

Cerwin-Vega XLS-215 Floorstanding Loudspeaker Review

Written by Augie Bettencourt

Cerwin-Vega was founded in 1954 by Gene Czerwinski, then a young aerospace engineer. Why start a loudspeaker company? First and foremost a music fan, Gene's goal was to reproduce the live musical experience. His design philosophy was based on high-efficiency drivers, durability, and "value for money products." For over 50 years, the name Cerwin-Vega has been synonymous with excellence in every area of the audio experience, and has built a reputation in the pro audio, car audio and home theater world of building high-performance, high-value speakers. Cerwin-Vega offers several different speaker lines across a broad price spectrum and the XLS Series is one of their best, replacing the older CLS Series with improved performance and specifications. With a moniker of "The LOUD Speaker Company," Cerwin-Vega's design goal is providing everything you need for a live concert or cinema experience at home, so the speaker line includes loudspeakers, center channel speakers and subwoofers.



Features and Design:

I was excited to receive my review samples of the XLS-215 tower speakers and XLS-6C center speaker, as I hadn't owned a Cerwin-Vega product since 1988. I smiled as I unboxed the large XLS-215 tower speakers, because the first thing I noticed as I looked through the black, metal perforated speaker grill was the famous Cerwin Vega red colored driver surround I hadn't seen in over 20 years. I say large, because they measure 49.7"H x 17"W x 21.1"D and weigh 116 LBS each. It's a large, boxy speaker that looks like something you'd see at a concert, except with an upgraded black wood-grain finish. The front of the speaker has two 15" cast frame woofers, a 6.5" midrange with fiber impregnated cone, and a 1" soft dome tweeter with ferro fluid, set in a waveguide for increased sensitivity, dynamic response and lower distortion. Cerwin Vega claims the waveguides results in near-perfect integration for a seamless marriage of midrange and high frequencies. The speaker is a ported design, so the back of the speaker has two ports and two pairs of gold-plated, metal binding posts for bi-amping or biwiring. The XLS-215 speakers have a rated frequency response of 38 Hz - 20 kHz (-3 dB), peak power handling of 500 watts and 95.3 dB sensitivity. A pair of XLS-215 speakers retails for only \$1,198, which seems ridiculously cheap for a pair of speakers of this size with this many drivers.

"The sound was always smooth and never grainy sounding, even at deafening volume levels. This is an amazing accomplishment for a speaker in this price range."

Set-up:

I started by setting the XLS-215 tower speakers where so many others have sat before in my listening room. I placed the speakers four feet from the back wall, and three feet from the side walls with the speakers slightly toed-in. I then moved



them around a bit to confirm speaker placement was optimal. The XLS-6C center speaker was placed on a stand where I also place all other center speakers. Once I had them adjusted, I let them play for about 20 hours before doing any critical listening. On hand for the review was the OPPO BDP-83, Sony BDP-S1000ES Blu-ray players and Sony PS3 for A/V sources. Also on hand for the video display was the Sony VPL-VW85 projector connected with a 35ft, M1000 HDTV HDMI Monster Cable. For part of the review the video connections were made through a Denon AVP-A1HDC1 A/V processor for video switching and audio processing. Each time Monster Cable M1000 HDTV HDMI cables were used for video connections, Cardas Audio Golden Reference speaker and interconnect cables, and Monster Cable 600sw and Monoprice subwoofer cables. All the cables worked perfectly and had no problems. Other associated equipment used for the review was the Sunfire TGA 7400 amplifier, Krell Evolution 403 amplifier and ButtKicker LFE Kit.

Music Listening:

I began my two-channel listening session with the late, great John Lee Hooker's Chill Out and the Song "Annie Mae." I was immediately struck by the XLS-215's ability to produce a huge soundstage with width, clarity and detail that I've never heard from speakers this inexpensive. I experienced no directivity sometimes encountered with horn-loaded tweeters. Transient attacks had just the right bite, bass response was



powerful and they easily filled my large 20' x 30' listening room with concert-level sound. The demand for slim speakers with a small footprint is high because they fit into most lifestyles. Consequently, many manufacturers put tremendous effort into over-engineered, small speakers with exotic materials to try and achieve big speaker sound, which is costly. The XLS-215 is a perfect example of building a larger, well-engineered speaker not limited to the constraints of a small package, keeping the cost low and still producing a great sounding speaker.

“Movie watching is all about dynamics and the XLS-215 speakers excel at dynamics like nothing I’ve heard costing three times the price.”

They sound the way they look; big and bold. Next-up was Dave Matthews Band’s Busted Stuff, choosing the song Digging a Ditch, which I had used for my recent review of the wonderful sounding Paradigm Signature S8 v.3 speakers. Matthews’ voice had a very natural, open quality, and the XLS-215 speakers imaged very well. Although the high frequencies lacked some refinement I’ve heard from much more expensive speakers, the sound was always smooth and never grainy sounding, even at deafening volume levels. This is an amazing accomplishment for a speaker in this price range.

Carlos Santana’s has always been a favorite, so next I picked the Shaman CD. The song from the same CD, “Sideways,” has become my favorite song from this disc. Its recording quality is excellent with great soundstage width and depth, but unfortunately it’s the only blues song on the CD. When listening to this song, Citizen

Cope’s voice was firmly planted deep in the middle of the soundstage with Carlos Santana’s guitar playing off to the left side. The XLS-215 speakers have great ability to create an ambient feel for the recording studio with a natural and airy sense of space. They placed all the performers and instruments very well with glorious midrange quality. Because of their high sensitivity, they required little amplifier power to achieve extreme volume levels with deep, powerful bass. Yes, they do play “LOUD.”

Movie Watching:

I decided to try them for movie watching and started with “The Bourne Identity” DVD. Bourne has a very active and enveloping sound mix right from the beginning, and the dynamic range was well rendered with excellent spatial detail. The front soundstage is very nicely spread out and the soundtrack and surrounds are almost constantly engaged, down to the subtlest ambient detail. Bass response was spectacular and the soundtrack was faithfully duplicated. The XLS-6C center speaker did a good job of handling dialogue and sonically matches the much larger tower speakers. Movie watching is all about dynamics and the XLS-215 speakers excel at dynamics like nothing I’ve heard costing three times the price.

I decided to try them with “Gladiator” Blu-ray the epic starring Russell Crowe sounded incredible with the Cerwin Vegas. From the gentle pluck of guitar strings to the dramatic Battle of Carthage, the XLS-215s had the ability to reproduce unrivaled detail, visceral slam and impact. There are smaller, much more expensive speakers I’ve heard that can match these speakers’s ability to create a convincing soundstage, but none with the deep, powerful bass



response of the XLS-215s with each speaker’s dual 15” woofers. These speakers are big, but they make really big sound, which is very difficult to achieve with a small speaker of any price.

Lastly I watched the “Avatar” Blu-ray. Avatar didn’t excite me the way it did most people, but this is a great sounding movie. Pandora just glows with subtle sound, dialogue is perfectly presented and the front and rear surrounds are engaged throughout the entire movie. The XLS-215 speakers have the ability to reproduce good detail, outstanding dynamics and thunderous bass response with no compression or strain at any sane volume level.

“The XLS-215 speakers have the ability to reproduce good detail, outstanding dynamics and thunderous bass response with no compression or strain at any sane volume level.”

Conclusion:

Gene Czerwinski was a music fan with a design philosophy based on high-efficiency drivers, durability, and “value for money products.” Nowhere is this more evident than in the XLS-215 tower speakers, each with their two 15” cast frame high excursion woofers, a 6.5” midrange with fiber impregnated cone, and a 1” soft dome tweeter, all wrapped in a nice black wood-grain finished cabinet with metal grille. They’re not small or polite, and look like something out of the 1980’s, but whether you want to jam with Carlos Santana at concert-levels, or reproduce Avatar’s jungles of Pandora, the Cerwin Vega XLS-215 speakers will never disappoint and represent an outstanding value at \$1198 per pair. If you have the room for a speaker of this size, their ability to produce detailed high frequencies, wide soundstage, open midrange and powerful bass is unparalleled for a speaker costing so little. They’re not perfect, but I can’t overemphasize how ridiculously inexpensive these speakers are considering how good they sound. I’ve heard speakers costing three or four times more that don’t sound as good, which could make them the best deal in home audio today.