS line. The least expensive of them is the LXT10 ($119 per pair), which can be added to the LM50 or LM60 without further componentry, as their equalization and crossover characteristics are matched. Its rated response goes up to 22,000 Hz. The LT30 has the same price but does not have the LXT10's built-in crossover. Instead, it has the TZ26 driver, the automotive version of the high-frequency driver found in B&W's home and studio monitors. The top-of-the-line tweeter module is the LT40 ($239 per pair). Its nickel-cobalt driver is the same as the one used in B&W's famed Model 801 home speaker.

There are two crossovers, each tailored to the tweeter module bearing the same number. The LX30 and LX40 ($159 per pair) employ third-order Butterworth networks and fast-acting signal-overload protection circuitry. To adjust off-axis tweeter response, there are three settings for the high-pass signal: −1.5 dB, flat, and +1.5 dB.

The LT40 mounts in a way that permits it to swivel in virtually any direction, but the orientation of the other two tweeter modules is limited to flush mounting or mounting on accessory plinths. Any of the module except the subwoofer can be fitted into the BR1 bridge mounting ($99) for configuration as a single unit in a rear-deck installation.