



AV INFO

PRODUCT: Premium HDMI-equipped soundbar

POSITION: Bowers & Wilkins' only soundbar product

PEERS: Bose Cinemate 1SR; Libratone Lounge; Sonos PlayBar

SPECIFICATIONS

DRIVE UNITS: 2 x 3.5in woofers; 2 x 3in midrange drivers; 4 x 3in surround drivers; 1 x 1in Nautilus tube-loaded aluminium dome tweeter

AMPLIFICATION: 175W

CONNECTIONS: 3 x HDMI inputs; 1 x HDMI output (ARC compatible); 1 x 3.5mm analogue/digital combi input; RS-232 service connector; subwoofer output

DOLBY TRUEHD/DTS-HD MA: No/No

SEPARATE SUB: No

REMOTE CONTROL: Yes

DIMENSIONS: 1,100(w) x 125(h) x 181(d)mm

WEIGHT: 14.1kg

FEATURES: Onscreen GUI; Dolby Digital & DTS decoding; Dolby Pro-Logic II; FlowPort; proximity sensor; wall or tabletop mounting; mirror black stainless steel skin and black steel mesh grille

Return of the wideboy

Bowers & Wilkins' debut Panorama was certainly impressive, but lacked vital connectivity. This HDMI-equipped second-gen model aims to win over **Danny Phillips**

THE LED-INSPIRED MOVE towards wafer-thin TV screens means there's no room inside their cabinets for powerful speakers. The result? Weedy, strained sound quality. Little wonder, then, that sales of soundbars have gone through the roof and audio brands are falling over themselves to get a slice of the pie. One such brand is Bowers & Wilkins, which in 2009 launched the Panorama – an expensive, luxurious soundbar that delivered stunning sound quality but lacked crucial HDMI connections.

Now B&W has unleashed the Panorama 2, which, like any good sequel, aims to go bigger and better, as well as upping the required budget – £1,650 to be precise.

With the majority of soundbar sales falling within the £100-£300 price bracket, is there still an appetite for a mega-bucks premium soundbar? B&W certainly hopes so.

Your £1,650 gets you a sumptuously made product, hewn from the finest materials and blessed with stunning looks. The enclosure is bulky but curvy, and styled in mirror black stainless steel that attracts more fingerprints than a *CSI* crime scene.

Its attention to detail is delightful. A fine steel mesh covers the front, while a newly-added proximity sensor lights up the touch-sensitive controls when you wave your hand near it. These govern volume, input and sound mode selection.

Internal aggression

One thing you don't get with the Panorama 2 is a separate subwoofer – that's because bass frequencies are handled by two 3.5in woofers inside the soundbar, reducing clutter considerably. Buyers aren't necessarily deterred by a separate sub – 8 out of 10

soundbars sold in 2012 were accompanied by one, says GfK – but B&W clearly feels the Panorama 2 can do the business without one.

There are nine drivers in total, all newly designed. The two woofers join a Nautilus tube-loaded tweeter and two midrange drivers in the all-important centre section, while four separately-housed 3in drivers handle the 'surround' channels.

It's worth pointing out that the Panorama 2 is a multichannel affair, with six Class D digital amplifiers on board supplying 5 x 25W to the centre drivers and surrounds, and 50W to the woofers.

Connectivity is vastly improved over the original. Crucially, this version boasts three HDMI inputs and an ARC-compatible output, bringing it bang up-to-date with today's Blu-ray decks and TVs. Here, then, it immediately stands out against rival (though

less expensive) products: Sonos' PlayBar, Bose's Cinemate 1SR and Libratone's Lounge all eschew HDMI hookup. More fool them.

Other connections are a combined analogue and digital 3.5mm input, an RS-232 service connection and a subwoofer output in case you feel the onboard woofers don't dig deep enough.

Digital drought

At this price I wanted the Panorama 2 to be an all-singing, all-dancing audio epicentre but that doesn't quite come to pass. There's no USB port for digital music playback, and no Bluetooth, AirPlay or DLNA streaming either. For £1,650, that's not really good enough, particularly for the type of audiophile buyer it's likely to attract. And it doesn't look good next to the Sonos and Libratone models.

In terms of audio decoding, the unit supports Dolby Digital and DTS but not Dolby TrueHD or DTS-HD Master Audio. Thankfully that's not a big deal given that you can feed LPCM (decoded by your Blu-ray deck) into the HDMI inputs. Meanwhile, Dolby Pro-Logic II expands stereo content.

An onscreen menu is fed to your TV over HDMI. I'm not talking jazzy graphics and slick animations, but it proves very useful, allowing you to control every aspect of the Panorama 2's audio performance. There are bass and treble adjustments, different Bass EQ modes for tabletop and wall placement, plus volume and distance settings for an external sub.

The Panorama 2 cements its place as the Rolls Royce of soundbars with a spellbinding performance. It's a remarkably smooth and silky listen, teasing out the tiniest details and playing string-heavy movie scores with the pomp and finesse of decent floorstanders.

That top-drawer treble is what sets this soundbar apart from cheaper rivals – there's a level of insight and texture here that £250 budget jobs just can't match.

The Panorama 2's other great talent is its ability to sound like a much bigger system. Its sense of scale is phenomenal given the cabinet limitations – raucous action scenes are potent and energetic, underpinned by taut bass that floods the room without sounding boomy. Crashes and explosions blast from the speakers with controlled force, while dialogue is articulated with terrific depth and clarity.

Cleverly, the surround drivers disperse sound in a way that creates a wide, natural sweet spot without resorting to ineffective virtual surround algorithms. There's no sense of rear effects placement or steering but that's always the big sacrifice when buying a soundbar – and I expect you'll be too caught up in its other virtues to care.

On balance, the Panorama 2 justifies its wallet-destroying price tag – but only just. I'm disappointed by the lack of wireless streaming options and digital file support, but with such sublime sound quality, plentiful sockets and a stunning design, it's hard not to succumb to its luxurious charms ■

HCC VERDICT



Bowers & Wilkins Panorama 2
→ £1,650 Approx → www.bowers-wilkins.com
→ Tel: 0800 232 1513

HIGHS: Sophisticated, potent sound; jaw-dropping build quality and design; three HDMI inputs

LOWS: No wireless music streaming or USB; expensive; HD audio decoding not built-in; no dedicated subwoofer

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★