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AWARDS 2024



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A FINE WINNING COMBINATION

Along with Halloween, the clocks going back and bonfire night, our calendars at *What Hi-Fi?* for this time of the year have an extra, rather intimidating, red cross on them. It signifies that it is time for our annual Awards, of course - and, almost in the blink of an eye it seems, here we are again, another year on.

Our team of dedicated reviewers has spent remarkable time and effort in coming up with this, the 42nd collection of products that have the right to brag that they are *What Hi-Fi?* Best Buy Award winners. That's a big thing both for us and the manufacturers, naturally - but it's also a huge thing for you, our reader. Every Award winner you read about in the pages of this very magazine is a winner in its particular category; so you can be sure that you are getting superb value for money and a top-performing product when you decide to buy.

We take our role in this extremely seriously; and the fact that we are still able to perform this service almost 50 years after the *What Hi-Fi?* brand began shows that the industry does as well.

Jonathan Evans, editor

MY PRODUCT OF THE YEAR

Q Acoustics 5050, p64

Brilliant floorstanders with a stunning, calm authority; and *What Hi-Fi?*'s readers agree! (see p91)



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HOW WE TEST



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All review verdicts are agreed upon by the team as a whole - not any individual reviewer. Each product will be listened to and/or viewed by several members of the test team, who will then discuss the final verdict before it appears in the magazine or on the website. This avoids any individual bias creeping in.

OUR SCORES EXPLAINED

One of the best ★★★★★
A serious contender ★★★★★☆
Worth a look ★★★★★☆
Disappointing ★★★★★☆
Awful ★★★★★☆

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WITH

ESTABLISHED 1978
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The curtain is up, the Champagne is popped and it's time to announce this year's Best Buy and Product of the Year winners



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See page 24

OUR PRODUCTS OF THE YEAR



ALASTAIR STEVENSON "The 42in LG C4 is my personal highlight for 2024. First because it's one of a very small number of dinky OLED TVs to arrive this year. Second, because it performed brilliantly in our viewing rooms!" **42in LG C4 PAGE 81**



KETAN BHARADIA "The A8 is Rotel coming back to what it does best. This slim amplifier is well made, sensibly featured and unassuming in its sonic presentation. It is happy for the music to take the limelight." **ROTEL A8 PAGE 60**



ANDY MADDEN "JBL has developed a reputation for fun and entertaining Bluetooth speakers, and the Xtreme 4 is just that and delivers a good dose of refinement, making for a fantastic speaker." **JBL XTREME 4 PAGE 36**



BECKY ROBERTS "This affordable gateway into hi-fi streaming combines foolproof usability with a comprehensively box-ticking feature set and, most importantly, an enjoyably mature and musical sound." **CAMBRIDGE MXN10 PAGE 51**



KASHFIA KABIR "Epos has made the most infectiously entertaining small speakers I've heard all year. The ES-7N are flexible with positioning, have expressive dynamics and ferociously punchy and accurate rhythmic drive from such a compact design. Enormous fun." **EPOS ES-7N PAGE 70**



TOM PARSONS "I love an AV receiver, and the Marantz Cinema 30 is probably the best all-round AVRI I've ever tested, with a perfectly pitched mix of punch and refinement, excellent usability and luxurious design." **MARANTZ CINEMA 30 PAGE 97**



LEWIS EMPSON "JVC's dazzling DLA-NZ800 stole the show in a fairly crowded year of projector releases. It costs a pretty penny, but it blows my local multiplex's projectors out of the water." **JVC DLA-NZ800 PAGE 94**



HARRY MCKERRELL "If you don't care about noise cancelling, the Hi-X25BT are possibly the best-value wireless headphones I have heard this year. Clean, insightful and endlessly entertaining, they are everything a pair of Bluetooth cans should be." **AUSTRIAN AUDIO HI-X25BT PAGE 33**



FIRST TESTS THIS MONTH WE GIVE VERDICTS ON THESE NEW PRODUCTS

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Standmount speakers | £1890 | whf.cm/Epos_ES_7N

Epos ES-7N

Small box, flexible nature and a huge talent



Most people choose small speakers because they have a modest listening space or don't want the speakers to dominate the room. Given these clear requirements, it is ironic that most compact models are still designed specifically to sound best when placed well away from walls. Some manufacturers even go as far as to call their smaller offerings 'bookshelf' designs; but take it from us that the vast majority of these won't have been optimised to work there.

Why would most speaker companies take such a contradictory design route? From an engineer's point of view, doing things this way makes the design much easier, given that they can (essentially) ignore the effects of the walls and focus on optimising performance. Given that the type of material used in the wall and even the support can make a significant difference to the way a speaker sounds, it is easy to understand why most prefer to avoid the complications. Epos, however, hasn't shirked the challenge in its new ES-7N standmounters.

Adaptable tuning

The company has taken a practical approach to the question of positioning limitations. It takes the form of a metal toggle switch on the ES-7N's back panel. Click the switch up, and the speakers are tuned for what the company calls a semi-free standing position, with the speakers on taller 70cm stands, typically 30-50cm from the rear wall. Most alternatives tend to need around 20-50cm more into the room to sound

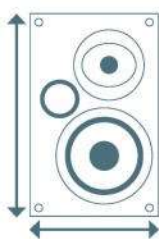
KEY FEATURES



Switchable frequency balance



Sensitivity: 86/89 dB/W/m



Dimensions (hwd): 29 x 20 x 27 cm

right. Move the switch down, and the output through midrange and treble frequencies is raised relative to the bass. And this gives a surprisingly even sound when the speakers are used up against a wall or on (or even in) a bookshelf.

Our first experience with the ES-7N speakers saw them placed inside Ikea's larger Kallax shelving units, and it was surprising just how capable and even they sounded at the time.

Given that there is a change in the relative levels of bass and the higher frequencies, it is no surprise to find that the Epos's sensitivity changes according to the position of the switch. They are rated at 89dB/W/m in the close-to-wall position and drop to 86dB/W/m when configured for semi-free space. Either way, their nominal impedance is rated at 4 ohms, which suggests that these speakers are demanding in terms of electrical load. Look at the published impedance curve, though, and you will find that it is relatively gentle. We had no issue driving them with Rotel's 30W-per-channel budget A8 integrated (£399), though given the Epos's capabilities and

price it is clear that more ambitious electronics should be employed.

Design and engineering

Let's get more into the nuts and bolts of the ES-7N's design. Its tweeter is a 28mm ceramic-coated aluminium dome, the same as used in the company's high-end ES-14N model (£3750). Unusually, it does without ferrofluid for improved dynamic performance. Below 2kHz, a front-ported 13cm mica-loaded polypropylene mid/bass unit takes over. As the cone is injection-moulded, Epos has a great deal of freedom to optimise the profile and thickness to get precisely the response required. In addition, the mid/bass driver has a double-magnet motor (to control stray fields and increase the force on the voice coil), a low-loss rubber cone surround and a high-temperature Nomex spider.

The Epos's 29cm tall cabinet is nicely made. Its panels are made of two layers of 8mm thick MDF separated by a high-loss damping material. There is an additional reinforcement in the form of a wooden block added to the top panel and a brace to help rigidity. At the base, you can screw in a quartet of small rubber feet, which provide decoupling when the speakers are used in a bookshelf or on top of conventional furniture. The ES-7N is available in four finishes (orange, black, white satin or walnut), and looks neat in all of them, though not particularly luxurious to our eyes.

We try the speakers on dedicated stands around 40cm from the rear wall

"Move the switch down and the output through midrange and treble frequencies is raised relative to the bass, giving a surprisingly even sound when the speakers are used up against a wall or on a bookshelf"



WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★





and inside and on bookshelves, and can report that they sound best when used out into the room in a conventional position. That's no surprise, of course, but it is interesting just how close to that optimum these Epos get when they are used elsewhere. There is a small loss in overall clarity and precision, and stereo imaging isn't as expansive, but in most ways we enjoy the result almost as much as when these cabinets enjoy space around them. It is obvious that a great deal of thought has gone into how to make the speakers flexible over their placement, and equally clear that the company has succeeded.

"The ES-7N are bold and confident performers that resolve high levels of detail and organise it in a cohesive and musical way. Play Kendrick Lamar's *Not Like Us* and the Epos kick like a mule"

The frequency adjustment switch gives the ES-7Ns great flexibility

These are relatively small speakers and so can't compete with larger designs such as KEF's three-way R3 Meta when it comes to bass weight, overall scale and dynamic reach. Yet, they do so much well that we don't really mind the losses.

The ES-7N are bold and confident performers that resolve high levels of detail and organise it in a cohesive and musical way. Play Kendrick Lamar's *Not Like Us* and the Epos kick like a mule. They sound taut and punchy with music such as this, delivering the song's jumpy rhythm track in a wonderfully surefooted manner. There is plenty of drive here and the speakers are great at conveying the music's varying momentum. Lamar's voice cuts through with clarity, and every word of his passionate delivery is easy to follow.

Considering these are small speakers with a modestly sized 13cm mid/bass unit, it is surprising just how solid and full-bodied they sound at low frequencies. They may not dig as deeply as their KEF rival, but they do sound more controlled and grippy. Comparison

with the similarly priced and sized Neat Petite Classic is interesting. We are big fans of the Neat's musical and rhythmic presentation, but the ES-7N are good enough to make them sound a little blurred and soft with it.

Switching to Micheal Giacchino's *It's Raining Vengeance* from *The Batman* OST, the Epos prove capable of delivering the music's broad dynamic sweeps and deeply oppressive feel superbly. The stereo imaging is expansive and precise, though some care needs to be taken over the toe-in angle to optimise things in this respect. KEF's Uni-Q driver delivers a broader soundstage with a wider listening spot with less effort, but that is the main advantage of such a co-axial driver arrangement.

Mirror image

The Epos are supplied in mirror-imaged pairs and we experiment with the speakers positioned with the tweeters on the inside edge and then the outer. We prefer them as the company recommends, with the tweeters





positioned on the inside. This configuration renders more solid and focused results.

Tonally, the ES-7N have a smooth, surprisingly full-bodied balance. While they are revealing of system and recording shortcomings they are refined enough never to make a meal of things. This means that they will produce good results with modest electronics, as our stint with Rotel's budget A8 integrated proves. If you want to hear the best from them though, the starting point should really be something like Naim's ND5 XS 2/Nait XS 3 streamer/amplifier combo at least. Move up to even more premium sources and amplification - we used our reference Naim ND555/555 PS DR music streamer/Burmester 088/911 MkIII amplifier - and the Epos shine even brighter. Make no mistake, there is plenty of sonic stretch in this design.

Overall, the Epos ES-7N are charmers. They are small, hugely capable and surprisingly unfussy in use. Pamper them with careful placement and a top-quality signal and they will deliver an excellent performance that is good enough to challenge the very best alternatives at this level. However, even when the conditions are not optimised, they continue to excel. That's a rare talent that should be celebrated.



A double-magnet motor inside the mid/bass driver controls stray fields

WHAT HI-FI?

SOUND



BUILD



COMPATIBILITY



FOR

- Clear, forthright and expressive sound
- Fine dynamics and rhythmic drive
- Flexible nature

AGAINST

- Nothing special in the styling department

RATING ★★★★★

VERDICT

The Epos ES-7N are small, immensely capable and easy to accommodate. What's not to like?

View offers

4K TV | £999 | whf.cm/Samsung_Q80D

Samsung Q80D (QE55Q80D)

Even without Mini LEDs, this Samsung mid-ranger hits the mark

This mid-range LED TV ditches Samsung's penchant for Mini LEDs and sheds a few hundred light-control zones, but still manages to outgun the vast majority of its peers.

Coming in at a pound under £1000, the 55in Samsung Q80D sits squarely in the middle of Samsung's 2024 range, a position it backs up with Quantum Dots, Full Array Local Dimming (FALD) and AI-infused processing.

The Q80D is a good-looking television. Its screen is encased in a premium looking and feeling silvery metallic finish, and if you haven't hung it on the wall it sits on a strikingly compact, heavy, attractively finished plate-style pedestal base that enables the TV to be positioned on even very narrow pieces of furniture.

The Samsung Q80D's specification and features mark it out as pretty much a textbook example of a modern mid-range TV. In particular, its panel is illuminated by regularly sized (rather than mini) LEDs placed directly behind the screen, and multiple zones of those LEDs can be illuminated independently. This 'local dimming' system extends on the Q80D to 100 separate zones - a solid number for sure on such a compact screen, but some way short of the sort of dimming zone numbers associated with most higher-end LED TVs these days.

Smart picture controls

The Q80D uses a VA LCD panel, which bodes well for its contrast but does mean that its effective viewing angles are relatively limited. It also boasts a Pantone-validated, Quantum Dot-created colour gamut that is claimed to cover 100 per cent of the DCI-P3 colour spectrum associated with most HDR mastering.

Happily, the Q80D's mid-range status doesn't prevent it from getting a decent bounty of gaming features. Its panel is a native 120Hz one, and all four of its HDMI ports support the latest gaming standards.

The Q80D's smart features and picture controls all fall under the oversight of Samsung's Neo Quantum 4 AI Gen2 processor. Promisingly this is the same

KEY FEATURES



Quantum Dot



Full-array local dimming



HDMI 2.1

Local dimming on the Samsung extends to 100 separate zones

processor used on the brand's flagship 4K TVs, meaning it brings all the same power, experience and AI-trained enhancements. The last of those should prove especially useful when it comes to upscaling HD and SD resolution content to the TV's native 4K resolution, and delivering a so-called Real Depth Enhancer that tweaks various elements of the image to give it a more three-dimensional appearance in line with how our eyes perceive the real world.

Convincing black tones

The Q80D's picture quality is impressive for a mid-range set, retaining more of the standards of Samsung's premium TVs than we would expect for the money.

This is especially true when it comes to dark scenes. The 100 dimming zones of the FALD panel are so expertly controlled by the Q80D's processing that they are capable of delivering rich, dark black tones that are actually much more compelling and convincing than those of some much more expensive rivals. Samsung's TV manages this, too, without typically throwing up significant areas of backlight 'bloom' around stand-out bright objects, or heavily dimming those stand-out bright objects down.

This strong backlight control is also astute enough to ensure in most picture presets that dark scenes retain plenty of shadow detail even in the blackest corners. As a result, dark scenes feel as rich in depth and texture as bright ones, giving you a more consistent and therefore immersive viewing experience than you get with many LCD TVs. The Q80D also unexpectedly retains reasonably punchy colours in dark scenes, mostly avoiding the desaturation problem in low-luminance shots that many TVs, both OLED and LCD, can suffer with.

Making the 55Q80D's excellent handling of dark scenes and dark picture areas all

the more impressive is the fact that it is also quite a bright TV by mid-range standards.

The brightest HDR images look much lighter and more intense than they tend to with most similarly priced LCD TVs, giving you plenty of impact with HDR sources at both the 'full screen' and small highlight levels. The sense of contrast that results from the Q80D's core brightness and black level performance is exceptional for a TV at this level - especially as it is also so carefully controlled that it doesn't look forced or over-extended. Even in the punchy Standard picture preset, peak bright areas don't 'flare out' and lose subtle shading detail, while the darkest areas don't 'hollow out' into empty black holes.

It's a testament to how good the Q80D's light control is for its money that it's only this deep into talking about its pictures that we get to another strength that has long been associated with Samsung TVs: sharpness. Native 4K content looks emphatically crisp, detailed and clean, while natural and holistic - as if it's simply a result of the TV's innate precision and control rather than some heavy sharpness-boosting processing.

The Q80D's processor upscales HD and even SD sources to 4K exceptionally effectively, adding genuine detail, depth and crispness without exaggerating any noise, grain, or jagged object-edging the source picture might contain.

For the most part, the Q80D's mid-range mastery continues with its Quantum Dot colours. There's a lovely intensity and richness to its tones with HDR images that are able to draw on the screen's punchy brightness to deliver much more colour volume than most mid-range TVs. The colour processing ensures, though, that the vividness doesn't come at the expense of plenty of subtlety and nuance, helping the colour performance contribute to the

"There's a lovely intensity and richness to its tones with HDR images that makes it able to deliver much more colour volume than most mid-range TVs"



Image: Bank Under Siege. Tamara Arranz/Netflix

image's sense of detail and depth rather than causing any sort of cartoon-like flatness or colour wash. There's a good sense of balance to tones, too, especially in the relatively accurate Movie and Filmmaker Mode picture presets, which makes it easier to soak up the image as a whole, rather than certain tones drawing undue attention to themselves.

In the otherwise very watchable Standard preset, though, abrupt cuts between light and dark shots can cause a noticeable jump in brightness just after the cut has happened, as the backlighting adjusts itself. Switching to the less dynamic Movie or Filmmaker Mode presets sees the issue disappear, though.

Games, meanwhile, look bright, detailed, and colourful, while gameplay feels brilliantly responsive and liquid smooth with 60Hz and, especially, 120Hz titles.

Detailed soundstage

As a mid-range model, the Q80D's sound doesn't benefit from as many speakers as Samsung's step-up models do. It does, though, hold on to a basic version of

Strong backlight control helps dark scenes retain plenty of detail

Samsung's Object Tracking Sound system, which manipulates the sound so that different effects appear to be coming from the correct area of the screen.

The Q80D's OTS system is good enough to create a reasonably large soundstage and make movie and TV soundtracks appear busy and detailed, especially those mixed for Dolby Atmos. There's a solid sense of heft and dynamism, too, and for the vast majority of the time, low-frequency sounds aren't disturbed by chassis buzz. Even very shrill trebles

sound clean and rounded rather than harsh and thin. The Q80D doesn't get particularly loud even at maximum volume, and the sound doesn't push forward into your room as aggressively as we would ideally like. Overall, though, it still sounds better than many rivals.

The Q80D delivers a surprisingly healthy chunk of the picture quality we have come to expect from Samsung's high-end TVs at a much lower price. It sounds good, and is one of the best gaming TVs we have seen for less than £1,000.

Overall, if there's a better mid-range TV around in 2024, we haven't seen it.

WHAT HI-FI?

RATING ★★★★★

PICTURE

★★★★★

SOUND

★★★★★

FEATURES

★★★★★

FOR

- Impressive contrast and sharpness
- Expansive and detailed audio for a mid-range TV

AGAINST

- No Dolby Vision
- Some backlight instability
- Entry-level OLEDs cost only a little more

VERDICT

Powerful processing, rich colours, excellent contrast and potent sound; pretty much an ideal mid-ranger

View offers

Stereo amplifier | £399 | whf.cm/Rotel_A8

Rotel A8

It's 'no-frills', but this amp hits the mark

We have a strong sense of *déjà vu* when we unpack Rotel's new A8 integrated stereo amplifier. It reminds us of the company's excellent, Award-winning budget models from the early 2000s. Sure, there is more sophisticated switching here along with flashes of colour thanks to the use of LED lighting around the central volume control, but in essence, the A8 looks to be packing the same DNA. Just to be clear, that's a good thing.

This is not an amplifier to show off about. Its appearance is simple and unassuming. It is a slim unit that stands just over 7cm in height and the styling is best described as functional. The A8 isn't trying to be a style icon; it is a tool to do a job - nothing more. And we like that focused approach, particularly at this level where budgets are tight.

Pleasingly, this is a solidly made unit where every switch and control feels properly engineered, and the casework is well finished and made with care. Look inside and you will find a sensibly specified power supply, neatly laid-out circuitry and plenty of evidence of good quality components.

KEY FEATURES



Moving-magnet phono input



Headphone output



30W per channel into an 8-ohm load

Don't be fooled by the Rotel's 'modest' output - it is surprisingly capable

The Rotel A8 isn't packed with features and even misses out on the digital inputs and Bluetooth connectivity that are relatively common at this price level. Are those big losses? Our answer would have to be no.

The budget norm

Typically, the digital modules used in budget amplifiers tend to be box-ticking exercises that don't tend to sound great. We haven't come across a situation where we prefer one of those to the DAC module fitted to a half-decent budget streamer, CD player or laptop for that matter. Bluetooth connectivity, however, is always useful, so its omission is a bit of a negative. But the lack of it isn't a deal breaker for us.

Elsewhere, the Rotel has the basics covered with a moving-magnet phono input for your record player and three single-ended line-level inputs for the rest of your sources. In most cases, this array of connections is likely to be enough for all but those with really complex stereo systems. There is a 3.5mm headphone output on the front panel too.

Even Rotel doesn't claim the A8 to be a powerhouse; it has a modest claimed output of 30W per channel into an 8 ohm load that rises only slightly to 40W per side as impedance halves.

That's notably short of a class-leader such as Marantz's PM6007, which claims 40W per channel rising to 60W under the same conditions.

On paper that suggests the A8 might need extra care in speaker partnering, but in use it proves surprisingly capable, driving everything from a pair of budget Wharfedale Diamond 12.1 standmounts to more premium options such as KEF's LS50 Meta without issue. The more time we spend with this little integrated, the more it becomes clear that this isn't an amplifier that shouts about its talents, more one that goes about its job without drawing undue attention.

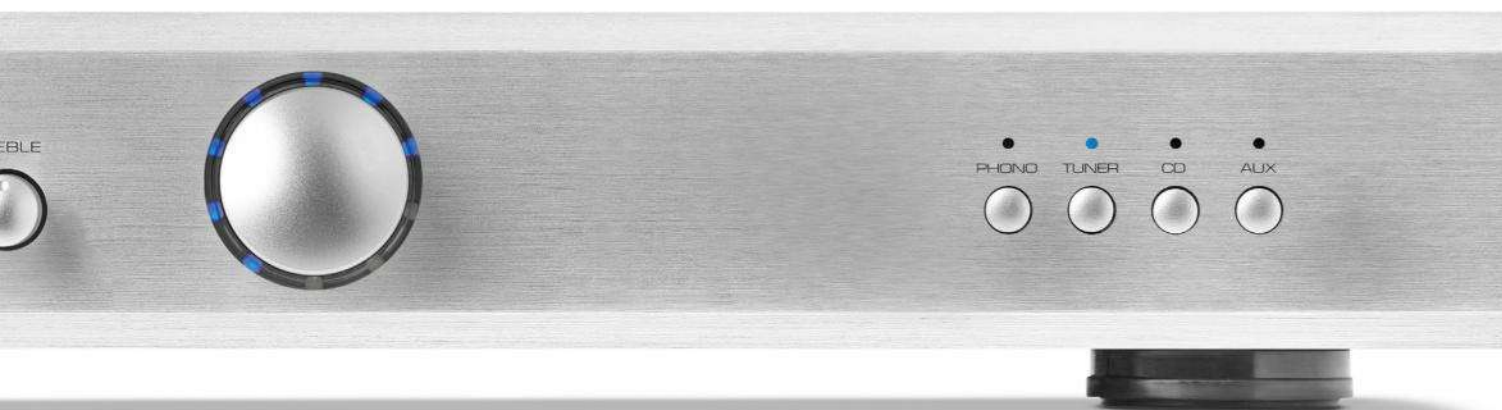
The natural sources for an amplifier at this level are the likes of the Rega Planar 1 record player, Cambridge Audio MXN10 music streamer or Marantz's CD6007 CD player. It works well with any of these, but also has enough stretch in its abilities to accommodate more ambitious alternatives such as a Rega Planar 3/Nd3 turntable or Arcam CD5 CD player without issue.

Much the same applies to speakers. While the A8 will drive the likes of Wharfedale's Diamonds well, it doesn't feel like a weak link even when we plug it into more premium alternatives such as KEF's mighty LS50 Meta. If you have this amplifier as part of a budget set-up, it will probably be the last thing you will need to upgrade.

Give it time

Straight from the box, this Rotel sounds a little restrained and mechanical. Given a few days of use, its presentation becomes more natural, losing the initial traces of hardness and gaining a good dose of fluidity. After that point, this is an amplifier that just fades into the background, letting the recording and





“While there is tough competition from the likes of Marantz’s long-running PM6007 and Cambridge Audio’s AXA35, the A8’s understated charms have us hooked”

the other components in the system step into the limelight.

Punchy bass, fine dynamics

As we listen to Barrington Levy’s *You Say Me Say* the A8 handles the song’s bassline with considerable skill, delivering it with impressive grip and punch. The song’s easygoing momentum is communicated well with a fine sense of drive and authority. This integrated is surefooted with rhythms and unusually expressive as far as dynamics are concerned. Levy’s voice comes through with character and charm intact.

While the rival Marantz PM6007 delivers the recording in a more spacious and more fluid manner, particularly through the midrange, it is the Rotel that comes across as the more authentic performer thanks to its pleasing resolution and greater insight into the music’s subtleties.

A switch to Górecki’s *Symphony No.3* reveals the A8 to have a firm handle on rendering large-scale dynamic shifts and keeping everything under tight control even when the music becomes demanding. It sounds organised and controlled even at points where most rivals struggle to stay coherent. There is a calmness about this amplifier’s delivery with difficult music that is hard to better without spending much more.

Stereo imaging is fine. There is a good sense of focus and a decent amount of stability, though its Marantz rival does render a more expansive soundstage. Still, the Rotel counters with superior definition, particularly at low frequencies where it is considerably more articulate and textured than any

alternative we have tested.

We try the Rotel’s moving-magnet phono stage and find it perfectly acceptable. As is typical at this level there is a drop off in clarity and transparency compared with the line-level inputs, yet the A8’s unassuming but hugely likeable character still shines through. As we listen to Mary J Blige’s *No More Drama* set, it is easy to appreciate the amplifier’s musically engaging yet still-composed nature.

The Rotel A8 is a fuss-free, well-built

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★

product that sets an enviable standard for sound quality at this level. While there is tough competition from the likes of Marantz’s long-running PM6007 and Cambridge Audio’s AXA35, the A8’s understated charms have us hooked. If you are looking for a stand-out budget amplifier, ignore this one at your peril.



Internally, the A8 is neatly arranged and benefits from high-quality components

WHAT HI-FI?

RATING ★★★★★

SOUND

★★★★★

BUILD

★★★★★

FEATURES

★★★★☆

FOR

- Precise, controlled presentation
- Expressive dynamics and punchy bass
- Solid build

AGAINST

- No digital inputs
- No Bluetooth

VERDICT

Rotel’s A8 is an unassuming but hugely capable integrated amplifier that is sure to worry the class leaders

View offers

Soundbar | £1399 | whf.cm/TheatreBar9

Sony Bravia Theatre Bar 9

How do you follow a three-time Award-winning soundbar? This is how



It is against its excellent, Award-winning predecessor HT-A7000 that the Bravia Bar 9 will be judged - that is still the best performance-per-pound soundbar we have tested, and you can now find it with some huge discounts. There are plenty of non-Sony rivals too, of course, most notably the Sennheiser Ambeo Soundbar Plus and Samsung HW-Q990D, the latter of which is a complete system in a box.

The Theatre Bar 9's rounded front corners and fabric cover, which shrouds 90 per cent of the bar's visible surfaces, make the Bar 9 look much softer and more discreet than the HT-A7000. It is exactly the same width at 130cm, but it's also less tall (at 6.4cm) and deep (11cm), making it seem more svelte and also more likely to sit in front of your TV without blocking the bottom of its screen. Should you prefer to wall-mount, there is a bracket included.

Under the fabric cover are 13 individual drivers (up from 11 on the HT-A7000) and quad passive radiators. Along the front are four woofers, three standard tweeters and two beam tweeters; on each end is a side speaker; and on the top are two up-firing speakers and those passive radiators.

The up-firing drivers and beam tweeters are the same as those found in the HT-A7000, but each of the other speakers is new. Of particular note are the four front-firing woofers, which are 1.7 times larger than those in the HT-A7000 and are designed to boost the bass and midrange.

This array is designed to create a bubble of sound in your room using Sony's 360 Spatial Sound Mapping, which creates 'phantom' speakers. You can, though, add more physical speakers if you wish, with the Bar 9 supporting the existing SA-RS5 and SA-R3S wireless surrounds and SA-SW5 and SA-SW3 wireless subwoofers.

The Bravia Theatre Bar 9 can handle both Dolby Atmos and DTS:X 3D sound formats. Sony's Acoustic Centre Sync means that owners of certain Bravia TVs

KEY FEATURES



Dolby Atmos



Sony 360 Spatial Sound Mapping



HDMI 2.1

can use the TV as the centre channel of the surround system created by the soundbar.

Disappointingly, the number of HDMI inputs has been reduced from two to one, though that is still more than some rivals, and it supports 4K/120Hz, VRR and ALLM. You can also send music using Spotify Connect, AirPlay and Bluetooth 5.2.

Impressive spatial organisation

Feeding the Sony Bravia Theatre Bar 9 Tool's *Invincible* via Bluetooth, we are immediately struck by how crisp and clean the delivery is, and how it sounds both airy and direct. The soundbar's rhythmic and spatial organisation is second to none, with every instrumental and vocal layer afforded space to breathe while clearly maintaining its tether to the whole.

Dynamics are superb, with lower-level subtleties in individual notes and Maynard James Keenan's vocals impressively rendered, and the track's overall build is delivered with consistent granularity. There's impressive tonal balance, with crisp but controlled treble and deep, weighty bass at the other end, with neither overshadowing the expressive midrange.

Playing the duel scene from *Deadpool & Wolverine*, the clarity and organisational ability again shine through. Every strike of sword on claw zings crisply through the controlled audio chaos, and every blade into body-part is conveyed with an appropriately unpleasant squelch.

Dynamics are once again excellent and,

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★

combined with the crisp punch of each effect, that makes for a hugely exciting delivery, while the bass underpins the action with satisfying weight.

Switching to our regular *Unbroken* Dolby Atmos test, the Theatre Bar 9 puts in arguably the most Atmos-y delivery we have heard from a solo soundbar. You'll need to add wireless surrounds if you want the audio to stretch behind the listening position, but the Bar 9 alone pushes sound far out to the left and right, a long way into the room and right up to the ceiling. More importantly, it places individual effects into this soundstage effectively and tracks them as they sweep across the room.

Its clarity and low-level dynamic subtlety mean the voices of the bomber's crew are both intelligible over the background noise and emotive, the flak hits with weight and punchy precision, and the impressive spatial organisation makes it easy to track the action audibly even when all hell breaks loose.

The Bar 9 is a noticeable upgrade on the HT-A7000, with just one exception: those increases to clarity and detail appear to have come with a slight reduction in warmth and richness, and at times the new Sony comes across as a little clinical.

Even so, the Theatre Bar 9 is comfortably better than its excellent predecessor. For clarity, detail, dynamics, solidity and outright Atmos-ness, it's hard to fault.

WHAT HI-FI?

RATING ★★★★★

SOUND



BUILD



FEATURES



FOR

- Superb clarity, detail and punch
- Impressive 3D audio processing
- Classy, subtle design

AGAINST

- Slightly clinical in its delivery
- Occasionally over-pronounced deep bass

VERDICT

Sony's new flagship soundbar is a surprisingly big upgrade on its Award-winning predecessor

JBL

TOUR PRO 3



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[View offers](#)Home cinema projector | £4599 | whf.cm/BenQ_W5800

BenQ W5800

A powerful projector that's all about movies

For us and many other true home cinema lovers, projectors are still the ultimate movie machines. So when the increasingly rare opportunity came along to check out a true and serious mid-range home cinema projector in the shape of BenQ's W5800, we were on it faster than you could say, "Hooray for Hollywood."

As with many projectors aimed primarily at fixed installations in dedicated home cinema rooms, the W5800 is quite a unit. At 146 x 53 x 39cm (hwd), its footprint is significantly bigger than your average living room model - and it's heavy, too. Its chunky and weighty black bodywork bodes well for its movie performance - especially as the W5800 uses much of its bulk to keep running-noise down to an easily ignored maximum of 30dB.

Its rounded corners give it a softer, more domesticated look, while the centrally mounted lens is recessed in a large outlet decorated with a fetching gold circular edge and attractive textured striations running from front to back. The front artfully combines large curved slats to each side of the lens to help heat from the laser lighting to escape, while the top edge is gently arced, contributing to an attractive, vaguely elliptical shape. Build quality is excellent throughout, too.

KEY FEATURES



4K resolution

2600 ANSI Lumens
brightness

Laser lighting

Set-up is easy and flexible, and adjustments are motorised too

Just because the BenQ W5800 is focused on home cinema rather than more general home entertainment doesn't mean it doesn't still have plenty going on. It's a DLP projector illuminated by a laser lighting system. It claims a peak brightness of 2600 ANSI Lumens, and a 4K resolution thanks to Texas Instruments' XPR technology (which uses DLP's digital mirrors to create more than a single pixel each for every image frame).

The projector's 4K claims are bolstered, too, by its use of a 14-element, seven-group lens that uses glass throughout to help maintain more sharpness and detail.

The W5800's claimed 2600 Lumens brightness has the potential to deliver an ideal balance between HDR punch in a dark room and black levels good enough to make dark horror-movie sequences look terrifyingly convincing.

Helping to get the maximum value out of the 2600 Lumens, too, is the W5800's impressive ability to deliver a full 100 per cent of the DCI-P3 colour spectrum typically used in the mastering of HDR content without needing a special filter. Wide colour filters on projectors invariably make images much darker, so being able to enjoy a full range of colour when watching HDR without having to sacrifice any brightness sounds very promising indeed.

The basic HDR10 and HLG formats are joined by HDR10+ with its extra scene-by-scene picture data. A Local Contrast Enhancer algorithm divides incoming pictures up into more than 1000 separate analysis zones to figure out the most effective image settings to use, while dynamic tone mapping optimises HDR content to the projector's capabilities.

The W5800 controls the amount of light emitted by its laser lighting system as part of its advanced HDR playback calculations, as well as providing an array of manual adjustment tools so expansive that the projector fully supports Imaging Science Foundation calibration if you want to get your fancy new projector delivering as accurate an image as possible. However, every W5800 already ships with a factory-calibrated mode that is certified to achieve greyscale results so accurate that no human eye will be able to detect any errors.

Connections include two HDMI's capable of 4K at 60Hz in HDR and 120Hz in 1080p - but there is no support for either VRR or, worse, a low input lag mode. This latter limitation leaves you trying to game through 130ms of lag with 60Hz titles - enough to make first-person shooter games essentially unplayable and even exploration games feel sluggish.

The BenQ W5800 doesn't carry any built-in speakers or smart features, either - however, if the W5800 does well enough with films to be the devoted home cinema machine it claims to be, nobody can fairly criticise it for not being anything else.

Set-up is really easy and flexible, with a substantial 1.6x level of optical zoom and a



"4K Blu-rays look packed with texture, detail and sharpness - even when pushed towards the outer edges of the W5800's maximum 200in image size"

WHAT HI-FI?



healthy amount of optical image shifting to left and right or up and down. These adjustments are motorised, too.

The W5800's ability to cover the whole DCI-P3 colour spectrum without a brightness-reducing filter means HDR pictures look blisteringly rich and vibrant. So much so that the 2600 ANSI Lumens brightness claim feels very conservative - especially in the sort of dark room environment the W5800 is designed for.

Refined colour presentation

It's not just the intensity and range of the W5800's colours with HDR sources that grabs our attention, either. There is also enough refinement in the colour presentation to ensure that colours always feel natural and balanced - even in the projector's relatively vivid presets. In fact, far from making colours look forced, the W5800's brightness and intensity actually makes colours look more realistic by adding more volume to the healthy saturations.

The W5800 also manages to retain more vivid saturations in very dark picture areas than the vast majority of projectors (and actually quite a few TVs), again without this vibrancy succumbing to imbalances, blend 'striping' or noise.

Out of the box, black tones are infused with a little too much greyness during HDR playback, as the projector tries a bit too hard - certainly harder than it needs to - to infuse HDR pictures with as much brightness as it can. Happily, though, it's possible to sort this issue out with a few simple picture tweaks. Specifically,

The BenQ is a little larger than average, but the unit is well built and attractive

reducing the HDR Brightness setting, activating the Dynamic Black feature, and sticking with the Low setting for the provided Local Contrast Enhancement feature. The resulting image isn't quite as bright or dynamic looking as it is in the projector's default presets, but black levels are deeper and more neutral, while those brilliant colours still look excellent

Sony's rival VPL-XW5000ES delivers better black levels, but is substantially less bright and costs a little more. Black depth and brightness are just two of many factors affecting a projector's picture performance, but it makes for an interesting comparison.

The W5800's light management is good enough, too, to ensure that dark scenes still retain enough shadow detail to avoid looking hollowed-out or flat. The light management does its work, too, without causing any obvious instability in the image's core brightness level. Black levels actually look great out of the box with SDR sources, and those colour subtleties still continue to mesmerise with SDR content.

There is still easily enough brightness in the W5800's SDR and, especially, HDR images after improving its black level performance, too, to retain a stronger sense of contrast than high brightness

projectors typically manage. In fact, while the W5800 obviously can't provide any truly localised brightness management, its dynamic tone mapping system, if you opt to use it, handles HDR so intelligently that the highest brightness peaks of both predominantly dark and bright shots shine with what feels like real HDR intensity. They do so, too, without losing distracting amounts of subtle shading information.

The W5800 also lives up to its 4K resolution claims. On 4K Blu-ray, *Top Gun: Maverick* and *Blade Runner 2049* look suitably packed with texture, detail and sharpness - even when pushed towards the outer edges of the W5800's maximum 200in image size. The clarity of the W5800's pictures doesn't crumble when there's motion to handle, either. Judder with 24p feeds doesn't look exaggerated, and we don't feel aware of any blur or lag with either camera pans or objects moving within the frame.

There is some minor rainbow effect - stripes of pure colour that flit over bright parts of the picture. This is relatively rare though, and subdued by the standards of the DLP projection world at large.

If you are in the market for a serious movie projector for a dedicated home cinema room, the BenQ W5800's class-leading colour delivery and impressive contrast-boosting set-up flexibility mean there is finally a compelling rival for Sony's awesome VPL-XW5000ES.

WHAT HI-FI?

RATING ★★★★★

PICTURE



BUILD



FEATURES



FOR

- Outstanding colour performance
- Excellent sharpness and detail

AGAINST

- High gaming lag
- Needs adjustment to look its best
- Minor rainbow effect

VERDICT

After a little tweaking, the BenQ W5800's single-minded focus on home cinema pays off handsomely

View offers

Turntable | £599 | whf.cm/Debut_Evo_2

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★

Pro-Ject Debut Evo 2

An appealing turntable in looks and sound

The new Pro-Ject Debut Evo 2 is an updated version of the five-star Debut Carbon Evo, with key elements taken from the two-time *What Hi-Fi?* Product of the Year winner, the Debut Pro, to elevate the performance further. As the Debut Pro is now being replaced (by a balanced-connection equipped model), it's this new Evo 2 that is being pitched as the real standard-bearer for the Debut line.

The Evo 2 costs £599, undercutting the outgoing Debut Pro, which we tested at £699. At this price, it goes toe to toe with its evergreen rival, the Rega Planar 2, the Planar 2/Nd3 package going for £599.

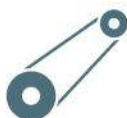
Simplicity with pizzazz

The Debut has a clean, minimal design that is well built and smooth in use. It marries that simplicity with a touch of pizzazz, depending on the colour of finish you choose. Our review sample was in a wine-red satin finish, the sophisticated hue and quality of which helps the deck look sleek and stylish, but Pro-Ject generously offers another nine finishes.

Aesthetics aside, there are significant updates throughout the Evo 2, while it also allows for further upgrades down the line. The steel platter of the older Debut Carbon Evo has been replaced with a heavy aluminium platter, while the 8.6-inch tonearm - comprising a one-piece carbon-fibre tube - is mounted on a new precision-milled aluminium block with low-friction bearings.

Fitted to the deck as standard is the new Pick-It MM Evo cartridge, developed in conjunction with Ortofon. You even have the option to change to a moving-coil cartridge, should you wish to.

KEY FEATURES



Belt-drive design



33⅓ / 45

Electronic speed change



10 finishes

The carbon-fibre tonearm is well made, but lacks a securing clip



The tonearm is a lightweight design and we don't experience excessive play in the bearings; the only thing we would have liked is a clip over the tonearm when placed in the arm rest for extra security. But the belt-drive deck is otherwise stable and easy to use.

We have tested the deck as it comes as standard, but you can use Pro-Ject's online Configurator tool to upgrade various elements of the deck, including the platter, cartridge and phono cables.

Set-up is fairly straightforward, and once we are ready we plug the Evo 2 into our reference system of Epos ES14N speakers and PMC Cor amplifier with a Vertere Phono-1 MkII L phono preamp. We also try it within the more price-compatible system of the KEF LS50 Meta speakers and Arcam A5 amplifier.

Let's get this out of the way first: the rival Rega Planar 2/Nd3 package is, for the same money, the preferred choice if you value rhythmic precision, agility and propulsive drive above all else. But the Debut Evo 2 counters with a beautifully fluid delivery and a particularly lovely and sweet-toned midrange - qualities that make it a very appealing listen.

The Evo 2 has a very likeable, lively, fleet-footed presentation that zips along merrily through every song. Michael Jackson's *Speed Demon* comes through

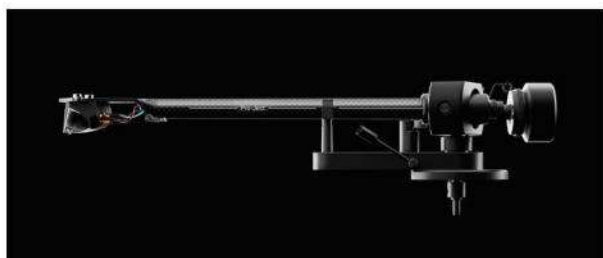
with crisp edges, clear and ample detail, and with just enough meat on the bones for instruments to have body and shape.

We would like a touch more grip and authority to propel the song's momentum, but the slightly lightweight and clean sound - together with a fairly taut bass - makes for an easy-going listen. That doesn't mean the Pro-Ject isn't able to deliver the true message of a song or elicit strong emotion. Nick Cave's gravelly tones are arresting and bittersweet, while Stevie Nicks' singing is emotionally charged and honey-toned.

Vocal dexterity

It is with voices and instruments such as piano that the Evo 2's true talent lies, though. Christine McVie's vocals on *You Make Loving Fun* shine through with clear, soaring highs and a breezy tone that is full of sparkle and sweetness. Piano notes have just enough heft and agility, but resonate with subtleties.

Pro-Ject has taken a friendly, capable deck and furnished it with significant upgrades to make it a more sleek and engaging performer. Some will prefer Rega's more mature and precise presentation at this level, but the Evo 2 is a capable and likeable alternative whose lively, fluid delivery and lovely way with voices might just win you over.



WHAT HI-FI?

RATING ★★★★★

SOUND

★★★★★

FEATURES

★★★★★

BUILD

★★★★★

FOR

- Lively, detailed and fluid sound
- Terrific with voices and midrange in particular
- Range of finishes

AGAINST

- Strong competition

VERDICT

Appealing in looks and sound, the, enthusiastic Evo 2 has a delicate way with voices and a smooth tone

View offers

Portable projector | £699 | whf.cm/BenQ_GS50

BenQ GS50

Prepare to be the talk of the campsite



This portable projector is not only designed to be moved easily between different mates' houses for sports watching, but could also be used in your back garden - or even while camping.

It's suitably well-built for a portable unit, there's real heft to it when you pick it up by the strap attached to its left-hand side, and the bodywork feels rugged.

Tucked inside the GS50's compact but rugged form is a Full HD DLP optical system illuminated by LED lighting capable of delivering a lifespan of 30,000 hours and up to 500 lumens of brightness. This is a high brightness claim for such a portable projector - 25 per cent higher, in fact, than the brightness claimed for the already punchy Anker Nebula Mars 3 Air.

The GS50 is rated by BenQ as being able to comfortably support only a 100in maximum image size. This seems to us like simply a healthy bit of common sense from BenQ's specifications department, as the Nebula Mars 3 Air looks too dull for comfort pushed past 90 inches, despite its 120-inch maximum image size claim.

Projectors truly focused on portability should be easy to set up, and so it is with the GS50. A simple drop-down foot under the front edge lets you angle the projector's image to where you want it, while auto focus and auto keystone correction ensure the picture's sides are perpendicular and the image looks sharp without any manual intervention. There's even an ambient sensor that enables the GS50 to adjust its pictures in response to the amount of ambient light around - particularly handy for a projector designed to work outside.

BenQ claims up to 150 minutes of video playback or 360 minutes of music playback from its built-in battery. This last potential use is backed up by an unusually powerful-sounding speaker array of two 5W drivers and a 10W bass woofer, with the cabinet designed to allow the sound to emerge across a 270-degree spread. The GS50 also ships with an Android TV dongle, giving you most of the streaming apps we now expect from the Android TV platform.

While there are some good things about the GS50's pictures, there are a couple of

KEY FEATURES



500 lumens
brightness



1080p



Android TV

issues that are hard to see past. The GS50's black levels with HDR content are really quite poor. Dark HDR scenes sometimes look so washed out with low-contrast greyness, in fact, that it becomes impossible to see what's really happening. It doesn't help that the overwhelming greyness has a slight red tone, taking the projector even further away from the neutral blacks you should be seeing.

There is also some freakishly bad motion handling with 24p movies, regardless of source. Camera pans or objects moving across the scene cause a really unnatural, distracting juddering effect. Honestly, it makes even kitchen sink dramas look awkward at times. And we weren't able to find any settings that dealt with it.

Punchy and richly saturated

The BenQ GS50's main strength is its brightness by portable projector standards. This is something of a double-edged sword given that it doubtless contributes to the projector's issues with handling dark scenes; but bright HDR content does look punchy, bold and richly saturated.

The GS50's brightness helps it punch through ambient light more successfully than most portable rivals. This is, as you might expect of an outside projector, by far the GS50's most appealing performance trait. We're not sure any projector will ever outgun bright sunlight, but in the more overcast conditions or long dusks of the typical British summer, or the more controllable ambient light levels you get in typical living rooms, colours retain fuller saturation, and subtle details remain more

visible, at least in bright scenes, than they do on pretty much any other portable projector we can think of. The GS50 also impresses with its sharpness. HD and especially 4K sources look detailed, textured and crisp, without exaggerated noise, grain or edge enhancement.

The GS50's sound is more flexible than its pictures; it is as usable for music as it is for movies. Its genuine stereo configuration, with drivers firing out of its left and right sides, helps its sound enjoy both a better sense of separation and a larger soundstage than we usually hear with projectors, especially portable ones. If you're using the projector inside, the sound fills the space in front of you really quite effectively, making the soundstage feel in scale with the large visuals. Outside, its power and throw distance means it retains clarity and impact within a larger seating 'hemisphere' before the sound is lost to the wind.

The GS50's scale, but also control, of audio enables it to craft even complex film soundtracks into effective layers of sound, as well as create a quite sophisticated sense of three-dimensional space where a mix contains enough subtle detail to make such a defined sense of space possible.

The GS50 is attractively designed, it produces decent sound, and in the outdoor environments it has been tuned for, its pictures do hold up better than those of most portable rivals. Its inability to adapt its images satisfactorily to interior viewing, however, especially in any remotely darkened room environment, rather let it down.

WHAT HI-FI?

RATING ★★★★★

PICTURE



SOUND



FEATURES



FOR

- Gorgeous but rugged design
- Bright by portable projector standards
- Decent audio

AGAINST

- Poor black levels/contrast
- No Netflix app
- Poor motion handling

VERDICT

Looks great, sounds great, and has all the features a portable projector needs - except picture quality

The GS50 backs up its good looks with rugged build and portability

View offers

Music streamer | £1599 | whf.cm/EXN_100

Cambridge Audio EXN100



Extensive features, refined performance

Cambridge Audio's music streamers have had a terrific run recently. From the budget MXN10 to the mid-priced CXN100, the brand's network audio players have achieved five-star success thanks to strong features, ease of use and great performance for the price.

And now the company can add another string to its bow. The new Cambridge Audio EXN100 aims to bridge the gap between the mid-range CXN100 and the flagship Edge NQ streamers, and is priced competitively at £1599.

While it follows a similar design language to the existing CX range with an uncluttered, metal chassis in the customary 'lunar grey' finish, the EXN100 is slightly taller, and has a larger TFT colour display screen. It may not be the most avant-garde in terms of styling, but overall it's a smart, well-built unit.

The knurled control/volume dial feels classy - both to the touch and in how it smoothly turns. The EXN100's 1280 x 720 screen has pleasing contrast and shows off colourful album artwork, song information and more in a crisp, bright manner that's easy to read.

The simple buttons and dial on the front panel offer basic playback and source selection, but you will need the accompanying StreamMagic app to fully control this streamer.

You don't get a remote; you do get one with the partnering EXA100 amplifier, but we find the app to be the most useful way of controlling the EXN100.

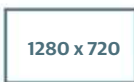
KEY FEATURES



Hi-res support:
32-bit/768kHz PCM,
DSD512



Tidal Connect



Colour display screen

This is the first
Cambridge Audio
streamer to include
an HDMI eARC port

Cambridge Audio's streamers tend to be well-oiled machines and the EXN100 is no different. Whether it's through the well laid-out app or the physical controls, the EXN100 is responsive and smooth in use. When used as a preamplifier, the numerical digital display moves intuitively in perfect concordance as we turn the volume dial. A small thing, but pleasing nonetheless.

Wide streaming support

The latest, fourth generation of the StreamMagic module - Cambridge Audio's proprietary streaming platform - forms the beating heart of the EXN100, and it supports a comprehensive variety of streaming methods so you can play music however and wherever it is stored. The EXN100 can play songs stored on UPnP-compatible media libraries and NAS storages on the same home network. It is Roon Ready and can stream music from any smart device using Bluetooth aptX HD.

It also supports AirPlay 2, Chromecast, Tidal Connect and Spotify Connect, while the app gives you access to Qobuz, Deezer and internet radio stations. A neat trick is that you can save your favourite radio station, playlist or album as presets on the app's home screen.

The DAC module is the same 32-bit ESS ES9028Q2M Reference chip as used in the £899 CXN100 streamer. Cambridge Audio claims its engineers have managed to eke out even greater

performance from this DAC chip than before, with a carefully tuned signal-path, and significant changes made to the post-DAC analogue stage using premium components chosen for better clarity, separation and stereo imaging.

In terms of file formats supported, the EXN100 can handle high-resolution audio files up to 32-bit/784kHz PCM and DSD512, and MQA files - the very same as its MXN10 and CXN100 siblings. All the relevant sampling rate and file format information can be seen on screen and in the app, for those curious about their music library.

The big headline here is the inclusion of an HDMI eARC input. It's the first Cambridge streamer to include an HDMI connection - thanks to popular demand - so you can hook it up directly to a TV.

Other physical connections include optical and coaxial inputs and outputs, a USB type B input as well as a USB type A port for plugging in flash drives. There are balanced XLR and RCA line-level outputs, while the short antennae for wi-fi and Bluetooth come fitted as standard.

We connect the streamer to our reference system of Burmester O88/911 MkIII pre/power amplifier and ATC SCM50 speakers, and try it out with more price-compatible kit such as the Cambridge Audio EXA100 and Naim Nait XS 3 amps, and Epos ES-7N speakers.





The EXN100 impresses us with a sound that is clear, spacious and balanced. If you have heard the CXN100 streamer you will recognise the familial presentation, and the EXN100 successfully offers a notable step up in every area. It delivers a stable stereo image, a larger and more open playing field for music to flourish in, and offers up a huge helping of extra detail.

Controlled, fluid rhythm

We play test-track favourite *Breezeblocks* by Alt-J and it flows well through the streamer. There's a controlled sense of rhythm, attack and drive, while also moving with just enough fluidity to sound at ease. The bass notes on Major Lazer's *Pon De Floor* go satisfyingly deep and are pulled taut - it's impressive to hear just how clean and shapely they are, too. There's no flab; there's ample punch. The sharp, staccato drum-hits are snappy, speedy and full of bite but never sound shrill or sharp. There's enough body to the sound that music never sounds thin but it is also not overly warm; it simply sounds well balanced.

The streamer delivers spry, composed and room-filling sound - elements that could be difficult to juggle, but the Cambridge Audio handles it all in an almost understated manner. Voices are clearly defined with natural tones and nuances brought to the fore; Waxahatchee's lilting, Americana vocals in *Right Back To It* are focused, set dead-centre and delivered with pleasing immediacy. In absolute terms we would like a bit more subtlety with the way it handles shifts in dynamics and a touch more grit to certain songs that require it, but it's a small complaint at this level.

We spin through a variety of music - CD-ripped classical, jazz and Kate Bush

A bright, clear screen forms part of the conventional yet smart frontage

tracks from our NAS drive, hi-res Tidal playlists and Sabrina Carpenter's latest album via AirPlay from our iPhone - and the EXN100's wonderfully clean, controlled and balanced character remains consistent.

Feed it high-quality tracks and it will perform at its best, but the streamer doesn't penalise you for playing lower MP3-quality radio stations or Bluetooth streams in the slightest.

When used as a preamplifier, the EXN100 sounds decent for its price and is a useful addition if your system already includes a power amplifier, or if all you need to drive is a pair of active speakers. In this mode, it sounds a little flat at lower volume settings, but improves markedly as we turn the level up.

How does the EXN100 perform against the older Azur 851N streamer, a former Award-winning model that is effectively its spiritual ancestor? We bring out our sample of the 851N from our stockroom, and are struck by just how stark the difference in sound quality is between the two. The 851N sounds rather muddled, dynamically squashed and smaller-scaled; the EXN100 is leaps and bounds ahead with better dynamics

and more power, and easily reveals subtler and clearer details.

The EXN100 is a solid and muscular performer. If you do want a greater dose of dynamic subtlety and verve, you have to pay about a grand more for the genuine next step up in performance, which are the terrifically capable Naim ND5 XS 2 and Audiolab 9000N (both five stars at £2499).

Natural family bond

The EXN100's natural amplifier partner is the matching EXA100 integrated, and the sonic signatures of the two are a perfect match. But we would also try alternative amplifiers, such as the Naim Nait XS 3. This talented amp (see p103) brings out a more upfront presentation and energetic performance from the EXN100 that could surprise and delight you even more.

The Cambridge Audio EXN100 streamer is exhaustively featured and slick to use, and the addition of HDMI will be a draw for many looking for a one-stop versatile streaming source for their home audio set-up. Its impressively clear, open and refined presentation will draw even more fans and, with a bit of creativity with partnering kit, will deliver an engaging, involving performance that can't be bettered at this price.

"The track flows well through the streamer. There is a controlled sense of rhythm, attack and drive, with just enough fluidity to sound at ease"

WHAT HI-FI?

SOUND



BUILD



FEATURES



FOR

- Clear, open and controlled sound
- Refined presentation
- Well featured
- Lovely to use

AGAINST

- Similar specs as more affordable siblings

VERDICT

Cambridge Audio has refined its streaming experience even further with the refined EXN100

RATING ★★★★★

View offers

UST projector | £2499 | whf.cm/PX3_Pro

Hisense PX3-Pro

Gaming-focused UST projector that's great for films too

The Hisense PX3-Pro is the latest ultra short throw projector (UST) from tech giant Hisense. A follow-on to the five-star Award-winning Hisense PL1, it is one of the only projectors we have tested this year to carry 'designed for Xbox Series' certification, which should make it great for gamers as well as movie fans.

And indeed, the PX3-Pro is a big upgrade on Hisense's previous UST offerings and it proves equally fantastic for watching movies as blasting demons in *Doom*.

The distinctly angular unit comes with a grey metallic finish that feels robust and feels hefty enough that it won't easily move once placed on a flat surface.

The only obvious design features are a metal grille on its front that covers its inbuilt 50-watt front-firing Harman Kardon speakers, which are Dolby Atmos and IMAX Enhanced DTS ready, and side vents. The last of these help to control airflow from the projector's fan cooling system.

The 55 x 30 x 12.2cm dimensions mean it is a little longer and shallower than some cheaper USTs, but the low height means it will neatly fit on most TV stands, cabinets and bookshelves.

The reason it is longer but thinner than many of its siblings is that the PX3 has a 0.22:1 throw ratio, which lets it create a large image, even when sitting very close to a wall. Its predecessor had a 0.25:1 throw ratio by comparison. The adjustable feet also make it relatively easy to adjust its level and picture positioning, which is good as there is no physical lens control.

Set-up is fairly simple by UST standards. The projector relies on keystone and digital picture correction. In theory, you

KEY FEATURES



240Hz refresh rate



3000:1 contrast ratio



80-150 inches image size

Its pitch to gamers is that its HDMI 2.1 sockets can run games at 4K/120Hz

can set it up automatically by taking a photo of a test pattern displayed on the screen/wall on your phone and uploading it to a Hisense website, which then adjusts the picture settings for you.

The PX3-Pro is also part of Hisense's Laser Cinema, rather than Laser TV, line, which means it doesn't come with a screen bundled. You will need to invest in one if you want the best results possible.

Not just for gamers

Hisense may be marketing the PX3-Pro mainly to gamers, but it has done a lot of work to improve its basic picture and audio quality compared with the PL1 and its direct predecessor, the PX2-Pro.

These include the ability to display a native contrast of 3000:1, an improved 3000 ANSI lumens max brightness and the ability to display a quoted 110 per cent of the BT.2020 colour space favoured by movie creators. The layman's version is that the projector has been designed to show a wider, more accurate range of colours, offer much higher peak brightness levels and significantly deeper, more detailed blacks than its siblings.

Unlike many UST projectors, the big selling point is that there are two HDMI 2.1 inputs that can run games at 4K/120Hz. So if you connect an Xbox Series X/S or PS5, the consoles can run at full speed. The third HDMI input has eARC capability that makes it quick and easy to connect it to an external Dolby Atmos sound system.

Out of the box, the PX3-Pro offers competent but not best in class picture quality. With *Dune Part 2* on 4K Blu-Ray, the standard mode's motion handling feels a little too heavy handed, and the contrast lacks subtlety, resulting in a loss of detail in both dark and light areas.

Switching to Filmmaker Mode, the picture goes too far the other way, with motion looking natural, but the picture feeling too subdued and slightly flat - blacks are slightly grey and peak brightness areas of the sweeping desert don't gleam the way they should. We get the best results returning to the PX3's HDR Standard setting, with the Adaptive

Contrast level set to Medium, Dynamic Tone Mapping on, all motion smoothing settings completely off and the Colour Profile set to Warm 2 - which makes skin tones look more natural, giving the cheeks of the desert-dwelling Fremen more warmth and a more authentic sandblasted feel.

Moving to *Blade Runner 2049*, as Ryan Gosling's character enters the dust-filled protein farm, there's oodles of detail in the wind-swept barren landscape. The projector offers realistic but vibrant colours, with the reds of Sapper Morton's suit popping from the otherwise grey shot, without looking overcooked.

Light control for a UST is also a cut above many rivals, with the picture looking wonderfully three-dimensional. Highlights around the steaming kettle resulting from stray light emanating from a dirty window offer true depth, making for an authentic, immersive viewing experience. Morton's movements as he throws K around the room feel violent, and have incredible heft, with no hint of oversmoothing. The only minor issue is that with all motion handling switched off, some particularly fast movements feel slightly jagged. However, the moment we adjust the motion handling to its lowest setting, an artificiality is added to the movements. Ideally, we would like a happy medium between the two.

To our surprise, the PX3-Pro also performs better than expected in an area in which projectors (particularly recent USTs) tend to struggle - dark detail. Watching an incredibly dark scene from *The Batman*, there is a little black crush, as the PX3's contrast has been cranked to make blacks appear deeper. And yes, they still appear as dark grey, rather than the perfect black you will find on even an entry-level OLED. But there is significantly more detail than you get from many competing USTs, including the Hisense PL1. Details in Batman's armour lost on the PL1 and Xgimi Aura 2 remain visible as he





menacingly walks out of the shadows.

Testing the Dolby Vision performance with *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story* reveals a wonderful bloom and immersive peaks, with stars and the halos around planets truly sparkling as the spaceship shoots across the screen.

The only serious weakness we experience occurs as we move on to our upscaling test, which initially involves playing a 1080p Blu-ray of *True Grit*. This is a famously difficult movie due to its intentional grainy, spaghetti-western quality. The PX3-Pro delivers more detail than the PL1, revealing picture elements that the cheaper projector misses, such as the trees and the shadow of a rocking chair. But there's still a lot of black crush, with entire sections of the picture appearing as dark grey and the stitched texture of the characters' clothes appearing flatter than we would like. Moving to Netflix and *Schitt's Creek* in SDR, the issue with black levels moving from dark to light sections doesn't repeat and the image is watchable, with characters' skin tones looking realistic. But dark segments of the picture still look flattened.

Not the best audio

The Hisense's in-built, Atmos-ready speaker system is fine for casual viewing, but still not on a par with the sound of a good soundbar, let alone a speaker package. Playing our standard *Blade Runner 2049* test scene, which includes a booming bass section that drives anything but the most accomplished speakers to

"Testing Dolby Vision performance with *Rogue One* reveals wonderful immersive peaks, with stars and the halos around planets truly sparkling as the ship shoots across the screen"

distortion, the Hisense's speakers struggle. Distortion creeps in and the audio sounds forced. Moving to a dialogue-heavy debrief scene, the audio sounds flat and not suitably immersive.

Thankfully, switching to the theatre sound profile things improve markedly. The sound as K converses with a hologram

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★

in his apartment is immediately wider and there is a better separation between their dialogue and background noise.

To be fair to Hisense, poor audio is a common problem we experience with USTs and projectors in general, so this shouldn't put you off the PX3-Pro. It just means we would recommend investing in a separate sound system if you want a truly immersive home cinema experience.

The Hisense PX3-Pro is a great UST projector for movie fans and gamers. Though the projector's audio is undeniably mediocre, even by UST standards, its picture quality more than makes up for this. The PX3-Pro's handling of dark scenes is particularly excellent by UST standards, and in general its picture is a marked improvement on any other projector in its class that we have tested.

If you are short on space, own an Xbox and love watching movies, then the Hisense PX3-Pro is well worth considering. The only downside is that it doesn't do a great job with SDR discs, which will be an issue for people with large Blu-ray collections.

WHAT HI-FI?

RATING ★★★★★

PICTURE

★★★★★

SOUND

★★★★☆

FEATURES

★★★★★

FOR

- Good shadow detail
- Great HDR performance
- Excellent gaming features

AGAINST

- Middling audio
- Blacks look slightly grey
- Less accomplished with sub-4K, SDR content

VERDICT

The Hisense PX3-Pro is a great UST projector for movie fans and gamers alike

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RECORD PLAYERS ARE GETTING BETTER; IT JUST ISN'T OBVIOUS

Record replay continues to improve, but it does so in a subtle way, writes technical editor Ketan Bharadia



What Hi-Fi? covers a wide range of products. There are categories, such as televisions, streamers, and wireless headphones and speakers, where things move quickly and obviously. Each generation of products brings useful (and not so useful) new features, improves usability (mostly) and pushes performance standards ever higher (almost always).

Then there are areas - stereo amps, conventional speakers and turntables - where things appear to move more glacially.

I want to focus on turntables here. Not just because I have a soft spot for them (which I do) but because, more than any other area *What Hi-Fi?* covers, it is a category that is packed full of products that tend to dominate, in many cases for decades at a time.

I'm thinking specifically of Rega's evergreen Planar 1, 2 and 3 record

Linn's turntables have loomed large in the market for years

SME's Model 20 Mk 2 is another fantastic deck with a long heritage

players; but what I have said could equally apply to Linn's LP12, pretty much all of SME's turntable and tonearm ranges, as well as the Michell Gyro SE we currently have in our test room.

Having had a look through our 40-year-plus archives, I notice that the current Pro-Ject Debut doesn't look too different from the original that was introduced way back in the late '90s. The Debut



has been developed and improved over the years, of course, but it just doesn't look very different. I could go on, but I'm sure you get the idea.

Pretty much all these products would, in general terms, be considered among the class leaders at their respective price points. So the easy conclusion would be that the turntable market as a whole has stagnated and progress isn't being made. That would be the easy conclusion - but not necessarily the correct one.

Subtle but significant progress

I am not for one second going to suggest that record players are improving in leaps and bounds every single year, because that simply isn't the case. It is a mature format that uses

well-understood technologies, manufacturing techniques and materials. These are not the conditions that encourage huge strides forward. However, improved production processes, more-sophisticated manufacturing equipment and cleverer electronics do give room for improvement. Take

Michell Gyro SE is the latest gentle evolution of a classic turntable



"This is a mature format that uses well-understood technologies, manufacturing techniques and materials"

Then there is the Linn LP12. What started as a single model has been turned into a pick-and-mix special, where almost every major part is available in a variety of options arranged in a broadly 'good, better, best' manner. Aside from the obvious things such as the choice of cartridge, tonearm and plinth finish, it is possible to specify three different power-supply modules, three types of sub-chassis, two types of baseboard and three phono stages. The extremes of this approach take a standard LP12 package from something that starts below £4000 to a top-end variant that costs more than six times as much, with a performance increase to match. Once again, to an untrained observer, it remains just an LP12, much the same as the early 1970s original.

To a lesser or greater extent much the same applies to all the stalwart

products that I have mentioned. Over the years there have been various new power supplies for the likes of the SME 20 and Michell Gyro SE, and subtle design tweaks across the range of products to improve performance. Mostly these companies don't really shout about these when they happen, so such improvements tend to pass the general hi-fi consciousness unnoticed.

Great products, greater still

Over the years (that is, over two decades plus in my reviewing career) I have been lucky enough to hear various generations of these decks - and I have no doubt that things are improving. That certainly doesn't mean that the earliest versions should now be considered bad, or anything like it. They all started as great products; but it is to all our benefit that the various manufacturers have worked hard to evolve each design to deliver even more musical pleasure.

the Rega Planar 3, for example. The last round of significant improvements for the deck happened back in 2016, when the extra bracing was added between the main bearing and tonearm. The current production is all but identical, but the change of cartridge from the long-running Elys 2 to the new Nd3 has lifted the package's performance notably. It is still a Planar 3 and, to anyone other than the eagle-eyed enthusiast, looks just the same, yet it has taken a proper step forward.



Rega's Planar range is evergreen yet still evolving

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WIRELESS HEADPHONES

With active noise-cancelling and other sonic tech moving at a rapid pace, this is a fascinating category

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2024

BEST WIRELESS
EARBUDS
£70-£150

SONY WF-C700N

PRODUCT OF THE YEAR



■ Sony WF-C700N

£80

If you're looking for a discreet pair of wireless earbuds that don't look or feel bulky, these Sonys could be for you. Their dimensions are impressively small, making the more expensive WF-1000XM5 look like a couple of boulders by comparison. This could partly be explained by the fact they use a 5mm driver, where the WF-1000XM5 boasts a much larger 8.4mm 'Dynamic Driver X'.

We are big fans of the comfort levels provided by WF-C700N. The Sonys slide in and twist into place in the lower portion of your outer ear. They don't dig in and instead just nestle in place, with the flexible silicone eartips finishing the job and providing an excellent seal. The net result is that they are easy to live with.

Smaller earbuds can sometimes be tricky to get into place, but the ever so subtly textured surface used here allows you to get a grip and manoeuvre the buds into place with minimal fuss.

Those circular pads you see on the outside of each earpiece aren't touch-sensitive surfaces but are in fact physical buttons, their functions customisable through Sony's Headphones Connect app.

Like many Sony wireless earbuds, the WF-C700N offer Sony's Adaptive Sound Control feature which allows the earbuds to switch listening modes automatically depending on your location.

Battery life is an acceptable seven and a half hours of playtime on a single charge with active noise cancelling turned on (this rises to ten with ANC off). While not as advanced as the XM5, these Sonys still prove more than competitive with noise-cancelling at this level, too.

With a blast of *Angel* by Massive Attack, it's not just the weight, depth and solidity of the notes that impresses, it's also the layers of detail the Sonys uncover and their ability to paint the

We are big fans of the comfort levels provided by the C700N

notes with believable texture. There's a fantastic sense of power and drive here that hooks you into the song. But it's not all about the bass. The WF-C700N still favour a balanced presentation overall. There's still percussion and a vocal to fit into the mix, and the Sonys are more than generous with the amount of exposure they give across the frequency range.

Beethoven's *Symphony No.5 in C Minor* requires solid timing and great organisation, and the Sonys pass the test with flying colours. With Cat Burns' *Go*, the Sonys seem to enjoy conveying the intimacy, emotion and delicacy in the vocal as well as the detail and dynamic shifts as fingers slide across guitar strings.

You have to hand it to Sony. It has managed to build a nice little portfolio of wireless earbuds that hit a number of key price points, and the WH-C700N are an easy recommendation at the money.

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2024

**BEST WIRELESS
EARBUDS
UNDER £70**

SONY WF-C510

■ Sony WF-C510 £55

There's a lot to be said for opting for a pair of fun-sounding, no-frills and affordable wireless earbuds you can just throw in your bag and use until the wheels fall off.

During testing, we found the Sonys slot into our ears with zero fuss and are easy to position. There aren't any extra elements to help keep them in place bar the silicone eartips, but during testing we found the seal and the stability offered to be excellent.

It's nice to see Sony hasn't completely stripped all the useful features out of these budget buds to hit their price point. You still get Multipoint Bluetooth so you can have two sources connected at once, and they offer IPX4 water resistance.

Sony has included Ambient Sound Control here, a feature we usually tend to see used only in conjunction with its active noise-cancelling earbuds. This allows some external noise through when you are using them, and the level can be tweaked in the Sony Headphones app. In addition to this, the mode gives you the

option of a 'voice passthrough' function which claims to help capture voices better "while suppressing noise".

Sony claims up to 11 hours of battery life, although the fine print does state that this is with Ambient Sound Mode, Sony's DSEE audio processing and EQ Custom mode all turned off. The case should be good for another 11 hours of playtime.

The key at this price point is to be fun, engaging and musical, and the Sony WF-C510 deliver all of this and more.

We test them with a range of genres and the Sonys just go about their business. You can tell the WF-C510 are part of the Sony family, such is their musicality and rhythmic ability - even complex pieces of music don't unravel, and their sense of timing and ability to just get into the groove of a song works with any music you play through them.

With Beyonce's *Baby Boy*, the Sonys serve up a solid, weighty and driven sound. There is serious power behind the



Despite their lower price, these Sonys are well equipped with features

track's prominent and repetitive basslines, and they capture the dynamic shifts in the quicker, more agile bass notes as they interject. When it comes to the midrange and treble, the strings and claps keep the tempo upbeat and sound refined and subtle at the same time. Beyonce and Sean Paul's vocals sound solid, expressive and display a good dose of natural warmth.

Sure, the earbuds' dynamic dexterity and agility can be bettered, but only if you move up a price bracket to a pair such as their WF-C700N siblings. But we can't really argue with the comfort, sense of fun and musicality that they convey. These are brilliant buds with a bargain price tag.

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2024

**BEST WIRELESS
EARBUDS
£150-£300**

**SONY
WF-1000XM5**

■ Sony WF-1000XM5 £220

Sony's **WF-1000XM5** replaced a two-time *What Hi-Fi?* Award-winner that dominated the category since launch and set a pace that rivals from Apple and Bose have only relatively recently matched.

The XM5 are smaller, lighter and less chunky, with smoother lines and more subtle curves, while the exterior mics are better integrated, making for a smaller, rounder and much more slender profile. This also helps reduce the effects of wind noise, helping improve call quality.

A brand new driver is, at 8.4mm, quite a bit larger than the 6.4mm unit used in the XM4. This larger driver doesn't need to move as much, which Sony claims helps reduce mechanical noise. It also uses two different materials, for high frequencies and lows. Sony's DSEE Extreme processing returns, and there's hi-res audio and 360 Reality Audio support, including, for the first time, dynamic head tracking. LDAC support is also here, as is Multipoint Bluetooth, Adaptive Sound Control and Speak-to-Chat. Battery life is eight hours

with Bluetooth and ANC activated, with the case providing another 16 hours, which compares favourably with rivals such as the Bose QuietComfort II and AirPods Pro 2.

Sound is where things start to get interesting. The XM5 sound very different from Sony's previous top of the range buds. There's a definite change of character - the new model doesn't sound quite as rich or full in the bass - but what Sony has managed to achieve as far as clarity and detail go is really rather special.

You can't accuse the Sonys of having no rhythmic drive as they power through Radiohead's challenging *15 Step* while managing to keep everything in check. The timing of the XM5 is on point as percussion is kept organised and well-defined. The complex song makes sense all the way through to the end.

The Streets' *Wouldn't Have It Any Other Way* has a beefy bassline and the Sonys get the balance of quality and quantity spot on. There's weight but it is also wonderfully controlled. This track once



The XM5 support 360 Reality Audio with dynamic head tracking

again hammers home that newfound level of detail. You can feast on the bassline, piano, vocal, backing vocal and percussion individually or as a whole. There's an openness we haven't really heard from wireless earbuds at this level before, and the definition and texture that shines through is quite exceptional. In the search for resolution, we feel Sony has sacrificed a little bit of the fun that was so appealing in their predecessors, but they are still musical and exhibit a fine sense of timing.

They might not sound quite as fun as their predecessors, but they move the game on in many aspects of performance. Another Award-win for the XM5.

WHAT HI-FI?

AWARDS 2024

**BEST WIRELESS
EARBUDS
OVER £300**

**BOWERS & WILKINS
Pi8**

■ Bowers & Wilkins Pi8 £349

For the Pi8, B&W has called on the expertise of the in-house engineering team responsible for its Px7 S2 and Px8 over-ears, and the brand seems to have left no stone unturned in its pursuit of a performance befitting these buds' price.

The Pi8 use premium plastics that feel nice in-hand, while mics and sensors have deliberately been positioned so they are free from potential obstructions. Inside each earbud is a 12mm carbon-cone driver, as used in B&W's Px8 and its 700 Series loudspeaker tweeter. It is claimed that the lightness and stiffness of this material help produce a fast transient response. The Pi8 use Qualcomm's latest wireless chipset that supports Bluetooth 5.4, though B&W actually uses a separate high-performance dedicated DAC/DSP amp to do a lot of the heavy lifting. This bypasses the Qualcomm chip and allows B&W to have more of a direct impact on the buds' performance.

A five-band equaliser in the app offers some nice fine-tuning options, while ANC

for the Pi8 gets tech from its Px8 over-ears too; and we find they do a very good job with low-frequency rumbles from traffic.

Of course, soundwise we expect excellence at this level - and there is a real maturity and refinement here. The Pi8 shine a light on music with a beautifully balanced approach - you can savour every frequency from the lowest of lows to the highest highs.

With rock tracks there is a richness to the notes but also a solidity and tightness that sees the buds deliver drum hits with precision and intent. These earbuds shine a light on dynamics and different textures, communicating them effortlessly. It's a really sophisticated, polished performance that is overflowing with detail.

The Pi8 don't just sketch out the textures and details but they colour them in, so you get a proper feeling of intimacy from more acoustic performances, too. Bass notes are dispatched with detail,



B&W's latest in-ears use a lot of trickle-down tech from pricier kit

power and authority - the earbuds put a serious amount of weight behind every strike, delivering a swift yet seismic blow.

The Bowers & Wilkins Pi8 are clear class-leaders. Their wonderfully sophisticated, balanced and transparent sound delivers a level of insight that is rare in wireless earbuds.

WHAT HI-FI?

AWARDS 2024

**BEST WIRELESS
HEADPHONES
UNDER £100**

SONY WH-CH720N

■ Sony WH-CH720N £99

These headphones are aimed at those people who aren't keen on forking out a few hundred quid for a more premium pair of over-ears, but don't want to skimp on ANC or suffer a significant drop in audio fidelity by opting for a more budget pair.

You will need to manage your expectations though. At less than £100, the CH720N are hardly lavish, but they are solidly made. Uncluttered and unassuming, these are cans designed to get the job done. No fuss; no flourishes; all business. They're comfy, too, with a cushioned headband and lightly padded ear cups. For this price, you won't find many better.

A big part of the CH720N's *raison d'être* is to provide ANC on a budget, and they do an effective job of dampening, if not silencing completely (as, say, the more premium WH-1000XM5 do), the rumble and swoosh of passing cars.

Decent sound and noise cancelling would probably be enough for most users at this price point, but the addition of Sony

DSEE sound upscaling and support for Sony 360 Reality Audio really add value.

These cans deliver music with heft and conviction, operating on the front foot in delivering an immediate, assertive sound with an emphasis on forceful, burly bass.

It's a sonic character that can be a bit much at times, and as we dig out tracks from Ava Max, The La's and Hans Zimmer, there is no question that a pushy, bassy presentation is very much the CH720N's default. This can be tempered in the Sony Headphones app by adjusting the equaliser; doing so leaves us with all of that assertiveness and drive without so much emphasis on that sledgehammer bass. Now we're in a better position to really let the Sony cans do their thing.

And for the price, we can't think of a pair of over-ears that could keep up such a spirited delivery as we plunge into Muse's pulsating, crunchy *Hysteria*. The CH720N's rendition of Tina Turner's *The Best* really reveals their understanding of the song's



The CH720N's feature set is impressive at the price

rhythmic drive, while Wu-Tang Clan's *Gravel Pit* is an invigorating listen.

Sony has delivered on its intent. These are dependably made, enthusiastic-sounding headphones that deliver good ANC and a strong feature set to the mid-to-low price bracket of the wireless headphones market. A job well done.

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2024

**BEST WIRELESS
HEADPHONES
£100-£200**

**AUSTRIAN AUDIO
HI-X25BT**

■ Austrian Audio Hi-X25BT £149

With one eye on studio use and the other on domestic listening, Austrian Audio's first Bluetooth over-ears promise the best of both worlds at a competitive price, melding the comfort and convenience that users crave from Bluetooth headphones with the clear, revealing sound that has served the firm so well in the wired space.

You can feel Austrian Audio's studio pedigree infusing the comfy cans. The memory-foam earpads remain relatively cool and comfortable over extended periods of listening, while the overall clamping force provides enough pressure around your head without it feeling as though it has been trapped in a vice. Better still, the ear cups fold neatly away, making the lightweight Hi-X25BT a strong choice as your go-to travel companion.

If you are somebody who wants all the latest gizmos from their headphones, Austrian Audio has clearly put far more work into how these over-ears sound. The big omission here is ANC, which we have

come to expect from headphones at this level - though the HiX25BT are able to block out some external noise physically thanks to the earpads. There's a very solid 30 hours of wireless playback; a decent number - and you can always switch to wired listening if your battery runs dry.

Though the wires may have gone, that signature Austrian Audio flavour remains. Like their budget Hi-X15 and premium Hi-X65 wired siblings, the X25BT provide a resplendently clean soundscape, bringing the sort of clarity and sparkle that we rarely hear at this level. There's very little muddiness or compression here - you will be able to pick out plenty of extra details thanks to the cans' insightful nature. Pearl Jam's *Present Tense* is replete with textural insight, from those quiet, perfectly placed electronic guitar plucks to Eddie Vedder's sincere vocal balladry. There's a fleet-footed lightness to the cans' presentation that allows tracks to zip along nicely, although they are a little leaner in the bass



The Hi-X25BT are light on features, but sound is where they excel

than most rivals. Even so, for precision and sharpness at the bottom end, the X25BT provide something of a masterclass. Austrian Audio has prioritised sound above all else, and while they won't appeal to feature-hungry consumers, for versatility and exceptional sound at a great price, the Hi-X25BT are solid gold winners.

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2024

**BEST WIRELESS
HEADPHONES
OVER £200**

**SONY
WH-1000XM5**

■ Sony WH-1000XM5 £319

Sony's latest premium over-ears possess all the elements that have made previous generations class-leaders at the money, including that effortlessly musical sound. But the XM5 manage to deliver even greater clarity and a more open presentation. It's actually quite a jump.

Design changes, too, are significant, with Sony attempting to create a slimmer, more seamless pair of headphones by reworking those areas that can contribute to wind noise. This has led to smoother, sweeping lines, while the plastics used are nice to touch, even if the older model still feels a bit more premium. Comfort levels are up there with the best, meanwhile.

The 40mm driver used in the XM4 has been replaced with a new, 30mm carbon fibre composite dome that has been specially designed to be lightweight and extremely rigid. With the help of the Integrated Processor V1 that first appeared in its XM4 wireless earbuds, as well as doubling the number of mics

to eight, once again noise-cancelling is top of the class.

Precision at low frequencies exposes greater detail and differentiates between notes more easily. Higher up the frequency range, these Sonys continue to extract more information thanks to an extra sense of clarity. Notes are also dispatched with unerring precision - the XM5 headphones don't miss a beat when it comes to timing.

Duel Of The Fates from *The Phantom Menace* OST is a rousing classical track and, from the moment the choir puts the wheels of the song in motion, you can hear the Sonys conveying dynamic shifts without any hesitation. Strings and woodwind instruments drive the track along, the Sonys carefully switching from the frantic, frenzied action to the quieter moments with a delicate touch.

Billie Eilish's *Bad Guy* allows the Sonys to flex their muscles. There's a real sense of drive and weight to the drums, but the XM5 also manage to keep edges clean and



Sony claims a "noiseless design" for its slimmer XM5s

pristine, which makes their rise and fall even more dynamic. The Sonys do a great job of rendering Eilish's delicate yet very deliberate stop/start vocal - another example of the expert timing on display.

The jump up in sound quality Sony has achieved here is a big one, and rivals could once again have their work cut out. If you are looking for a new pair of premium wireless noise-cancelling headphones, your auditioning should start here.

View offers: whf.cm/BestRadios2024

RADIOS

The humble 'wireless' has evolved into a thoroughly modern music box with streaming smarts

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2024

BEST RADIO
£100-£400

RUARK AUDIO
R1S

PRODUCT OF THE YEAR



■ Ruark Audio R1S

£299

Elegant, stylish, gorgeous - just some of the many superlatives we could use to describe this lovely Ruark radio.

It's compact enough to perch on kitchen counters, work desks or bedside tables, and the front panel boasts a sleek fascia that hides the driver and looks classy in any environment. The full-colour display is large and crisp, with a strong contrast that makes the text legible from a distance.

Whether you view the R1S as a radio with streaming powers, or a wireless speaker with radio functions, this is a versatile unit that gives you options to play music in a variety of ways.

Love radio? FM, DAB/DAB+ tuners are built in, and there is a telescopic aerial. The R1S also has internet radio thanks to the built-in wi-fi, giving you access to thousands of global stations.

Also integrated are Spotify Connect, Amazon Music and Deezer, while those wanting to play any other music source

from a phone, laptop or tablet can easily connect to the R1S using Bluetooth.

There's a handy USB-C port that charges your smartphone and plays MP3 files from compatible devices, a 3.5mm auxiliary input for connecting other audio sources - even a 3.5mm headphone jack. We have tested more premium wireless speakers that aren't quite so generous with physical connections; we love how friendly and resourceful this little Ruark is. There is even space to add an optional battery pack (an extra £69) to make the R1S portable. Under the hood is a single full-range driver powered by Class A/B amplification.

We have often described Ruark's products as having a rich, full-bodied sound with a strong, lush midrange - ideal sonic characteristics for a radio. But the R1S is different; it sounds so articulate, neutral, precise and authoritative, and is surprisingly clear and crisp, revealing plenty of detail. Its timing is precise and

The Ruark's lovely retro styling will complement any environment

agile, with ample solidity underpinning every note to sound satisfyingly tethered and natural. There are physical limitations to how much bass you can eke out of a small cabinet (with a downwards port) but the R1S delivers just enough bass that is pulled deliciously taut to land with impact.

We play a variety of music genres and stations, and the radio's punctuality combined with a good sense of authority is unusual to hear. Voices are all projected clearly and sound characterful, while instruments aren't pushed to the background in favour of putting the spotlight on the midrange, as many radios tend to. There's dynamism and emotion, all delivered with an impressive amount of confidence and organisation.

From the elevated design to the broad spread of music-playing options available, if you're after a talented do-it-all internet radio that has modern streaming talents, this is one you should consider.

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★
AWARDS 2024

**BEST RADIO
UNDER £100**

**ROBERTS
REVIVAL PETITE 2**

■ Roberts Revival Petite 2 £100

Even today there is something universally appealing about the humble radio, especially one with such a compact form and such lovely retro looks.

Like the original five-star Petite, it's so tiny it can fit onto the palm of your hand and perch in any corner, windowsill, bookshelf or cluttered desk. The build quality is reassuringly solid and oozes high quality, and we love the rounded, smooth corners, soft but sturdy leather-like covering and colour-matched grille. It's available in seven attractive hues, too. The contrasting bronze trims, metal buttons and Roberts logo complete the look.

The dimmable OLED display screen is tiny but clear and packs in a whole lot of information such as radio station name, track/artist name, current source, signal strength, battery level icon and the time. Pushing the control dial reveals additional details, such as bitrate and genre.

As well as analogue FM and DAB/DAB+ digital radio there's Bluetooth for

streaming from any source. A 40mm driver with a passive radiator provides this titchy unit's sound, but there is nothing tiny or diminished about the presentation. It's a lively, rhythmically engaging sound that has a surprising amount of weight and punch to it, given the unit's size. The way it handles voices is a highlight, sounding clean, solid and detailed. The voices are admittedly given centre stage compared with the rest of the musical arrangement and instruments, but it's a balance deliberately chosen for talk radio. Voices have a natural warmth that is appealing, and enough detail and nuance to communicate each presenter's different personality and inflections well.

This translates well to songs played through the Roberts, as the Petite 2 bops



As well as 'traditional' radio, Bluetooth is also on board

along merrily with everything we play through it. Whether you're listening to BBC Radio 3 or Heart FM, the sonic balance is judged well to ensure it sounds confident and dynamically interesting, with the right amount of solidity and richness underpinning the midrange and upper bass to sound satisfying.

The Petite 2 is an utter delight to use, and a lot of fun to listen to. We can see this stylish, versatile, enjoyable-sounding radio appealing to anyone who still values the humble wireless radio - and wants all the added extras, too.

■ Ruark Audio R2 Mk4 £479

So much of the Ruark R2's appeal lies in its stylish, sleek modern-retro design. It would look at home anywhere in your home - you could even have it as the main audio system in your house.

The R2 is powered by 18 watts of Class A/B amplification, with two 75mm full-range drivers for stereo sound. There are two small, downward-firing bass ports on the underside, with enough space to operate wherever you place the R2. There is built-in support for Spotify Connect, Amazon Music and Deezer, while Apple Music or Tidal users can use the Bluetooth input. FM and DAB/DAB+ tuners come as standard. There's a 3.5mm auxiliary line input for connecting external sources and a 3.5mm headphone jack. A USB-C port can be used to play stored audio files on a flash drive, up to MP3 quality.

If you aren't charmed by the R2 Mk4's looks and feature set, you will be once you start playing music. Radio, streams and podcasts all sounds hugely enjoyable - with Ruark's naturally rich, weighty and

expressive sound signature that we have come to love. Radio stations come through clear and punchy, with a full-bodied approach that makes even the lower-quality digital stations pleasant to listen to.

It's a likeable presentation from the get-go. Play better-quality stations or stream songs from your favourite music app, and you will get tons of solidity, detail and dynamic expression. It is a shade on the warm side of neutral, but never so far as to colour the natural tone and feeling of songs. Underneath that genial, likeable manner is an impressive amount of sonic prowess for a product of this type. There



WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★
AWARDS 2024

**BEST RADIO
OVER £400**

**RUARK AUDIO
R2 MK4**

The R2 Mk4 is more than just a radio, and it looks great too

are no harsh edges to that smooth treble; there is ample headroom for higher notes to soar as well. For what is a fairly compact unit, the sound that emanates from the R2 Mk4 is surprisingly big and spacious, and it can reach decently loud volumes without losing composure. Voices in particular thrive through the R2, an important aspect for talk radio and podcasts, and the R2's natural warmth and textural depth lend so much life through the midrange.

If you're looking for a high-quality music system that looks great, is lovely to use and sounds wonderful, you have found it.

[View offers: whf.com/BestWirelessSpeakers2024](https://whf.com/BestWirelessSpeakers2024)

WIRELESS SPEAKERS

Out and about or listening at home, these speakers are versatile, talented and sound great

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2024

BEST PORTABLE WIRELESS SPEAKER OVER £200

JBL XTREME 4

PRODUCT OF THE YEAR



■ JBL Xtreme 4 £330

For the Xtreme 4, JBL has stuck to an evolution of the model's design rather than a revolution. It's still a cylindrical shape with the same tactile, ruggedised elements such as the wrap-around grille, made from a combination of recycled plastic and fabric. It's still waterproof and dustproof - well, it wouldn't be very 'Xtreme' if it fell over at the first sight of a raindrop, would it?

A new base features two strips of silicone bubble feet to give the speaker a bit more grip and greater stability to reduce the chances of it rolling over.

The driver configuration is the same as before: two 70mm woofers and two 20mm tweeters behind the grille. You also have the usual JBL-logo-wearing passive radiators at either end that you can see pulsing along in time with your tunes.

Battery life gets a big boost up to 24 hours (from 15 hours on the Xtreme 3). If that isn't enough (and it probably will be

for even the biggest party animal), JBL's Playtime Boost feature can also squeeze out an extra six hours. We would steer clear of this feature, though; it boosts mids and highs but also sucks the weight and solidity out of the bass.

AI Sound Boost helps the speaker maintain sound quality at loud volumes and prevent distortion. It uses an AI algorithm to predict the speaker's movement and power response - we push the JBL hard during testing and it remains composed and controlled even when the volume is cranked past 11.

Auracast Bluetooth tech makes its debut on the Xtreme 4, and means you can pair two together in stereo, or you can connect multiple compatible JBL units.

For such a chunky speaker it produces a fantastically refined sound that is wonderfully clear and consistent across tracks. Low frequencies are poised and punchy but don't lack weight. Highs are

The rugged JBL's grille is made from recycled plastic and fabric

crisp enough so they don't feel rolled off. Detail levels are excellent for the money and it's still exciting and fun to listen to - exactly what you want from a product such as this.

With Yungblud's *Breakdown*, the JBL does a great job of delivering the emotion and feeling in his vocal, and mixing it in with the flow of the melody. The sweet-sounding piano play sets the song on its way with expertly defined edges before the song's drum'n'bassy bassline kicks in. There's real speed and precision to each probing bass hit, with the speaker cutting a precise groove. The JBL's clarity, cohesion and solidity are a real highlight here.

Consistency is key to new entries in a product line. It isn't always about making huge leaps in performance, it can also be about small, subtle adjustments that are carefully considered and well executed. The Xtreme 4 is just a superb all-round performer that is difficult to fault.

WHAT HI·FI?

AWARDS 2024

**BEST HOME
WIRELESS SPEAKER
UNDER £100**

**APPLE
HOMEPOD MINI**

■ Apple HomePod Mini £99

With a **startling** audio performance, the HomePod Mini sonically embarrasses its direct competition. It gets to the core of your music, ensuring everything it plays is engaging and interesting. It is both sophisticated and mature in its sound.

It is also affordable enough to be bought in quantity, laden with smart skills and has an uncanny ability to introduce you to new music you will love. All of which makes it a deeply impressive proposition.

And when they say 'Mini', they're not joking. At just 8.4cm tall and 9.8cm wide, it is roughly half the size of the similarly priced Amazon Echo, and is even smaller than the Echo Dot. Classy and alluring touches such as the lights in the top glass panel make the wraparound light strip of the Amazon Echo look as sophisticated as a set of traffic lights.

Within the HomePod Mini's spherical, mesh-covered frame, chosen as much for its acoustic properties as for its stylishness, is a single, Apple-designed full-range driver

that fires sound downwards and out of the 360-degree waveguide around the bottom. The driver is held by a suspension system to reduce distortion, and is flanked by two passive radiators designed to help create a bigger, weightier sound.

Three of the four built-in microphones listen out for the 'Hey Siri' command; the fourth uses echo location to ensure you can be heard over loud music or background noise. The HomePod's brain is the S5 chip, which Apple claims analyses and optimises the performance over 180 times per second, based on the position of the speaker and what is being played.

Musically, the Mini comfortably outperforms its size and price; it's clean and remains composed at all volumes. It is more solid and authoritative than a speaker this small has any right to be, and its bass is seamlessly integrated into the overall presentation. There is excellent overall tonal balance and consistency, with no frequencies over-exaggerated. Like the



For its size, the Mini's sound is far more authoritative than you'd expect

original HomePod, the Mini has an innate ability to get to the core of a track, delivering it as faithfully as its stature allows. That is a rare ability, particularly at this price - for which you get all this and the ability to control compatible devices in your house, too. Another Award win for 2024 is therefore a no-brainer.

■ JBL Charge 5 £160

Anyone looking for substantial on-the-go sound from something durable and around the weight and size of a bottle of wine, this one's for you.

JBL's Charge range of rugged, portable, no-nonsense Bluetooth speakers has consistently impressed us. The Charge 5, builds on its hard-wearing predecessors with an IP67-rating that means it can be submerged in water up to a depth of 1.5m and is also fully dustproof.

There's a useful USB-A port for charging your devices, and a new USB-C charging port too. Under the hood are plenty of improvements. The 52 x 90mm bass driver is a little wider than before, and there is a new 20mm tweeter. These units both have dedicated power amplification, 30W for the woofer, 10W for the highs. It now features Bluetooth 5.1, but the same 7500mAh battery offers the same 20 hours of playback from a charge.

JBL's updated daisy-chaining technology, here enabled via a Party

WHAT HI·FI?

AWARDS 2024

**BEST PORTABLE
WIRELESS SPEAKER
UNDER £200**

JBL CHARGE 5

Boost button, means you can beef up your portable sound by linking the Charge 5 with up to 100 other PartyBoost-enabled JBL Bluetooth offerings, such as the Boombox 2, Flip 5, Flip 6 and Pulse 4 models. The JBL Portable app is fairly basic, with no EQ optimisation, but it's good for firmware updates, to deploy PartyBoost remotely and to create a stereo pairing with another Charge 5.

We press the PartyBoost button on the Charge 5, then do the same on our Flip 5, and sound dutifully comes from both, clearly and with no noticeable lag.

The Charge 5's extra ounce of prowess over the Charge 4 soon reveals itself. It is



The Charge 5 is capable of delicacy as well as bass clout

marginally more impactful - the leading edges of notes through the low end are crisper, resulting in a more agile performance. Vocals are also more energised and feel well placed in what is an expansive mix for a portable speaker of this size, while the Charge 5 also proves itself capable of delicacy and nuance as well as oomph and bass clout.

With those marginal improvements, both sonically and aesthetically, over its predecessor, the Charge 5 is currently as good a sound as you can get in a portable Bluetooth speaker design for less than £200. Which, for another year, makes it a worthy winner here.

■ Apple HomePod 2 £299

The new HomePod sounds even better than its predecessor, making it one of the very best wireless speakers you can buy.

Like the original, the HomePod 2 features a woofer at the top and tweeters at the bottom, a configuration that is still unusual. The high-excursion woofer design can shift more air than a typical wireless speaker's driver, resulting in louder, weightier sound. The woofer bounces audio off the underside of the top panel so that it can then escape the casework evenly around its circumference.

Sound from the five tweeters is fired down and outwards via individual horns, with the arrangement designed to prevent sound reflecting off the surface upon which the speaker is placed. A number of sensors between them measure the performance of the HomePod in real-time, in terms of its positioning, the music it is playing, volume and even its own "current mechanical and electrical conditions". The data collected by these is then analysed by



the new S7 chip, and the performance adjusted so the sound is as good and correct as it can be.

The HomePod 2 supports Spatial Audio for playing Dolby Atmos tracks via Apple Music, though it can also be used for movies if you have an Apple TV 4K.

Sound-wise, the new HomePod delights. With Apple Music's Dolby Atmos version of *The 1* by Taylor Swift, we are struck by the clarity and warmth of Swift's voice, at once airy and focused, and the breathy quality of the delivery is really nicely resolved. The chorus harmony is a lovely advert for Dolby Atmos music and the new HomePod's ability to reproduce it, with the additional vocal tracks stretching up and outwards, spatially distinct and ethereal but very much part of the whole. We spin up SBTRKT's *Trials Of The Past* in Apple Lossless, a rather fizzy recording that is driven to brightness and sibilance by lots of serious hi-fi kit, meaning most affordable wireless speakers don't stand a chance. Yet



The subwoofer bounces audio off the underside of the top panel

the HomePod 2 delivers it with assured control. With James Blake's *Limit To Your Love*, the HomePod 2 demonstrates the sort of low-frequency flexibility that the average wireless speaker can only dream of. The HomePod 2 has boundless energy all round, whatever you play through it.

If you are an avid Apple user, and preferably an Apple Music subscriber, the HomePod 2 is arguably the best speaker of this type you can buy.

■ Audio Pro C20 £450



The C20 wants to do it all, across a range of wired and wireless inputs, to give you the ultimate listening flexibility. The look is very simple and very Scandi - all clean lines and very little in the way of flash or flourish. At 196 x 410 x 220mm and 6.2kg, this is a big, weighty unit, and the build quality is top notch. Everything feels solid, from the cabinet to the confident clickiness of the control panel buttons.

It has a set of RCA inputs, a moving-magnet phono stage, an optical input for digital sources, an HDMI ARC for connecting it to your TV and a subwoofer out too. There's AirPlay 2 and Google Cast for playback over wi-fi up to 24-bit/96kHz and Bluetooth 5.0 built in. There's Spotify Connect and Tidal Connect, plus Audio Pro's own multi-room offering.

The C20's striking driver design features a single 16.5cm woofer at its centre and two 25mm tweeters on either side. These are powered by one 130W and two 30W Class D amplifiers, for a total power output of 190W. For a speaker at this size and price, that's not

bad at all. That power translates to playback. But while the C20's wide, open soundstage can fill rooms with ease, this isn't a speaker that is all about showing its muscle above all else. There is bass weight by the bucketload, sure, but there's focus and clarity too.

Playing *Baddadan* by Chase & Status, the C20 shows both its authority and dynamic capabilities. This is a big drum'n'bass track, but it does have light and shade - it builds in intensity, from the more stripped back intro to the busy, bass-heavy chorus, and the C20 doesn't miss a beat. It reaches deep to reproduce the synth-y bass notes, but keeps them packed with detail and texture too. It does this alongside a well-integrated midrange that is never dragged down by the weight



The C20 has Audio Pro's 'looks like a koala' driver array

below it. It also avoids ever sounding detached, creating a very cohesive sound, no matter how busy things get in a mix.

Through the optical input, the presentation tightens up a bit more, there is a touch more fine detail and dynamically it takes the ebb and flow of tracks up a notch too. There's no change in character - it just sounds a little bit better. HDMI works well too. Dialogue is focused and projects well towards the viewer, and there's no lack of power and bass punch for movies.

The C20 can do a lot of things, and do almost all of them very well indeed. The performance here is so authoritative, and so detailed, it offers a taste of hi-fi in very capable wireless speaker form.

■ Naim Mu-so Qb 2

£699

First you are lured in by the unit's asymmetrical curves, then you are wooed by that gorgeous rotary volume dial with touch-screen controls in its centre. But it's what happens underneath that makes this speaker so exceptional. A three-way stereo speaker combination with midrange and bass drive units is powered by 300W of amplification. The single bass driver fires directly forwards, while a pair of tweeters and midrange drivers are angled outwards for wider dispersion.

Inside is Naim's premium streaming platform, also found in the second-gen Uniti products and flagship ND 555, with streaming options courtesy of Airplay 2, Chromecast, Roon, Bluetooth, Spotify Connect, internet radio and Tidal.

You will also be able to access files up to 32-bit/384kHz on your home network via the Naim app. Here you can build a high-end multi-room system of up to five Naim streaming products, all controlled by one device. Want to add your Mu-so

Qb 2 to an existing Apple or Google multi-room ecosystem? Simple.

Sonically, treble response is lively and open, truly sparkling after a little running in to match the richness of tone evident throughout the rest of the frequency range. The overall presentation is muscular but agile. There's plenty of bass weight and precise low-end punch too.

The Qb 2's mantra is openness. There is an airiness to the soundstage, those angled drivers dispersing sound well. It also displays first-rate timing and dynamic range. It doesn't simply keep up; it thrives on snappy rhythmic patterns, issuing a sprightly performance, anchored by its impressive scale in the low frequencies. It can bare its teeth when necessary too, snarling as it attacks distorted guitar lines. But it also has a gentler, more caring side when the noise quells to a whisper.

It is well equipped to bring that kind of hi-fi sensibility and analysis to one-box wireless listening, and we can think of few



WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2024

BEST HOME WIRELESS SPEAKER OVER £500

NAIM MU-SO QB 2ND GENERATION

The Mu-so Qb's angled drivers provide a wider sound dispersion

combinations of separates that can better the sound and match the price. You really are getting a lot for your money here. The greatest value is found not in its features or design, but in a sonic performance that will effortlessly dispense with any all-in-one rival. This is one-box wireless listening *par excellence* and a worthy winner once again.

FIVE GREAT NOUGHTIES TRACKS TO TEST YOUR SYSTEM

Genre-spanning classics from the 2000s that will reveal your system's strengths, or flaws



Dizzee Rascal Dance Wiv Me

This will put your system through its paces. It initially sounds like a light and airy dusting of poppy R&B, complete with soulful vocals. But once the bass drops it becomes clear we are dealing with a proper club banger. Your system will need a nimble low-end to keep up with that agile bassline, as well as Rascal's raspy, energetic vocal.



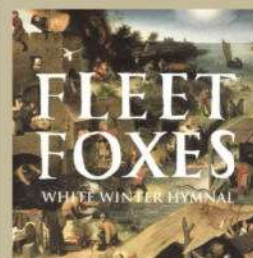
Slipknot Duality

Incredibly fast, ferocious drumming and heavy-but-nimble fretwork deserve a terrifically agile, precise and detailed system. But Corey Taylor's remarkable vocal range with its different textures, tones, distortions, volumes and nuances demands a great system that can differentiate all those vocal variations to deliver the song's full effect.



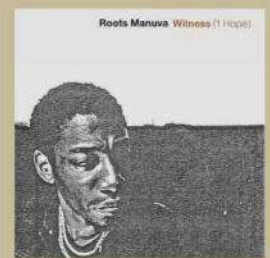
Gorillaz Clint Eastwood

A common blunder is kit rushing through this track's nodding trip-hop tempo, and it sounding sped up. The rapped vocal allows a system to flex its midrange suppleness, while the melodic should come across true to its weird sound - a cross between a harmonica and accordion, high-pitched and thin but airy.



Fleet Foxes White Winter Hymnal

It's the voices here that are the real star of the show, with dense, reverb-laden harmonies that sound like they were recorded in some kind of rural church. If your system's up to scratch, you should almost be able to mistake this Fleet Foxes track for something from the early 1970s, rather than the age of MySpace.



Roots Manuva Witness (1 Hope)

That squelching bassline was Roots trying to imitate the *Doctor Who* theme and is complemented beautifully by sparkling effects that sound like stars being born. Manuva claims his production aimed to single out the poor quality sound systems used in many clubs in the noughties. Let's hope your system is up to the task.

View offers: whf.cm/BestTablets2024

TABLETS

These are the best portable devices for watching movies and listening to music on the go

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2024

**BEST PREMIUM
TABLET**

**APPLE IPAD PRO
13-INCH M4**

PRODUCT OF THE YEAR



■ Apple iPad Pro 13-inch M4 £1299

The largest iPad Pro has long been a brilliant if pricey way to watch movies on the move - and that is taken to the next level here. This is the first iPad with an OLED screen, potentially meaning a big upgrade in picture performance. And we can confirm this latest iPad Pro is the new benchmark for movie-watching on the go.

The screen has increased in size by 0.1 of an inch, but it's thinner by 1.3mm, and is lighter than the previous model by a not-insignificant 100g. This is a hugely well-made and premium-feeling device that is a pleasure to possess.

Apple has given the new iPad Pro a 'tandem OLED' display that combines two OLED panels so that it offers all of the benefits of OLED (most importantly, the pixel-level contrast control and perfect blacks) while still matching the previous Mini LED display for brightness. So, according to Apple, the new iPad Pro is still able to hit 1600 nits with HDR highlights

and 1000 nits of full-screen brightness. It can now hit 1000 nits with SDR content, too, whereas the previous model was limited to 600 nits with such content.

The iPad Pro has long been overkill in terms of power, and this new model has the mighty new M4 processor, that Apple claims necessary in order to power the 'precision, colour and brightness' of the new tandem OLED display. We suspect that most owners never get close to hitting the limits of their iPad Pro's capabilities, particularly if they are more interested in the iPad as a movie and music player, as we are, rather than a productivity device.

Playing *Napoleon* from Apple TV+, the new iPad Pro's warmer tonal balance is clear to see, and it gives its reproduction a more cinematic feel. This iPad is an even more accomplished handler of motion than previous generations. OLED is inherently far more responsive than LCD technology, and you can see that in the

The tablet boasts Apple's M4 chip, which may be processing overkill

constant crispness of the delivery, particularly in fast, unpredictable motion.

The screen's highlights combine with even deeper blacks to produce overall greater contrast which benefits perceived sharpness and three-dimensionality - and those super-deep OLED blacks thankfully don't crush shadow detail.

All told, this is a spectacular picture performance that combines pop and dynamism with superb subtlety and cinematic richness, resulting in a portable movie experience that is a match for the best home cinema displays.

All this doesn't come cheaply, but if you have the luxury of a large budget, the new iPad Pro 13-inch is irresistibly good. Invest in a pair of AirPods Max for headphone listening, and they will elevate the iPad's cinematic chops to frankly amazing levels and make a long-haul movie marathon a thing of genuine joy. A very deserved winner indeed.

■ Amazon Fire HD 10 £150

While not cheap by any means, the Fire HD 10 looks like very good value for a 10in tablet. It has got the highest pixel density of any Fire tablet, too, helping to make it perfect for watching movies on the move.

Unsurprisingly, it can't match an iPad for build quality, but neither does it look or feel cheap. The plastic chassis has a nice, grippy texture, while the front is all glass and uniformly black when the screen is off. Its bezels are about 2cm thick around the 10.1in, 16:10-ratio active display. As a whole it is just 8.6mm thick (the standard iPad is 7mm) and 434g (the iPad is 477g), and in the hand it feels both slim and solid.

That 10.1in screen has a 1920 x 1200 resolution (just over Full HD in TV terms). That equates to a pixel density of 224ppi, which is higher than any other Fire tablet, and not a million miles off the 264ppi of every iPad barring the pixel-rich Mini.

Running the show is a 2.0GHz octa-core processor that isn't going to

pull up any trees but is more than adequate for smooth operation, streaming and casual gaming.

While the Fire HD 10 doesn't support HDR, we are immediately struck by how bright and punchy the image is playing *The Grand Tour* on Prime Video. Colours really pop in the bright Zimbabwean sunshine, and the green fields and trees are lush. The skin tones of the three presenters are realistically presented - May looks a bit sunburned, but that's because he is.

Switching to *Rogue One* on Disney+, it is clear that the Amazon tablet can't match an iPad for deep blacks, but it doesn't look grey or washed out, either. On the contrary, it's a pleasingly contrasty performance. The tablet handles the more subdued palette of the movie well, authentically reproducing the dusty browns and greys of the uniforms of the rebel troops.

'Full HD' doesn't sound very impressive in a world of 4K and even 8K TVs, but it's

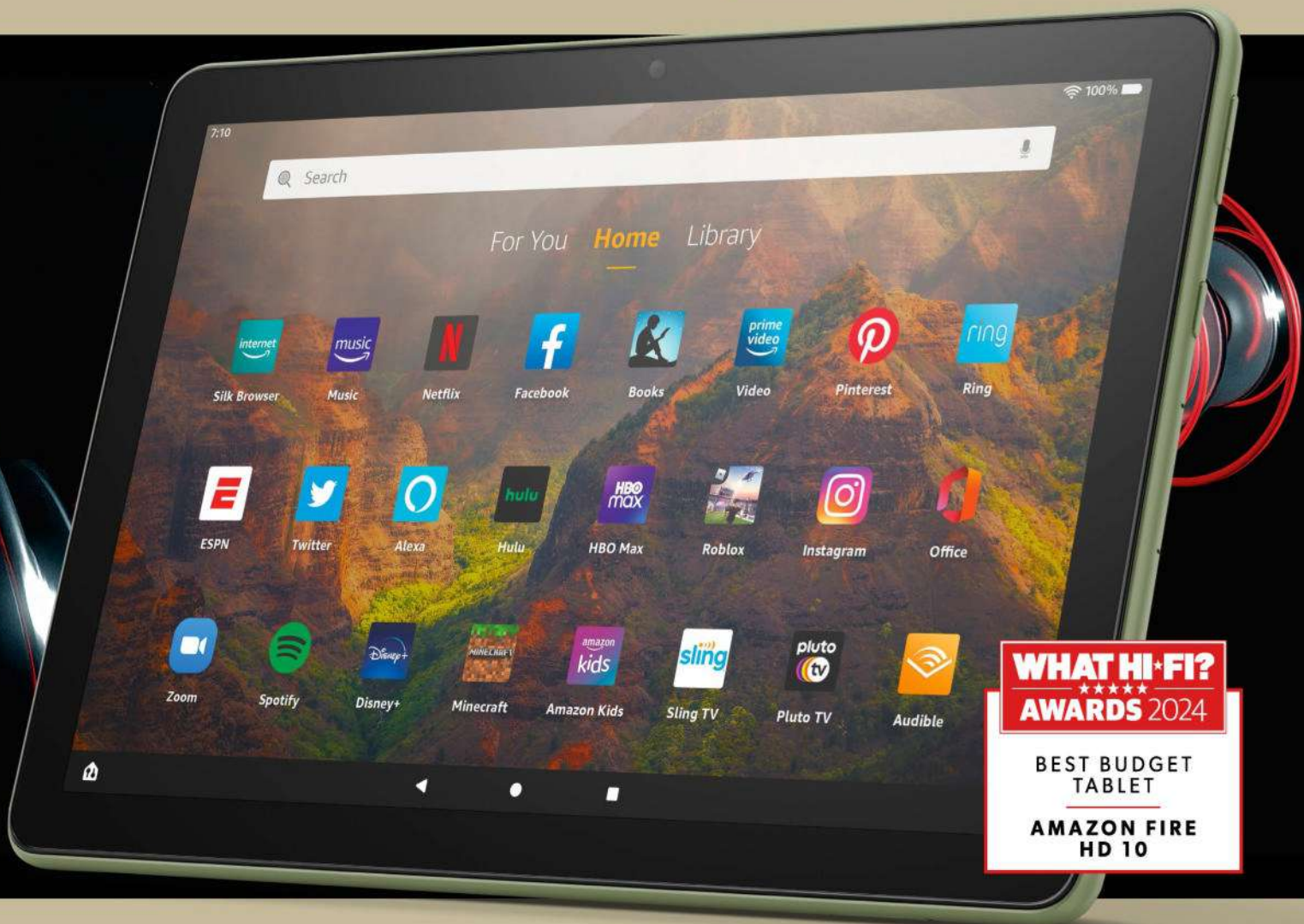
more than adequate for a sharp and fairly crisp delivery at this size. In fact, there is an unexpected three-dimensionality to the presentation. There's lots of detail in faces, clothes and scenery, with only a little blur to motion. All told, the Fire HD 10 delivers movies and TV shows in a way that is pretty faithful to creative intent and with a surprising amount of pop and definition.

Connect a pair of headphones for music listening (via the 3.5mm connection or Bluetooth) and you will discover a delivery that is a little low on impact but pretty high on detail and tonally nicely balanced.

The Fire HD 10 offers a really solid picture performance that successfully balances authenticity with surprising punch and sharpness, and audio that is good enough for a movie soundtrack and the odd bit of music listening.

Considering the price of iPads, the world needs a cheap-but-good alternative; and the Fire HD 10 is exactly that.

The Fire HD10 has the highest pixel density of any of the Fire tablets



[View offers: whf.com/BestPortableMusicPlayers2024](https://whf.com/BestPortableMusicPlayers2024)

PORTABLE MUSIC PLAYER

This portable device will bring hi-fi quality to your music, wherever you feel like taking it

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2024

**BEST PORTABLE
MUSIC PLAYER**

**ASTELL & KERN
A&NORMA SR35**

PRODUCT OF THE YEAR

■ Astell & Kern A&norma SR35

£799

The **A&norma SR35** might test the definition of 'entry level', but there's no uncertainty over whether it performs to its price point. The SR35 has evolved both the features offering and performance of its 2022 Award-winning predecessor, the SR25 Mk II, with a bunch of technologies designed to reduce noise and maximise performance. Dual Band Wi-Fi (2.4/5GHz) is now supported to deliver bolstered network stability whether streaming or making use of its brand-new Roon Ready support. Two-way Bluetooth now supports the 5.0 standard, alongside the aptX HD and LDAC codecs.

The 20-hour battery life remains, and all in all, the SR35 is a very well-specified player - and not *too* well-specified either. We have seen portable music players adopt a full Android operating system and all the apps and phone-like density that goes with it, and most of the time it feels unnecessary for such an audio

device. We like the SR35's stripped-back functionality, as we have always admired the geometrically quirky aluminium casework and sleek, shiny finish of A&K's entry-level players, with compact dimensions that make it pocketable and easy to hold and operate in one hand.

Power and finesse

This is the kind of musical machine we have come to expect from A&K, and the company has remained consistently loyal to a full-bodied, entertaining character across its entire range of players.

It's a very likeable presentation, with a tonal balance slightly on the rich side and a combination of power and finesse that feels very mature for a source at this level - one that most headphones will get along with just fine. Thankfully, that same sonic signature also shines through our favoured Grado RS1x headphones when the SR35 handily steps in as a budget-level DAC.

The SR35 is compact enough to operate with just one hand

The SR35 effortlessly flows with all music it is handed, conveying a very decent amount of dynamic expression and ultimately more detail than we have heard from a player at this price. Playing Peter Broderick's *Eyes Closed And Travelling*, the player captures the undulating dynamic subtleties of his spirited piano-playing to a level that is unique until you reach further up A&K's lineup. There's plenty in the way of verve when we chuck it Elvis Costello's *Lipstick Vogue* and Drake's *What Next*, but also the organisation and control to ensure nothing feels rushed or messy. Admittedly its soundstage isn't as wide-open or big-sounding as the cheaper FiiO M11S, but nor does it feel small or congested, and the SR35 reveals its superiority (and justifies its premium price) through greater clarity, subtlety and rhythmic cohesion. This is a more sophisticated, next-level performance than the other few budget players still around are capable of.



A NEW GENERATION OF SOUND.

Our new MA receivers + Stage 2 Speakers are the ultimate home audio combo. As the only system on the market featuring every component from the same brand, they pair together seamlessly to deliver the best sound experience for the next generation of consumers. Check them out at [JBL.com](https://www.jbl.com).

JBL

[View offers: whf.cm/BestSmartphones2024](http://whf.cm/BestSmartphones2024)

SMARTPHONES

The best hand-held phones for watching movies and playing music on the go

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2024

**BEST
SMARTPHONE
UNDER £500**

**SONY
XPERIA 10 VI**

PRODUCT OF THE YEAR

■ Sony Xperia 10 VI £349

Sony's strategy of cutting down on premium build materials and camera performance while retaining picture quality in order to reach a more affordable price point has always resonated with us. This is the third generation we have reviewed with this formula, and again, put simply, the Xperia exceeds its diminutive price tag as the most cinematic phone we have seen for the money.

While this is the entry-level Xperia device, it nonetheless boasts a 6.1in OLED display with a resolution of 1080 x 2520 pixels with a density of 449ppi - an identical specification to the more expensive Xperia 5. But while the device technically supports HDR, it's not the HDR10 standard as seen on the Xperia 5.

The opening sequence of *Blade Runner 2049* is delivered with well-defined outlines and plenty of detailed texture in clothing, skin and the environment alike. While the display can appear to lean cooler than we prefer, the colours overall remain balanced and well-judged, leading to a pleasingly natural-looking image.

What is most striking is how much three-dimensional depth there is to the image. In the farmhouse scene, we find there is some loss of dark detail in the very blackest part of the image, but areas bathed in murky white light from the windows have a natural-looking illumination without appearing over-brightened.

The Xperia 10 VI continues the budget series' trend of formidable audio

This is the most cinematic phone we have tested at this price point

performance at a reasonable price. Plugging our over-ears into the 3.5mm headphone jack we are met with a snappy and rhythmic performance of *DARE* by Gorillaz that captures the playful energy of the track. Taylor Swift's *The 1* has plenty of detail, with the sort of low-level dynamic subtlety required to deliver Swift's yearning lyrics with the necessary emotive qualities. The sound remains spacious, well organised and dynamic.

Sony's ability to deliver a phone this talented in the picture and sound department for this price should be studied by other manufacturers. If you want an affordable handset that doubles as an impressive portable music and movie player, this could be the one.



■ Apple iPhone 16 Pro £999

The 16 Pro is a formidable smartphone for watching movies, and it's equally impressive when it comes to music too.

There is a slightly larger screen than last year's device - a 6.3in Super Retina XDR OLED display, with a variable refresh rate from 1Hz to 120Hz, a resolution of 1206 x 2622 pixels and a pixel density of 460ppi.

The bottom line is that this iPhone delivers a balanced, sharp, bright image that looks stunning with all content.

With *Top Gun: Maverick* in Dolby Vision, we are met with a warm, rich and engaging image. Edges are crisp and well defined, leading to a pleasingly three-dimensional presentation. While the picture as a whole

is rich and punchy, it is also expertly balanced, and there is a palpable subtlety to be found. Top that off with inky blacks courtesy of the OLED display and impressive motion handling, and the iPhone 16 Pro proves itself a formidable portable movie-watching machine.

This is also easily the best-sounding phone we have heard this year. We listen to a range of tracks on Tidal, and find the iPhone's warm, smooth and dynamic sound digs out even more detail than ever.

Apple's attention to detail enhances every aspect of the 16 Pro's AV experience in a meaningful way. That makes this handset extremely easy to recommend.

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2024

**BEST SMARTPHONE
OVER £500**

**APPLE
IPHONE 16 PRO**

The 16 Pro's display is 6.3in, bigger than that of last year's 15 Pro



View offers: whf.com/BestWiredHeadphones2024

WIRED HEADPHONES

For the true audiophile, these expressive wired headphones will enhance your listening experience

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2024

**BEST WIRED
ON-EAR
HEADPHONES
£100-£200**

RØDE NTH-100

PRODUCT OF THE YEAR

■ Røde NTH-100 £105

There's a lot of choice in over-ear headphones at this sort of money, but wired headphones are harder to come by. And wired headphones that claim to be equally at home in the studio as in the living room are rarer still.

The NTH-100 use a combination of plastic and metal, with Alcantara fabric at the contact points. A lot of attention has been paid to the headband and hanger, and the clamping force is very nicely judged - so the NTH-100 don't really feel their 350g weight and stay comfortable for long sessions. A little 'twist/lock' control on either side of the headband locks the position once you are happy with the fit.

'Purity of purpose' is probably the most charitable way to describe the NTH-100, with 40mm full-range dynamic drivers and a claimed frequency response of 5Hz-35kHz, which is more than adequate.

Headphones are either for the purposes of casual entertainment, or

they are for critical, business-like purposes such as monitoring or mixing. It's unusual to find a pair of headphones that are able to fulfil both roles adequately; and it's even rarer at the sort of money Røde is asking.

Wired to an Audioquest Dragonfly Cobalt and taking receipt of a 24-bit/96kHz file of Nick Drake's *Pink Moon*, the Rødes waste no time in establishing that they are an almost fanatically insightful and revealing listen, happy to dish all the details no matter how minor and/or fleeting. They are a balanced and poised listen too, not exactly analytical for the sake of it, but able to describe the whole picture for you.

Tonally, they are on the naturalistic side. What bass there is in this recording is respectably deep, but also swift and well controlled. Attack and decay of individual sounds are really well observed, making the NTH-100 a rapid and punchy listen. It

Despite weighing 350g, the Rødes are comfortable over long sessions

also means they muster very decent rhythmic expression, too.

There is substance to treble sounds, which are delivered with crispness, attack and real conviction. The midrange, though, is the star of the show. Even the most slight variations in tone or timbre are picked up on, even momentary shifts in harmonic detail are identified. Drake's voice on this recording is quiet and without affectation, and it sounds very much as though the mic is really close indeed to his mouth - and subsequently the NTH-100 describe his singing with intimacy and immediacy.

With considerable dynamic headroom, a big, solidly constructed soundstage and an overarching impression of 'control', the Rødes are deeply capable headphones. If you want to know the minutiae of the differences between 'mix A' and 'mix B', or if you just want to hear your recordings in a cleanly explicit manner, they are just the job, and outstanding value.

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2024

**BEST WIRED
ON-EAR
HEADPHONES
UNDER £100**

**AUSTRIAN AUDIO
HI-X15**

■ Austrian Audio Hi-X15

£89

Founded by ex-AKG employees, Austrian Audio hit the ground running three years ago with a range of excellent wired headphones; the Hi-X15 picked up this Award in 2021 and 2022. It was the first model we had heard from the brand that we would consider a proper budget offering, and so good are they that they retain their Award this year.

From the use of proper metal hinges to the matte plastic on the arms, these wired headphones have a quality feel that belies the price. In each earcup is a 44mm driver and ring-magnet system with a copper-clad aluminium voice coil. The grip level is nicely judged, with just enough pressure applied to keep them from sliding around your head, while the soft, 'slow retention' memory foam earpads are also comfy.

Any rough and ready recordings are mirrored in how the sound is fed into your ears, and this transparency gives them a huge advantage over rivals, especially for a closed-back design. This sense of openness

allows an immense amount of detail to be served up without having to worry about sound leaking out.

Throughout the frequency range, these headphones deliver consistently high detail levels and fantastic dynamics. Play *The End* by Kings Of Leon, and the Hi-X15 pick apart and deliver the funky bass guitar riff at the start, the drum kit and lead guitar with consummate ease. You can almost feel the texture of each instrument as it is being played. At the same time there is enough weight and substance to low frequencies that you don't feel as though you are missing out. The headphones punch their way along, each note dispatched with force and power.

The Hi-X15 are analytical headphones, but they still manage to make music entertaining, by extracting bags of detail but keeping the soul of your music intact. These are mature-sounding headphones that go above and beyond at the money - and that keeps them at the top of the pile.



■ Grado SR325x

£249

Over time, Grado has consistently developed its Prestige range of headphones in small evolutionary steps - and so it is with this 'x' generation, with most of the important work going unseen.

The 44mm drive unit has been given a revised motor system, new diaphragm and upgraded coil, with the aim of improving efficiency and reducing distortion. The new eight-conductor cable uses super-annealed copper and is claimed to deliver a purer sound than before.

Changes to the drive unit are obvious too. We listen to Massive Attack's *Heligoland* and the SR325x sound notably cleaner and clearer than their predecessor, the SR325e. These headphones have always been detailed and articulate performers, and that hasn't changed, but the 'x' generation sounds that bit more precise and insightful. We can follow low-level instrumental strands with more ease, especially in the album's more densely produced tracks. Rhythms are still delivered with enthusiasm and punch.

The SR325x's open-backed design means they leak sound, but are wonderfully expressive dynamically, and while lows are agile and tuneful, there is still not the outright weight and low-end punch of closed headphone designs. They can sound a little bass-light in comparison with such products, though we are happy to make that sacrifice given the many benefits of the open-design approach.

With Lana Del Rey's *Chemtrails Over The Country Club* set, we love the Grados' ability to convey the texture and attitude in her voice. The excellent insight generates a lovely sense of atmosphere and we find ourselves getting lost in the music rather than merely focusing on performance. The new-found sense of refinement provided by the SR325x makes it easier to relax when listening, too.

Whether it's the soul of Gladys Knight, the hard-edged tunes of Nirvana or hip-hop of Eminem, these headphones sound right at home and once again fully justify their Award win this time around.

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2024

**BEST WIRED
ON-EAR
HEADPHONES
OVER £200**

GRADO SR325X



■ SoundMagic E11C

£40

SoundMagic has retained the budget-earbud crown that it has held for several years now thanks to its affordable in-ear model, the E11C.

The E11Cs have a cylindrical, aluminium-casing design and a choice of small, medium or large silicone tips. They also have a silver-plated copper cable to help reduce the loss of signal quality. On the cable for the left earphone are the remote control and three-button mic. It's a standard affair that will work with Apple and Android phones, giving you volume and stop/start functionality.

The sensitivity rating of 112dB is high, meaning the E11C in-ears can deliver plenty of volume. It also means they will use less of your device's power at average volume. But quite simply, for the money, the E11Cs just sound really good. From the off, you are treated to a well balanced, entertaining, energetic sound. Listen to Drake's *God's Plan* and the deep, sub-bass notes hit as they should, with decent

depth and warmth, while the hi-hats tick along clearly at the top end. Drake's vocals sit comfortably in the midrange and, again, clarity is a strength here.

Aphex Twin's *T69 Collapse* proves a more challenging workout, but thanks to a crisp, not too bright treble, the track's energetic drums are delivered with life and control. The E11Cs are able to deliver a well-timed and enjoyable listen, combining precision with good dynamic range to keep rhythms in check.

A 4/4 dance track is always a good test of timing, and *Algo!* by Troy is a no-nonsense pounder, complete with off-beat stabs to keep things interesting. The SoundMagic E11C earphones again deliver an enjoyable listen.

At this price we simply can't argue with their entertaining, upfront sound - and you even get a remote control and mic for your money, too. All of which means that once again, the SoundMagic E11C take top prize in their budget category.



■ Shure Aonic 3

£179

It's easy to see the appeal of affordable (and ubiquitous) wireless earbuds. So the question is, why would you even consider spending this kind of money on a pair of in-ears that have to rely on eartips for noise isolation, an in-line mic for controls and a 3.5mm jack to connect to your smartphone? Well, we urge you to spend a minute or two in the company of the Aonic 3; you will soon have answered that question for yourself.

Radiohead's *15 Step* is a true test of timing that can easily trip up any speakers or headphones that aren't paying attention. Yet the Aonic 3 absolutely nail it. Even if the track isn't necessarily your cup of tea, these Shures make it a delight to listen to. There's no sense of confusion, no jumbling of elements. These in-ears separate strands and knit them together in one glorious musical tapestry. The sense of rhythm and timing on offer from the Shures needs to be heard to be believed.

The same is true of their dynamic ability. On Billie Eilish's *No Time To Die*, delicate

keystrokes of a piano combine with an intimate vocal that oozes detail. Bass notes don't protrude and highs don't cut too deep. The Shures are honest, transparent and true to the original recording.

We are big fans of the fit and level of comfort that these lightweight buds offer - thanks to the nine different pairs of eartips supplied, including silicone, foam and flange designs. You also get a 3.5mm to 6.3mm headphone adapter, should you want to plug the Shures into a traditional stereo amp. These Shures might not be the most thrilling pair of headphones we will ever hear, but they continually impress - and we are struggling to think of a pair of in-ear headphones at this level that come even close to the Aonic 3 for transparency, detail, dynamics and musicality.

Breathtakingly musical, and comfy to wear, the Shures set a benchmark for in-ear headphones at this level. If you can resist the bells and whistles promised by wireless earbuds, ignore these multiple Award-winning Shure Aonic 3 at your peril.



View offers: whf.cm/BestCDplayers2024

CD PLAYERS

If you're still hanging on to your beloved CDs, they will sparkle when played through these

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2024

BEST CD PLAYER
£500-£1000

ARCAM CD5

PRODUCT OF THE YEAR



■ Arcam CD5

£699

Going by its amplifier siblings' Award-winning performances, the CD5 could be just what CD fans have been waiting for.

Similar to the A5 and A15 amps, the CD5 sports a sleek, minimal design and is made to a high standard. The black aluminium body with yellow accents looks modern in an understated way, and the whole unit feels robust. The front display, with its simple text showing track information, is easy to read from afar. The disc-loading tray operates smoothly and quickly, with a gentle but reassuring mechanical whirr. We find the CD5 easy and responsive to use, whether pressing the unit's large buttons for playback or using the small remote.

Connections are minimal, with just a single pair of RCA line-level outputs and, on the digital side, one optical and one coaxial output apiece. The CD5 supports playback of CD, CD-R and CD-RW disc formats. You can also play music files (in

FLAC, WAV, WMA, MP3 and AAC up to 24-bit/192kHz) if they are stored on a USB flash drive or hard disc storage via USB-A.

Arcam uses digital circuitry based around an ESS ES9018 DAC (the same one used in the A5 and A15 amps), while new components have been used and tested intensively by the engineers to ensure they deliver the best audio performance.

We start our testing with Jamiroquai's *Virtual Insanity* and straight away we know we're on to a winner. The CD5 flows with an assured fluidity and composure that has us hooked on to that smooth, slinky tune from the get-go. It sounds agile and nimble, tracking every beat, every leading edge of a note with snappy precision - but never becoming too analytical. It gets the funk across with bags of personality and charm.

With Hans Zimmer's *The Dark Knight*, the slow whine of tension that ratchets up and the thunderous wallop of bass is all handled with authority and

Playback of CD, CD-R and CD-RW is supported, but not SACD

confidence. There's drive and attack, with a fantastic ability to handle shifting dynamics and it keeps us on the edge of our seats as the drama unfolds. It delivers a great big spread of sound that fills up a room easily, but never overwhelms, staying on the pleasant side of transparent and neutral.

It is with piano and voices that the Arcam's charm fully comes to the fore. From Gershwin's *Rhapsody In Blue* and Chilly Gonzales' *Whist*, to Norah Jones's *Sunrise* and Bruce Springsteen's *Growin' Up*, every element is convincingly and authentically relayed by the CD5.

Most of all, it's just fun to listen to. The CD5's rich and likeable presentation delivers the essence of a song in the most entertaining way, while also ensuring it hits all the right hi-fi notes along the way.

This is a tremendously talented player that deserves an audition if you want to give your beloved CDs a new lease of life.

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2024

**BEST CD PLAYER
UNDER £500**

MARANTZ CD6007

■ Marantz CD6007

£379

It's now a mightily impressive five wins in a row for the Marantz CD6007, a mainstay on this particular podium since the previous Award holder, the Marantz CD6006 UK Edition, stepped down.

The CD6007's build quality is excellent. It feels solid and operates with a slickness that belongs at a far higher price point. The disc mechanism is quiet and responsive, and we can't think of a rival CD player that feels as polished. A change of DAC chip to ESS Technology's well-regarded ES9010K2M allows the CD6007 to process hi-res PCM files up to 24-bit/192kHz and DSD128, though you will need to use the front-panel USB Type A socket to get the files into the player.

Aside from the front-panel USB, there are single-ended RCAs for the analogue output alongside optical and coaxial for digital. Marantz offers the option of turning the digital outputs off when they are not in use, which brings a little extra clarity to the sound.

The Marantz CD6007 offers a choice of two digital filter options for those who like to tweak. Filter 1 has a slow roll-off and is claimed to offer a deeper stereo image, while Filter 2 has a sharper roll-off, intended to produce a more direct and brighter presentation.

These options have a significant bearing on the sound. Compared with the old CD6006 UK Edition, this Marantz renders a more expansive and better-focused soundstage. Instruments stay locked in place when the music becomes more demanding. Notes are defined with a touch more precision, particularly at low frequencies.

Larger-scale dynamics are delivered with more verve and punch, and tonally there is a subtle shift too, with the 6007

The CD6007 operates with a slickness that belies its price

sounding more forward and a touch brighter. We can hear leading edges of the bass notes more clearly and there is a greater feeling of space between instrumental strands. We play a variety of music files through the USB input, and the CD6007 copes with hi-res PCM and DSD without issue.

And so it is that in 2024, the 6007 still does more than enough to stay ahead of the pack. And that's largely down to Marantz striking the right balance between keeping a winning formula and improving where necessary. Perhaps there's life in the old compact disc yet, but at this point in the format's life arc - at the affordable end of the market at least - that's all it takes to ensure class leadership.



WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2024

**BEST CD PLAYER
OVER £1000**

CYRUS CDi

■ Cyrus CDi

£1495

This is the 11th consecutive year that Cyrus's CDi has made these pages - it continues to rule the roost at this level.

At the heart of this player's continued excellence is the way it reads data. Cyrus spent years developing dedicated transport control software with the aim of getting the maximum amount of data off the CD while also minimising errors - the company claims around 20 per cent fewer reading errors than any off-the-shelf alternative. The transport is a little noisy when loading a disc, though silent during playback.

We play Hans Zimmer's *Supermarine* from the *Dunkirk* soundtrack and the CDi displays the uniform, articulate and intuitive presentation we would expect from a premium player. Offering buckets of detail, it allows the percussive interjections to surface, while the more intense parts of the score soar to a dramatic climax. Each layer is precisely unpeeled, and each instrument passes through the mix with a coherent flow.

The player's rhythmic talent also shines through. Pace and momentum are exercised with vibrancy, and we are entertained by the Cyrus's dynamic agility, authority and neutrality.

Cyrus has never been about compromise, and the CDi's solid build and fuss-free, half-width design are admirable, although the basic black text on green background display looks more and more dated with every passing year.

Transport is said to achieve 20% fewer reading errors than rivals

True to Cyrus fashion, upgrades can be carried out by connecting the company's PSX-R2 external power supply (£995) for improved scale, authority and detail - but we are certain you will be happy with the CDi alone for a long time to come.

The CDi is easily the best-sounding machine at this price. Its blend of analysis, agility and rhythmic precision is spellbinding. And a 12th win this time next year still seems on the cards.

View offers: whf.cm/BestMusicStreamers2024

MUSIC STREAMERS

Want to add music streaming to your hi-fi system? These dedicated streamers are simply sensational

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2024

**BEST MUSIC
STREAMER
OVER £2000**

**AUDIOLAB
9000N**

PRODUCT OF THE YEAR



■ Audiolab 9000N

£2499

Audiolab's 9000N is a strong performer that ticks pretty much every box as far as sound quality is concerned. Its Lumin-based platform gives the Audiolab 9000N most of the functionality you would expect from a modern streamer. It can play music files from across your home network and stream songs from the likes of Spotify Connect, Tidal Connect, Qobuz and Tunein Radio. File compatibility is extensive, taking in 32-bit/768kHz PCM, DSD512 and MQA. That should be enough to cope with most music collections.

There are, though, notable omissions, such as Bluetooth and Chromecast, though it does support Airplay 2.

Audiolab has a great deal of experience designing digital-to-analogue circuitry, and at the heart of the 9000N sits an eight-channel ESS Sabre ES9038 PRO DAC chipset. Those eight channels are configured to work in stereo to minimise noise and distortion. Elsewhere, care

has been taken over filtering, clocking accuracy and providing low-noise and stable power feeds to all the circuitry.

Build quality is as good as we have come to expect from Audiolab. This is a solid, well-finished unit that is relatively easy to use. On the front panel is a crisp 4.3in LCD which can also be set to display analogue or digital signal level meters - a nice touch.

The 9000N has clean, large-scale and spacious presentation - it doesn't sound cluttered even when confronted by complex music such as Orff's *Carmina Burana*, and it retains an enviable degree of composure as the music explodes from quiet sections to full-bore crescendos.

Tonal neutrality is impressive, as is the streamer's ability to resolve the finest of details. Instrumental and vocal textures are rendered with care, and its confident handling of dynamic nuances keeps the listener gripped. The 9000N delivers an expansive and

Build quality is of a high standard, as we expect from Audiolab

stable soundstage packed with sharply focused instruments.

As we switch to Billie Eilish's *Hit Me Hard And Soft* set, the 9000N continues to sound right at home, with precision and clarity to its performance while still conveying the energy in the music well. There is enough in terms of drama and subtlety to keep us listening all the way through, which is always a good sign. This album also shines a light on the Audiolab's taut bass and surefooted way with rhythms.

The internal DAC circuitry is hugely capable, too. Its performance is consistent with that heard using the streaming section, delivering the same pleasing blend of precision, resolution and control.

The 9000N is something of a musical chameleon. It is impressively transparent and shifts character depending on the recording being played. We haven't come across a streamer at this level that is as capable in this respect.

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2024

**BEST MUSIC
STREAMER
UNDER £300**

WIIM PRO PLUS

■ **WiiM Pro Plus** **£219**

Like quite a few similar products, the WiiM Pro Plus is designed either to bring high-quality audio streaming smarts to set-ups that pre-date the technology, or to improve systems that aren't much good at it. It's a fair bit more affordable than the most budget music streamer we have seen so far (half the price of the Cambridge MXN10), and at just 42 x 140 x 140mm, it won't take up very much space either.

Physical inputs and outputs include USB-C for mains power, ethernet, digital optical input and output, a digital coaxial output and stereo RCA line-level in and out. Wireless functionality is where it's at for a music streamer, of course, and there is dual-band wi-fi and Bluetooth 5.1 (with SBC and AAC codec compatibility). Chromecast is built in, Apple AirPlay 2 is available, and the slick Home control app has support for Spotify Connect, Tidal Connect, Qobuz, Deezer, Amazon Music, Pandora, TuneIn and more. The app can also access any music stored on a common

network thanks to DLNA compatibility. And, if you connect an analogue source, the Pro Plus can be wirelessly streamed to other WiiM products to other zones of your home. It's a simple and convenient way to get a multi-home wireless audio system without paying Sonos money.

With a 24-bit/96kHz file of Weyes Blood's *Grapevine* accessed from network-attached storage, the WiiM creates a big, properly defined soundstage on which musicians can operate securely, and keeps detail levels high at every point. This is particularly apparent in the midrange, where the vocal is brimming with character and attitude. The WiiM is attentive to even the most minor or transient dynamic variations in the delivery, and the vocal line sounds immediate, natural and full of conviction.



The WiiM can also be used to get multi-room audio into your home

The broad tonality is a little on the cool side - but this is more of a trait than a shortcoming. And the frequency range is integrated cleanly, with no recesses or areas of overemphasis - the unity of the presentation is impressive, and its powers of integration are always apparent. And when used as a preamplifier, or perhaps as a bridge to other WiiM products around your home, the Pro Plus sensibly gets as far out of the way of your music as it can.

As a first, affordable introduction to the charms of music streaming, the WiiM Pro Plus is hard to lay a glove on at the price.

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2024

**BEST MUSIC
STREAMER
£300-£750**

**CAMBRIDGE AUDIO
MXN10**

■ **Cambridge Audio MXN10** **£449**

Neat, compact and easy to pop onto your hi-fi rack, the MXN10 is one of the most unobtrusive units you will find, not to mention one of the least expensive.

It's finished in smooth, inoffensive lunar grey; clean, clear and simple. The MXN10 is fitted with an RCA line-level analogue output, one coaxial and one optical on the digital side, as well as an ethernet port if you are planning on plugging the unit directly into your router as opposed to relying on wi-fi. It's not exactly a party round the back, but there's enough here to satisfy the essential requirements.

Having a broad array of streaming choices is, obviously, essential for a network streamer, and the MXN10 includes Google Chromecast, AirPlay 2, Spotify Connect, Tidal, Deezer and Qobuz, as well as support for Bluetooth 5.0. There's built-in internet radio which, thanks to MPEG-DASH support, provides high-quality radio streaming across practically any global station you can think of. It can also play stored music files from your home network.

The MXN10 is impressively equipped with the ESS Sabre ES9033Q DAC, making it compatible with hi-res files of up to 32-bit/768kHz PCM and DSD512.

Max Richter's melancholic slow-builder *Never Goodbye* is delivered in a spacious and well-organised manner. The MXN10 walks a carefully chosen path between the even-handed, detailed and spacious sound of the similarly priced Audiolab 6000N Play and more characterful and energetic balance of previous Award-winner, the Bluesound Node (2021). It combines the strengths of these talented rivals while adding a dose of dynamic expression and rhythmic coherence that they can't match.

The MXN10 has a broad array of streaming choices on board

Jay-Z and Justin Timberlake's *Holy Grail* further reveals the MXN10's capabilities. Whether it's Timberlake's high, soulful vocals or Z's hard and heavy rapping under a punchy beat, the MXN10 delivers a real sense of rhythm and swing by the time the verses kick in. It provides all the energy and movement the track demands.

The more we listen, the more the MXN10 reveals its myriad strengths, providing Wu-Tang Clan's *Gravel Pit* with bounce and heft before wowing us with a powerful yet clean rendition of Deftones' *Sverve City*. Listening to the MXN10 is a pleasure. We think it's the finest affordable music streamer on the market.



**Cambridge Audio
EXN100
£1599**



The EXN100 aims to bridge the gap between the mid-range CXN100 and flagship Edge NQ streamers, and it follows a similar design language with a simple, metal chassis in a 'lunar grey' finish. A TFT colour display screen shows off album artwork, song information and more in a crisp, bright manner that is easy to read.

Cambridge's StreamMagic platform supports a comprehensive variety of streaming methods. It can handle hi-res audio files up to 32-bit/784kHz PCM and DSD512, and MQA files - the same as its MXN10 and CXN100 siblings. Sampling rates and file format information can be seen on screen and in the app. This is also the first Cambridge streamer to include an HDMI eARC input for connecting to a TV.

There are optical and coaxial inputs and outputs, a USB type B input, a USB type A port for plugging in flash drives, balanced XLR and RCA line level outputs, and a short antenna for wi-fi and Bluetooth.

The EXN100 impresses us with a sound that is clear, spacious and balanced. If you have heard the CXN100 streamer you will recognise the familial presentation, and the EXN100 successfully offers a notable step up in every area. It delivers a stable stereo image, a larger and more open playing field for music to flourish in, and offers up a huge helping of extra detail.

We play *Breezeblocks* by Alt-J and it flows well through the streamer. There's a controlled sense of rhythm, attack and drive, while also moving with just enough fluidity to sound at ease. The bass notes on Major Lazer's *Pon de Floor* go satisfyingly deep and are pulled taut - it's impressive to hear just how clean and shapely they are, too. There is no flab; there's ample punch. The sharp, staccato drum hits are snappy, speedy and full of bite, but never sound shrill or sharp. The streamer delivers spry, composed and room-filling sound -

The EXN100 can handle hi-res files up to 32-bit/784kHz PCM

elements that could be difficult to juggle, but the streamer handles it all in an almost understated manner. Voices are clearly defined with natural tones and nuances.

We spin through a variety of music from different sources and the EXN100's wonderfully clean, controlled and balanced character remains consistent. Feed it high-quality tracks and it will perform at its best, but the streamer doesn't penalise you for playing lower MP3-quality radio stations or Bluetooth streams in the slightest.

When used as a preamplifier, the EXN100 sounds decent for its price and is a useful addition if your system already includes a power amplifier, or all you need to drive is a pair of active speakers.

The Cambridge Audio EXN100 streamer is exhaustively featured and slick to use. Its presentation is impressively clear, open and refined and, with a bit of creativity with partnering kit, it will deliver an engaging, involving performance that can't be bettered at this price.

FIVE OF THE BEST TRACKS OF 2024 FOR TESTING HI-FI

Our pick of songs released this year that will prove a great test of your system's talents



Pearl Jam
Dark Matter

Straight out of the folder marked "loud guitars, louder drums". Use it to assess how well a system can manage weight, authority and organisation, with this track offering the ideal chance to see what a decent system can do when presented with brutal drum fills before huge, punchy guitar chords rampage into the mix.



Yard Act
Dream Job

This track could easily become one-note, cacophonous and messy. A great system, however, will reveal the layers of instruments and vocals in an organised, three-dimensional soundstage. The taut bassline, scuzzy, electrifying guitar riff, synth highlights and jubilant chants should come through with high energy,



Michael Kiwanuka
Floating Parade

More sophisticated and layered than his earlier efforts, the dreamy, ethereal quality will make demands of your system, while the bassline anchors the track and stops it drifting off into arty-farty territory. If your set-up can communicate all the detail of the low-end without encroaching on the more delicate elements, it's a keeper.



Charli XCX
Von Dutch

While the track is certainly tongue in cheek, its electronic dance influences are strong thanks to a pulsing synth beat and snappy drums that require good timing and low-end punch. It's dynamically varied, with slowly building sections that lead to a swift drop and explode into the zingy electronic, synth-laden chorus.



Waxahatchee
Right Back To It

The warm-toast-and-honey vocal harmonies, acoustic strumming and gentle electric guitar together form a great test of a system's midrange. Never should that finger-picked banjo in the right channel lose its purpose beside the front-and-centre vocal; the ever-present bassline should anchor and gently propel but not dominate.

BE THE CENTRE OF THE MUSIC



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TURNTABLES

Whether you're buying new records or dusting off old ones, these great players will do your vinyl justice



WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2024

BEST TURNTABLE
£500-£1000

REGA
PLANAR 3/ND3

PRODUCT OF THE YEAR

■ Rega Planar 3/Nd3 £799

Rega's Planar 3 was introduced in 1976, the same year *What Hi-Fi?* was born. Since then, it has remained one of our go-to recommendations for sensibly priced record players. While the deck hasn't changed much in appearance since then, just about every part of it has been refined at some point.

As far as this latest iteration goes, its performance remains class-leading, its build is impressive, as is the quality of the engineering - especially of the fitted RB330 tonearm; but it's the change of cartridge from the Elys 2 to the new Nd3 moving magnet that earns it this Award.

The Nd3 is the entry-level model in a three-strong range that Rega believes is the first to use neodymium in a moving-magnet cartridge. All the cartridges in the range have a recommended tracking weight of 1.75g and produce a healthy output of 5-6mV. No partnering phono stage should take issue with that.

The main point of differentiation in the range comes down to the choice of stylus tip. The Nd3 uses the most basic type, which is elliptical in profile and made of a man-made polycrystalline diamond.

As the Planar 3 deck is unchanged, any difference in sound is down to the cartridge. As we work our way through Michael Jackson's *Bad* set and Beethoven's *9th Symphony*, it becomes clear that the Nd3 cartridge is better in just about every area. There is an obvious similarity in sonic character, with both the Nd3 and Elys 2 delivering similar energy and drive. They are both pretty well-balanced tonally, too.

But there is a significant improvement in detail resolution, as the Nd3 tells us more about the recording, rendering vocals and instrumental textures more convincingly. It has stronger dynamics too. The dramatic percussion on Jackson's *Speed Demon* comes through with far greater impact on the newcomer while the

The change of cartridge to the Nd3 has earned the P3 this Award

orchestral peaks of the *9th Symphony* are more muscular and authoritative. Stereo imaging is more expansive and notably improved in terms of focus. We find that the Nd3's high-frequency performance is cleaner and more refined, while bass is cleaner, deeper and more precise.

This Rega package continues to be a class-leading entertainer. The turntable conveys the rhythmic drive of music superbly, making the most of hard-charging tracks, to squeeze out every last drop of excitement and drama. Yet drop down a gear and it can communicate a love song with skill. Voices come through with clarity, and brim with expression thanks to a midrange performance that is articulate, fluid and substantial.

The Planar 3/Nd3 package represents a notable improvement on its predecessor without a jump in price. It is a well-built and engineered turntable that performs to an enviably high standard for the money.

■ Pro-Ject Primary E

£199

Another Award for our favourite entry-level record player, Pro-Ject's Primary E. This is a wonderful back-to-basics deck that does everything we would expect from a record player at this level.

The Primary E is a moderate development of the five-star Primary we reviewed back in 2017; but importantly this deck, which also includes an Ortofon moving-magnet cartridge, costs less than the original when introduced.

The Primary E's priority is clearly entertainment. It confidently nails the basics, from an even tonal balance to a clear, clean delivery that is spacious enough to keep things coherent.

Detail levels are pleasing for the money and the Pro-ject has the skill to organise information musically. Body and substance cling to every frequency as reliably as the belt does to the platter edge, and that's made all the more enjoyable by a spirited sense of drive



and momentum. You will have to move up to the likes of Rega's Planar 1 to do appreciably better in these respects.

We lay down The National's *Trouble Will Find Me*, and the Pro-Ject promotes the LP's warmth and sweetness. It is sensitive to the sullenness of the heart-swelling instrumentals, demonstrating levels of insight, and passable in the company of budget amplification and speakers. We ask

Simple to set up, great sound and affordable. What more can you ask?

ourselves, what more could we ask from a sub £200 deck? Not much.

Set up is straightforward too. With the anti-skate weight and the 1.7g tracking force pre-set, all you are required to do is attach the belt to one of the two motor pulleys (33⅓ and 45rpm).

As a capable, fuss-free and affordable turntable, the Primary E is a brilliant buy for those seeking an entry point to the joys of vinyl listening.



■ Rega Planar 1

£299

This is the ninth year in a row that Rega's Planar 1 turntable has picked up a *What Hi-Fi?* Award. Much like its bigger brother, the Planar 3, the Planar 1 package has seen major changes over the years, despite outwardly showing little sign of the progress made.

Pretty much everything you see on this deck has undergone some form of modification, and there are also hand-me-downs from higher up the range. The Rega Carbon MM cartridge is now fitted as standard, and this is the first of Rega's entry-level turntables to house a 24V synchronous AC motor with an aluminium pulley, offering low noise and better speed-stability.

It takes just a few moments' listening to realise the Planar 1 has no real peers at this price. We have long admired Rega's sprightly presentation and it welcomes us like an old friend.

This is not an entry-level amount of detail: the acoustic guitar in The Tallest Man On Earth's *Dark Bird Is Home* is complemented by the reverb in the first



line; the distinction in treatment of each part is clearly audible, setting the vocal apart. Some manufacturers have a tendency to turn up the analogue warmth; not Rega - but even so this deck still produces a full-bodied sound.

There is energy in the Planar 1's rendering of more animated numbers and a solidity that supports the subtler ones, while often its combination of precise timing and broad dynamic reach

Entry-level price, but way above entry-level performance

makes its rivals' performances sound like half-hearted rehearsals.

No other record player at this price can better the 1's depth of engineering or its ability to bring records to life. It's a smart-looking device too. In fact, even as an entry-level turntable, this is the kind of player that could feasibly be the last of a system's components you would feel necessary to upgrade. The Planar 1 fully deserves this ninth win.

■ Rega Planar 6/Ania £1675

Rega has tended to dominate the turntables categories in our Awards, and this year is no different. This is the eighth year the mighty Planar 6 has won this category - because no rival has come close to bettering its combination of precision engineering and class-leading sound.

As with other members of the Planar family, this is a product that has been carefully refined over the years to keep it competitive. And, as with its siblings, the Planar 6 has taken a particularly big step up in performance with the latest round of upgrades.

The previous RP6 came fitted with an Exact moving-magnet cartridge - an option Rega still makes available; but the company now offers a variant with its Ania moving-coil cartridge. This a quality cartridge, so to do it justice you will need to pair it with a high-quality phono stage - but that will be well worthwhile.

The Planar 6/Ania combination delivers a frankly astonishingly refined and mature sound. It doesn't go for



WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2024
BEST TURNTABLE
£1000-£2000
REGA
PLANAR 6/ANIA

immediacy to grab your attention, nor is boldness put to the forefront; instead its party piece is an unnerving ability to juggle balance, subtlety and timing in the most understated way.

Moreover, it seems quite effortless - the difference between having to play the music and acting merely as a conduit for what is etched into those grooves on the vinyl disc. The Planar 6/Ania does the latter with aplomb, drawing as

The Planar 6/Ania combo delivers a refined and mature sound

realistic a sonic portrait as any turntable we have heard at this price.

Don't let the visual similarities with some of the cheaper Planar turntables persuade you that there's not much of a sound-quality jump between the decks. Take the time to have a good listen and the improvements with each incremental price increase are clear to hear. If your budget allows, this is still the record player to beat here.

■ Vertere DG-1 S/ Magneto £3950

The DG-1 was a multiple Award winner and our firm recommendation for a premium turntable. But, in a market this competitive, there is no standing still.

This latest version is a careful evolution of that original, one that fine-tunes the details rather than making huge changes.

The DG-1's distinctive arm is flat, to avoid the resonances of traditional metal tube designs, and here the construction has changed to use two bonded pieces of a five-layered polymer. The signal wires are flexible PCB signal conductors and sit between the two polymer sections.

The main-bearing design is now even more tightly toleranced and finished to a higher standard, and there have also been tweaks to the motor's control software and structural stability too.

Despite the Vertere turntable resolving an immense amount of detail, we find ourselves lost in the music rather than

encouraged to analyse the recording or production. In fact, Four Tet's *There Is Love In You* could have been made just to highlight the DG-1 S's strengths. The mass of instrumentation shows off the deck's excellent resolution and its ability to keep track of a multitude of musical strands. This album's complex polyrhythms are delivered with verve, and there is no shortage of punch and drive. We particularly love the way this

The distinctive flat arm remains for the S-version of the Vertere DG-1



WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2024
BEST TURNTABLE
OVER £2500
VERTERE
DG-1 S/MAGNETO

Vertere delivers bass frequencies; they are taut, agile and tuneful but also beautifully textured.

The DG-1 S has no trouble with anything we throw at it, sounding powerful and composed with Beethoven and thoroughly comfortable with the musical interplay on Miles Davis' *Kind Of Blue*.

In short, this new generation DG-1 S builds on the excellent original to remain at the forefront of turntables at this level.

View offers: whf.cm/BestStreamingServices2024

STREAMING SERVICES

Our two winners here have retained their crowns by means of continual adaptation and improvement



Tidal £10.99/month

Once again, Tidal bags the top spot here (that's 10 years in a row, stats fans).

Somehow, this hi-res streaming service always manages to up its game and stay one step ahead of the competition. This year, a key change has been a simplification to the service's pricing structure. While access to 24-bit hi-res streams and Dolby Atmos Music and Sony 360 Audio tracks used to be locked within a £19.99 'HiFi Plus' tier, with CD-quality streaming offered in a £9.99 'HiFi' option, there is now just one individual subscription plan costing £11 per month. This price matches Apple Music and Amazon Music, meaning Tidal is no longer the most expensive hi-res streaming service out there.

Tidal's Family plan, for up to six family members, now costs £17 a month, while the Student Plan has been discounted by 50 per cent and now costs just £5.

In addition to offering a competitive song library of "110+ million", Tidal (like Amazon Music) also boasts a growing catalogue of Dolby Atmos Music tracks.

Hi-res-specific playlists can be genre-specific, and there are now 'New Arrivals' and 'Essentials' playlists, artist-specific ones, plus artist and track 'Radio stations', which allow subscribers to listen to an uninterrupted stream of hi-res tracks based on their listening habits.

Whether you are listening to CD-quality or hi-res streams, Tidal sounds

Tidal has upped its game once again to stay ahead of rivals

great compared with its rivals, and the streaming service's layout is exemplary, too. The desktop app's large number of tabs has been reduced to match the smartphone app, with most content now grouped under the catch-all 'Home' tab.

Tidal apps also form part of several networked hi-fi products' offerings, from Sonos and Bluesound to Linn, Naim and Cyrus streaming products. Google Chromecast supports Tidal too, while Tidal Connect, which supports hi-res FLAC and Dolby Atmos, allows for easy streaming to a growing number of compatible products.

All this is more than enough for us to say Tidal is still the music-streaming service we most heartily recommend.

Disney+ From £4.99/month

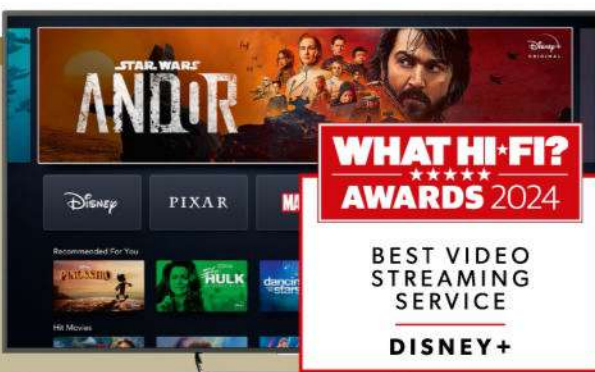
The rich - and still rapidly evolving - catalogue of content from Disney and its subsidiaries includes hundreds of films and TV series, from all-time classics to family favourites. This is the only place to see new *Star Wars* and Marvel releases, and is the exclusive streaming hub for every Disney theatrical release from 2019 and beyond. It also includes material from Star, a channel that offers "grown up" content, as well as Hulu originals.

Many titles are presented in the best video and audio technologies available today - 4K, HDR10, Dolby Vision and Dolby Atmos - and Disney has really gone the distance where device support

is concerned. Atmos content on Disney + spans more than 100 titles which are also available in Dolby Vision HDR.

On the 'Standard' and 'Standard with ads' tiers (£8.99 and £4.99 respectively, Full HD), two screens can stream simultaneously on one account, while on the 'Premium' tier (£12.99, 4K UHD and HDR), you can have up to four screens.

We find ourselves drawn to the technically wonderful *The Lion King* live-action remake (a 4K Dolby Vision title) and are met with appropriately lush landscapes, tangible textures of lion fur, baboon skin, bird feathers and a clean, crisp picture.



Great support for the latest audio and video tech is a real boon here

Even older titles that have been remastered in Full HD, such as *Pete's Dragon* (1977) and *The Aristocats* (1970), display a surprising amount of clarity, coherence and richness on our LG OLED.

This is a polished service that fans of Disney's ever-expanding output, both children and adults, are bound to enjoy, and it retains its video-streaming service Award despite a recent price rise.

View offers: BestDACs2024

DACs

Digital-to-analogue converters are often overlooked, but the best ones can transform your system's sound



WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2024

BEST DAC
£300 - £700

CHORD MOJO 2

PRODUCT OF THE YEAR

■ Chord Mojo 2

£395

Few real-world (read: not ludicrously expensive) products can be considered real game changers in hi-fi. But in 2015 the Chord Mojo burst onto the then-fledgling portable DAC/headphone amplifier scene as one of them, flag in hand and ready to claim territory.

The palm-sized device justified its elongated name ('Mobile Joy'), pushing the parameters of what was possible for compact, on-the-go sound quality in the three-figure price domain.

The fittingly named Mojo 2 is the long-anticipated, re-engineered replacement. And while the aesthetic hasn't exactly been overhauled for the sequel, significant progress has been made elsewhere to protect the Mojo's position at the pinnacle of the portable DAC world.

The headline development lies inside the aluminium casework and is what Chord is calling the 'UHD DSP',

supposedly the world's first lossless digital signal processor. We are seeing the word 'lossless' more than ever in today's digital-savvy world, as more and more software and hardware companies strive towards bit-perfect reproduction of digital music. And here the sky-high promise is customisable digital-to-analogue conversion that doesn't degrade sound quality along the way.

Chord's proprietary 104-bit processor has opened the Mojo 2 up to a smattering of features, most notably tonal adjustments across the frequency range.

Elsewhere, a key element of the Mojo's portability has been redesigned - the battery. The Mojo 2 still charges over Micro USB, but an FPGA-based charging system has been designed to deliver not only faster but also more efficient and cooler charging. To that end, Chord claims that the Mojo 2's battery life is 'better than eight hours'

A raft of well chosen design tweaks put the Mojo back on top

(that being the claimed figure of the original Mojo).

Perhaps the most practical upgrade, however, is the addition of a USB-C input, which joins the existing optical, Micro USB, and 3.5mm coaxial inputs on one of the Mojo 2's end panels.

We aren't exaggerating when we say that Chord advanced the Mojo in pretty much every sonic area. Its soundstage has been opened up for the sequel and that extra depth and dimension has been filled with greater resolution that is not only unmistakably present thanks to a big boost in clarity but also more precisely placed. A listen to Ludovico's Einaudi's *Rolling Like A Ball* in hi-res is enough to tell us as much; the leading edges of piano notes are crisper without compromising the flow of the piece, and harmonic subtleties are more discernible.

All of which comfortably keeps this remarkable device on top of the pile.

■ AudioQuest DragonFly Cobalt

£179

If anyone still thinks the idea of spending £179 on a USB stick is foolhardy, we recommend they get acquainted with the AudioQuest DragonFly Cobalt. After all, it has now bagged six Best Buy wins in a row.

There are elements here that are shared with the multiple Award-winning DragonFly Red, including the 2.1v headphone output, bit-perfect digital volume control and MQA renderer; but the Cobalt also carries an advanced ESS ES9038Q2M chip for a more natural sound, while the PIC32MX274 microprocessor increases processing speed by 33 per cent.

Also included is a DragonTail USB-A (female) to USB-C (male) adaptor for use with the growing number of electronics that offer connectivity for the latter.

You really wouldn't think a device this small could make such a difference to a

set-up's sound - but it does. Lines are drawn round the edges of each instrument, with detail on offer to complement the cleanliness and military precision.

The Cobalt isn't necessarily concerned with polishing your music; bedroom recordings can still sound intimately lo-fi, purposefully screeching treble remains uncensored, and grisly riffs still drag their knuckles along the floor.

Timing is greatly improved, with beats locking in like puzzle pieces, so much so that it can sometimes leave its sibling, the DragonFly Red, feeling a tad lazy. The Cobalt's hard work is also heard as it belts out grand dynamic shifts before donning its reading glasses to contour those more diminutive quivers.

All of which makes the Cobalt something of a no-brainer - and it is a worthy winner again this year.

Convenience, value and great sound - the Cobalt is a no-brainer



WHAT HI-FI?

AWARDS 2024

**BEST DAC
UNDER £300**

**AUDIOQUEST
DRAGONFLY
COBALT**

■ Chord Qutest

£1195

To give Chord Electronics its due, a superlative was really the only way it could go when naming a successor to the four-time Award-winning 2Qute; and the Qutest justifies it. That's not wholly surprising, considering it is largely based on a previous Chord Award winner, the Hugo 2.

It uses the same DAC architecture, software coding and frequency-shaping filters, but ditches the headphone amplifier and rechargeable Li-on batteries that make the Hugo 2 portable.

The technical evolution from the 2Qute to the Qutest left this unit's overall sonic character - crisp, clean and explicitly detailed - unchanged. The Qutest offers more resolution, and its presentation is slightly bigger and more spacious too.

We play Peter Broderick's *Eyes Closed And Traveling*, and suddenly our system acquires a new dynamic facility. The

Qutest faithfully conveys the undulating dynamics of this varied piano piece, clocking the sudden surges as well as the more subtle simmerings.

Notes have crisper leading edges, carry warmth and texture in abundance, and never decay prematurely. Timing is tighter too, which helps the Qutest sniff out a rhythmic structure, no matter what the genre. It is as happy rocking out to tumultuous tunes as it is rolling with classical compositions.

None of this is surprising when you consider that the Qutest implements the

The talented Qutest offers a beguiling blend of clarity and warmth



WHAT HI-FI?

AWARDS 2024

**BEST DAC
OVER £700**

CHORD QUTEST

bespoke FPGA (Field Programmable Gate Array) digital-to-analogue conversion technology found in every other Chord DAC.

It's a very Chord-like product, with colour-denoting buttons, which glow white for USB Type-B (capable of accepting 32-bit/768kHz PCM/DSD512); yellow for the first BNC coaxial and red for the second (24-bit/384kHz); and green for the optical (24-bit/192kHz/DSD64).

Essentially, this is another great-sounding, well-equipped Chord DAC, and a worthy winner once again.

View offers: [BestAmplifiers2024](#)

STEREO AMPLIFIERS

A beautifully judged new entry – straight in at number one – and a quartet of stylish stalwarts. Welcome to the corridors of power



WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2024

**BEST STEREO
AMPLIFIER
UNDER £500**

ROTEL A8

PRODUCT OF THE YEAR

Rotel A8 £399

If you have read the 'First Tests' section of this issue, you may already know all you need to about this terrific new integrated amp from veteran Japanese amplification specialists Rotel. If you haven't, fear not; here are the highlights.

Although we have awarded the A8 five stars, what we didn't let on in our test (see p12) was that it has bagged our stereo amplifier Product Of The Year.

Although competition is fierce in the budget amplifier market, the A8's combined talents are enough to edge it onto the top podium spot. That said, it is modestly styled and not packed with features. It even misses out on the digital inputs and Bluetooth connectivity that is relatively common at this price level. Are those big losses? Our answer is 'no'.

This solidly built, 30W-per-channel amp has a moving-magnet phono input for your record player and three single-ended line-level inputs for the rest of

your sources. There is also a 3.5mm headphone output on the front panel.

Straight out of the box, the Rotel sounds restrained and unremarkable, but give it a few days' use and it starts to shine. We listen to Barrington Levy's *You Say Me Say* and find the A8 handles the bassline with considerable skill, delivering it with impressive grip and punch. The song's easygoing momentum is communicated well with a fine sense of drive and authority. This integrated amp is surefooted with rhythms and unusually expressive as far as dynamics are concerned. Levy's voice comes through with character and charm intact too.

Switching to Górecki's *Symphony No.3* shows the A8 to have a firm handle on rendering large-scale dynamic shifts and keeping everything under tight control, even when the music becomes demanding. It sounds organised and controlled even at points where most

Fresh off the production line, this is an unusually expressive amp

rivals struggle to stay coherent. There is a calmness about this amplifier's delivery with difficult music that is hard to better without spending much more.

Stereo imaging is fine. There is a good sense of focus and a decent amount of stability. Definition, meanwhile, is first-class, particularly at low frequencies where the A8 is considerably more articulate and textured than any alternative we have tested.

We try the Rotel's moving-magnet phono stage and find it perfectly acceptable. As is typical at this level, there is a drop off in clarity and transparency compared with the line-level inputs, yet the A8's unassuming but hugely likeable character still prevails.

The Rotel A8 is a fuss-free, well-built product that sets an enviable standard for sound quality at this level. In the realm of stand-out budget amplifiers, we don't think it can currently be bettered.

Arcam A5

£749

Like its sister model, the A15 (see below), the Arcam A5 – the entry-level integrated in the company's range – presents a minimalist yet stylish face to the world. The yellow highlights around the large control dials, vents and sides give a sleek appearance, while the front-panel control dials are nicely weighted in operation.

This amplifier is more than just a pretty face, though. The company has obviously thought long and hard about the features to include, and has come up with what is arguably the most comprehensively equipped stereo amplifier we have reviewed at this level. There are three line-level inputs and a moving-magnet phono stage, plus preamplifier outputs for those who feel the A5's 50W-per-channel output won't be enough. On the digital side is a pair of coaxial inputs and a single optical input that can handle streams of up to 24-bit/192kHz thanks to an ESS ES9018 DAC chip. Two-way Bluetooth 5.2 with aptX Adaptive is also on the menu.

An amplifier at this level has a difficult balancing act to perform. It is as likely to



be partnered with budget kit as it is more premium offerings, so it has to be forgiving enough not to emphasise the shortcomings of more limited partnering equipment, yet still have the insight and transparency to make the most of more capable signals. The A5 manages this balancing act superbly. It has a sweet nature that, while full-bodied and smooth, never robs the life from the music.

Eminem's *Recovery* is a thin, rather hard-sounding recording, and the Arcam treads the line between diplomacy and bluntness brilliantly. It has a refined yet lively presentation that conveys the building momentum of a track such as *No Love* superbly, thanks to a confident and surefooted way with rhythms. The midrange is clear, articulate and full-bodied. Eminem comes through with

Good looks, fine equipment levels and a full-bodied, refined tonality

venomous attitude intact and we have no trouble tracking his rapid-fire delivery.

With Mahler's *10th Symphony* the A5 delivers a good sense of scale and has the resolution to keep track of a multitude of instrumental strands easily. Its full-bodied tonality gives the orchestra a pleasing amount of solidity and presence. When it comes to the stereo imaging, the Arcam delivers an expansive, nicely layered soundstage populated with sharply focused instruments. Larger-scale dynamic swings are rendered with conviction and there is a good dose of scale. As we switch between sources we cover a wide range of music and the A5 never disappoints. This is a superbly rounded performer.

It has been many years since we have heard such a convincing amp from Arcam. If you are thinking of buying at this level, this has to go at the top of your shortlist. It really is that good.

Arcam A15

£1099

Anyone who has a good-looking, talented and charismatic little brother will appreciate the challenge faced by the Arcam A15. But, like any well-adjusted elder sibling, this amp is more than content with its own personality. And so it should be, because it does more than just offer a bit more power than the A5 (80W per channel into 8 ohms rather than 50W).

Arcam has been generous with the spec sheet with three line-level inputs, a pair of coaxial digital and a single optical. The ESS ES9018 DAC chip is at the heart of the internal DAC module. There is a preamplifier output for those who want to upgrade by adding an outboard power amp, and a 3.5mm headphone output, plus a moving-magnet phono stage. Two-way Bluetooth 5.2 and aptX Adaptive opens up easy use with phones, tablets and laptops.

It's built well too. Its casework feels sturdy and is finished nicely. Plus, its sibling's good looks run in the family.

This is a wonderfully commanding and controlled performer. It excels in terms of

grip and composure, delivering way more in terms of scale and authority when compared with its little brother. It also sounds more open and dramatic, as we discover when listening to Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture*. We are impressed by the scale and the way this compact design deals with the music's savage dynamics. There is no shortage of punch and power, but there is insight too, the A15 tracking the multitude of instrumental strands with skill. Dynamic nuances are conveyed with finesse, and we love the way it renders instrumental textures with such delicacy.

Stereo imaging is expansive, stable and nicely layered, regardless of complexity or

More than just a beefier A5, the A15 has its own sonic character

volume. While the A15 doesn't have the sweetness or slight richness we so like in its cheaper sibling, it compensates with a higher level of clarity and precision.

The A15 has this powerful, precise and poised character regardless of input chosen. Arcam was one of the pioneers of outboard DACs back in the '80s and that experience shines through in the performance of the A15's digital section. It is crisp, insightful and engaging.

This is another bullseye for Arcam. The A15 is a clear step better than its talented sibling, delivering greater clarity, scale and precision. We haven't heard a better-sounding alternative for the money.





Naim Nait XS 3

£2499

When an amplifier has been around, in one form or another, as long as the Nait XS has (since 2008), you can be sure of two things: first, that the basic design is spot on; and, second, that it has had plenty of time to benefit from tweaks and improvements. Both are true here. What's more, you have to go back to 2018 to find a different product in this slot.

The XS 3's moving-magnet phono circuit is made up of three stages - a gain stage, passive equalisation and final gain with active equalisation. The idea is to minimise noise while keeping plenty of dynamic headroom. The equalisation curve is custom, suggesting a good bass response with enough low-end roll-off to prevent rumble spoiling the sound.

It's pretty common to find built-in phono stages included as a box-ticking exercise with little regard to getting the best performance. The circuit in the Nait XS 3 bucks that trend with a detailed and punchy performance that brims with energy and interest. It's relatively quiet too.



When it comes to connections, there is the choice of stereo RCA or, of course, Naim's preferred DIN sockets for the four line-level inputs. The user also has the option to split the pre and power amplification sections, should they want to slot something even more sophisticated into their system.

The XS 3 sounds especially crisp and agile, impressing with a combination of insight, dynamic subtlety and rhythmic drive that is hard to better at this level. Detail resolution is good, but it's the

Smooth elegance on the outside, great electronics on the inside

amplifier's ability to assemble all that information into a cohesive whole that really impresses.

There's a generous dose of dynamics, and it is composed too, with a good degree of refinement when required. We also love the way this amp tracks complex rhythms.

If the emotional impact of your music is front and centre for you, listen to this Naim. It remains the most musically enticing stereo amplifier option at this price. Somehow, we are not surprised.

Rega Aethos

£3300

Regular readers of this magazine will know that we are big fans of Rega's integrated amplifiers. Between the io, Brio, Elex-R and Elicit-R, the company has picked up more five-star verdicts and *What Hi-Fi?* Awards than we care to remember. And when the Aethos appeared four years ago, we found it was - and still is - worthy of the Rega name.

The Aethos (125W per channel into 8 ohms) is hardly feature-packed; but if you are happy with line-level analogue connectivity, there is more than enough here. It has five line-level inputs, a 6.3mm headphone output, a preamp out, a direct input into the power amp section that bypasses the volume control, and - that rare thing - a tape loop. Those looking for digital inputs, Bluetooth connectivity, or even a phono stage will need to look elsewhere.

Build quality is impressive. The chunky styling of the casework may not be to all tastes, but it does suggest that



the Aethos means business. Plus it feels rock solid and inspires confidence.

There's all the verve of Rega's affordable integrateds here, along with a huge dose of extra clarity, precision and muscle. Dvořák's *New World Symphony* is delivered with all the authority we would expect, sounding wonderfully detailed and unstressed - even when pushed to high levels. All that information is tightly knit in a cohesive and convincing way,

Effortless muscle and authority combine with fine detail and clarity

making the overall presentation impressively clean and forthright.

We also play Laurie Anderson's *My Right Eye*, where the Rega's enthusiasm with rhythms and its impressive punch come to the fore.

Naim's Supernait 3 has similar qualities to this Rega and challenged it hard here, but it costs £1000 more. Even ignoring the price difference the Aethos remains our choice.

LISTEN SMARTER WITH THE JBL TOUR PRO 3

Featuring a next-gen smart charging case™



Now there's a smarter way to listen on the go. The JBL Tour Pro 3 feature a redesigned Smart Charging Case with its own touchscreen, so you can control your listening experience without taking your phone out of your pocket or bag. That's true listening freedom.

A portal to smarter listening

The 1.57-inch touchscreen not only shows what song is playing or who's calling, it can also display photos, provide access to your Spotify account, set an alarm, and show information like the time, remaining battery life, messages and more. It can also work as a dongle to beam hi-res audio to the earbuds from any AUX or USB-C source like a phone, tablet, TV or in-flight entertainment system, and share

The JBL Tour Pro 3 feature a redesigned Smart Charging Case with its own touchscreen

content to nearby devices. It's your portal to smarter listening.

Pro sound in a Pro package

With dual drivers in each earbud, the JBL Tour Pro 3 provide more clarity and clean, agile bass and vivid vocals. Hi-Res-certified wireless audio via the 24-bit LDAC format delivers three times more data than standard Bluetooth, resulting in exceptional sound quality. And they have plenty of listening modes too, with JBL Spatial 360 sound dropping you right in the middle of a 360-degree audio experience. Turn on Head Tracking, and sounds become even more realistic and anchored in space as if they were actually happening around you.

You can personalise the sound experience to your personal listening

profile, or stay alert to the outside world with Smart Ambient modes. You can even have a conversation without taking the earbuds out using the Smart Talk mode.

And when you want to block out the outside world entirely, they have you covered. The JBL Tour Pro 3 adjusts their active noise cancellation to your surroundings in real time, so even sudden, loud noises don't intrude on your listening. And because they come with an additional set of foam eartips for even better passive noise isolation, you'll remain undisturbed, whether you're listening to music or concentrating on the task at hand.

For the best sound experience on the go with leading-edge features, the JBL Tour Pro 3 have it all in a compact, tech-rich package.

[View offers: whf.cm/BestFloorstandingSpeakers2024](https://whf.cm/BestFloorstandingSpeakers2024)

FLOORSTANDING SPEAKERS

If your listening room is better described as 'spacious' than 'compact', a floorstander is likely to be your best bet

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2024

**BEST
FLOORSTANDING
SPEAKER**
£1000-£1500

**Q ACOUSTICS
5050**

PRODUCT OF THE YEAR

■ Q Acoustics 5050 £1299

For these new range-topping 5050s, Q Acoustics has scaled up the winning recipe that saw its 5040 floorstanders achieve this Award last year. The most significant changes between the two models are bigger twin mid/bass drivers and a bigger cabinet. Visually, the new floorstanders look more dominating and will certainly benefit from being used in larger spaces.

The basic engineering remains the same, with the mid/bass units larger at 15cm (up from 12.5cm with the 5040) but once again benefitting from the company's 'Continuous Curved Cone' design that is claimed to incorporate the best characteristics of straight-sided and flared cone designs (bass, and control at higher frequencies, respectively).

The 5050's crossover point between the twin mid/bass units and 25mm soft-dome tweeter is a fairly conventional 2.7kHz. The tweeter is vented and derived from that used in the more upmarket Concept series.

The 5050s' larger mid/bass drivers necessitate a cabinet that is notably wider, and this enclosure feels nicely made and well finished. It is rigid too, thanks to carefully considered internal bracing. The front baffle is lined with butyl rubber (to damp resonances). Inside are four Helmholtz pressure-equalising tubes, designed to control internal air pressure and reduce standing waves. The 5050 is claimed to go only 2Hz deeper in the bass (37Hz vs 39Hz) than the 5040, but in use that translates into considerably more low-frequency heft and gives the speakers a calmer, more mature disposition.

As we listen to *Time* from Hans Zimmer's *Inception* OST, it is hard not to be impressed by the depth and definition of the music's complex and powerful lows. The 5050 sound composed and unstressed even as volume levels rise.

Given a little space to breathe and a slight angle towards the listening position,

the 5050 generates a well-focused, nicely layered and generous soundstage. The positions of sounds and instruments are stable and locked into place even when the music becomes demanding. Their tonal balance is still a touch forward, so it pays to take care with system matching. There is no questioning the clarity and insight on offer though. These speakers dig up plenty of detail, and are able to delve into complex productions and deliver clear insights. They manage to keep hold of a multitude of instrumental strands without losing track of the musical whole.

The 5050 can go from a whisper to an orchestra at full bore effortlessly, too, while still having the skill to convey the nuance and passion in a solo voice. It would be nice to have a little more natural richness through the midrange, but it is hard to argue with the 5050's articulation and finesse in this region. If you have the space and extra budget, this is where our money would go.

The 5050s' larger mid/bass drivers require a notably wider cabinet



■ Wharfedale Diamond 12.3

£499

Wharfedale's Diamond range of small but talented standmounters dates back to the early '80s. The range now includes floorstanders, and the most compact and affordable of them is extra special.

These 2.5-way speakers are masters at juggling the almost-contradictory demands of being forgiving with budget all-in-one electronics while at the same time having enough transparency to make the most of price-compatible separates. They are smooth, even-handed and wonderfully refined for the money.

Feed them a poor signal and they reveal the shortcomings, but will round off rough edges and downplay unwanted aggression without smothering the life out of the music. Given a good source and suitably capable amplification, though, they perform superbly. They resolve a large amount of information but also present it in an organised and controlled way. And all that talent is wrapped in a classy finish that belies the 12.3's modest price.

At just short of 98cm tall, the 12.3 aren't massive speakers, but they still perform best if given a little room to breathe, at least 50cm from the rear wall; we settle on 90cm in our test room. Similarly, keep them at least 70cm away from the side walls if you want to maximise stereo imaging, sonic balance and clarity.

Feed them *Trance Frenz* by Ólafur Arnalds and they deliver a lovely layered sound that is brimming with detail and dynamic nuance. As we move from Jay Z's *The Blueprint 3* to Kate Bush's *Hounds Of Love*, we appreciate the articulate and expressive midrange and the seamless integration between the drive units. We like how Wharfedale has avoided excess; there is enough bass weight to satisfy but not so much that it spoils the balance of the presentation. The lows are agile, satisfyingly rich and textured with it.

It's tough to make a truly talented affordable floorstander, but Wharfedale has cracked it. Worthy winners once again.



WHAT HI-FI?

AWARDS 2024

**BEST
FLOORSTANDING
SPEAKER
UNDER £500**

**WHARFEDALE
DIAMOND 12.3**

■ Q Acoustics 5040

£879

We are always impressed by speakers that are even-handed enough to step out of the way of the music and let it shine. And that presentation is what you will find with Q Acoustics' 5040 speakers. At just 97cm x 18cm (hw), these floorstanders can slip unobtrusively into most rooms, too.

The 125mm mid/bass driver uses Q Acoustics' Continuous Curved Cone design, that is claimed to marry the rigidity advantages of a conical cone with the high-frequency break-up characteristics of a flared design. The 25mm soft-dome tweeter is decoupled from the front baffle to reduce any distortions caused by structural vibrations. The three drive units are linked by a second-order crossover network that uses metallized polyester film capacitors, air core inductors and high-power wire wound resistors. The speakers' 91dB/W/m sensitivity and claimed nominal impedance of 6 ohms that dips to a minimum of 3 ohms means it makes sense to pair the 5040 with a more muscular amp.

With *Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture*, the 5040 sound wonderfully clear and precise, with the leading edges of notes crisply defined and rendered without any excess harshness. There is plenty of detail here, from lush instrumental textures to the subtle clues that go into defining the acoustic space of the recording venue.

Tonally, they sit just on the lean side of neutral, which helps to give them plenty of agility and grip. Low-frequency notes come and go with little overhang yet lack nothing for punch and authority. We like the way they sound composed and controlled, even with demanding music. Stereo imaging is also impressive – the 5040 paint a spacious, focused and nicely layered soundstage.

These towers sound fast and fun. There is plenty of attack, but enough solidity and refinement to avoid accusations of aggression. With Post Malone, Nitin Sawhney or Miles Davis, never do these speakers sound out of their comfort zone. That makes them an easy recommendation.



WHAT HI-FI?

AWARDS 2024

**BEST
FLOORSTANDING
SPEAKER
£500-£1000**

**Q ACOUSTICS
5040**

■ PMC Prodigy 5

£1995

PMC is aiming to bring high-end audio to the man on the street with its Prodigy range. The priority, as becomes clear when you look at the Prodigy 5, is as much sound-per-pound punch as is possible; considerations over design and aesthetic flourishes fall by the wayside in the pursuit of the best audio you can get for the price. And this, theoretically at least, should lead to a pair of speakers that, while utilitarian in appearance, knock it out of the park in terms of sonic performance.

PMC claims to use the same core tech across both its flagship studio products and its home audio speakers, with the Prodigy 5's 27mm tweeter and 13cm mid/bass driver aiming to fill a large space thanks to its transmission line technology.

The Prodigy 5 are typical PMC speakers, in that they are unfussy and transparent when it comes to partnering equipment. The slimline floorstanders are easygoing and good-natured up to a point; transparent enough to show you the qualities of a better amplifier but generally

willing to reveal, rather than exaggerate, the faults in recordings or partnering kit.

PMC has hit the sweetest of sweet spots with the Prodigy range, balancing subtle details and musical flourishes with a perceptibly heightened sense of presence, poise and confidence. Take their rendition of Björk's *Bachelorette*. This complex, almost industrial ballad requires as much of the surgeon's scalpel as it does the engineer's hammer to truly do it justice. The Prodigy 5's rendition fulfils these contrary objectives without a hint of strain, matching Björk's distinctive, piercing vocal vulnerability with the full-bodied and cohesive instrumentation below, all the while revealing the kinks and subtle phrases inherent in such a carefully curated arrangement.

While comparatively priced rivals substitute space for precision or dynamics for subtlety, PMC's unassuming towers are truly comprehensive performers. This is just about as good as we have heard a pair of speakers sound at this price.



■ Spendor A7

£3950

A7 could well stand for 'Awards x 7', since these Spendors have now won a Best Buy Award in their category for a mightily impressive seventh time in a row.

There is nothing flash about the A7s; standing 93cm tall, they exude a simple elegance. Build quality is first rate. You can choose Black Ash, Dark Walnut or Natural Oak veneers, or Satin White.

These are two-way speakers. Each has an 18cm mid/bass driver and a 22mm tweeter with a wide surround that helps to disperse the sound further.

Position them correctly - around 20-30cm from a wall - and you will reap the rewards. The Spendors have rear-firing slot-shaped reflex ports to reduce noise and distortion, and to give better grip on bass than a conventional tube-shaped port can generally manage.

This is a big sound, packed with insight and great dynamics. Detail levels are fantastic, with each instrumental strand and vocal quirk laid bare. The

sound is terrifically clean and organised, but where other Spendors prioritise refinement, these A7s also pack in bags of punch to keep things sounding lively. They are wonderfully expressive as well, vocals being a particular highlight.

Despite their relatively compact size, these speakers also go satisfyingly deep, and keep a firm grip on the bassline of Massive Attack's *Angel*. Each note is pulled taut, and the edges are precise but wrapped in layers of texture.

More raucous tunes could perhaps do with a bit more brawn behind them - but that's a trifling concern in light of the A7s' stunning precision, clarity and subtlety. Factor in their hugely enjoyable dynamics and flair for rhythm, and Spendor can certainly hang on to this Award for another year at least.



View offers: whf.com/BestStandmountSpeakers2024

STANDMOUNT SPEAKERS

These standmounters represent the very best ways to conclude your music's journey to your ears



WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2024

**BEST
STANDMOUNT
SPEAKER**
£300-£600

**BOWERS & WILKINS
607 S3**

PRODUCT OF THE YEAR

■ Bowers & Wilkins 607 S3 £549

The smallest and most affordable of B&W's 600 range, the 607 S3 replaces the previous Award-winning 607 S2 Anniversary Edition standmounters. We hesitate to call these latest speakers truly 'budget', but they are still B&W's entry-level pair and pack in more than enough punch to justify the outlay.

B&W has stuck with the same compact footprint (30 x 16.5 x 20.7cm), keeping the 607 S3 a great option for smaller spaces. The build quality is excellent and for the price they look elegant and premium.

First and foremost of many updates is the use of titanium in the 25mm decoupled double-dome tweeter assembly. The tweeter's two-part design uses a thin 25-micron main dome reinforced by a 30-micron ring - both made with titanium. B&W says the switch to titanium from aluminium in the 600 speakers should allow for sweeter, more refined and better detail at the higher end.

The tube-loading system at the back of the tweeter has been elongated to reduce further unwanted, rearward standing waves from affecting the front output of the tweeter unit. A new tweeter-grille design taken from the new flagship 800 Signature Series is incorporated, too. Both upgrades are claimed to result in a more open sound. The 13cm Continuum mid/bass driver returns, backed by a more powerful motor assembly inspired by the step-up 700 S3 range, and the crossover has been updated with higher-quality components to aid transparency.

The new 607 S3 sound incredibly fun. There's clarity and refinement to a really admirable level, but we are struck by just how entertaining, zippy and musical this new pair sounds. Instead of sacrificing dynamic expression and pure enjoyment for a more sophisticated and open sound, B&W has managed to meld these

Their compact size makes the speakers ideal for smaller spaces

elements together into a capable and entertaining package.

Songs we know well and play every time during reviewing - by Alt-J, Bruce Springsteen and John Williams - are all given a zest of life through these talented speakers. They sound rhythmically cohesive, agile, and well organised. The overall presentation is more open-sounding than before. The 607 S3 do a fantastic job of capturing delicate highs as well as the deeper, resonating notes. That new titanium dome offers a cleaner, more sweet-sounding treble that is lovely to listen to. We play track after track during our time with the 607 S3 and find that the speakers sing with any genre of music.

B&W has gone back to its roots with these stunning speakers, which, for their size and price range, really are a talented, energetic and dynamic pair. One that, to our ears, remains a winning combination.

■ Wharfedale Diamond 12.1

£249

Wharfedale's mission here is the same as when it first introduced the Diamond in 1982; that is, to offer top-class sound at an affordable price. To that end, the 12.1 is a neat and compact box that won't dominate any room and, using differing thicknesses of MDF bonded together to control resonances plus strategic bracing, it is rigid but well-controlled.

The 13cm mid/bass unit's 'Klarity' composite cone material is designed to offer a good balance between rigidity and damping. This driver is tuned by a rear-firing reflex port. The tweeter is a 25mm textile dome designed for wide dispersion, a smooth response and strong dynamics. The two drivers are linked with a carefully calibrated crossover using parts usually found at higher price points.

These speakers have a surprisingly bold and full-bodied presentation. They sound confident and composed in a way that evades most budget rivals, and top that with a good degree of refinement.



They dig up a pleasing amount of detail and manage to organise it in a cohesive and musical way, with easy to follow low-level musical strands and a presentation that doesn't start to get confused when things get busy.

Tonally, they are smooth and forgiving but remain nicely balanced, with enough in the way of bite. We like the reassuring way they handle larger-scale dynamics, delivering more in the way of authority and

'Klarity' cone material aims for a balance of rigidity and damping

scale than their modest price and size suggest. Low frequencies come through with confidence and more fullness than expected. They deliver a good soundstage, expansive and stable, even when the music gets demanding. We are impressed with the seamless integration between the drive units, and the way these speakers convey voices with such confidence.

All in all, the Wharfedales' broad spread of abilities fully deserve this Award.



■ Bowers & Wilkins 606 S3

£699

B&W's much improved 606 speakers are large-scaled and refined performers.

These standmounters are a two-way vented design, with a 25mm titanium-dome tweeter and the 16.5cm Continuum cone for the mid/bass. The use of titanium aims to improve resolution and refinement in the high frequencies, while the grille mesh covering the new tweeter arrangement is claimed to deliver a more open sound. There is also an improved, more powerful motor assembly for the mid/bass driver, an updated crossover with higher quality bypass capacitors, a neater speaker-terminal layout and reflex-port design at the back of the speaker, and a longer tube-loading system to further reduce unwanted radiation from the back of the tweeter.

This latest-gen 606 is leaps ahead when it comes to clarity and dynamism, making the older 606 S2 sound rather cluttered and dynamically flat in comparison. This leaner, more precise and more refined beast offers a bigger, more open and spacious presentation, with plenty of room for songs to breathe and flourish. There are



new-found levels of refinement and ample headroom for that cleaner treble to soar, while vocals come through with all their distinct personalities and tonal variances. At times, this level of detail is enchanting.

The speakers can reach party levels with ease and clarity; with the bigger mid/bass driver and deeper cabinet come added weight, punch and authority. Orchestral pieces roar with more conviction and in a

The 606 S3 are leaps ahead when it comes to clarity and dynamism

wider soundstage than the smaller 607 S3s allow, while low-frequency performances are controlled, with an organic depth.

While the 606 aren't slouches when it comes to attack and agility, the smaller 607 are just a tad more agile and rhythmically adept. But did we have any trouble playing albums continuously without getting bored through the 606? Absolutely not. The 606 S3 are a big, easy listen.



■ KEF LS50 Meta

£999

KEF's Uni-Q driver array has been thoroughly reworked for the Meta, taking in the refinements KEF has developed over the past few years and, crucially, adding MAT (Metamaterial Absorption Technology). Here, the rearward sound feeds into a puck-sized plastic circular maze, which KEF claims absorbs a wide range of frequencies much more effectively than alternative methods. The result should be cleaner, less distorted highs.

And the improvements are significant. The basic sonic character is instantly familiar, but the new Metas have gained a level of clarity and finesse the originals only hinted at. They sound so much more transparent, and render low-level details, such as instrumental textures, much more convincingly. It's a full-bodied presentation with a good degree of authority for such compact speakers. Large-scale dynamics are handled well and there is a good amount of muscle for a speaker of this size. These are refined and composed



WHAT HI-FI?
★ ★ ★ ★ ★
AWARDS 2024

**BEST STANDMOUNT
SPEAKER**
£800-£1000

KEF LS50 META

performers that rarely sound stressed, and they sound smooth and balanced while still having enough in the way of high-frequency bite. They will reveal shortcomings in poor recordings, but don't go out of their way to be nasty.

KEF's Uni-Q designs tend to image well by their very nature, and the LS50 Meta

The Metas have a full-bodied presentation with plenty of authority

generate an expansive, tightly focused and convincingly layered soundstage. We are also impressed with the image's stability when the music gets demanding.

The MAT tech and all the other work KEF's engineers have put into the Uni-Q array has kept the Awards coming for the fifth year in a row.

■ PMC Prodigy 1

£1250

Just because these Prodigy speakers sit at the bottom of the company's lineup doesn't mean they are exempt from PMC's tried and tested technologies - and it certainly seems as if PMC is serious in taking its studio-grade sound mainstream.

The soft-dome tweeter has been developed from the one found in the five-star PMC Result6 studio monitors, while the mid/bass unit is the same as featured in the company's custom install series. This, PMC says has become the reference for Dolby Atmos music mixing in studios around the world.

It is in the design that PMC likely cut costs, the Prodigy 1 being less striking and stylish than price rivals. That the focus has seemingly been put into the engineering is hard to argue with when you hear just how spectacular the Prodigy 1 sound.

These PMCs showboat their stunning clarity, detail and charisma from the get-go. An all-round level of sonic sophistication typically associated with speakers beyond this price is confirmed throughout our



WHAT HI-FI?
★ ★ ★ ★ ★
AWARDS 2024

**BEST STANDMOUNT
SPEAKER**
£1000-£1500

PMC PRODIGY 1

listening, their midrange talents coming to the fore with vocals and communicating emotion so well. And the bass - wow. For speakers of their stature and price, they dig deep but retain definition, with pace and punch to complement that presence and depth. While the Prodigy 1 are neutral and could be labelled 'analytical', this is not at the expense of entertainment and fun.

These 'entry-level' speakers use tech found in pricier PMC speakers

Such versatility helps make this yet another pair of PMC speakers we can wholeheartedly recommend; but it's their hugely enjoyable performance that seals their Award win. They sound terrific and no less 'PMC' than the company's pricier models. The Prodigy 1 simply open up the PMC sound to a wider audience - one that deserves to be in your home.

■ Epos ES-7N

£1890

The Epos ES-7N are charmers; small and hugely capable. The 29cm tall cabinets are nicely made with panels comprising two layers of 8mm thick MDF separated by a high-loss damping material. The tweeters are a 28mm ceramic-coated aluminium dome, while below 2kHz, a front-ported 13cm mica-loaded polypropylene mid/bass unit takes over.

As the cone is injection-moulded, Epos has a great deal of freedom to optimise the profile and thickness to get precisely the response required. In addition, the mid/bass has a double-magnet motor to control stray fields and increase the force on the voice coil.

These are relatively small speakers and so can't compete with larger designs when it comes to bass weight, overall scale and dynamic reach. Yet, they do so much well that we don't really mind the losses. The ES-7N are bold and confident performers that resolve high levels of detail and organise it in a cohesive and musical way.



WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2024

**BEST STANDMOUNT
SPEAKER**
£1500-£2500

EPOS ES-7N

They sound taut and punchy, delivering rhythm tracks in a wonderfully surefooted manner. Considering that these are small speakers with a modestly sized mid/bass unit, it is surprising just how solid and full-bodied they sound at low frequencies. They may not dig as deeply as some, but they do sound controlled and grippy. Tonally, the ES-7N have a smooth, surprisingly full-bodied balance.

These compact speakers sound surprisingly solid at low frequencies

With careful placement and a top-quality signal, they will deliver a performance good enough to challenge the very best alternatives at this level. However, even when the conditions aren't optimised, they continue to excel. That's a rare talent that should be celebrated.



■ Mission 770

£3499

What if you take a classic design as a base, and then execute it with the full might of current technology and the benefit of improved technical knowledge gained over the decades? Well, you get these Mission 770s, a resurrection of the late '70s originals that offer an excellent alternative to the established class leaders.

The tools available to a speaker designer to optimise performance are so much more sophisticated than they were in the '70s that it is easy to understand how the current 20cm polypropylene drive units could easily outperform their ancestors. The same applies to the 28mm microfibre Polyester dome tweeter, which is a modern vented design that is linked to the mid/bass via a more complex crossover than before.

These are big standmounters - their internal volume is 38.5 litres, around double that of most rivals, so there is certainly the potential for them to dominate in modestly sized rooms. As a general rule, big speakers with big drive



WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2024

**BEST STANDMOUNT
SPEAKER**
OVER £2500

MISSION 770

units tend to produce big bass, and that holds true here - but also we can't recall a similarly priced standmounter that has as much finesse when it comes to delivering low-end. They sound taut and agile, but also delicate in the way they paint bass textures and resolve low-level information, with plenty in the way of punch and power when required. There is also a clear, precise and expressive midrange, with a lively and engaging presentation that is well judged, never sounding thin or overly aggressive.

The Mission 770 are right up there with the very best at this price. While the link to the past will be the main attraction for some, for us that is put in the shade by the speakers' excellent all-round performance. The 770 have a range of sonic talents that sets them apart from most rivals and again earns them this Award.



■ Elac Debut ConneX DCB41

£399

Elac's Debut ConneX DCB41 is a powered set-up where one speaker contains all the electronics, including the 2 x 50 watts of amplification, while the other is a conventional passive design. The two speakers are linked with a standard, supplied speaker cable.

You will need to supply the source, though. This can be an aptX Bluetooth signal from your phone, or anything digital that connects directly through the USB (Type B), optical or HDMI inputs. The addition of HDMI ARC is a smart touch and opens up the ConneX to be used with TVs.

There is a single set of stereo RCA inputs that can be switched between being a line-level or a moving-magnet phono input; it's fair to say Elac has covered most bases well.

The Debut ConneX DCB41 doesn't take up much space. The individual units stand around a hand-span high, fitting into most places with ease. Build quality is pleasing; good and solid. These speakers would be right at home on a desktop, but can also work in a decently sized room.



Through the digital inputs, they are clear, balanced and insightful performers. There is a good level of detail here and the ability to organise that information into a cohesive and musical whole. As we listen to a range of music from *Sorrows Away* by folk group The Unthanks to Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture*, it becomes clear that these speakers are surprisingly capable.

These powered speakers just need you to bring the source

The overall presentation is controlled and even-handed and the understated way this system goes about its job is eminently likeable. This is a product that fades into the background, leaving the music to take the limelight. We are big fans of systems such as this. They are neat, well-featured and excellent value, and earn a rich recommendation from us.



FIVE FUNK AND SOUL CLASSICS TO TEST YOUR SYSTEM

Give your hi-fi a workout with these bonafide 1960s and '70s soul classics



Sly & The Family Stone Trip To Your Heart

A slice of upbeat funk with a melty sort of chorus. This one doesn't have the social conscience of *Everyday People* or *Stand!* but that's Sly Stone for you; one foot in progressive psychedelia, the other in the world of wedding floor-fillers. It does have a hell of a swing to it, and the tempo changes should prove a workout for any system.



Marlena Shaw California Soul

This sunshine-drenched paean to the music of the Golden State has some iconic orchestration, finger-snapping drums and of course, Ms Shaw's wonderfully soulful voice. It's a joyous celebration of soul music ("When you hear the beat you want to pat your feet..."). The strings give it a really cinematic feel, too. Hear it and smile.



Sam & Dave Soul Man

A playful bassline, catchy guitar riff and horns which punctuate the track with a precision and a sharpness that could excite a poorer system's treble. Sam and Dave take turns singing, so your system must be transparent enough to differentiate and pick out the required levels of detail in each singer's soulful, snappy delivery.



The Temptations Papa Was A Rolling Stone

A real slow-burner to start. Over 12 minutes, we are treated to some *Shaft*-inspired wah-wah guitar, simmering strings, get-up handclaps and that creeping bassline. It's nearly a full four minutes before we hear the classic opening line "It was the third of September..." But boy does it fly by.



James Brown Super Bad

The opening drum beats hit you right in the chest, and the raucous chorus contains some of the most ferocious shrieking ever committed to vinyl. As with a lot of the rap music it inspired (and that sampled Brown's oeuvre), it's basically a song about how excellent the person singing it is. And on the strength of this track, who are we to argue?

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MUSIC SYSTEMS

Not everyone has space for separates, but with these compact hi-fi systems, there's no need to compromise on the sound

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2024

**BEST HI-FI
SYSTEM**
£500-£1500

**TECHNICS
SA-C600**

PRODUCT OF THE YEAR



■ Technics SA-C600

£799

The Technics SA-C600 is generously featured, nice to use and built well. Most importantly, it sounds good. While it is tempting to go through each source separately - built-in CD player, network streaming capabilities with up to 32-bit/384kHz file compatibility, DAB/FM radio, wirelessly via AirPlay 2, Chromecast or Bluetooth or its built-in moving-magnet phono stage - there is really no need to do so, as the SA-C600 proves an admirably consistent performer across the board. It produces musically compelling results regardless of how we are listening.

We call it a system, but you still need to add a pair of speakers. Consider the likes of Dali's Oberon 1 standmounters (£399) a good starting point, but the SA-C600 has enough ability to justify going as high as KEF's mighty LS50 Metas (£999).

Listen to Bob Marley's *Legend* set and the Technics captures the generally easy flow of the music well. It's an expressive

and punchy player that builds its performance around a solid framework of surefooted rhythmic drive and expressive dynamics.

Detail levels are good, but it is the confident way this unit organises that information into a cohesive and musical whole that really impresses. It isn't long before our attention is focused on the spellbinding music rather than the mechanics of hi-fi. Basslines are taut and tuneful, while Marley's voice comes through with clarity and passion intact.

Tonally, this is a smooth and refined presentation, as is the Technics way, but there is enough attack when the music demands. This impression is reinforced when we switch to Bruce Springsteen's *High Hopes* set. The hard-charging version of *The Ghost Of Tom Joad* on this album is a stern test for any piece of hi-fi, with its full-throttle attitude and crunching beat, and the Technics copes admirably. It has a

The SA-C600 is a well-featured system - just add speakers...

solid, robust sound that conveys the song's energy well, and the resolving power to keep instrumental strands separate. Most of all it is an entertaining listen, one that manages to communicate the musical message effectively.

Mahler's *Symphony No.10* is a dense and demanding piece of classical music. The Technics does well - though to be fair, if you're after the last word in insight, a well-chosen combination of separates will do better. Regardless, the SA-C600 captures the feel of the music convincingly, delivering a combination of drama and fluidity that grabs a firm hold of our attention. A claimed power output of 30 watts per channel (into 8 ohms) is pretty modest, but the SA-C600 exceeds expectations by sounding surprisingly authoritative and suitably large-scale.

Technics has hit a real sweet spot with the SA-C600. It is sensibly featured, easy to use and sounds surprisingly musical.

Denon D-M41DAB

£399

When it comes to micro-systems, the D-M41DAB has been unrivalled as king for as long as we can remember. And for very good reason. Now, with a considerably lower price than at launch, this system is better value than ever. Despite being a standalone system - with built-in CD and streaming - there are analogue and digital optical inputs for playing music from external sources too.

The whole character of this system is one of a pleasingly forward presentation. It still sounds nicely even, but really throws itself into rhythms with confidence.

Dynamics, too, are particularly insightful and expressive. We play Hot Chip's *Made In The Dark* on CD and immediately notice the spacious gains in the soundstage as well as greater detail. Dynamics, too, are more insightful and expressive. Changing pace with Ryan Adams' *Heartbreaker*, it's clear the energy with which the Denon rendered Hot Chip can be easily traded for gracefulness and delicacy.



WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2024

BEST HI-FI SYSTEM
UNDER £500

DENON D-M41DAB

The drop in sound quality from CD to Spotify stream has no effect on the D-M41DAB's sonic mastery. The combination of low-end stability and dynamic sensibilities leaves us with a remarkably human performance for a hi-fi system at this price. Indeed, this system offers a character of performance that can hold its own against groups of separates costing much more.

The D-M41DAB has a pleasingly musical sonic presentation

You can always upgrade the D-M41DAB by replacing the supplied pair of speakers, but we don't think you will feel the need - and you would need to spend a fair bit more cash to get a markedly better sound.

The D-M41DAB is impressive proof that great pound-for-pound hi-fi sound need not always mean separate components - and it's the overall integrity of the Denon's sound that remains a winner here.

Naim Uniti Atom

£2299

Naim describes the Uniti Atom as a streamer, but that does it something of a disservice. This is a system in its own right, to which you need attach only a suitably talented pair of speakers.

It consists of 40W of class A/B amplification derived from the Nait integrated amps. Connectivity is by way of speaker terminals, ethernet and USB inputs, a single digital coaxial and a pair of digital optical sockets, two analogue connections and an HDMI socket.

Google Chromecast, Spotify Connect, Tidal and internet radio are on board, plus there's AirPlay and aptX HD Bluetooth. It's all navigated via the remote control or equally logical Naim app.

Naim's Uniti Atom is an absolute treat to listen to, no matter what the source or material it is fed. Balanced, dynamic and expressively detailed, it manages to combine just the right level of attack with an open and even-handed attention across the entire frequency range. It's rather like

going through a door and listening to the music from inside the room instead of having to strain to hear things from outside. There's a level of detailed expression here that rivals can easily miss.

Timing has always been a forte of Naim's all-in-one systems, and none of it is sacrificed with the Uniti Atom. This Naim is unfazed by the scale of a recording, the speed at which it travels, or with organising the instruments within it.



WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2024

BEST HI-FI SYSTEM
OVER £1500

NAIM UNITI ATOM

Naim hits the sweet spot between lifestyle product and serious hi-fi

Rarely does a product look and sound as good as the Uniti Atom, but here Naim has drawn big old capital S's on Style and Substance. It would be easy to understate just how great a performer the Uniti Atom is, insofar as it is what we have come to expect from Naim - and it's no surprise to find it winning an Award yet again this year. But if you hear one and fail to be excited at the prospect of ownership then, quite frankly, there's little hope left for you.

Triangle AIO Twin

£699

Systems that integrate amplification, connectivity, streaming and more into one box or a pair of speakers are an increasingly neat and attractive way to get hi-fi sound into your home. Not only are they lifestyle-friendly, but their feature set also means you can play just about anything through them. The Triangle AIO Twin may look like a pair of 'normal' speakers, but this is a fully fledged, versatile music system in its own right, with a whole host of features and a level of performance that makes for quite the bargain.

The two speaker cabinets look smart and classy, and are an appealing size - bigger than desktop speakers, but smaller than your standard standmount speakers.

They can play just about anything, from Bluetooth streams to music files stored on your home network via ethernet - even your vinyl records via a built-in moving-magnet phono stage. Internet radio and all major streaming services are on board, there is hi-res audio support up to



WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2024

**BEST SPEAKER
SYSTEM
UNDER £750**

**TRIANGLE
AIO TWIN**

24-bit/192kHz, and support for aptX HD, SBC and AAC codecs. They can even be a soundbar alternative for your TV.

This system is incredibly fun to listen to. It's an enthusiastic performer, happy to tackle any musical genre and recording quality, that simply wants you to enjoy the music being played. But alongside that dose of fun, there is a mature sense of composure running through its veins that is really impressive.

Triangle's AIO Twin is a truly versatile and compact system

While we aren't expecting lashings of deep bass from such relatively compact speaker cabinets, we are impressed with how taut, shapely and snappy basslines are. It moves the rhythm of a song forward, never lagging or sounding tubby. It's balanced across the frequencies too.

If you are looking for a neat, elegant system that (nearly) does it all, and that you don't have to pay over a grand for, this system is worth your attention.

KEF LSX II LT

£899

By dropping the option of a wireless link between the speakers, the auxiliary input and a few colourway options, KEF has been able to bring the price of this new LT ('lite') model down without sacrificing the core appeal of the LSX II. It offers extensive streaming features inside some of the best compact speakers around.

All in all, the LSX II LT is a handsome, well-made speaker system. These speakers still use the 11th-generation 11.5cm Uni-Q driver array, where the tweeter sits in the middle of the mid/bass unit. The LSX II LT are true active speakers with a Class D power amplifier dedicated to each drive unit. Though there's no analogue aux input, the USB-C port should work for most modern source devices. There is an HDMI ARC port, optical input and a subwoofer output.

To our ears, the spin-off shares the same sonic credentials as the LSX II, with almost no sonic shortcomings when the two are directly compared. Perhaps that shouldn't surprise us, what with both speaker pairs sharing the same driver units, cabinet sizes



WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2024

**BEST SPEAKER
SYSTEM
£750-£1500**

KEF LSX II LT

and internal electronics. The LT are in no way "lite" on the audio front - there's a solidity, crispness and breadth of bass that all belie a streaming system of this size.

The LT offers punch, focus and a snappy sense of propulsion without a hint of fuss or strain. There's a subtle mix of emotional expression and insight combined with a deft aptitude for control, poise and perfect balance. The top end very rarely strays into over-enthusiasm, and that meaty bass,

'Lite', but with the same drive units, cabinet sizes and internal electronics

while forceful and surprisingly weighty considering the size of the units, never allows itself to become indulgent or flabby.

If you're not bothered by losing a few extra connectivity options and features but still want that same tight, impressive sonic presentation, the KEF LSX II LT are a fantastic value alternative to the LSX II. By taking a great system and streamlining it without compromising the sound, the LSX II LT have nailed it. Good work, KEF.

■ KEF LS50 Wireless II

£1999

The original LS50 Wireless was an active speaker system take on KEF's LS50 - with built-in amplification and streaming smarts - and the Wireless II squeeze even more performance out of that familiar chassis and Uni-Q driver arrangement.

They do this through an innovation called MAT (Metamaterial Absorption Technology), in the form of a round piece of plastic with a maze-like structure that cleverly absorbs sound waves radiating from the rear of the tweeter dome so they don't distort the unit's output. Each 'path' in this structure is 'tuned' to absorb a specific range of frequencies.

A 100W class A/B amplifier powers the tweeter, while 280W Class D is available to the mid/bass driver. The wireless connection has been upped to 24-bit/96kHz (an ethernet cable increases that to 24-bit/192kHz), and support for DSD256 and MQA decoding is also on board.

There are plenty of ways to play music through this KEF, and changes to the



WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2024

BEST SPEAKER SYSTEM
£1500-£3000

KEF LS50 WIRELESS II

Wireless II include adding an HDMI eARC socket to make it more TV-friendly. Alongside this are coaxial, optical and 3.5mm aux inputs and a subwoofer output.

KEF has taken its predecessors' admirable precision to another level. The effect of MAT is clearly heard in the cleanliness of the treble, although mids are cleaner-cut and bass more defined too, their extra refinement making the originals sound a touch crude.

KEF's innovative revisions take the Wireless II's sound to another level!

The presentation has been opened out, that extra room not only filled with subtler, more precise detail, but also allowing for greater instrument separation.

The sonic advancements on its predecessor are not only a credit to KEF's engineering but also representative of how far such speaker system concepts have come, and help further highlight the appeal of an all-in-one stereo system. Worthy Award winners once more.

■ JBL 4329P Studio Monitor

£3499

The 4329P are powered, streaming-savvy speakers, and are rather imposing-looking. JBL's iconic 25mm horn-loaded driver is driven by 50 watts of amplification and fights for your gaze against a 20cm purple-pulp paper cone mid/bass below it.

On the rear panel of the master speaker is a range of inputs to complement its core streaming support - Apple AirPlay 2, Google Chromecast, DLNA and Bluetooth (aptX Adaptive, 5.3). There's balanced XLR, 3.5mm aux, and Toslink/optical and USB Type B that both support PCM files up to 192kHz. A subwoofer output can facilitate a 2.1 system with an external subwoofer.

Even with the Bluetooth presentation, which is a little cruder than other playback methods, the JBLs have a mighty presence - open, solid and powerful, with a quantity and quality of bass that comparatively make the KEF LS50 Wireless II's low-frequency output seem like a mere purr.

These speakers do everything to capture our attention during our listening, conveying the size and scale of atmospheric



WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2024

BEST SPEAKER SYSTEM
OVER £3000

JBL 4329P STUDIO MONITOR

Pink Floyd soundscapes while ensuring every instrument has the room, clarity and texture needed. That bass extension is really able to anchor bass chords, and it is impossible not to appreciate the 4329P's scale and full-bodiedness.

With Toto's *Rosanna*, the 4329P lap up the track's energy, with no sign of restraint as they roll with the drum beat and piano melodies, punch through the climaxes,

These imposing JBLs boast both quantity and quality of bass

and soar with the guitar solos and synths. Often kit encouraging you to turn the volume up is a sign of it offering little else to keep you entertained, but this system wants to have fun as much as you do.

That these JBLs are so versatile while managing to sound so mature is testament to JBL's persistent efforts in speaker design, and a milestone in all-in-one speaker systems of this kind and at this price.

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ACCESSORIES

They rarely grab the limelight, but these background actors are crucial to your systems's overall plot and often play a crucial supporting role – sometimes literally



■ Rega Fono MM Mk5 £220

Rega's **Fono MM** has been our go-to recommendation for an affordable phono stage for so long now that we are beginning to wonder if rival manufacturers are ever going to produce anything that will knock it off its perch. Quite simply, this minimalist, moving-magnet-only design remains better than any other budget option.

Not wanting to spoil a winning recipe, Rega ensured the revisions from the Mk4 to the Mk5 were minimal. The main changes were cosmetic – but since the Fono MM was already a clear class leader, that was clearly a wise decision.

Connectivity is simple, and that works a treat with the likes of Bruce Springsteen's *Born To Run*, the Rega conveying the hard-charging energy of the music well. Things are rock-solid rhythmically and there is enough in the way of low-end power to satisfy; those lows are taut without being overbearing.

Detail resolution is good too. This isn't the most pristine of productions but the Fono MM can uncover a good amount of detail and organise it into a cohesive and musical whole. This little Rega makes a decent fist of conveying the scale and

Rega says "if it ain't broke, don't fix it" – a mantra that works a treat

authority of Beethoven's *Fifth* and is full of enthusiasm when it comes to thumping out the music's dramatic dynamic shifts.

The Fono's presentation is decently balanced when it comes to tonality, and sound staging – while not the most spacious – is nevertheless perfectly acceptable. Rega may not have pushed the boat out with the Fono MM for a while, but it really hasn't needed to. The secret to the Fono MM's success really comes down to its performance. Judged by sound quality, the Rega Fono MM Mk5 phono stage remains the one to beat at this level.

■ Moon 110LP v2 £560

Unlike the cheaper Rega above, this classy-looking phono stage is switchable between moving-coil and moving-magnet cartridges. And unlike most rivals, the Moon offers gain adjustment in four increments, from 40dB through to 66dB – enough to cope with every moving-magnet design and all but the lowest-output moving-coil cartridges.

This is a fine-sounding phono stage, particularly with moving-magnet cartridges, and it has the classic Moon

sonic signature: fluid and refined but with enough in the way of drive and punch to satisfy. The stereo imaging is accomplished and remains stable even when the music becomes demanding.

If you play records, no other electronic component in your system has as much impact on the sound as a phono stage, and it is rare to find a unit this talented – and this well built – at the price. If you are after a quality mid-priced phono stage, this Moon shines brightly.



■ Vertere Phono-1 MkII L £1495

As we move into premium phono-stage territory, we encounter Vertere's one and only model of this type. And it's a stonker. Much as with the Rega Fono MM, there was no design revolution when the MkII L - carrying a new, gold-plated L-shaped circuit board, and available with a choice of black, silver or orange finishes - replaced the MkI. It was simply a case of the manufacturer carefully honing an already capable product.

This is the most entertaining phono stage we have heard at this level. In comparison with the original MkI, it delivers notably more in the way of dynamic expression, together with improved clarity and insight. Levels of hiss and hum are unobtrusive, too.

We love the scale of Orff's *Carmina Burana* that is apparent through the Vertere, as well as the way it delivers the seismic dynamic shifts of the recording with so much enthusiasm. As with the previous version, the MkII L makes listening to music interesting and, where appropriate, fun. Highly recommended.



WHAT HI-FI?

AWARDS 2024

**BEST PHONO
STAGE OVER £1000**

**VERTERE
PHONO-1 MKII L**

■ Chord Company RumourX £20/m

This version of the long-running Rumour series of speaker cables is three years old now - and showing no signs of having its Best speaker cable crown wrested from it.

Through our reference systems, we are consistently delighted by how this cable performs. It is a detailed and dynamically expressive performer that is unusually surefooted when communicating rhythmic drive. And, as we listen to the likes of Ólafur Arnalds and Hans Zimmer, we remain

impressed by its sonic balance and its taut, controlled bass performance. There is a greater sense of openness and a little more subtlety with dynamic nuances than you will find with other wires. At the top end, our system sounds just that touch more refined. And we stick with our assertion that the inclusion of ChorAlloy is responsible for the RumourX's ability to pass the signal without messing with it too much. In short, this cable does more than enough to hang on to its Award this year.



WHAT HI-FI?

AWARDS 2024

**BEST SPEAKER
CABLE**

**CHORD COMPANY
RUMOURX**

■ Chord Company C-line £65 (for 1 metre)

If you want to give your hi-fi system a lift, Chord's excellent C-Line interconnect is a great way to do it. The cable features Chord's Tuned ARAY technology, which has been trickled down from products aimed at more high-end hi-fi. Add in high-grade copper conductors and high-density foil shielding, and you have a cable that is well equipped to make your hi-fi shine that bit brighter and truer than it would with a more pedestrian - or bundled - interconnect. You will also find a stronger rhythmic drive and more expressive dynamics with the C-Line connecting your equipment.

Despite all that, the C-Line's true forte is the way it allows us to hear the musicality in a piece, allowing the components of a system to knit everything together seamlessly. It doesn't ignore things such as the size of the soundstage and the detail within, but places its main emphasis on the character of your music.

So - having heard what the rest can do - we see no need to ask Chord to remove this Award from its corporate mantelpiece this year.



WHAT HI-FI?

AWARDS 2024

**BEST ANALOGUE
INTERCONNECT
UNDER £100**

**CHORD COMPANY
C-LINE**

■ Chord Company ClearwayX ARAY £105 (for 1 metre)

We make no apology for including a third Chord cable in this section; this company knows, as it were, how to make good connections.

Like other cables in the company's stock, the ClearwayX ARAY Analogue RCA has evolved over time, the last upgrade introducing the addition of XLPE dielectric material for the first time on a (relatively) affordable cable.

This RCA interconnect shares the same characteristics as its predecessors, and it allows our test system to retain high levels

of clarity, crisp leading edges, rhythmic cohesion and even-handed tonal balance. And it seems to eke out a greater degree of control, punch and musical expression.

You might think that spending north of £100 per metre on a 'simple' interconnect is a bit of an indulgence, but we can assure you that, if those extra little improvements in your system's sound quality are at all important to you, you won't regret the outlay. This cable is most definitely a worthwhile investment.



WHAT HI-FI?
 ★★★★★
AWARDS 2024
 BEST ANALOGUE
 INTERCONNECT
 OVER £100
**CHORD COMPANY
 CLEARWAYX ARAY
 ANALOGUE RCA**

■ Atacama Evoque Eco 60-40 SE2 £270 (per shelf)

Some might say that the support you use for your equipment is of secondary importance. Those cynics are wrong, however - and these shelves will show such folk the error of their ways.

We happen to think that furniture (of all kinds) should look nice, but those curved sides aren't just for show, you know. They help to reduce the build up of internal standing waves, something reinforced by the shaping of the cut-outs on the underside. To deal with vibrations, each leg is decoupled from the shelf it is attached to, and has an internally mounted weight that controls resonance. They are terminated by rounded brass spikes for a degree of grounding between layers.

We are struck by how much more agile and dynamic our electronics sound when used on the Atacama. There is more detail and greater separation between dense instrumental strands. Dynamic expression, precision and rhythmic coherence are better too. And those gains are, we believe, worth investing in, even if the price tag is a little higher than it was last year.



WHAT HI-FI?
 ★★★★★
AWARDS 2024
 BEST EQUIPMENT
 RACK
**ATACAMA EVOQUE
 ECO 60-40 SE2**

■ Atacama Moseco 6 £169

Here's a great example of elegance and efficacy combining to great effect. These Atacamas have been our favourite budget speaker stands ever since we first reviewed them back in 2014.

This is a classy pair of stands thanks to the neat, minimal design. The two metal columns - one filled for better stability, one for cable management - and the bamboo bases ensure a rigid build and sturdy support.

With a variety of speakers placed on them (from KEF's LS50 Metas to

Bowers & Wilkins' 607 S3), these Atacamas allow our system to flourish by letting the speakers deliver their best in terms of punch, detail and rhythm. We are impressed with how weighty and dynamic these stands make our system sound.

There's texture to basslines, a twang to guitars, and expressive (if slightly forward) vocals. Overall, it's a very enjoyable performance.

For a pretty reasonable price, these elegant, well made stands will bring out the full potential of your stereo speakers.



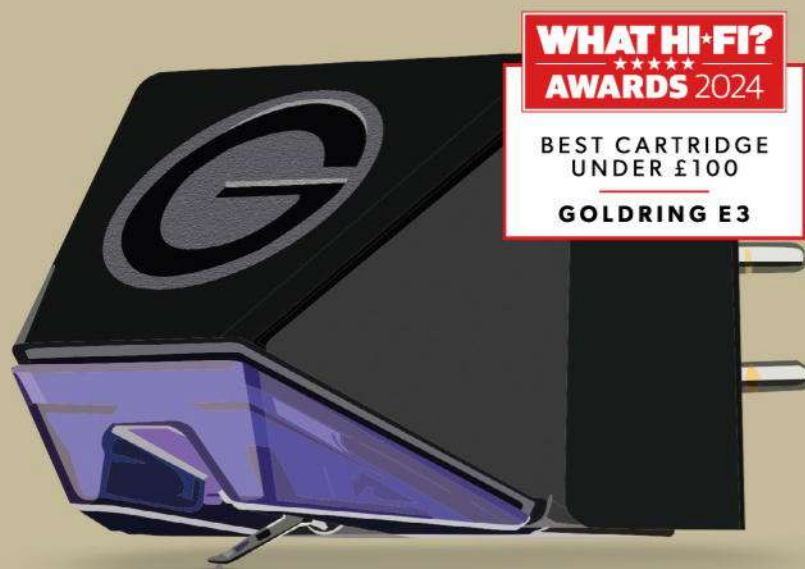
WHAT HI-FI?
 ★★★★★
AWARDS 2024
 BEST SPEAKER
 STANDS
**ATACAMA
 MOSECO 6**

■ Goldring E3 £89

Here is another enduringly good product that seems to have taken up permanent residency in our annual list of Award-winners. And so it should – the E3 is a superbly realised moving-magnet cartridge. It will work well with the majority of affordable turntables, tracks securely at a typical 2.0g and is available in a fetching shade of violet.

It's an impressively rounded performer, delivering the bombastic opening to Beethoven's *Ode To Joy* with all the control and power the piece demands. It produces an organised sound too; one that can keep track of myriad instrumental strands without losing its way. But there is also plenty of dynamic punch and scale with music such as this.

If those talents weren't enough, the Goldring also has a decent serving of attack and a surefooted way with rhythms. A high level of refinement keeps even aggressive recordings listenable, and the sound it delivers is clear, informative and fun. Once again, a worthy *What Hi-Fi?* Award winner that is the perfect complement to a quality mid-priced deck.



WHAT HI-FI?

AWARDS 2024

**BEST CARTRIDGE
UNDER £100**

GOLDRING E3

■ Sumiko Rainier £159

In the same way that a cable upgrade can lift your system's sound, a cartridge swap can have a similar effect. And this affordable moving-magnet cartridge would make a good choice for those itching for that first upgrade to their turntable.

It is a nicely made unit, with a body designed to support the internal generator assembly rigidly while minimising unwanted internal resonances.

Listening to Beethoven's *Fifth*, we can't help but be impressed at the way this cartridge conveys the sense of power and scale of this piece.

It's the musically cohesive way that the Rainier delivers all that information that makes it special. Dynamics are deftly handled and there is plenty of punch when required too. Tonally, the results are full-bodied, with a rich and powerful bass – a far cry from the thin, forward presentations we tend to hear from cartridges at this level.

It's a fine overall performance that has us listening for fun long after the official reviewing process is done. You will have to pay a fair bit more to better it.



WHAT HI-FI?

AWARDS 2024

**BEST CARTRIDGE
£100-£250**

SUMIKO RAINIER

■ Nagaoka MP200 £415

Nagaoka may not be a familiar name to many readers, but this Japanese brand has an impressive and unusual heritage. It was formed in 1940 to make precision parts for clocks and watches, before acquiring expertise in making diamond stylus tips and, later, complete cartridges.

The highlight here is an unusually clear, controlled and entertaining performance. This moving-magnet's talents start with balanced tonality and continue with expressive dynamics and plenty of punch. As we work our way through our record collection we are seduced by the cartridge's composure when playing difficult and dense recordings such as Orff's *Carmina Burana*, and its ability to resolve large amounts of information. This Nagaoka tracks low-level instrumental strands with ease while still managing to make sense of the whole. Stereo imaging is nicely layered too, and the midrange performance is terrific.

The Nagaoka MP-200 is a great all-rounder. It is well made and easy to fit too, and there is nothing electrically that puts a hurdle in the way of compatibility. Suffice it to say that very little debate was needed when it came to choosing a winner in this category.



WHAT HI-FI?

AWARDS 2024

**BEST CARTRIDGE
OVER £250**

NAGAOKA MP-200

View offers: whf.cm/BestTelevisions2024

TELEVISIONS

As TV tech marches on, 2024's sets are visually more impressive than ever

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2024

BEST 55IN+ TV

SONY BRAVIA 8

PRODUCT OF THE YEAR



■ Sony Bravia 8

£2099

The Bravia 8's predecessor, Sony's A80L, was a *What Hi-Fi?* Product of the Year winner last time around, and remains a stellar OLED TV. This means that the very fact Sony has managed to improve on it at all is impressive, especially as the upgrades target the key areas cinephiles care about.

Its WOLED panel is quoted as being 10 per cent brighter, making the Bravia 8 the latest of many OLED TVs at this price to market higher maximum brightness as a key reason to upgrade.

As with all the new TV chips we've seen this year, the set's Bravia XR chip promises to leverage AI to improve the set's picture processing and let it deliver an even more authentic, natural-looking home cinema experience - something it largely manages.

HDR10, Dolby Vision, HLG and IMAX Enhanced mode are on board and, while only two of the set's four HDMI's meet the 2.1 standard, 120Hz/4K, VRR, ALLM and Dolby Vision Gaming are supported.

After a bit of fandangling with picture settings, we find we get the best results in 'Professional' mode - Sony's Filmmaker mode equivalent, that aims to reduce processing to its absolute minimum and offer a picture as the director intended.

Watching *Dune*, the Bravia 8's picture is wonderfully natural, with characters' skin tones and the brown hues of the rebels' desert suits offering a suitably realistic tone. Motion handling is beautiful, and we don't see any artefacts as Ryan Gosling's car zooms over the farm in *Blade Runner 2049*. Dark areas retain oodles of detail, even in the dimly lit home, creating, once again, a more natural picture. The Bravia 8's light control has been refined, giving the picture even more depth and a wonderful three-dimensionality. Light leaking into a dark room oozes detail from its reflections, while offering a true sense of depth. The black and white scenes in *Oppenheimer*, meanwhile, reveal exceptional levels of

Sony is pushing higher maximum brightness with its latest OLED

detail in every stitch and weave on characters' suits and ties. The picture is wonderfully sharp, with characters and objects holding a true sense of depth and separation from the background.

Testing those peak-brightness claims with *Pan*, a terrible movie we use to test peak brightness due to its atypical 4000-nits mastering, the Bravia 8 continues to impress, delivering immersive peak brights that retain a tad more detail than the A80L.

Sony's Acoustic Surface Audio+ technology involves actuators that vibrate the whole screen to generate sound, and while the TV's audio is slightly bass-light, it makes up for this with exceptional control, especially in the Cinema sound mode.

The Bravia 8 is not a massive step forward for Sony OLED TVs; it isn't a night and day improvement on its predecessor the way the LG C4 is compared with the LG C3. Nevertheless, it is still an incredibly good TV, and a worthy winner here.

■ LG C4 (OLED42C4) £999

The 42in LG C4 is a fantastic OLED TV for those short on space, or who don't fancy having a giant TV take up the entire room.

LG has done a stellar job packing the 42in C4 with all the features movie fans, gamers and general TV watchers will need. While it doesn't feature the Award-winning micro lens array (MLA) technology seen on the premium LG G4, LG has still managed to increase the display's max brightness - a key theme for step-down OLEDs this year.

Despite its smaller dimensions, the 42in C4 has identical connectivity to its larger siblings - four HDMI 2.1 inputs at 48Gbps that support most of the latest gaming features. Hence it is also our Best Gaming TV for 2024. There are three USB sockets, an aerial, plus optical connections.

Its brain isn't LG's most powerful chip, but it keeps webOS 24 running smoothly and brings useful features such as virtual 11.1.2 sound upmixing and enhanced voice remastering, alongside various picture processing improvements on the older C3.

WHAT HI-FI?

AWARDS 2024

BEST 40-43IN TV

LG C4 (OLED42C4)

In Filmmaker Mode with Cinematic Movement active, its picture is excellent. The C4 delivers brilliant peaks, with the sun reflecting off the ocean in *Top Gun: Maverick*, revealing impressive levels of detail and a true sense of three dimensionality as the rippling waves cascade into the distance. Contrast levels as the movie transitions to Maverick riding his motorbike through the desert are wide and impactful. Movements look wonderfully smooth and artefacts never creep into the rapid movement of the bike.

The 42in C4's incredible light control ensures the desert sands of *Dune Part 2* sparkle as the sun drips over it. The TV serves up wonderful levels of detail and a wide gamut that brings the landscape truly to life. Movements look natural, even with the rapidly buzzing wings of the Ornthopter and characters' movements during fast-paced knife fights, never falling victim to the dreaded soap opera effect. Everything just looks natural.



Screen images: Senna. Guillaume Leporace/Netflix

The smallest C4 has identical connections to its larger siblings

Most inbuilt TV speaker systems are passable at best, and this is particularly true of more compact 42in sets, and so it is with the C4. We recommend pairing it with a decent soundbar.

While its audio isn't the best, the 42in LG C4 is still the best small(ish) OLED TV you can buy. It delivers a wonderfully punchy, immersive viewing experience despite its size, with noticeably higher peak brightness than most of its OLED rivals. A winner, then.

■ LG C4 (OLED48C4) £1199

Stop us if you've heard this one before, but LG's latest 48in C-series OLED TV is the best TV of its size you can buy right now. It undercuts or matches its rivals for price, it has a flawless gaming feature set and its picture is a clear step up over the C3.

There's none of the Micro Lens Array (MLA) brightness-boosting technology found on the flagship G4; instead, this uses one of LG's OLED Evo displays, which is reportedly brighter than last year's model.

The C4's gaming specification is nearly identical to that of the C3, with four HDMI 2.1 sockets with full 48Gbps bandwidth support for the latest gaming features. The C4 supports HDR10, Dolby Vision, HLG, and Dolby Atmos audio when connected to a compatible soundbar or AVR over HDMI eARC. Pair it with an LG soundbar, and you can take advantage of WOW Orchestra, which combines the TV's 2.2-channel audio system with the soundbar audio.

We find that many of the attributes we admire in the larger 65in version of this TV have worked their way down to the more

WHAT HI-FI?

AWARDS 2024

BEST 48-50IN TV

LG C4 (OLED48C4)

compact model. In our preferred Filmmaker mode with the Cinematic Movement clarity setting applied, we find the smaller C4 has all of the richness and solidity of the larger variant. Colours appear warm and skin tones have a touch more life to them, making Sony's A80L look a tad pasty in comparison. Colours are pleasingly punchy without looking garish, pleasingly crisp and three-dimensional without looking overly etched.

The OLED48C4 handles highlights very well indeed, its punchy and vibrant presentation also remains controlled and natural. This TV is also meticulously detailed. The scratches and metal rivets of the War Rig in *Mad Max: Fury Road* are displayed with excellent levels of detail, and the same can be said with skin and clothing textures too.

We also find the Cinematic Movement setting to be useful when watching something like *Mad Max*, as the frantic action is handled well, with no noticeable judder or stuttering.



Screen images: Senna. Alexandre Schneider/Netflix

The C4's panel is reportedly much brighter than last year's C3

The TV struggles with *Blade Runner 2049*'s admittedly tricky low-end audio. There is notable distortion at the deepest frequencies and bass lacks depth and impact. It is also quite a localised sound, with fairly uninspiring projection or scale.

We find very little else to criticise this TV on, though, making it an easy recommendation for those who want a truly cinematic experience without sacrificing loads of space.

LG C4 (OLED42C4)
£999



The 42in LG C4 is the smallest size in the tech giant's current step down line of OLED TVs. It's also a direct successor to the LG C3, a *What Hi-Fi?* Best Gaming TV Award-winner. Its smaller form factor makes it perfectly suited to gaming - and its size isn't the only reason for the string of Awards that have been bestowed on the exceptionally gaming friendly C-series.

The key to the success of the C-series in this area is with its feature set. And, despite its smaller dimensions, the 42in C4 has identical connectivity in this regard to its larger siblings. This means you still get four HDMI 2.1 inputs with 48Gbps bandwidth support for 4K/144Hz gaming with VRR and ALLM supported. LG TVs are still unique in offering four 2.1 HDMI inputs as most TVs from other brands still offer only two HDMI 2.1 inputs, one of which usually doubles as the eARC input.

Dolby Vision gaming support is another atypical feature that will delight Xbox Series X/S gamers in particular. This is a

gaming version of the Dolby Vision HDR standard that is designed to improve compatible games' contrast and colour vibrancy. Regular HDR support is also solid, with the C4 working with the HDR10, Dolby Vision and HLG standards. The inclusion of webOS 24 is another selling point; webOS has the best app support of any TV platform and has an exceptionally easy to navigate UI.

Picture-wise, the only minor downside is that it's not quite as much of a night-and-day improvement on its predecessor as its larger C4 siblings. Still, with *Top Gun: Maverick*, we find the C4 delivers brilliant peak highlights, impressive levels of detail and a true sense of three dimensionality to the scenes. Movements look wonderfully smooth and artefacts never creep into the rapid movement of Maverick's bike.

Incredible light control ensures the deserts of *Dune Part 2* sparkle, and characters' movements during fast-paced knife fights never fall victim to over-



LG's C-Series is still the best for gaming specs and features

smoothing. With *Pan*, mastered to an atypical 4000 nits brightness, the smallest C4 creates a stellar spectacle that matches its larger 48in sibling and beats the peaks offered by the older C3.

Trust us when we say that you won't find a better small OLED for gaming at this price. Its audio isn't the best, as can only be expected with a TV at this size, so just remember to budget for a soundbar too.

Screen image: F1 Manager 2024 - Available for NS, PC, PS4, PS5, XO, XSX. Frontier Developments, GamesPress.

Samsung QE75QN900D
£4799



Samsung's flagship 8K TV doesn't come cheap. But, as well as delivering a four-fold increase in pixels over a 4K TV, it backs that ultra-fine resolution up with other premium picture quality features and a spectacularly premium design. And it's fair to say that its 7680x4320 pixel count and futuristic design are far from the only things it has got going for it.

The use of Mini LEDs (around a fortieth the size of regular LEDs) immediately raises the potential for more precise light control. All those LEDs are controlled by a bumper 1920 local dimming zones. Its new Neo Quantum 8K AI Gen 3 processing brain apparently features the accumulated knowledge of 512 neural networks that have been tirelessly analysing different types of imagery so the TV can optimise its picture performance on the fly.

The star turn here is a radically more powerful, AI-informed 8K upscaler, that does an unprecedented job of turning 4K and even HD sources into 8K - handy given the shortage of native 8K content.

The precision with which the QN900D adds the tens of millions of extra pixels required to turn 4K and HD into 8K feels almost mystically impressive. It's not just that detailed textures look sharper - it also looks denser and more three-dimensional, all with little or no hint of artificiality.

This unprecedented level of upscaling makes a clear case for 8K being a feature genuinely capable of delivering a 'next-gen' experience. Native 8K sources are on a different level of beauty again. Our test reel of American vistas and wildlife rendered in 8K HDR looks exquisite, as if you have had some kind of 'fuzzy filter' removed from your eyes.

The fact that it can also control its light down to impressively localised levels for an LCD TV helps to inject even more definition into the minutiae that makes 8K special. The QN900D's colour performance is advanced enough, too, to keep pace with the screen's brightness and resolution.

While overall the set's sound lacks bass, impact and forward projection, Samsung's



There's not much 8K content yet, but it's a fantastic upscaler of 4K too

Object Tracking Sound system deserves some love. Sound effects and voices really are positioned around the screen with excellent accuracy, giving you back at least some of the immersion lost by the sound's lack of volume and forward projection.

While Samsung might not be able to control whether or not the creative industries finally start making 8K content, with the QN900D it certainly makes a seriously compelling case for 8K hardware.

Screen image: Senma. Alan Rosklyn/Netflix

WHAT HI·FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2024

**BEST BUDGET
85IN TV**

TCL 85C805K

TCL 85C805K
£1498

It's worth stressing just what a difference an 85in screen makes to your viewing experience. Compared with the sort of 65in screens normally found at this price, it's like going to the cinema every night, rather than just staying in watching TV.

All four main formats of HDR means this set is equipped to take in the best version of literally any HDR content you feed it.

Most surprising of all is the way the 85C805K's screen is illuminated by a combination of Mini LED lighting and local dimming that you would typically find only on a high-end TV. A mighty 880 dimming zones (more than many mid-range and even premium LCD TVs) should help in delivering plenty of contrast and intensity without as many of the backlight clouding and blooming issues we might normally expect to see from such a large LCD TV.

We are immediately started by how bright it is, pumping out levels of light both for peak HDR highlights and full-screen bright HDR images on a par with the best

mid-range and even some premium smaller LCD TVs. The full-screen brightness is also double and beyond anything even the most cutting-edge OLED TVs are able to deliver.

Even more pleasing is the way it is able to deliver so much brightness right alongside startlingly deep, rich black tones. Thanks to the Mini LED lighting and, especially, local dimming system, there's only a slight hint of general greyness over dark scenes. Nor is there much backlight clouding or local dimming-created blooming around stand-out bright objects.

Put the 85C805K's unexpectedly deep and clean black tones alongside its equally unexpected brightness, and you've got an extremely satisfying contrast performance that ensures the TV delivers on the 'range' part of HDR rather than only pushing the light end of the brightness spectrum.

The set's 2.0-channel Onkyo speaker system manages to get plenty of punch out of its reasonably high 30W power rating and is able to cast the TV's sound well beyond



Screen image: Semma, Alexandre Schneider/Netflix ©2024

Huge, cinematic and affordable – perfect for movie fans on a budget

the edges of its bodywork, which makes the viewing experience feel even bigger.

Despite costing less than some 55in TVs, the TCL 85C805K manages to combine the sheer largeness of its 85in pictures with excellent gaming support and genuinely cinematic and immersive picture and sound quality. It's pretty much a dream come true for home cinema fans who don't have limitlessly deep pockets.

FIVE OF OUR FAVOURITE DOLBY ATMOS MOVIE SCENES

Want to push your Dolby Atmos sound system with films that hit the heights? We have just what you need



Dune Part 2
Hunters become hunted

As the Harkonnen troops march into the sand cloud created by their missiles, all you can hear is the troops' cautious steps, surrounding the listening position. When one fires his gun, the burst zips across the room. Fremen warriors emerge from the audio gloom and your entire room fills with chanting; and you completely understand why the troops are so scared.



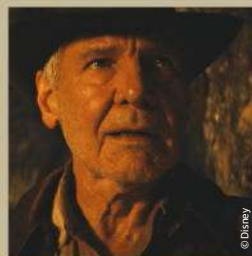
A Haunting In Venice
The basement

This scene, the lead up to which begins with the singing of a child only Poirot can hear ("the investigator has poached his egg", as one character puts it), is the soundtrack's best, with its combination of huge, bassy thumps, disembodied singing, wild woodwind action and a raging storm contributing to a chaotic, room-filling presentation.



Deepwater Horizon
Explosion aftermath

This movie makes judicious use of every channel in a system. As Mark Wahlberg's character regains consciousness after an explosion, detailed little sound effects – crumbling plaster, dripping water, an electrical short and a high-pitched alarm – appear from all around you and fill the room in a carefully crafted Atmos presentation.



Indiana Jones And The Dial Of Destiny
The caves

This scene includes some underwater action that should fill your room with burbling effects, as well as a brief gunfight that involves bullets that whizz around and behind the listening position. There are plenty of quieter moments too, with soft dialogue and brilliant little audio details for a good Atmos system to pick out.



Angel Has Fallen
Drone attack

This scene features thrumming military VTOL aircraft flying overhead, drones zipping across your room in every direction and more sofa-shaking explosions than you'll hear on bonfire night. It's a thing of ridiculous wonder and perhaps the best scene on this whole list if you simply want to use your system to knock someone's socks off.

[View offers: whf.com/BestSoundbars2024](https://whf.com/BestSoundbars2024)

SOUNDBARS

Neater than a full surround set-up, these will add truly immersive audio to your TV viewing

WHAT HI-FI?
★ ★ ★ ★ ★
AWARDS 2024

**BEST SOUNDBAR
SYSTEM**

**SAMSUNG
HW-Q990D**

PRODUCT OF THE YEAR

■ Samsung HW-Q990D £1499

We reckon Samsung absolutely hates it when people combine its TVs with soundbars from other brands. That's why it is so determined to produce market-leading soundbars of its own. It has been getting steadily closer to that lofty ambition, too, with last year's flagship Q990C model falling just a whisker short of a five-star verdict.

The Q990D has now achieved what its predecessor couldn't quite. This is a full system comprising a soundbar, wireless subwoofer and two wireless surround speakers, with a huge 11.1.4 total channel count. There are 22 drivers in total: six elliptical midrange drivers and three tweeters that fire forwards, plus four side-firing drivers and two up-firers. Each of the surround speakers features one forward-, one side- and one up-firing driver, and the subwoofer has a 20cm driver. Samsung recommends that the surrounds be placed behind the listening position at a 135-150-degree angle, though the system will of course compensate if you instead have to put them to the sides.

There are four main audio presets, and for movies, our preferred processing mode is Surround, but it's a close call with Adaptive. Just a touch softer than Adaptive, Surround still delivers a very lively presentation that ensures there's oodles of excitement to action scenes. The flack in *Unbroken's* bombing run scene explodes with punchy precision; there's lots of bassy meat following each initial impact, and bullets ricochet off the bomber's metal innards with crisp definition.

The Q990D does a superb job of delivering Atmos-ness, too. It really fills the room with sound and places effects in three-dimensional space with impressive precision for a soundbar system. It's not only that planes sweep across, above and behind the listening position, impressive though that is, but the varied distance from you that effects appear in – some very close to your ear and others across the room. Most people think of height when they think of Atmos, and the Q990D certainly delivers that, but it's this 3D audio effect that Atmos is really about.

This soundbar system has a huge 11.1.4 total channel count

The Q990D is an impressively dynamic performer, particularly with big shifts in volume. There are rivals that are a little more subtle and nuanced, but the Q990D is still perfectly capable of conveying the emotion in dialogue, which is always clear, even when the presentation is packed with other sounds.

The step up isn't huge, but the overall comparison with the Q990C is positive. The Q990D has more bite and punch, and more low-level dynamic subtlety. The bass is also more present but at the same time more seamlessly integrated, so while it adds more weight to effects they also sound more natural. The surrounds integrate with the soundbar even better this time around, too, to make for a general improvement to the presentation.

This a hugely compelling package and, while not cheap, it's good value compared with alternatives with similar specification and features. If you want something approaching 'proper' Atmos sound without buying an AV amplifier and 12 individual speakers, it has to be on your shortlist.

■ Sonos Beam Gen 2

£449

Since its launch in 2018, the Sonos Beam soundbar won the *What Hi-Fi?* Award for the best soundbar in its price category each year. Then it was knocked from its pedestal by its second-generation sibling.

Key to the Beam's success has been a simplicity of design and streamlined functionality that has overcome two of the limitations of compact speakers: sonic scale and weight.

The Gen 2's quintet of front-facing drivers are configured into five separate arrays and, when watching Atmos content, two of these are dedicated to reproducing overhead and surround sounds. With enhanced processor power, the Gen 2 uses psychoacoustic HRTF (head-related transfer function) tech to give the impression of height without needing to get vertical. We have experienced Dolby Atmos delivery through processing wizardry before, and we have to report that the results have been mixed. Here, while genuine



overhead sounds are perhaps a stretch too far, there is more to Atmos than helicopters flying overhead, and the Gen 2 handles Dolby Atmos better than any similarly priced soundbar.

Dolby Atmos allows a film's production mixers to place sounds and music as discrete objects within a soundfield, and having the ability to decode it means there is tangible motion, depth and space, which heightens the sense of immersion. The Gen 2 is able to project changing sonic perspective with accuracy and clarity. Whether it's a chirping bird, car or voice, there is remarkable consistency across the complete soundfield during *Roma*, while

Two of the five drivers reproduce overhead and surround sounds

with *Bohemian Rhapsody*, the Gen 2 does a great job of representing the Atmos sound design as the camera's viewpoint roams about the stage and each instrument or monitor comes into sonic focus.

The Beam Gen 2 doesn't just live up to the high bar set by its predecessor, it exceeds it by a margin. The decision to use processing power and forward-facing drivers to recreate Atmos has paid off, with a more capable and effective handling of the format than many soundbars with upward-firing drivers. With streaming smarts, expert handling of motion, depth and space, it's the best Dolby Atmos soundbar at this price point.



■ Sonos Arc

£719

While the Arc arrived late to the Dolby Atmos soundbar party, since its launch in 2020 it has proved to be the heart and soul of it - and it hasn't left yet. Despite contenders frequently vying for its crown, the Arc is still one of the very best performance-per-pound soundbars you can buy - as evidenced by this, its fourth *What Hi-Fi?* Award.

At 114cm, the Arc is a bit wider than a typical modern 49in TV and so best partnered with at least a 55in model. The curvy design helps mask the Arc's dimensions and makes it look svelte, but its 8.5cm height is not inconsiderable.

The Arc's Dolby Atmos soundfield is generated by 11 Class-D digital amplifiers that power 11 custom drivers - eight elliptical woofers and three silk-domed tweeters, two of which fire diagonally into the room. It delivers one of the most convincing Atmos presentations of any soundbar we have heard. Playing the bombing-run scene from *Unbroken*, we



are immediately transported to within the fuselage of the B-24 Liberator. Our listening room is filled with wind noise and the whirr of the plane's engines, and the incidental creaks and rattles are placed in specific spots, including right in the top corners of the wall we are sitting against.

The Arc is dynamically deft too; large dynamic shifts are handled with aplomb, the first fly-by of the Japanese fighter plane and the machine gun fire from the Liberator rocking the room, even at less than a quarter of the Arc's volume.

Watching *Blade Runner 2049*, bullets streak across the room, while low, distant rumbles of thunder and the building music are suitably menacing. This is a supremely well-judged bass performance, with vast

The hefty Arc is designed to be partnered with larger TVs

quantities of deep, weighty and tuneful bass without the lower frequencies ever overwhelming and, even at its loudest and deepest, the Arc remains composed.

Treble is clear and sparkly too, but never too bright. That tonal evenness helps make the Arc a much more musical performer than most soundbars too, although our one small gripe is that stereo music isn't projected forward towards the listening position as much as you would expect, given that movie soundtracks are delivered with such three-dimensionality.

The Arc is a stunning performer. It delivers one of the most immersive Dolby Atmos experiences we have heard from a soundbar, and it's a wireless speaker too. Rarely does a device do so much so well.



WHAT HI-FI?
 ★★★★★
AWARDS 2024
BEST SOUNDBAR
 £1000-£1500

SONY BRAVIA
THEATRE BAR 9

■ Sony Bravia Theatre Bar 9

£1399

Replacing a three-time Award-winner can't be easy, and yet that is the task Sony has set itself here. Had Sony not replaced it with this new Bravia Theatre Bar 9, there's every chance the HT-A7000 would have won an Award again this year.

The newcomer features subtler styling, a more practical design, a better app and more drivers - though fewer HDMI sockets. The rounded front corners and fabric cover, which shrouds 90 per cent of the bar's surfaces, make the Bar 9 look much softer and more discreet than its predecessor. Under the fabric are 13 individual drivers and quad passive radiators. Along the front are four woofers, three standard tweeters and two beam tweeters; on each end is a side speaker; on top are two up-firing speakers and those passive radiators.

Of particular note are the four new front-

firing woofers, which are 1.7 times larger than those of the HT-A7000 and are designed to boost bass and midrange. This array is designed, as expected, to create a bubble of sound in your room using Sony's 360 Spatial Sound Mapping, which creates 'phantom speakers'. You can, though, add more physical speakers if you wish.

Playing Tool's *Invincible* via Bluetooth, we are instantly struck by how crisp and clean the delivery is, and how it sounds both airy and direct. The 'bar's rhythmic and spatial organisation is second to none, with every instrumental and vocal layer afforded space to breathe while clearly maintaining its tether to the whole.

With *Deadpool & Wolverine*, its clarity and organisational ability again shine through. Every strike of sword on claw zings crisply through the controlled audio

Larger front-firing woofers aim to boost the bar's bass and midrange

chaos, and every blade into body-part has an appropriately unpleasant squelch.

Dynamics are excellent and it all makes for a hugely exciting delivery. Switching to *Unbroken* in Dolby Atmos, the Bar 9 puts in arguably the most Atmos-y delivery we have heard from a solo soundbar. It pushes sound far out to the sides, a long way into the room and right up to the ceiling. Crucially, it places individual effects into this soundstage effectively and tracks them as they sweep across the room.

It's a noticeable upgrade on the HT-A7000, with just one exception: those increases to clarity and detail appear to have come with a slight reduction in warmth and richness. But even with that slightly clinical character, for clarity, detail, dynamics, solidity and outright Atmos-ness, the Theatre Bar 9 is hard to fault.

■ Sennheiser Ambeo Soundbar Max

£2199

The Ambeo is much bigger than most soundbars. It is also more expensive, and a fair bit fussier. So, when there are so many good Dolby Atmos soundbars out there, why would you buy Sennheiser's beast of a bar? Because it's also much better, that's why. In fact, the Ambeo is the best-sounding soundbar we have tested.

The reason it's much bigger than most products of its type is that Sennheiser has opted for much larger drivers, capable of covering a far greater portion of the frequency range, negating the need for an external subwoofer. This is a genuine one-box home cinema solution.

That driver array consists of six 10cm woofers and five 25mm tweeters arranged across the front and sides, plus two upward-firing 9cm full-range drivers.

Around the back of the Ambeo you will find four HDMI sockets, three of which are standard inputs, with one supporting eARC (Enhanced Audio Return Channel).

WHAT HI-FI?
 ★★★★★
AWARDS 2024
BEST SOUNDBAR
OVER £1500
SENNHEISER
AMBEO
SOUNDBAR MAX

This means it can send and receive sound signals - including Dolby Atmos - from the TV via the one cable.

Alongside the HDMI's are an ethernet socket, USB for updates, an optical input and stereo RCA aux-in, while Bluetooth and Chromecast make your streaming options almost endless. There's a subwoofer pre-out, too, should you feel the need to add a dedicated bass unit.

We are not ones for pre-judging, but we have to admit that we didn't expect the Ambeo Soundbar to be nearly as good as it

The Ambeo's bigger drivers cover more of the frequency range

is. A rich, natural sound bounds from this unit, with dynamic shifts both large and small well within its grasp.

Most important is how well it delivers those surround effects. Its presentation stretches into the room, up to the ceiling and almost around the listening position.

Yes, the Ambeo Soundbar is bulky and, yes, it's far from cheap. But the sound quality and processing on offer here are good enough to justify both its cost and footprint, and keep the Ambeo once more a worthy winner in its price category.

INNOVATION OF THE YEAR

Apple's implementation of Tandem OLED in the iPad Pro M4 is stunning, and could be the future of OLED TVs

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2024

TANDEM OLED

INNOVATION OF THE YEAR

Tandem OLED

Buckle up, folks, because this is a slightly controversial one. You see, Tandem OLED car displays have been a thing since 2019; but 2024 is the year the tech has come to devices you can watch movies on. Of those devices, the Porsche Design Honor Magic6 RSR smartphone and Apple iPad Pro M4 launched globally within days of one another. But the latter has a much larger screen and the former hasn't even been submitted for review, so it's the Apple implementation that gets our Award.

In short, a Tandem OLED panel has two OLED layers sandwiched together, rather than a single layer as is the norm for OLED displays. These two OLED layers can work together (in tandem, if you will) to massively boost brightness; but Tandem OLED panels can also be thinner, more power-efficient and more durable. Apple's implementation of Tandem OLED (or 'Ultra Retina XDR') in the iPad Pro M4 is stunning.

Mini LED tech, which is what the previous iPad Pro used, is generally able to go much brighter than OLED, but the new Tandem OLED iPad Pro matches its predecessor for peak and full-screen HDR

brightness, with figures of 1600 nits and 1000 nits respectively. It's this full-screen figure of 1000 nits that is most impressive. We have become used to next-gen MLA OLED and QD-OLED TVs with peak brightness figure claims in the thousands, but those are achievable only with tiny highlights. Full-screen brightness on even the latest, brightest OLED TVs measures in only the low hundreds.

But why is the iPad's Tandem OLED display matching the previous model's brightness figure so exciting? Primarily because that brightness is now combined with perfect OLED blacks and pixel-by-pixel contrast control. Movies pop from the screen in a way that the previous model can't match. The switch to OLED has made the display more responsive,

"Who wouldn't want an OLED TV that could go brighter, draw less power from the grid and be even thinner than current models?"

Tandem OLED's two layers work together to boost brightness

too, which makes motion smoother, and there's a cinematic richness to the delivery.

The Tandem OLED display appears to have enabled Apple to reduce the thickness of the new iPad Pro which, at 5.1mm, is the thinnest product Apple has ever produced. This might be down to the thinness of the Tandem OLED panel, but it's also possible that the panel's power efficiency has allowed Apple to fit slimmer batteries.

So, are Tandem OLED TVs on the way? Not immediately, but it's easy to see why a Tandem OLED TV would appeal: who wouldn't want an OLED TV that could go brighter, draw less power from the grid and be even thinner than current models? Whether Tandem OLED makes it to TVs or not, there's no denying how innovative it is - or how impressive it is in the new iPad Pro.

View offers: whf.cm/BestSetTopBoxes2024

SET-TOP BOXES

As well as giving you access to a vast range of content, these boxes allow you to record shows and, with Sky Q, enjoy multi-screen viewing

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2024

BEST
SUBSCRIPTION
BOX

SKY Q

PRODUCT OF THE YEAR

■ Sky Q From £31/month

Over eight years on from its launch, Sky Q still seems - and its hardware still looks - thoroughly up-to-date. Given that passage of time, we do well to remind ourselves that the concept is extraordinary - even if you do have to fork out to enjoy its many pleasures (that £31 figure represents the most basic starting point).

There are four Sky Q boxes, and the broadband hub. The main box is the Sky Q 1TB, which is the default box given to anyone taking out a new Sky Q subscription. There is also a Sky Q 2TB box, but this will add to the cost of your package. Both of these boxes handle 4K Ultra HD content. A non-4K Sky Q 1TB box is also available for those who are

happy watching in HD, while the Sky Q Mini is for bedrooms and second rooms, and piggy-backs off your main Q box.

You will also need to factor in paying for the content you want to watch. There are all sorts of bundles on offer, led by the flagship Sky Sports and Sky Cinema packages, but bolstered by the inclusion of Netflix and Spotify. All of this costs a significant amount of money, but Sky Q is the best TV service available in the UK by a long way.

The breadth and depth of content remains Sky's strongest selling point, but the interface and 'fluid viewing' experience, as Sky calls it, is almost as important. That interface (which is regularly updated) is fast, good-looking,

It is expensive, but Sky Q is still the best of the bunch by a mile

intuitive and gets you to the content you want quickly. Sky's curated content continues to improve too, offering up personalised programmes and films based on your viewing habits in an effort to keep pace with the experience offered by streaming services such as Netflix, Disney Plus and Amazon Prime Video.

The amount of 4K content has vastly improved since launch and some of that content now comes with Dolby Atmos sound, too, and the HDR content on offer improves those sharp, detailed pictures even more.

Sky Q is a multi-tasker *par excellence*, and its across-the-board talent means it thoroughly deserves to clock up its ninth consecutive Product Of The Year Award.

■ Humax Aura £249

The most obvious use for the Humax Aura is as a Freeview Play recorder, with enough internal storage options to capture hours of live HD and SD television. But this is no one-trick pony.

With its Android TV platform, you can also use it as a Chromecast with benefits - a way of adding more than 5000 apps and streaming services to feed your TV or projector with plenty of 4K fun. With its USB sockets, hi-res audio and 3D home-cinema codec support, there's an option to use it for local film file playback too.

The Aura is a tidy 26 x 20cm box (with 1TB or 2TB capacity) that takes up about the same space as your wi-fi router. At the

back are a single HDMI 2.1-out, USB 3.0 and USB 2.0 (Type A) sockets for local media, optical audio-out and a LAN connection.

Its three Freeview Play tuners bring access to over 70 non-subscription live TV channels and more than 20,000 hours of on-demand entertainment through the catch-up services. It's an excellent Freeview recorder with an easy to use TV guide, plenty of space and handy remote recording features.

If you have your heart set on a single-box solution for your TV recording and video streaming, the Aura is a solid choice.



WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2024

BEST PVR
HUMAX AURA

View offers: whf.com/BestBlurayPlayers2024

BLU-RAY PLAYERS

Despite the ubiquity of video streaming through TVs, there is still a place for a good Blu-ray player. And this one is a real belter

WHAT HI-FI?
 ★★★★★
AWARDS 2024
**BEST 4K
BLU-RAY PLAYER**
**PANASONIC
DP-UB820EB**
PRODUCT OF THE YEAR


■ Panasonic DP-UB820EB

£349

Streaming movies is all well and good (often very good), but many of us still like to own our own copy of certain films, not least for those times when the one you were planning to watch has made an untimely exit from the streaming service you were planning to watch it on. That is when a Blu-ray player comes into its own.

So, if 4K Blu-ray is one of your preferred formats within your home movie set-up, you need a dedicated player that can deliver on multiple fronts. The DP-UB820 supports all major HDR formats, delivering a hugely immersive and impactful picture, backed up by a strong audio performance. It borrows much of its picture-processing tech from Panasonic's flagship 4K machine, the DP-UB9000, but costs less than half the price of that model.

The full range of surround-sound codecs on 4K Blu-ray and streaming services are handled, including Dolby Atmos and DTS:X. It also covers all the bases for HDR, with HDR10, HDR10+ and Dolby Vision support. All the key catch-up and on-demand video-streaming services

are here, including BBC iPlayer, Netflix and Amazon Prime Video - ideal if you are plugging straight into a projector.

We fire up the player with *Blue Planet II* in 4K and HDR10, and head to the Galapagos Islands, where we are greeted with a detailed and sharply drawn volcanic landscape. The picture proves to be as vibrant and immersive above sea level as it is below. As marine iguanas nibble away at vegetation on the sea floor, the Panasonic picks up an impressive level of detail on their skin and claws, while, on the surface, the reds, oranges and bluey-whites of a crab's shell appear bright and punchy, in contrast to the darker surrounding areas.

Switching to *Aquaman* in Dolby Vision, the Panasonic raises the bar even higher. As pirates arrive to board the Russian sub, the headlights and the red landing lights on their underwater submersible punch through the murky depths. As the action moves inside, the muzzle flash from a machine gun lights up the screen with concentrated and precise explosions. There's a real sense of intensity to each

Across-the-board excellence is the key to this player's enviable longevity

blast. The clean, noise-free picture looks realistic and draws you in to admire details and textures in the black suits of armour.

The Panasonic delivers stable Sicilian rocky outcrops, adorned with rich green foliage - and, combined with the bluey-green hues of the sea, it makes for an inviting picture. The player gives the rays of sunshine impact, but doesn't overplay the sun-kissed scene as Arthur and Mera wander around the village market.

The DP-UB820 is a decent upscaler too. The original *Transformers* movie on Blu-ray is a stern test, with plenty of noise and a warmish tint to the colour balance, but the Panasonic does a good job of making the picture more watchable.

The Panasonic complements its exciting picture with sound to match. It delivers a weighty and powerful performance that is more muscular and grown up than many budget players, with rich dialogue.

For its price, the DP-UB820 provides a hugely entertaining picture and sound performance, and so retains its Award yet again. Will anything knock it off its perch?

[View offers: whf.com/BestVideoStreamers2024](https://whf.com/BestVideoStreamers2024)

VIDEO STREAMERS

With so much terrific 4K content out there waiting to be watched, a quality streamer is a must. And our title holder has quality in spades

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2024

**BEST VIDEO
STREAMER**

APPLE TV 4K

PRODUCT OF THE YEAR

■ Apple TV 4K (2022)

£149

The **Apple TV 4K** has been an Award-winner since its release in 2021, but the 2022 update brought in a more powerful chip and smaller casework, along with plenty of subtle improvements across the board, from general usability tweaks to a blazing-fast new processor inside.

Those upgrades were enough to win it a Product Of The Year gong last year - and are enough for it to keep it this year.

The big draw here is the excellent A15 Bionic processor, the same one found in the iPhone 14. It is joined by 4GB of RAM. This enables the TV 4K to fly through menus without a single

stutter. The tvOS 16 operating system brings multiple user profiles, personalised spatial audio for compatible AirPods, support for the Matter smart home standard, Apple Fitness+ compatibility and a contemporary Siri interface.

All HDR formats - HDR10, HLG, Dolby Vision and, notably, HDR10+ - are supported. There's Dolby Atmos and Apple's own Spatial Audio platform for movies, TV and music from Apple Music and Tidal. It's not all about streaming here, and via iTunes Apple offers plenty of 4K HDR film and TV content to purchase as well.

Watching *Babylon* via iTunes,

Ease of use, format support and picture quality are all first-class here

the Apple TV 4K really shines. The rich colour palette of the film is right at home, with the streamer taking a bold yet balanced approach; the pinkish-orange sunrise over 1920s California pops off the screen with impressive vibrancy, without looking overblown. Contrast is another strength, and it has plenty of prowess when it comes to dark details too. Sound quality is as good as its picture performance to boot.

Those 2022 revisions were well judged, as nothing has since come along to topple this talented streamer from its top spot. Any pretender to the Apple TV 4K's crown will have to better its neat combination of comprehensive featuring and fine picture quality. And that is a tall order indeed.



READERS' AWARD

We asked you which product was your favourite and you responded eagerly. It was close, but we have a winner...



WHAT HI-FI?
★ ★ ★ ★ ★
AWARDS 2024

READERS' AWARD

**Q ACOUSTICS
5050**

PRODUCT OF THE YEAR

■ Q Acoustics 5050 speakers

The main business of the *What Hi-Fi?* Awards is our expert review team hunkering down with a host of products new and old to give you the best possible recommendations across a wide range of categories and prices. But we also ask you to lend a hand; and that's what this category is all about. The Readers' Award allows visitors to our website to vote for their favourite product of the year from our shortlist of some of the most popular reviews.

This year we had a 13-strong selection that included Denon and Marantz AVRs, TVs from LG, Philips, Sony and TCL, plus headphones, speakers and systems. And, after a close vote, it's the Q Acoustics 5050 speakers that take this year's crown.

If you haven't read the floorstanding speakers section of the Awards, then - spoiler alert - we are happy to report that the very same Q Acoustics speakers are our Product of the Year in that category. Great minds, and all that.

Frankly, we are not surprised. Q Acoustics is on a fine run of producing

stand-out towers - last year it was the 5040s that took our Product of the Year, and this year we remain just as enamoured with the company's 5000 range.

This top-of-the-range model has larger, 15cm twin mid/bass drivers and a roomier, wider cabinet compared with those 5040s. The technical highlight remains a smooth, seamless profile for the mid/bass diaphragms. This Continuous Curved Cone avoids the use of a traditional dustcap and its inherent distortions but is also claimed to incorporate the best characteristics of straight-sided and flared cone designs (namely bass, and control at higher frequencies, respectively).

Inside the enclosure, you will find four Helmholtz pressure-equalising tubes. We came across this unusual technique to control internal air pressure and reduce

Clever tech ideas help produce a sound that you, dear readers, love

"We don't mind if the Readers' Award picks out a product we might not, but it's satisfying when we are all agreed"

standing waves in Q Acoustic's high-end Concept 500 floorstanders. It worked well there and clearly does the job here, too.

Sonically, that larger cabinet helps deliver a lashing of extra bass as part of an overall sound that remains controlled and articulate. Given space to breathe and slightly angled towards the listening position, the 5050 speakers generate a generous soundstage that is well-focused and nicely layered.

They are dynamic and exciting too, but always clear and composed. Some slight care is required when choosing your partnering equipment, to avoid any harshness in the treble, but otherwise it's a case of sitting back and enjoying what the 5050 floorstanders can do.

We don't mind if the Readers' Award picks out a product that we might not have lauded as a top-drawer piece of kit, but there's no denying that it's satisfying when we are all on the same page - as we are here. If you have the space and you can afford them, you can't go wrong with the Q Acoustics 5050 speakers.

[View offers: whf.cm/BestProjectors2024](http://whf.cm/BestProjectors2024)

PROJECTORS

If you are looking for cinematic scale in your home set-up, you really need one of these impressive 4K projectors

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2024

BEST PROJECTOR
£3000-£10,000

SONY
VPL-XW5000ES

PRODUCT OF THE YEAR



■ Sony VPL-XW5000ES £4999

This is the cheapest truly native 4K laser projector the home cinema world has yet seen. There are similarly priced DLP laser projectors that use 'double flashing' tech to achieve a 4K image, or pixel-shifting technology that achieves a 4K effect, but none carries a native 3840x2160 pixel count as this Sony does. To illustrate just how surprisingly cheap this projector is, stepping up to its mid-range XW7000ES native 4K sibling will set you back £14,990.

Despite its price, it still benefits from Sony's X1 Ultimate processing, previously available only on its flagship projector. The X1 Ultimate platform powers digital contrast optimisation, object-based HDR remastering, object-based resolution enhancement, enhanced upscaling, clarity-boosting Reality Creation and, perhaps the most important element of the projector's processing system, the Dynamic HDR Enhancer. This incredibly clever system analyses incoming content so that it can pick out relatively bright highlights and increase their intensity without damaging or changing other elements of the picture.

The XW5000ES's Triluminos Pro colour engine is claimed to reach as much as 95

per cent of the digital cinema world's DCI-P3 colour gamut, and an IMAX Enhanced mode is also on board. The XW5000ES's laser lighting is rated to deliver a peak light output of 2000 lumens, enough potentially to transform picture quality with HDR sources.

This extra light combines with a trio of 0.61-inch SXRD chips, the smallest Sony has ever managed to produce. As well as potentially leading to sharper, more densely detailed pictures, these new chips are apparently more reflective and deliver a more uniform reflective surface than their predecessors - factors that could also enhance contrast, colour accuracy and colour gradations

The X1 Ultimate processor is actually phenomenally effective by the standards of a projection world that traditionally feels miles behind TVs when it comes to image processing. The XW5000ES's pictures look so good right out of the box that it's hard to know where to start.

Black levels and local contrast quickly explode any concerns that introducing laser lighting at such an unprecedented price point for SXRD projection could see

The projector's laser lighting is rated to deliver a peak 2000 lumens

Sony really struggling to present dark scenes convincingly.

The Dynamic HDR Enhancer injects extra impact into the sort of bright highlights that make HDR images sing - it's hard to reconcile this with the fact that the Sony doesn't support any local dimming, especially as it 'boosts' bright highlights without messing up the rest of the picture.

It further beats cheaper '4K' laser projection rivals with its phenomenal sharpness. Native 4K footage looks even more detailed, dense, 3D and crisp than it has on any of Sony's previous entry-level and even mid-range 4K SXRD projectors. In fact, backed up by the processing prowess of Sony's Reality Creation system and a digital focus-optimiser system that uses digital processing to compensate for potential lens focus errors, it delivers the finest show of 4K resolution we have seen on any projector costing under 10 grand.

Despite being Sony's cheapest 4K laser projector ever, the XW5000ES delivers gorgeously cinematic and detailed pictures. And that is why we have no hesitation in awarding it Product Of The Year once again in 2024.

■ BenQ W1800

£999

The BenQ W1800 sets its stall out to serve up a cinematic experience on a budget in a couple of key ways. For starters it claims to be a 4K projector, and it can support both of the HDR10 and HLG HDR formats.

As with all such affordable '4K' projectors that use DLP optical tech, the W1800 doesn't carry a native 3840x2160 number of digital mirror devices (DMDs) on its 0.47-inch chip. Instead it draws on the amazing speed with which DLP's mirrors can respond, to get them to deliver essentially multiple pixels of picture information within a single frame to create what BenQ describe as a 'true' 4K approach, as ratified by the Consumer Technology Association in the US.

The BenQ's pictures immediately strike us as genuinely cinematic as soon as we clap eyes on them - and, while deeper scrutiny uncovers a limitation or two, our first impressions hold well throughout our testing. The projector's excellent colour and light control makes pictures



WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2024

**BEST PROJECTOR
UNDER £1250**

BENQ W1800

exceptionally sharp and detailed for such an affordable projector - in fact its pictures really do look like 4K, as billed. Certainly denser, more nuanced and, as a result, more three-dimensional than you would see with a regular 1080p DLP projector.

Colour tones across the board look beautifully natural, richly nuanced and remarkably well balanced. The W1800's

The attractive projector is small enough to fit on any coffee table

HDR images are consistent, even-handed and therefore immersive.

BenQ's decision to focus here on good old-fashioned home cinema values has paid off handsomely. Its pictures might not be the showiest around, but they are refined, natural, authentic and, there's that word again, cinematic. As a result, we have no hesitation in awarding a Best Buy here.

■ Epson EH-TW7100

£1399

In a world of laser and ultra-short-throw projector technologies, Epson has kept faith in its traditional 3LCD projectors - and this has paid off with the EH-TW7100.

The EH-TW7100 may not be native 4K, and its bulb will need replacing every few years, but its reasonable price tag speaks for itself. It produces 4K via a trio of 1080p LCD chips and employs pixel shifting to give the UHD effect. Given that native 4K projectors start at more than double the price, this represents a reasonable compromise. It is also HDR-enabled, supporting HDR10 and HLG.

An excellent picture is provided out of the box. The opening shots of the Missouri countryside in *Guardians Of The Galaxy Vol.2* are expertly balanced for a projector at this price. The scene is bright, the colours natural and the clouds carefully shaded. While it's not as sharp as a true 4K picture, nor are the blacks as deep as those of some rivals, there is a nuance to the tone and texture of faces that is hard to beat.



WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2024

**BEST PROJECTOR
£1250-£2000**

EPSON EH-TW7100

The Imitation Game at 1080p on Blu-ray is still sharp. The close-ups during Alan Turing's Bletchley interview are detailed and unaffected by noise or blur. The colours and black depth are just as good as at 4K, and these sequences offer a perfect opportunity to show off this projector's skills with dark detail. Even at SD, watching *Lord Of The Rings: The Two*

The EH-TW7100 is HDR-enabled, supporting HLG and HDR10

Towers on DVD, the big picture from this projector brings this epic adventure to life.

It's a picture that is in line with the character, if not the class, of what you will get at the cinema. That, combined with its luminance, connectivity and flexibility, adds up to a superb family projector that will make a great addition to almost any home. You won't find better in this class.

BenQ X3100i

£2099

This is a projector designed very much with gaming in mind. But the more time we spend with the BenQ, the more certain we are that its cutesy looks and strong gaming chops are just the start of its charms.

This is a DLP projector illuminated by a 4LED lighting system. This adds a so-called extra LED to the usual red, green and blue LEDs, and amplifies the overall output of green light to enhance brightness. DLP's XPR tech, where the switchable mirrors on the DLP chipset are 'flashed' multiple times per image frame, is used to create 4K.

Its gaming credentials are genuinely extensive, but we kick off our tests with movies, and the BenQ does a better job with all of our choices than many supposedly more film- or home entertainment-focused models we have tested.

The X3100i's 3300 lumens of peak brightness deliver bright HDR scenes with more than enough intensity. At the same time, it does a remarkably effective job of producing much more convincing and

consistent black levels than so many of its brightness-obsessed peers manage. Its picture remains consistently natural-looking during both bright and dark scenes.

The X3100i continues to excel when fed gaming sources. The brightness, sharpness, colour saturation and consistently effective contrast intersect immaculately with every game genre and location. It is

This Ben-Q is aimed at gamers, but does a great job with movies

also one of the most responsive gaming experiences we have had outside of a dedicated gaming monitor.

While delivering a fantastically responsive, immersive, vibrant and sharp experience with games, it also works surprisingly brilliantly with movies. Its built-in sound performance is more than serviceable too. A deserved win here.



JVC DLA-NZ800

£15,999

This laser projector will likely appeal only to the most dedicated of home cinema enthusiasts. There are much more affordable options on the market, but JVC is making no apologies for the price of its high-end projector.

While it wouldn't win any beauty contests, its smooth and sturdy construction is still very much appreciated, while the process of getting the projector up and running is simple, speedy and intuitive.

This is a D-ILA projector, which means it uses JVC's Liquid Crystal on Silicon (LCoS) projection technology that combines the best aspects of DLP and LCD projection tech, typically offering deep and detailed blacks and crisp, well-defined details.

The most striking aspect of its picture performance is how natural it looks. We find the picture to be expertly balanced while still oozing rich and engaging detail. Colours are expertly judged, with a warmth to skin tones that strike a balance between looking lively without veering

into unnatural. Contrast is also a key strength, as the solidity and three-dimensionality of images are a sight to behold, with tangible depth and solidity.

Black levels are also stellar by projector standards; but what is most impressive about the DLA-NZ800 is how adept it is at picking out intricate details. The 8K e-shift mode is truly impressive in how it sharpens

D-ILA projection tech typically offers crisply defined details

the outlines of subjects and digs up finer textural details in the environment. Motion is handled very well too.

JVC's latest D-ILA laser projector is crisp, detailed, balanced and, most importantly, staunchly cinematic. While it doesn't go out of its way to dazzle, its authenticity ensures that it is firmly in the discussion of the best projectors available.



■ Hisense PL1

£1499

Designed as a TV alternative that can reach up to 100 inches without costing nearly as much as a super-large TV would, an ultra short-throw projector strikes a nice balance between practicality and theatricality. In order to be a successful UST, it has to tick every box we look out for in both the best projectors and the best TVs, which is no easy task. Thankfully, the PL1 not only steps up to the task, but it clears many other options within its field.

We are more than impressed with its sharp, punchy and cinematic image, as well as its adept handling of motion. With *Baby Driver*, the Hisense leaps into action with a solid and punchy picture. The red Subaru gleams on screen, while the black outfits of the bank-robbing crew look impressively black, especially by projector standards. As the shot transitions to Baby rocking out in the front seat of the getaway car, we see how solid the PL1's image is. Sharp outlines, competent handling of contrast and crisp details combine to



WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2024

**BEST UST
PROJECTOR
UNDER £2000**

HISENSE PL1

create a three-dimensional depth effect that is impressively cinematic, more so than most TVs, and without sacrificing too much in the way of clarity or black depth.

The built-in sound is more than serviceable, with the projector attempting some directionality with the sound when it comes to cars passing by Baby during the aforementioned scene, and there is some

For the price, you won't get a more affordable huge screen experience

semblance of bass, although there's not a huge amount in the way of dynamics and detail. Realistically you will want to hook up a soundbar or AVR.

With its clean, punchy and solid image, the Hisense PL1 is a gem at this price. It's a TV alternative that actually lives up to its promise and you'd be hard-pressed to find a cheaper 100-inch home cinema option.

■ Hisense PX3-Pro

£2499

Hisense's latest ultra short throw projector follows the two-time Award-winning Hisense PL1. It also carries 'designed for Xbox Series' certification, which should make it great for gamers as well as movie fans. And during testing, we found the PX3-Pro is indeed fantastic both for watching movies and blasting demons in *Doom*.

Hisense may be marketing the PX3-Pro to gamers, but it has done a lot of work in designing the projector to show a wide, more accurate range of colours, offer much higher peak brightness levels and significantly deeper, more detailed blacks.

There's oodles of detail in *Blade Runner 2049*'s wind-swept barren landscape. The projector offers realistic but vibrant colours, too, without looking overcooked.

Light control is also a cut above that of many rivals, with the picture looking brilliantly three-dimensional, offering true depth, and making for an authentic, immersive viewing experience.

The Hisense's inbuilt, Atmos-ready speaker system is still not on a par with the



WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2024

**BEST UST
PROJECTOR
OVER £2000**

HISENSE PX3-PRO

sound from a good soundbar. Switching to the theatre sound profile offers better separation between dialogue and background noise, but during action scenes, the speakers don't manage to deliver any sense of height, and fail to project forward enough for our liking.

The Hisense PX3-Pro is a great UST projector for movie fans and gamers alike.

The PX3-Pro's excellent light control makes for immersive viewing

Though the projector's audio is undeniably mediocre, its picture quality more than makes up for it. Its handling of dark scenes is particularly excellent by UST standards, and in general its picture is a marked improvement on any other projector in its class we have tested. If you're short on space, own an Xbox and love movies, this could be the one.

View offers: whf.com/BestHomeCinemaAmplifiers2024

HOME CINEMA AMPLIFIERS

Big-screen entertainment needs big sound to really hit the spot, and these two AV amps are spot-hitting masters

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2024

BEST HOME CINEMA AMPLIFIER UNDER £1500

SONY TA-AN1000

PRODUCT OF THE YEAR



■ Sony TA-AN1000 £899

This superb AV amplifier retains its Product Of The Year crown this year with some ease, thanks to its top sound quality and generous equipment levels.

Sony has really packed in the features here. Seven channels of amplification can be configured to either a 7.1 set-up or a 5.1.2 Dolby Atmos. The Sony outputs a claimed 85W of power per channel with all channels driven. There are two HDMI outputs with eARC and six HDMI inputs, all claimed to be HDMI 2.1 ports.

HDR10, HLG and Dolby Vision HDR formats are on board, with further support for IMAX Enhanced. Audio format support is also excellent with Dolby Atmos, DTS:X and Sony 360 Audio, with its phantom speaker system creating simulated height channels and surrounds.

Wireless connectivity includes Bluetooth, Spotify Connect, Chromecast and AirPlay 2. You can even hook it up to a Sonos multi-room set-up, if you have one.

This amp is seriously talented, with a powerful and dynamic performance that continues to impress the more we hear it.

With the Dolby Atmos 4K Blu-ray of *Drive*, the precision and clarity of the AN1000 immediately strike us. There is an enhanced sense of emotion and texture in The Driver's voice that helps to highlight Ryan Gosling's performance, picking up on subtle tonal variation in his delivery. In the ensuing car chase, we are treated to an impressive show of dynamics as the car roars away from the police, while intricate details, such as the hissing inflection of the police officers' radios, are pin-sharp. We get a beautiful display of scale and immersion as the sound of a helicopter travels overhead and towards the rear speakers in an impressively smooth motion.

Moving on to *The Batman*, as the Batmobile's snarling engine revs up we find ourselves shaken by the excellent bass performance, thanks to its powerful

Everything you could reasonably want from an AV amp at this level

approach. Bass feels taut and snappy, adding to the already punchy dynamics with a gleefully guttural low-end response. What is striking is the directionality of the sound, which shifts with the cars on screen as they turn and weave through traffic.

Interstellar on 4K Blu-ray highlights the AVR's wide and spacious soundfield. Here we explore Sony's 360 Spatial Sound Mapping feature, that creates a bubble of sound around and above you without the need for additional speakers. It certainly creates a much more expansive soundfield with enhanced verticality. But it's the moments when the impeccable *Interstellar* soundtrack builds that the Sony kicks into overdrive, delivering the score with all of the tension and drama that it deserves.

Sony has caught lightning in a bottle. The AN1000's crisp, precise and punchy sound strikes a nearly perfect balance, elevating every movie and song we throw at it. This amplifier just ticks all our boxes.

■ Marantz Cinema 30

£3999

Before we got our hands on the Cinema 30 earlier this year, it had been a while since we had reviewed a Marantz AVR – and we warmed to it as soon as we opened the box.

If you appreciate AVR aesthetics, you will probably love this amplifier. It has all the heft that one could want from a serious piece of home cinema kit, but it has oodles of style, too, from the carbon fibre-like finish to the left and right of the raised centre panel, to the identical size of the volume and source knobs and the small, circular ‘porthole’ display that is a Marantz trademark. It’s a very clean design, but pop open the front panel (which has a lovely weighty but smooth action) and there’s a second display with further useful buttons. The remote control is classy too.

Active processing features include Audyssey Dynamic EQ, which is designed to compensate intelligently for listening at lower volumes. Audyssey MultEQ XT32, meanwhile, is essentially the Audyssey speaker calibration and room correction in action.

The Cinema 30 features a newly developed DAC module with 32-bit ESS digital-to-analogue converters, a new power supply and new power amplifier transistors. It boasts 11 channels of amplification (rated at 140W per channel

at 8 ohms with two channels driven), and features four subwoofer outputs.

3D Audio support is, as you would expect, extensive. Dolby Atmos and DTS:X are on board of course, the latter in its ‘Pro’ form and IMAX Enhanced offshoot. Auro 3D is supported, too, as is 360 Reality Audio.

Sister company Denon’s HEOS platform is built-in for music streaming, although we suspect most people these days will send music to their amplifier directly from the app of a streaming service, or using one of their phone’s wireless protocols (Chromecast, AirPlay 2 and Bluetooth are all supported). All seven of the HDMI inputs and two of the outputs support 4K/120Hz (or 8K at 60Hz) and all other advanced gaming features.

Once we have worked out that Dolby Loudness Management, apparently enabled by default, is best turned off, we are treated to a punchy, weighty and wonderfully dynamic sound that turns our test procedure into a glorious marathon of movies and music.

We kick off with the classic *Mad Max* Dolby Atmos demo, which begins with a voiceover and culminates in a car chase (with a bit of crunchy lizard in between). You don’t hear Max’s voice coming from any of the speakers – you hear it right in the middle of the room, hovering slightly

over the listening position, disembodied and echoing around almost as if it’s your own inner monologue.

Switching to *Deepwater Horizon*, the Marantz’s ability to place sounds precisely in three-dimensional space combines with a knack for producing a huge, enveloping soundscape. Detailed sound effects appear from all around you and together fill the room. Again, you hear the sounds, not the speakers. There is fine detail here combined with awesome ferocity and – when we switch to our usual *Blade Runner 2049* chapter-two stress test – deep bass with oodles of weight and all of the punch required to drive the scene as intended.

To test the Cinema 30’s ability with music, we switch the amplifier to Pure Direct so we are listening just to the front stereo channels with no additional processing, and the overall delivery is miles better than that of most AV amplifiers. James Blake’s bassily challenging *Limit To Your Love* is despatched with lovely clarity, refinement and control.

As is probably clear by now, the Marantz Cinema 30 is an absolutely superb AV amplifier. It has richness, smoothness and control, but also delivers all of the scale and punch that one could hope for. A worthy winner if ever there were one.

Impressive bass, fine detail, bags of refinement – and it looks good



WHAT HI-FI?
 ★★★★★
AWARDS 2024
 BEST HOME CINEMA AMPLIFIER OVER £1500
MARANTZ CINEMA 30

[View offers: whf.cm/BestSpeakerPackages2024](http://whf.cm/BestSpeakerPackages2024)

SPEAKER PACKAGES

Thrilling movie experiences need stunning sound as well as visuals, and these surround set-ups will provide it

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2024

**BEST SPEAKER PACKAGE
OVER £2000**

**BOWERS & WILKINS
606 & 607 S3
SPEAKER PACKAGE**

PRODUCT OF THE YEAR



■ Bowers & Wilkins 606 and 607 S3 speaker package £2049

Since this speaker package comprises two pairs of five-star speakers, you probably won't be surprised to find out that it sounds good. Really good.

Starting with the main players in this system we have the B&W 606 S3 stereo speakers. At 34 x 19 x 30cm, the 606 S3 are much more compact and less likely to dominate your room than some rivals, although you will have to factor in space for stands. Inside the 606 S3 you will find a two-way vented design with a 25mm dome tweeter and 16.5cm cone driver. There's a titanium-dome tweeter accompanying the mid/bass driver made from B&W's Continuum cone material. B&W has switched to titanium from aluminium to 'improve resolution and refinement in the high frequencies'.

The 607 S3 are smaller across the board at 30 x 17 x 21cm (hwd), and feature a similar internal arrangement to the 606 S3, although its Continuum mid/bass driver is

smaller, at 13cm. The HTM6 centre channel is robust and compact at just 16 x 48 x 26cm (hwd), and is a two-way vented design with a titanium-dome tweeter (25mm) and two Continuum cone mid/bass drivers (13cm). Rounding things off we have the ASW610 subwoofer which is, you guessed it, compact at 32cm x 31cm x 35cm (including feet). The ASW610 is a powered subwoofer with a 25cm paper and aramid-fibre cone long-throw driver powered by 200W of Class D amplification.

Kicking things off with *Interstellar*, there's lots to take note of, namely the captivating vocal performances that are truly done justice by the B&W package with the speakers producing a rich and textured yet natural and lifelike presentation. An explosive moment is conveyed with meaty, powerful bass that is snappy and controlled in equal measure. This is thanks to the package's impressive dynamics, which consistently allow for

The 606 and 607 S3 speakers are five-star products in their own right

instantly punchy and guttural bass and enhanced volume when required.

This S3 package is also adept when it comes to detail, with each sound effect inside the ship (its creaking as it makes evasive manoeuvres, the various beeps and clicks of the control panels) coming across with exceptional clarity and nuance. It is very adept with directional sound, with no noticeable gaps between the surrounds and front and centre channels. It also sounds pleasingly realistic, as no single speaker sticks out or draws attention to itself, instead passing the sound around in an organic way.

We always had a sneaking suspicion that this package could be excellent based on our prior experience with the 606 S3 and 607 S3 stereo pairs. However, we are still taken aback by how good this package sounds as a whole. Clear, detailed, rich and dynamic, this speaker system impresses, and earns this Award for a second time.

■ Wharfedale DX-3 5.1 Pack

£499

You want top-notch surround sound in a compact package? Well, Wharfedale has answered your prayers with this minuscule speaker system that happens to be a sequel to a long-running *What Hi-Fi?* Award winner, the DX-2 package.

The surround speakers (just 19 x 12 x 12cm, hwd), use a compact two-way closed-box design, so they can be positioned close to a wall and are ideal for wall-mounting. Each features a 19mm silk-dome tweeter and a 75mm woven-polypropylene cone mid/bass driver with a claimed frequency response of 100Hz - 22kHz. The centre channel is minuscule by usual centre-channel standards. At just 12 x 31 x 12cm (hwd), it sits comfortably under a TV. Inside you will find the same 19mm tweeter flanked by a pair of 75mm mid/bass units. The subwoofer features a 200mm woven polypropylene cone and 70W of powered amplification.

Wharfedale has clearly tweaked the sound in order to prioritise scale and



WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2024

**BEST SPEAKER
PACKAGE
UNDER £500**

**WHARFEDALE
DX-3 HCP**

dynamics, and we certainly appreciate how cinematic it sounds overall. Starting with *The Batman*, we immediately recognise the stellar clarity of this speaker system, with everything from the twinkling of shattering glass to the Batmobile's growling engine and even the dialogue that competes with these effects all being presented clearly and with plenty of definition. Despite its modest size, the system can deliver properly weighty sound with precision and immediacy. This

These speakers
may be compact,
but their sound is
plenty big enough

is in part due to the excellent subwoofer, which provides plenty of low end while remaining controlled.

The DX-3 HCP delivers sound above and beyond what most soundbars are capable of while being half the price of most packages that we recommend. Its unassuming, compact footprint may give the impression that it will deliver a small sound to match, but that's far from the case. The DX-3 easily holds its own in the home cinema speaker package market.

■ Wharfedale Diamond 12.1 HCP

£999

Fluid, composed and consistent, the Wharfedale 12.1 HCP is a mature yet affordable surround sound system. You may have noticed that Wharfedale has more than its share of Awards in this category, and that is simply down to the fact that this veteran speaker brand has unrivalled strength in depth.

For the Diamond 12, Wharfedale brought in German-based designer Karl Heinz Fink (recipient of our Outstanding Contribution Award in 2022), and the result is a solidly built, nicely finished, well-engineered package. It comprises a quartet of the excellent Diamond 12.1 bookshelf speakers (two front, two rear), a 12.C centre speaker and an SW-10 powered subwoofer.

The tautness and dexterity of the SW-10 is particularly striking here. It is an incredibly musical sub and it blends seamlessly with the smaller speakers, which themselves have a well-integrated

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2024

**BEST SPEAKER
PACKAGE
£500-£1000**

**WHARFEDALE
DIAMOND
12.1 HCP**



low end. The result is a rich and lively sound, particularly with films that have a heavily featured score.

The soundfield is smooth too, and although floorstanders at the front would provide more scale, there is something to be said for the consistency of tone created by using the same speaker for fronts and surrounds.

To give these tabletop-sized boxes a vigorous musical challenge, we try *Blade Runner 2049* and they project the meaty,

Poise, fine diction
and charisma: the
Audrey Hepburn of
speaker packages

sonorous score with both composure and charisma. There is delicate nuance, too, in the sound of the raindrops landing on the windscreen during the scene where Ryan Gosling's K flies to the orphanage.

With poise, effortlessness, cut-glass diction and charisma, the Wharfedale Diamond 12.1 HCP is the Audrey Hepburn of home cinema speaker packages. Its skill across the entire frequency band gives it a mature sound that makes it rewarding with both music and film.

Wharfedale Diamond 12.3 HCP

£1299

Ninety years of speaker-manufacturing know-how are bound to bear a good deal of tasty fruit; sure enough, everything that makes the Diamond 12.1 HCP (on the previous page) shine is in evidence here with its bigger brother. And some. This is a 5.1 package that is mature, stylish and practical.

This package - available in black, walnut, white or light oak - comprises the 12.3 floorstanders for fronts (£499 if bought separately) supported by a pair of mid-sized 12.1 bookshelf speakers as surrounds (£249) and the 12.C in the middle (£229). The SW-10 powered subwoofer (£399) is on bass duty. At the rear, like every other model in the range, the 12.3s have two sets of terminals for bi-wiring.

Starting things off with *Gravity*, the floorstanders immediately make their presence and capability known in the powerfully dynamic opening orchestral



sting. As the subsequent radio communications bounce seamlessly around the system, there is a fantastic consistency across the soundstage as well as plenty of dialogue clarity. The SW-10 combines a firm grasp with swift agility, resulting in a textured performance that blends effortlessly with the low end of the 12.3s.

Switching to the Live Aid scene in *Bohemian Rhapsody*, we are pleased to find that the Diamond 12.3 HCP delivers a

The taut, snappy sub blends sweetly with the rest of this impressive system

performance that is enjoyably musical and dramatically detailed. The snappiness of the sub lends depth to drum fills and bass licks, while small touches, from the lively slap reverb of the stadium to the giggle of a security guard picked out in the crowd, are delivered with playful nuance.

There's lots to admire about the classy and composed Diamond 12.3 HCP. This is a detailed and dynamically responsive system that, like its stablemates, delivers beyond its price point.

Dali Oberon 5 5.1 Speaker Package

£1599

If clarity, detail and expression are high on your list of desirable attributes for a speaker package (and we can't think why they wouldn't be), don't let this stylish set of cabinets pass you by. It comfortably beats every rival around it on all three of those fronts.

The Oberon 5 floorstanders have a fairly large and lightweight 29mm soft-dome tweeter, which can dip into lower frequencies to help integrate with the two 13cm mid/bass drivers. It's a similar story for the Oberon 1 surrounds, though there's just one mid/bass driver here. The centre Vokal speaker has the same drivers, with the tweeter in the middle of two mid/bass drivers and the front-facing bass port underneath, while the 170W E9-F sub uses a 23cm aluminium-coned woofer and a downward-firing bass vent.

We fire up our projector and play *Deadpool* on 4K Blu-ray. The film's



opening scene puts home cinema sound through its paces. It's chaotic, with explosions, dialogue, cars zooming left and right, and plenty of thumps and hits as henchmen meet their grisly ends. The Dali Oberons perform the job admirably.

There is a beautiful rasping quality as a motorcycle zips across the soundstage in a wonderfully integrated fashion, and we soon become aware of a surprising amount of authority and power to this relatively diminutive package. Airborne

At this price, Dali's elegant Oberon 5 Package has no discernible flaws

vehicles slam into the road with terrifying weight, and every punch sounds as though it has been delivered with super-human strength - yet details of the twisting metal are never steamrollered by the thuds.

From a wishlist comprising a full, warm sound, punchy bass, expressive dynamics, plenty of detail and seamless integration, most packages in this price bracket might score three or four out of five. This stylish system has them all.

TEMPTATION AWARD

Bespoke components of the highest quality are the key to the Esoteric's success

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2024

TEMPTATION

ESOTERIC
K-05XD

PRODUCT OF THE YEAR



■ Esoteric K-05XD (CD player) £11,650

This far into the age of hi-res music streaming, it would be easy to write off any new stereo disc player as anachronistic. That isn't how we see things. We know many of our readers still have huge CD collections and want to get the best from them. Right now, we can't think of a better way to do that than on Esoteric's magnificent K-05XD SACD/CD player, which was launched earlier this year. At £11,650 it comes in at the top-end of the market, but such quality always costs. And in this case we think it is more than worth it.

Rather than simply buy-in the mechanisms from OEM suppliers, as most other companies do, Esoteric has gone down the bespoke route with its proprietary VRDS transports; the initials stand for Vibration-free Rigid Disc clamping System.

This has always been more than mere marketing guff. In essence, it involves clamping the entire top surface of the disc in a bid to eliminate any resonances as well as flatten any slight warping, so that the laser and its servo mechanism have an easier time when reading the digital data. In theory, the result should be a better sound.

This player's digital-to-analogue section is rather tasty too. Rather than use off-the-shelf DAC chips, as most of the competition still does, Esoteric has designed its own circuit that works with FPGA (Field Programmable Gate Array)-based algorithms to ensure compatibility with 32-bit/384kHz PCM files as well as DSD512 music streams. MQA is also on the menu.

This player has a wonderfully clean and organic presentation. There is no sense of harshness or over-emphasis of the leading edges of notes. We are listening to *Jesus To A Child* and George Michael's voice comes across with nuance and texture. While the presentation is as neutral as they come, it also avoids charges of sounding sterile by delivering the natural warmth and emotion in his performance well. The musical backdrop is beautifully defined, with no hint of confusion. Every instrument has its place, and is easy to follow, while the

We can't think of a better way to get the best from your CD collection

"The musical backdrop is beautifully defined, with no hint of confusion. Every instrument has its place"

combination of them all still comes together as a convincing musical whole.

This player has a large-scale and authoritative presentation and stereo images with pleasing precision. Instruments are layered with care and locked into position, even when the music becomes demanding.

We love the spacious nature of the soundstage and the general lack of clutter. The Esoteric's impressive ability to dig up low-level details shines through in the convincing way it places the orchestra within the recording venue. There is nothing showy here - no attempt to make the recording sound more impressive than it is. Just a pleasingly accurate rendition of the original recording.

As we work our way through a DSD recording of Aimee Mann's *Lost In Space*, The Dark Knight Rises OST (24-bit/192kHz PCM) and D'Angelo's *Black Messiah* (24-bit/96kHz PCM) we are consistently impressed by the Esoteric's subtlety and its ability to weave a multitude of instrumental strands into a cohesive and musically appealing sonic tapestry. It delivers a transparent and enjoyable sound that reflects the source quality with honesty. We can ask no more than that.

OUTSTANDING CONTRIBUTION

The sphere of influence enjoyed by this year's winner is rare indeed in the world of hi-fi— as is his dedication to achieving excellence

■ Roy George Naim

Roy George is one of the most unassuming and determinedly obsessive engineers we have ever had the pleasure to meet. He retired as Naim's Technical Director back in 2018 but continued to work as a part-time consultant for another three years. The company's first and only turntable, the Solstice, was his final project. After he helped to produce a conveyor belt of superb products over the best part of four decades, we simply couldn't let such an illustrious career pass without the recognition it deserves.

His connection to Naim Audio started in 1973, just after the company was founded. At first, he was a customer, owning an early NAC12/NAP160 pre/power combination. But, after finishing his electronics degree and a stint working at Goodmans, he was offered a job as a speaker consultant by Naim's founder, Julian Vereker. The year was 1985.

Roy's first product was the Naim SBL speaker, which was produced that very same year. This cleverly engineered, multi-box floorstander proved a taster of his fresh, highly individual approach to hi-fi design.

From there it is fair to say that George's fingerprints have been on every Naim Audio product made, encompassing all parts of the hi-fi chain from CD players and streamers to speakers taking in a record player, lots of amplifiers, cables and racks. Few engineers are talented enough to work across such a wide remit, and it is the breadth of Roy's contribution as much as its quality that we are celebrating here.



WHAT HI-FI?
★ ★ ★ ★ ★
AWARDS 2024

ROY GEORGE

OUTSTANDING CONTRIBUTION

There have been so many superb products over the period of Roy's involvement; our highlights are the legendary CDS CD player, the ND555 (our current reference streamer) and a steady stream of terrific Naim integrated amplifiers, of which the latest one, the XS3, has formally been awarded a place in *What Hi-Fi?*'s Hall of Fame this year.

Roy's attention to detail is legendary among those who have worked with him, and at times could seem to border on lunacy to those on the outside. His efforts to minimise the sonic degradation caused by structural vibrations are extreme,

Roy George has been involved with every Naim product since 1985

culminating in products having sprung suspension systems to isolate sensitive circuit boards and deliberately loose-fitting mains sockets. He has undoubtedly spent many hours listening to the position of the cable ties used to keep the inside of Naim's electronics looking tidy, and the sonic changes a tweaking of a few lines of software code can make. We bet Roy George has obsessed over it all.

Given everything he has accomplished, Roy's modesty is disarming and his straightforward manner when it comes to explaining complex technical matters is always much appreciated.

Great products have laid the foundation for Naim Audio to become the powerhouse brand it is today. There is no doubt in our minds that George's hard work has been instrumental in making that happen. Roy George, we salute you.

"Roy's first product was the Naim SBL speaker - a taster of his fresh, highly individual approach to hi-fi design"

HALL OF FAME

This is where we honour one product for its enduring excellence. This year's winner draws on a most impressive pedigree

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2024

HALL OF FAME
NAIM NAIT XS 3
PRODUCT OF THE YEAR



■ Naim Nait XS3 £2499

Naim's Nait XS3 integrated amplifier has won its price category in *What Hi-Fi?*'s Awards for five consecutive years. That's a remarkable achievement – but it takes more than half a decade's worth of domination for a product to make our Hall of Fame. This award considers not only the product itself but whether its lineage has made a lasting impact on the world of hi-fi. There is no doubt in our minds that Naim's Nait series of integrated amplifiers has done just that.

The original Nait integrated amplifier was launched in 1983. It was a basic half-width box with a claimed power output of just 13W per channel. Originally priced at around £180, it offered a cut-price way to access Naim's famed sound. Up until then the company had only made separate pre/power products, and they sold at what would be considered premium to high-end prices.

That original amplifier was fun, and entertained as few others could at the price. Its basic DNA has survived through the various generations of Nait products since then, and we feel runs as strongly as ever in the current XS3. There are both cheaper and more expensive integrated options in the company's current range,

but, for us, the XS3 offers the best balance of performance and price.

It is now a full-width unit, of course. Remote control is standard and the power output has gone up to a respectable 70W per channel. Despite these upgrades, the XS3 remains something of a purist device though, with tone controls and digital inputs not even on the menu. There is a moving-magnet phono stage though, and it is a good one that retains the pleasing sonic character we hear through the four line-level inputs.

The Nait XS3 isn't a dead-end purchase either. It can be upgraded by adding one of the company's outboard power supplies, and to terrific effect. A front panel-mounted 6.3mm headphone output completes the amp's features list.

How does the Nait sound? Essentially, the XS3 is energetic and entertaining. It takes the multitude of musical strands in Arvo Pärt's *Tabula Rasa* and combines

The current Nait lives up to the lofty standards set by its predecessors

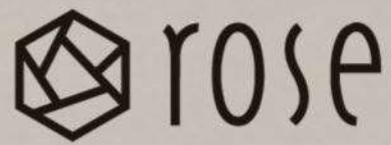
them to deliver a musical and emotionally absorbing performance. Detail resolution is excellent, but it is the amplifier's ability to assemble all that information into a cohesive musical whole that really impresses.

This piece of music is perfect for demonstrating the Nait's generous dose of dynamics, the amp tracking the slow build of the music well. The result is composed too, with a good degree of refinement when required.

We switch to Neneh Cherry's *Blank Project* and love the way this amplifier tracks the album's complex rhythms. There is a proper sense of momentum to Spit Three Times and plenty of punch when the music demands. Yet, alongside the bombast, there is also finesse; Cherry's voice is nicely focused and comes with nuance and passion. That's what makes this amplifier so special.

The Nait XS3 is a fit-and-forget product in the best sense. It slots into your system and does exactly what you want it to, and that is to deliver the music with its emotional impact intact. We can't ask for any more from an amplifier than that. Its Hall of Fame place is richly deserved.

"This award considers not only the product itself but whether its lineage has made a lasting impact"



RA280

Top-Notch Master Integrated Amplifier

RA280: Feel the essence of music

Enjoy pure and natural sound as close to the original recording as you can get with the RA280:
A near-perfect sound that transcends boundaries between digital and analogue technologies
with excellent linearity achieved through strong power damping and short dead times.



Beyond Audio, **HiFi ROSE**



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BUYER'S GUIDE

The definitive guide to the best home-entertainment kit you can buy

From 75in 4K TVs to turntables, and from portable Bluetooth speakers to Dolby Atmos surround sound packages, here's where you will find the perfect hi-fi and AV product, fast.

NEW ENTRIES THIS MONTH

Just two new products made the cut this month. The addition of the superb Nd3 moving-magnet cartridge to Rega's evergreen Planar 3 turntable sets new standards at the price, while the Dali Rubikore 2 combine class leading insight with a compellingly lively character and considerable rhythmic talents.



Dali Rubikore 2, p118

As entertaining as they are informative, the formidable Rubikore 2 deliver a good time, and then some

Rega Planar 3/Nd3, p123

The Planar 3/Nd3 package represents a notable improvement on its predecessor without a jump in price



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HOW TO POSITION YOUR SPEAKERS

It's not just a case of 'plonk 'em down and plug 'em in'; getting your speakers set up properly can make all the difference to how they sound. We show you how to get it right on page 120.

AMAZON PRIME VIDEO TIPS

Our guide to getting the most out of the popular streaming service, whether you're watching on a TV, tablet or smartphone. See page 141.

AWARD-WINNERS AT SEVENOAKS



WHAT HI-FI? AWARDS 2024
BEST STEREO AMPLIFIER £500-£1000
ARCAM A5

WHAT HI-FI? AWARDS 2024
BEST CD PLAYER £500-£1000
ARCAM CD5

ARCAM

A5 Amplifier £749 | CD5 CD Player £699

Play music straight out of the box, the ARCAM A5 includes a Bluetooth solution with Qualcomm AptX Adaptive technology providing up to 24-bit HD audio, while its built in phono stage will ensure your records sound as lush and engaging as possible.

The ARCAM CD5 is for those intimate listening experiences with your favourite music on Compact Disc. New components and materials have been painstakingly analysed and reviewed to ensure brilliant sound quality.

SONY BRAVIA 8

K65XR80 65" 4K QLED TV £1999

The perfect centrepiece for your living space with slim styling that harmonises in any environment, lifelike pictures and atmospheric sound. Sony's OLED screen individually and expertly controls 8 million self-illuminating pixels, turning each one on or off to dark and light for deeper blacks and more dazzling colours.



WHAT HI-FI? AWARDS 2024
BEST 55IN AND LARGER TV
SONY BRAVIA 8

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WHAT HI-FI? AWARDS 2024
BEST STANDMOUNT SPEAKER £1000-£1500
PMC PRODIGY 1

PMC

Prodigy1 Speakers £1249

The multi award-winning prodigy1 is a supreme compact standmount/bookshelf design, ideal for small to medium-sized rooms, yet capable of a rich, dynamic sound from a diminutive form.

SONY

TA-AN1000 AV Amplifier £699

Experience breathtaking 8K video and immersive 3D audio with the award-winning TA-AN10000 7.2-channel 8K amplifier. Enjoy spectacular room-filling immersive sound from your 7.2 or 5.2.2 setup with Dolby Atmos and DTS:X. 360 Spatial Sound Mapping also brings unique phantom speaker technology to your audio experience, making you feel like you're actually in the scene.



WHAT HI-FI? AWARDS 2024
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Stereo amps up to £500

Rega io £379

Best stereo amplifier under £400, Awards 2021 ★★★★★

Those who are happy with a no-fuss, purely analogue amp and who prioritise entertainment should arguably consider the io their number one choice.

Power 30W **Inputs** Line-in x2, MM **Outputs** Headphone



NAD D 3020 V2 £399

September 2018 ★★★★★

A likeable effort that features a full-bodied sonic performance with fine timing and dynamics and lots of useful features.

Power 30W **Inputs** Line-in, MM, optical, coaxial, BT **Outputs** Headphone



Marantz PM6007 £499

Best stereo amplifier under £500, Awards 2023 ★★★★★

Clearer and punchier than its Award-winning predecessor, Marantz's latest entry-level amplifier never puts the formidable 6000 Series dynasty in doubt.

Power 45W **Inputs** Line-in x4, MM, coax, optical **Outputs** 6.3mm h'phone



Mission 778X £549

March 2024 ★★★★★

Make no mistake, this is a well-rounded product that deserves plenty of success. Retro appeal or not, the Mission 778X convinces.

Power 45W **Inputs** Line-in x2, MM, coax, optical **Outputs** Pre-out, 6.3mm



Rega Brio £599

Best stereo amplifier £400-£700, Awards 2018 ★★★★★

An upgrade on the Brio-R, this incredibly talented stereo amplifier offers a sound that's subtle, precise and engaging.

Power 50W **Inputs** Line-in x4, MM **Outputs** 6.3mm headphone, record



Arcam A5 £749

Best stereo amplifier £500-£1000, Awards 2023 ★★★★★

It has been years since we've heard such a convincing stereo amp from Arcam. Thinking of buying at this level? This one has to go at the top of your shortlist.

Power 50W **Inputs** Line-in, coax, optical, MM, BT **Outputs** Pre-out, h'phone



Cambridge Audio CXA61 £750

Best stereo amplifier £500-£800, Awards 2022 ★★★★★

Justifies the price premium over the Audiolab 6000A and the Rega Brio by delivering a superior combination of sonic ability features and build quality.

Power 60W **Inputs** Line-in x4 **Outputs** Preamp, speaker x2, headphone



Cambridge Audio CXA81 £999

Best stereo amplifier £800-£1500, Awards 2022 ★★★★★

Class leaders are constantly being replaced in hi-fi – but rarely is it done so soundly as by Cambridge Audio's CXA81 integrated amplifier.

Power 80W **Inputs** Line-in x4, XLR, USB **Outputs** Pre, sub, headphone



£500 to £1000

Arcam A15 £1099**Best stereo amplifier £1000-£1500, Awards 2023 ★★★★★**

We worried a bit for the A15 when we heard how good the A5 was. But this is a clear step better than its sibling, delivering greater clarity, scale and precision.

Power 80W **Inputs** Line-in x3, MM, optical, coaxial x2 **Outputs** Pre-out H'phone

**Rega Elex Mk4 £1199****April 2023 ★★★★★**

Revealing and faithful, the new Elex is capable in ways far beyond our expectations at this mid-tier price point. It's a stunning amplifier.

Power 72W **Inputs** Line-in x4, MM, optical, coaxial **Outputs** Headphone

**Moon 240i £1990****Best stereo amplifier £1500-£2500, Awards 2018 ★★★★★**

A gorgeous piece of kit that puts in a stunningly revealing and dynamic performance. The Moon 240i is in a class of its own.

Power 50W **Inputs** Line-in x2, MM, optical x2, coaxial x2 **Outputs** 3.5mm

**Rega Elicit Mk5i £2000****October 2022 ★★★★★**

Just over 30 years on from the original, the Elicit integrated remains an excellent choice for those who prioritise sonic performance.

Power 105W **Inputs** Line-in x4, MM, opt, coax **Outputs** Preamp, headphone

**Naim Nait XS 3 £2199****Best stereo amplifier £1500-£3000, Awards 2023 ★★★★★**

A fit and forget product in the best sense, the Nait XS 3 slots into your system and does just what you want – delivers music with emotional impact intact.

Power 70W **Inputs** Line-in x4 **Outputs** Preamplifier, headphone

**Roksan Blak £2799****Best stereo amplifier £2500+, Awards 2018 ★★★★★**

A well equipped all-rounder with a powerful and energetic sound. It's happy to work with a wide range of systems and musical genres too.

Power 150W **Inputs** Balanced XLR, line-in x3, MM, USB, aptX Bluetooth

**Electrocompaniet ECI 80D £2899****June 2021 ★★★★★**

Electrocompaniet's entry-level integrated amp is a generously equipped and sophisticated-sounding performer.

Power 2 x 80W **Inputs** Line-in x2, coaxial x2, optical x3, MM, aptX B'Tooth

**Rega Aethos £3300****Best stereo amplifier over £3000, Awards 2023 ★★★★★**

The Aethos retains all the verve of Rega's established affordable integrations, but adds a huge dose of extra clarity, precision and muscle to the recipe.

Power 125W **Inputs** Line-in x5 **Outputs** Preamplifier, headphone

**Naim Supernait 3 £3499****Best stereo amplifier over £2500, Awards 2019 ★★★★★**

In adding a good-quality MM phono stage and tweaking the power amp section, Naim has made a great amplifier even better.

Power 80W **Inputs** Line-in x5, MM, XLR **Outputs** Subwoofer, headphone

**Rotel Michi X3 £4700****June 2022 ★★★★★**

Add the exceptional build and comprehensive specifications to the hugely capable sonic performance and the Michi X3 is a must-have on your shortlist.

Power 200W **Inputs** Line-in x3, MM, XLR, coax, opt **Outputs** Preamp, h'phone



£1000 to £2500

£2500 to £5000

Luxman L-509X £8500

June 2018 ★★★★★

Much more than an expensive retro throwback; its blend of build, features and performance is hard to better at this price.

Power 120W **Inputs** Line-in x6 **Outputs** Headphone, preamp



Audio Research GSi75 £14,998

April 2017 ★★★★★

This can stand toe to toe with the finest pre/power combos at this price; it's a well equipped one-box solution for high-end purists.

Power 75W **Inputs** Line-in x3, MM, MC, USB **Outputs** Headphone



Nagra Classic Pre/Power amp £29,000

August 2018 ★★★★★

Rivals have more muscle, but once in full flow the Nagra lets the music take centre stage. One of the finest pre/powers money can buy.

Power 100W **Inputs** Line-in x5, phono, XLR



CD PLAYERS & TRANSPORTS

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Marantz CD6007 £339

Best CD player under £500, Awards 2023 ★★★★★

No one can accuse Marantz of pushing the boundaries on the CD6007, but it has taken an already excellent CD player and made it a bit better.

Type CD transport **Outputs** Coaxial, optical



Arcam CD5 £699

Best CD player £500-£1000, Awards 2023 ★★★★★

A tremendously talented player that deserves an audition if you're still holding on to your beloved CDs and want to give them a new lease of life.

Type CD player **Outputs** Coaxial, optical, line-level



Musical Fidelity M2sCD £699

June 2020 ★★★★★

Musical Fidelity's CD player sounds expansive, detailed and delicately layered - a resoundingly listenable proposition.

Type CD player **Outputs** Coaxial, optical



Naim CD5si £1149

October 2014 ★★★★★

The CD5si boasts a full-bodied, winningly enthusiastic approach to music. The absence of digital outputs means there's no upgrade path.

Type CD player **Outputs** Line-out, DIN



Cyrus CDi £1195

Best CD player over £1000, Awards 2023 ★★★★★

Cyrus says this player is its best-sounding yet, and after listening to how confident and entertaining it sounds, it's hard to disagree.

Type CD player **Outputs** Line-out, coaxial, optical



Roksan Caspian M2 CD £1999

Awards 2010 ★★★★★

The Caspian M2 CD has been around the block and is showing few signs of its age but it still combines skill with timing, dynamics and authority.

Type CD player **Outputs** Line-out, coaxial, optical, USB, XLR



Marantz SA-10 £5999

April 2018 ★★★★★

One of the best digital source components around. Its unfussy disposition allows it to sound at home across a wide range of systems.

Type CD player **Outputs** Coaxial, optical

**Chord Blu MkII £7995**

January 2018 ★★★★★

The most informative and enjoyable sound we have heard from the CD format. Partner it with the DAVE and we doubt you can do better.

Type CD transport **Outputs** Coaxial x2 **Inputs** Coaxial, USB

£6000
and above**DACs**

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whf.com/BBDACs**iFi Go Link £59**

October 2023 ★★★★★

The iFi Go Link feels like the perfect device for enhancing your headphones on the move and on a budget, living up to its brief.

Size 13.5cm long **Resolution** PCM 32-bit/384kHz, DSD 256, MQA

**iFi Zen DAC V2 £159**

Best DAC under £200, Awards 2023 ★★★★★

A good jump in quality over the Award-winning original, to keep features and performance best in class – and for not much extra money.

Inputs USB 3.0 **Size** 35 x 160 x 117mm **Res** PCM 384kHz, DSD256, MQA

**iFi hip-dac 2 £179**

April 2022 ★★★★★

At this level, you're unlikely to find a portable DAC as clear, zealous, fully featured, or as downright good-looking as the iFi hip-dac 2.

Inputs USB 3.0 **Size** 14 x 7 x 102mm **Res** 32-bit/384kHz, DSD256

**iFi Go Blu £199**

February 2022 ★★★★★

When portability is paramount, the iFi Go Blu is every millimetre the convenient sonic upgrade your phone needs.

Size 54 x 34 x 13mm **Resolution** 24-bit/96kHz (wired)

**Audioquest DragonFly Cobalt £269**

Best DAC £200-£300, Awards 2023 ★★★★★

If you loved the DragonFly Red and you're looking to make the next step up without compromising on size or form, this is something of a no-brainer.

Size 6 x 2 x 1cm **Resolution** 24-bit/96kHz

**Chord Mojo 2 £449**

Best DAC £300-£1000, Awards 2023 ★★★★★

Familiar in form but next-level everywhere else, the Chord Mojo 2 is the *The Godfather Part II* of DAC sequels.

Inputs Coaxial, optical, USB **Size** 23 x 83 x 62mm **Res** 32-bit/768kHz, DSD

**Cambridge Audio DacMagic 200M £449**

Best DAC £300-£500, Awards 2021 ★★★★★

25 years and several evolutionary steps along the DacMagic line in terms of features and performance, the DacMagic 200M is a talented all-rounder.

Inputs Coax, opt, USB **Size** 6 x 22 x 19cm **Res** 32-bit/768kHz, DSD 512



Up to £300

£300 to £1000

£300 to £1K

Audiolab M-DAC+ £695

August 2016 ★★★★★

Audiolab's follow up to the M-DAC gets a great deal right with a sound that's neat, tidy and expansive. The M-DAC+ demands your attention.

Inputs Coaxial x2, optical x2 **Size** 11 x 25 x 29cm **Res** 32-bit/384kHz



£1000 to £10,000

Chord Qutest £1195

Best DAC over £1000, Awards 2023 ★★★★★

As with the 2Qute, the Qutest is a superior DAC which sets a new benchmark at this price with its clear and precise performance.

Inputs Coax x2, opt, USB **Size** 4 x 16 x 7cm **Res** 32-bit/768kHz PCM, DSD512



Chord Hugo 2 £1895

Best DAC over £1500, Awards 2022 ★★★★★

The Hugo 2 has a hefty price tag but, at this level, there isn't another DAC near that can communicate so unambiguously or so effortlessly.

Inputs Coaxial, opt, USB, BT **Size** 2 x 10 x 13cm **Res** 32-bit/768kHz



Chord DAVE £7995

Awards 2016 ★★★★★

The uniquely named DAVE costs a lot, but we would argue it's the best DAC money can buy. Build quality is excellent and the sound is very special.

Inputs Coaxial x2, opt x2, XLR **Size** 6 x 34 x 15cm **Res** 32-bit/768kHz



£10,000 and above

Nagra HD DAC/MPS £23,600

September 2018 ★★★★★

An effort that boasts a natural, fluid and informative sound. If you're in the market for the ultimate DAC, this would certainly be a frontrunner.

Inputs Coaxial x2, opt, AES/EBU x2, USB **Res** 24-bit/384kHz



How to digitize your vinyl collection

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Turntables might not be cutting-edge tech, but for their look and feel – not to mention thrillingly articulate analogue sound – you can't beat them. The only thing your record collection lacks is portability, but there is a way to take those LPs with you

What do you need?

The basic building blocks are: a turntable, a phono stage, an analogue-to-digital converter with USB output, and a computer with suitable recording software. There are turntables that come with a phono stage, analogue-to-digital converter and USB output built in. But most are at the budget end and focus on getting the job done rather than doing it particularly well.

Your recordings won't necessarily reflect the quality of sound possible from your records, though Audio Technica's AT-LP5 and Sony PS-HX500 vinyl-ripping decks do their best to buck that trend. If you already have a turntable, the best option is to buy a decent USB phono stage. We like the £90 Rega Fono Mini A2D and Pro-Ject also produce decent affordable alternatives.

Recording software

Channel D's Pure Vinyl offers a great deal of flexibility. It features built-in phono equalisation, so you can feed the turntable's output straight into the computer without needing a phono stage in the signal path.

There are also powerful editing functions that aid optimisation. The downside is a price of around £250 once the trial period is over.

A more affordable alternative is VinylStudio. This includes many of the features of Pure Vinyl, and costs around £20. Another option is Audacity. It's free and does a good enough job. While the interface looks complicated and some of the editing functions take a while to figure out, spend some time with it and it will become familiar enough.

Patience is a virtue

Before you start, make sure your deck is working optimally as that will aid a better recording. Is the cartridge tip free from fluff? Are the tracking force and bias adjusted correctly? Simple checks like these can help. Vinyl can be recorded only in real time. If a song lasts five minutes, that's how long it will take. Make sure the player isn't jostled during the recording, and keep the playback volume low to reduce any degradation of sound caused by feedback from the speakers. Make sure your

records are spotless. Any hisses, clicks and pops will be recorded. You can buy software to edit such sounds but it's time-consuming and processing could spoil the recording.

It's all in the details

Storage is affordable, so we'd be tempted to go down the high-resolution route: 24-bit/96kHz is the norm for many studios and seems a good compromise between quality and memory space. It doesn't really matter whether it's WAV, AIFF or FLAC files as long it's compatible with what you normally use. Records don't have metadata built in such as album art and track information, so that data has to be manually entered. The process is fairly tedious, but it makes it easy to locate tracks. Your computer won't recognise individual tracks, so you'll have to stop recording when you've finished ripping each one and mark tracks that flow into each other.





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AudioQuest DragonFly Cobalt

★★★★★
BEST DAC
£300-£700



Chord Mojo 2

★★★★★
BEST DAC
OVER £700



Chord Qutest

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Astell&Kern SR35

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Up to £500

WiiM Pro Plus £219**Best music streamer under £300, Awards 2023 ★★★★★**

As a first, affordable introduction to the many and various charms of music streaming, the WiiM Pro Plus is hard to lay a glove on at the price.

Outputs RCA line-level, coaxial, opticalAWARD
WINNER**Audiolab 6000N Play £449****Best music streamer under £500, Awards 2020 ★★★★★**

A great, affordable way to implement streaming into your system without compromising sonic quality. The best budget solution we've seen...

Outputs Line-in, coaxial, optical, subwooferPRODUCT
OF THE YEAR**Cambridge Audio MXN10 £449****Best music streamer £300-£750, Awards 2023 ★★★★★**

Cambridge Audio has crashed the entry-level music streamer party. Is the MXN10 the finest affordable music streamer on the market? It could well be.

Outputs Coaxial, optical, RCA line-level

£500 to £1000

Bluesound Node (2021) £549**Best music streamer under £750, Awards 2022 ★★★★★**

For this outlay the Node 2021 represents one of the most entertaining and comprehensive ways of adding music streaming to your hi-fi system.

Outputs RCA, coaxial, optical, subwoofer, 3.5mm**Cambridge Audio CXN100 £899****June 2024 ★★★★★**

Improvements in clarity, precision and spaciousness mean the amply featured and user-friendly CXN100 streamer remains the one to beat at this price.

Inputs Coaxial, optical, USB x2

£1000 to £5000

Arcam ST60 £1199**Best music streamer £1000-£1500, Awards 2022 ★★★★★**

Arcam's first effort in the music streaming field is laudable: the ST60 ticks multiple streaming boxes while prioritising performance.

Inputs Coaxial, optical, USB**NAD C 658 £1499****Best music streamer £1000-£1500, Awards 2020 ★★★★★**

One of the most fully furnished, future-proofed and intuitive streamers we've come across – and one of the most convincing performers at this price.

Inputs Coaxial, optical, USB, phono, RCA**Melco N100 £1999****June 2020 ★★★★★**

An excellent choice if you're looking for a high-quality streamer with storage built-in and already have a capable DAC, or can add one.

Inputs USB 3.0 x2, ethernet **Outputs** USB 3.0AWARD
WINNER**Naim ND5 XS 2 £2299****Best music streamer over £1500, Awards 2023 ★★★★★**

Naim's 'entry-level' network streamer? Fear not; if this is the best your system ever sounds, you'll be doing your ears mighty proud.

Inputs USB, ethernet **Outputs** Line-out, DIN, coaxial, optical

Audiolab 9000N £2499

October 2024 ★★★★★

This is a strong performer that ticks pretty much every box as far as sound quality is concerned. The established class champions need to worry.

Inputs USB **Outputs** Line-out, balanced, coaxial, optical

**Technics SL-G700M2 £2899**

September 2023 ★★★★★

As an all-round proposition, the Technics SL-G700M2 is hard to better at the price. This is a well-conceived and surprisingly capable unit.

Inputs USB, coaxial, optical **Outputs** Line-out, balanced, coaxial, optical

**Cambridge Audio Edge NQ £3500**

March 2019 ★★★★★

A truly fantastic streaming preamplifier that has a clear, bold and spacious presentation across all its many inputs. And it looks good, too.

Inputs Line-in x2, balanced XLR, coaxial, optical x2, HDMI, USB x2, BT

**Linn Selekt DSM £5250**

Reviewed online, 2019 ★★★★★

If you're looking for a top-end one-box electronics solution, this is a good place to start. Its modular approach to high-quality sound is admirable.

Inputs Line-in, MM, MC, coaxial, optical x2, HDMI, USB, AirPlay

**Naim NSC 222 £5700**

August 2023 ★★★★★

Want the performance of separates high-end hi-fi without all the clutter? Naim's NSC 222 streaming preamplifier could be the answer.

Inputs Line-in, MM, coaxial x2, optical x2, USB, AirPlay 2



£1000 to £5000

£5000 and above

RADIOS

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whf.cm/BBDABRadios**Roberts Revival Petite 2 £100**

August 2024 ★★★★★

Packed with features and emitting a clearer, richer, more dynamic sound than you might expect, this delightful little portable is a must-have sonic accessory.

Battery 20hrs (rechargeable) **Size (hwd)** 73 x 124 x 85mm **Finishes** 7



"It's a lively, rhythmically engaging sound that has a surprising amount of weight and punch to it, given the unit's size"

Roberts Stream 94L £199

Best radio under £250, Awards 2023 ★★★★★

The updated Stream 94L radio remains a firm favourite, with its extensive playback options, unfussy nature and hugely enjoyable sound.

Battery Optional **Size (hwd)** 25 x 17 x 13cm **Inputs** 3.5mm, USB, BT, wi-fi



AWARD WINNER

"This radio is such an enjoyable performer. We have it playing throughout the day and never tire of it."

Up to £200

Tivoli Model One Digital Generation 2 £299

Best radio over £200, Awards 2022 ★★★★★

We really enjoy Tivoli's winning little box of tricks. Old-school radio feels and modern AirPlay 2 and Chromecast; it scores consistently high marks.

Battery No **Size (hwd)** 11.5 x 22.2 x 14cm **Inputs** Aux in, BT, Apple AirPlay



"The sound is more than enough for the neighbours to know about it, but it is still sonically regimented"

£200 and above

Ruark M2 Mk4 £479

Best radio over £250, Awards 2023 ★★★★★

If you're after a high-quality music system that looks great, is lovely to use and sounds wonderful, the Ruark R2 Mk4 should be at the top of your wishlist.

Battery No **Size (hwd)** 18.5 x 34 x 15cm **Inputs** 3.5mm aux, USB-C, BT

PRODUCT OF THE YEAR

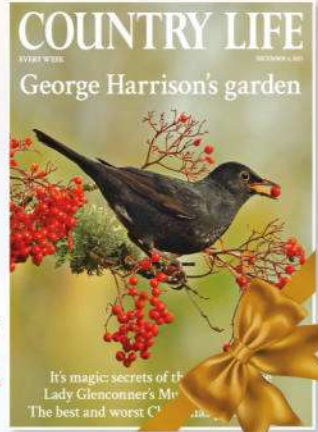


"Underneath that genial, likeable manner is an impressive amount of sonic prowess for a product of this type"

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STEREO SPEAKERS

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whf.cm/BBHifiSpeakers**Dali Spektor 2 £199****Best standmount speaker under £200, Awards 2020 ★★★★★**

The 2s combine Dali's traditional strengths with a generous dose of entertainment that even Mission and Q Acoustics struggle to match.

Size (hwd) 17 x 28 x 28cm **Bi-wire** No **Finishes** 2

"The way these speakers handle dynamics is impressive"

Standmounts
up to £200**Elac Debut B5.2 £250****Best standmount speaker under £300, Awards 2023 ★★★★★**

ELAC's latest budget standmounter is talented enough to worry the established competition.

Size (hwd) 34 x 18 x 23cm **Bi-wire** No **Finishes** 1

"These new Debuts should be considered one of the company's finest efforts"

Standmounters from £200 to £500

Dali Oberon 1 £349**February 2019 ★★★★★**

About the size of a shoe, these articulate and bold-sounding speakers have a wonderfully unfussy nature and are a joy to listen to.

Size (hwd) 27 x 16 x 23cm **Bi-wire** No **Finishes** 4

"Tonally, these are nicely judged and have a smooth treble that still has plenty of bite"

Bowers & Wilkins 607 S3 £599**Best standmount speaker £300-£600, Awards 2023 ★★★★★**

B&W has gone back to its roots with these stunning speakers, which, for their size and price range, really are a talented pair.

Size (hwd) 30 x 16.5 x 21cm **Bi-wire** Yes **Finishes** 3

"That's a sizeable amount of work done throughout, then. But how do the new 607 S3 sound? Incredibly fun."

B&W 606 S3 £749**Best standmount speaker £600-£800, Awards 2023 ★★★★★**

If you can afford a step up above the 607 S3, want a larger-scale sound and need more oomph to your bass, the B&W 606 S3 will be more to your liking.

Size (hwd) 35 x 19 x 30cm **Bi-wire** Yes **Finishes** 3

"With the bigger mid/bass driver and deeper cabinet comes added weight, punch and authority"

Revel Concerta2 M16 £999**Best standmount speaker £750-£1000, Awards 2019 ★★★★★**

One of the best speakers we've ever heard below the £1000 mark.

Make sure to partner carefully to get the best out of them.

Size (hwd) 37 x 22 x 27cm **Bi-wire** No **Finishes** 2

"They pound out crescendos with relish, refusing to harden or compress, even at high volume"

KEF LS50 Meta £1000**Best standmount speaker £800-£1000, Awards 2023 ★★★★★**

KEF has taken a terrific speaker and made it even better with its innovative Metamaterial tech. The LS50 Metas are now the class leader at this level.

Size (hwd) 31 x 20 x 28cm **Bi-wire** No **Finishes** 4

"We're soon marvelling at the Metas' delicacy and precision. They sound so much more transparent than before"

Wharfedale Linton £1000**May 2020 ★★★★★**

You could listen to these speakers for days and still not get tired. Effortless weight, spot-on stereo imaging and layer upon layer of marvellous detail.

Size (hwd) 30 x 19 x 25cm **Bi-wire** No **Finishes** 3 **Active** Yes

"The moment we start listening, we get a brilliant sense of scale and space from the Lintons"

PMC Prodigy 1 £1250**Best standmount speaker £1000-£1500, Awards 2023 ★★★★★**

Hugely versatile and unfussy speakers – but it's their hugely enjoyable performance that first and foremost seals their five-star fate.

Size (hwd) 32 x 16.2 x 23.7cm **Bi-wire** No **Finishes** 1

"The focus and cost have been put into the engineering; hard to argue with when you hear just how spectacular the Prodigy 1 sound"

From £1000 to
£2000

Spendor Classic 4/5 £1600

June 2021 ★★★★★

These Spendors are refined, insightful and wonderfully balanced – the ideal premium speakers for a small room.

Size (hwd) 31 x 19 x 16.5cm **Bi-wire** No **Finishes** 2



"These speakers are impressively unfussy about placement... in each case, they make the best of the situation"

JBL 4309 £1899

February 2022 ★★★★★

The JBL 4309 may not be the most sophisticated listen, but there's little at the price that delivers sound with such energy.

Size (hwd) 42 x 26 x 23cm **Bi-wire** Yes **Finishes** 2



"With appropriate music, they offer an intense emotional hit that most rivals just don't get close to"

KEF R3 Meta £1900

Best standmount speaker £1500-£2500, Awards 2023 ★★★★★

KEF knocks it out the park again: the R3 Metas are wonderfully transparent, refined speakers that are hugely entertaining performers, too.

Size (hwd) 42 x 20 x 34cm **Bi-wire** Yes **Finishes** 4



"We are proven right in our expectations: you can instantly hear the impact the inclusion of MAT technology has in these speakers"

Monitor Audio Studio 89 £2000

September 2024 ★★★★★

The Monitor Audio Studio 89 are talented and engaging performers that excel in clarity, precision and resolution.

Size (hwd) 34 x 16 x 36cm **Bi-wire** No **Finishes** 1 (gloss black)



"The Monitors' presentation is impeccably clean and precise without sounding overly analytical"

ATC SCM19 £2150

Awards 2016 ★★★★★

It's quite a trick for a speaker to be highly analytical with music, yet never sound clinical or passionless. But that's the case with the SCM19s.

Size (hwd) 44 x 27 x 30cm **Bi-wire** No **Finishes** 2



"We like the SCM19s' ability to render a large soundstage and populate it with well focused instruments"

Dali Rubikore 2 £2299

December 2024 ★★★★★

The Rubikore 2 confidently walk the fine line between indulging in a likeable personality and being careful not to imprint much on the signal.

Size (hwd) 35 x 20 x 34cm **Bi-wire** Yes **Finishes** 4



"The bass, in similar fashion to the treble, is lucid, defined and agile. And that midrange between them? That's the star of the show, actually"

ProAc Response D2R £3295

Best standmount speaker over £1500, Awards 2021 ★★★★★

Wonderfully transparent, yet never overly analytical, these ProAcs excel at giving the music the limelight. We can't ask for any more than that.

Size (hwd) 43 x 21 x 26cm **Bi-wire** Yes **Finishes** 6



"The Response D2Rs are wonderfully expressive speakers, even at low volumes"

Mission 770 £3299

Best standmount speaker over £2500, Awards 2023 ★★★★★

The link to the past will be the main attraction for some, but for us that is put in the shade by the speakers' excellent all-round performance.

Size (hwd) 59 x 30 x 30cm **Bi-wire** No **Finishes** 1



"We can't recall a similarly priced standmounter that has as much finesse when it comes to delivering bass"

Fyne Audio F701 £3999

January 2021 ★★★★★

Among the most musically engaging choices we have heard. If you have this much to spend, make sure you hear these before buying anything else.

Size (hwd) 46.5 x 28 x 39cm **Bi-wire** Yes **Finishes** 3



"They sound big, bold and enthusiastic in a way that eludes much of the high-end competition"

KEF Reference 1 £4999

July 2018 ★★★★★

These are superb all-rounders that work well across a wide range of music, systems and rooms. The dedicated stands are pricey though.

Size (hwd) 44 x 21 x 43cm **Bi-wire** Yes **Finishes** 3



"Rather than excel in a few specific areas, they perform well across the board"

Ruark Audio MR1 Mk2 £329**Best desktop speaker, Awards 2023 ★★★★★**

Gorgeous retro design and superb sound make the Mk2s an update that manages to be even more appealing than its predecessor.

Size (hwd) 17 x 13 x 14cm **Powered** Yes **Finishes** 1**AWARD WINNER**

"Quite simply, these are superb speakers of their type"

Desktop speakers

Q Acoustics M20 £379**July 2022 ★★★★★**

An unfussy, just add source set of powered speakers. For this money, you will be hard pushed to better the sound quality with hi-fi separates.

Size (hwd) 28 x 17 x 30cm **Powered** Yes **Finishes** 3**AWARD WINNER**

"The M20 is far more likely to become your entire music system than it is simply your new desktop speakers"

Wharfedale Diamond 12.3 £499**Best floorstander under £500, Awards 2023 ★★★★★**

Terrifically accomplished for the money. Don't buy another pair of floorstanders at this level without trying these first.

Size (hwd) 98 x 18 x 32cm **Bi-wire** Yes **Finishes** 4

"They deliver a lovely layered sound that's brimming with detail and dynamic nuance"

Floorstanders up to £600

Elac Debut 2.0 F5.2 £599**September 2019 ★★★★★**

A mature, honest presentation, neither sucking the life out of a piece, nor exaggerating it. Elac is one of the few companies to do this with such aplomb.

Size (hwd) 100 x 18 x 23cm **Bi-wire** No **Finishes** 1

"These Elacs can go low, but there is a bass clarity beyond the grasp of most floorstanders at this price"

Dali Oberon 5 £699**Best floorstander £500-£1000, Awards 2020 ★★★★★**

A great option for floorstanders under £1000, these Dalis are fun-sounding speakers, with a great dose of transparency that's impressive for the price.

Size (hwd) 83 x 16 x 28cm **Bi-wire** No **Finishes** 4

"The Dali's sound simply flows in an organic and convincing manner"

Q Acoustics 5040 £999**Best floorstander £500-£1500, Awards 2023 ★★★★★**

The Q Acoustics 5040 are even-handed performers that simply step out of the way of the music and let it shine.

Size (hwd) 97 x 18 x 28cm **Bi-wire** No **Finishes** 3**PRODUCT OF THE YEAR**

"These towers sound fast and fun. There is plenty of attack, but enough solidity and refinement to avoid accusations of aggression"

£600 to £1000

Triangle Borea BR08 £999**Best floorstander £500-£1000, Awards 2022 ★★★★★**

These Triangles are exceptional – certainly good enough to challenge the best at this price. Play all genres of music and do it with an addictive charm.

Size (hwd) 102 x 21 x 32cm **Bi-wire** No **Finishes** 4

"They punch hard, combining high levels of detail with the ability to produce a cohesive and musical whole"

Wharfedale Evo 4.4 £1199**Best floorstanding speaker £1000-£1500, Awards 2022 ★★★★★**

The Evo 4.4s are entertaining and detailed, with enough in the way of refinement to make them an excellent long-term choice.

Size (hwd) 106 x 25 x 35cm **Bi-wire** Yes **Finishes** 3

"Tying everything together is a fine sense of timing that results in surefooted rhythms"

Q Acoustics 5050 £1299**July 2024 ★★★★★**

These floorstanders do everything their junior siblings, the 5040, can do but add an extra dose of authority and a slightly calmer manner.

Size (hwd) 102 x 39 x 34cm **Bi-wire** No **Finishes** 4

"Get the positioning right and you will get some of the most controlled, articulate bass we have heard at this level"

Floorstanders £1000 to £2000

B&W 603 £1249**June 2019 ★★★★★**

The B&W 603s are floorstanding speakers that are up there with the best at this price. You should give them a whirl...

Size (hwd) 98.5 x 19 x 34cm **Bi-wire** Yes **Finishes** 2

"They are blessed with a wow factor that other speakers at this price can only dream of, especially with voices"

Floorstanders £1000 to £2000

Revel Concerta2 F35 £1899

May 2019 ★★★★★

There aren't many speakers at this price that make listening to music as enjoyable as the Revel Concerta2 F35s.

Size (hwd) 102 x 21 x 31cm **Bi-wire** No **Finishes** 2



"It's impressive how effortless the Revels sound. They dispatch any genre you throw their way with minimal fuss"

PMC Prodigy 5 £1995

Best floorstander £1500-£2500, Awards 2023 ★★★★★

The Prodigy 5 deftly balance natural vocals, refined bass and a snappy sense of rhythm to deliver a supremely cohesive listening experience.

Size (hwd) 90.5 x 16.5 x 23.7cm **Bi-wire** No **Finishes** 1



"A genuinely fun listen; the sort of speakers you want to keep probing to see how they convey your favourite tracks"

ProAc Response DT8 £1999

Best floorstander £1500-£3000, Awards 2022 ★★★★★

The DT8s deliver such an entertaining sound, we can't help but recommend them. Take a bit of care with system-matching and they will impress.

Size (hwd) 98 x 20 x 23cm **Bi-wire** Yes **Finishes** 5 (plus 2 specials)



"The DT8s paint on an expansive sonic canvas, and locate instruments with precision and stability"

Sonus faber Lumina V £2499

March 2023 ★★★★★

The Sonus Faber Lumina V offer an enticing and easy-going approach to music replay that makes them a serious alternative to the usual choices.

Size (hwd) 105 x 28 x 37cm **Bi-wire** Yes **Finishes** 3



"Their midrange is a true highlight. It is as articulate and expressive as we have heard at this level"

£2000 to £5000

Fyne Audio F501SP £2799

January 2021 ★★★★★

The difference in price between the standard F501 and the SP version is massive, but then so is the jump in performance.

Size (hwd) 98 x 29 x 32cm **Bi-wire** Yes **Finishes** 3



"If you're looking for excitement and energy, we can't think of an alternative that betters these at the price"

Spendor A7 £3200

Best floorstanders over £2500, Awards 2023 ★★★★★

The A7s continue Spendor's knack for combining precision, clarity and subtlety with hugely enjoyable dynamics and rhythm.

Size (hwd) 94 x 18 x 31cm **Bi-wire** No **Finishes** 4



"The sound is terrifically clean and organised. The A7s also pack in bags of punch to keep things sounding lively"

£5000 and above

Martin Logan ElectroMotion ESL X £5495

June 2023 ★★★★★

They deliver a terrifically precise and spacious stereo soundstage. Voices and instruments are layered with care. They deserve a high place on any shortlist.

Size (hwd) 150 x 24 x 53cm **Bi-wire** Yes **Finishes** 1



"It's a fast, emotive presentation, one that gets straight to the core of the music"

Positioning your speakers

Read more at... www.whathifi.com/features



It's no good spending hundreds of pounds on your new speakers if you then don't allow them to perform properly. Take care with positioning to get them to sing.

Wall or in the open?

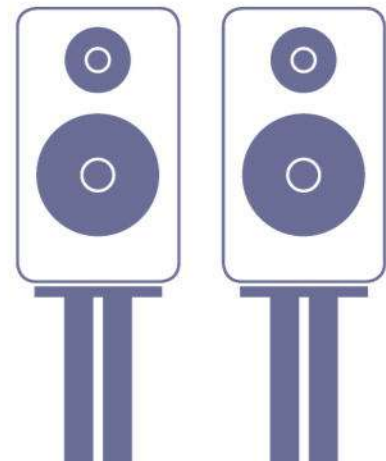
Where's the best place to position a speaker? Some speakers might sound better against a wall, while others prefer to be out in the open. Whatever your specific requirements, your speaker choice should primarily take into account how much space you have to house them.

Use a stand

Speaker stands keep the speaker cabinet rigid. This allows for more of the drivers' movement to be translated into sound and not wasted through vibrations. If your stands are on a carpet, make sure you have spikes to ensure stability.

Tweeter height

The higher-frequency sounds from a tweeter are more directional, and having them at ear level ensures optimum performance. So try to choose stands that will have your speaker at the right height for your seating position.



Audiovector SR3 Avantgarde £6320

January 2019 ★★★★★

These floorstanders match their impressive price with impressive sound. They demonstrate a good deal of organisation, stunning clarity and real punch.

Size (hwd) 103 x 19 x 33cm **Bi-wire** Tri-wire **Finishes** 8



"Importantly, they are subtle, conveying nuances with skill"

£5000 and above

ATC SCM40A £6800

April 2014 ★★★★★

The price looks steep but factor in built-in amplification and exceptional sound, and the SCM40As emerge as something of a high-end bargain.

Size (hwd) 98 x 37 x 34cm **Bi-wire** No **Finishes** 2 **Active** Yes



"Once up and running, these ATCs are deeply impressive speakers"

SYSTEMS

CONVENIENCE DOESN'T HAVE TO MEAN LOWER QUALITY

View offers
whf.cm/BBHifiSystems

Denon D-M41DAB £329

Best hi-fi system under £500, Awards 2023 ★★★★★

Denon hasn't rested on its laurels. It's managed to better the M40, delivering improved sound and functionality. The best just got better.

Inputs CD, line-in, optical x2, BT, DAB/FM **Outputs** Subwoofer



Up to £500

Elac Debut ConneX DCB41 £499

Best powered speakers, Awards 2023 ★★★★★

We are big fans of systems such as this. They are neat, well-featured and the best of the breed represent excellent value. This is one of them.

Inputs USB, line-in/phono, opt, Bluetooth, HDMI (ARC) **Outputs** Subwoofer

**Triangle AIO Twin £699**

Best speaker system under £750, Awards 2023 ★★★★★

If you're looking for a fun music system that also sounds hugely capable in hi-fi terms, at a decent price, this system is worth your attention.

Inputs Line-in/phono, opt, Bluetooth, USB, ethernet **Outputs** Subwoofer

**KEF LSX II LT £899**

April 2024 ★★★★★

The LSX II LT is a fantastic alternative to the pricier LSX II. By taking a great system and streamlining it without compromising sound, KEF has nailed it.

Inputs HDMI ARC, USB-C, optical, ethernet **Outputs** Subwoofer

**Technics SA-C600 £899**

Best hi-fi system £500-£1500, Awards 2023 ★★★★★

A really well-conceived product that fully deserves the *What Hi-Fi?* Awards wins that have followed. Highly recommended.

Inputs RCA line-in, phono, USB, opt., coaxial **Outputs** Sub, 3.5mm h'phone



£500 to £1500

KEF LSX II £1199

Best speaker system £750-£1500, Awards 2023 ★★★★★

A stylish streaming system that comes with none of the baggage and boxes a separates set-up brings. Nothing else really comes close at this level.

Inputs HDMI ARC, USB-C, optical, ethernet **Outputs** Subwoofer

**Rega System One £999**

May 2022 ★★★★★

The System One gets the basics of music reproduction spot-on, delivering musical cohesion and dynamic expression that eludes most alternatives.

Inputs Line-in x2, MM phono **Outputs** 3.5mm headphone



£1500 to £2500

Ruark Audio R410 £1299

January 2024 ★★★★★

A flexible, function-rich and great-sounding hi-fi system that somehow manages to be a good-looking piece of furniture at the same time.

Inputs Line-in, optical, USB-C, MM phono, HDMI (eArc)



Naim Uniti Atom £1999

Best hi-fi system over £1500, Awards 2023 ★★★★★

Rarely does a product look and sound this good. A triumph of design, the Atom boasts class-leading levels of insight and clarity.

Inputs Line-in, coaxial, opt x2, USB, BT, wi-fi **Outputs** Line-out, headphone



KEF LS50 Wireless II £2449

Best speaker system £1500-£3000, Awards 2023 ★★★★★

The LS50 Wireless IIs arrived with a world of expectation on their shoulders – and they well and truly met them. This is a sequel of rare quality.

Inputs Line-in, optical, 3.5mm, HDMI (eARC), BT, wi-fi **Outputs** Subwoofer



£2500 and above

JBL 4329P Studio Monitor £3499

Best speaker system over £3000, Awards 2023 ★★★★★

So versatile in so many ways, while managing to sound so mature, these JBL's are a milestone in all-in-one speaker systems of this kind.

Inputs XLR, 3.5mm, opt., USB **Outputs** Subwoofer



KEF LS60 Wireless £5999

August 2022 ★★★★★

Everything a modern all-in-one hi-fi system should be, combining eye-catching looks, a suite of useful features and outstanding sound quality.

Inputs HDMI eARC, optical, coaxial, RCA, ethernet **Outputs** Subwoofer x2



Multi-room

Audio Pro System from £650

Best multi-room system under £1000, Awards 2018 ★★★★★

Audio Pro's multi-room system is not the most advanced, but no other system makes more sound-per-pound sense than this one.

Res 16-bit/44.1kHz **App** iOS, Android **Formats** MP3, FLAC, WMA



Sonos System from £1047

Best multi-room system, Awards 2023 ★★★★★

If you don't need hi-res, Sonos is an obvious choice for multi-room. A great user experience alongside a full-bodied, insightful sound.

Res 16-bit/44.1kHz **App** iOS, Android **Formats** MP3, FLAC, WMA



TURNTABLES

DECKS TO KEEP THE VINYL REVIVAL THRIVING

View offers whf.cm/BBTurntables

£150 to £300

Pro-Ject Primary E £159

Best turntable under £200, Awards 2023 ★★★★★

Pro-Ject has revised a budget deck to nail the under £150 market – and has succeeded on every front.

Speed 33⅓, 45rpm **Size (hwd)** 11 x 42 x 33cm



Audio Technica AT-LP3 £199

Best turntable under £200, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

A fully automatic turntable that doesn't scrimp on performance, this is the ideal entry-level deck for those looking to dip their 'vinyl toes' in.

Speed 33⅓, 45rpm **Size (hwd)** 13 x 44 x 35cm



Rega Planar 1 £275

Best turntable £200-£500, Awards 2023 ★★★★★

This revamped entry-level deck from Rega doesn't sound anything like an entry-level deck. Pleasingly solid, accurate and agile – it's a lovely listen.

Speed 33½, 45rpm Size (hwd) 12 x 45 x 36cm



Sony PS-HX500 £249

Best USB turntable, Awards 2018 ★★★★★

A turntable with the ability to rip vinyl into hi-res files, but it's also an entertaining deck with a big, open sound.

Speed 33½, 45rpm Size (hwd) 11 x 43 x 36cm



Pro-Ject Essential III £259

October 2017 ★★★★★

Another excellent turntable from Pro-Ject. The Essential III is easy to set up and offers a detailed and musical performance.

Speed 33½, 45rpm Size (hwd) 11 x 42 x 33cm



Audio Technica AT-LP5 £299

Awards 2016 ★★★★★

A pleasure to use and listen to, the LP5 boasts both ease of use and the added bonus of a USB output. At this price there's none better.

Speed 33½, 45rpm Size (hwd) 16 x 45 x 35cm



Rega Planar 1 Plus £329

July 2018 ★★★★★

All the sonic talents of the Planar 1 with an equally talented phono stage built in. The Plus is a winning combination of convenience and excellent quality.

Speed 33½, 45rpm Size (hwd) 12 x 45 x 36cm



Dual CS418 turntable £499

July 2022 ★★★★★

A strong performer and a proper alternative to the established class leaders, the CS 418 delivers a performance that puts it in the front runners at the price.

Speed 33½, 45, 78rpm Size (hwd) 14.5 x 43.5 x 37cm



Pro-Ject Debut Pro £699

Best turntable £500-£750, Awards 2023 ★★★★★

The Pro is the most ambitious and capable Pro-Ject Debut model yet. It's right up there with the very best in the class.

Speed 33½ & 45rpm (78rpm with an adaptor) Size (hwd) 11 x 42 x 32cm



Rega Planar 3/Nd3 £799

December 2024 ★★★★★

A well-built and engineered turntable that performs to an enviably high standard for the money. Setting it up is a breeze and using it is a pleasure.

Speed 33½ & 45rpm Size (hwd) 12 x 45 x 36cm



Technics SL-1500C £899

Best turntable £750-£1500, Awards 2023 ★★★★★

With a really good built-in phono stage and an auto-lift function, this Technics is a beautifully made, fuss-free record player that sounds great.

Speed 33½, 45, 78rpm Size (hwd) 23 x 16 x 12cm



Clearaudio Concept £1195

Best turntable £800-£1200+, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

A thoroughly sorted, easy-to-own package with tremendous sound, combining punch, extension and tonal variation in equal measure.

Speed 33½, 45, 78rpm Size (hwd) 14 x 42 x 35cm



£150 to £300

£300 to £500

£500 to £1000

£1000 to £2000

£1000 to £2000

EAT B-Sharp Super Pack £1368

July 2018 ★★★★★

EAT's entry-level deck is a fine one that can count among its talents a sense of control, sure composure and a well judged sonic balance.
Speed 33⅓, 45, 78rpm **Size (hwd)** 14 x 46 x 35cm



Rega Planar 6/Ania £1469

Best turntable £1500-£2000, Awards 2023 ★★★★★

A refined, articulate and precise turntable that's lovely to listen to. It requires good system-matching to get the best out of it though.
Speed 33⅓, 45rpm **Size (hwd)** 12 x 45 x 37cm



Rega Planar 8/Apheta 2 £2439

Best turntable over £1000, Awards 2019 ★★★★★

Clever engineering and sky-high standards make this Rega's most ambitious and boundary-pushing turntable yet. It's gorgeous in sound and design.
Speed 33⅓, 45rpm **Size (hwd)** 13 x 42 x 32cm



Vertere DG-1 S/Magneto £3550

Best turntable over £2000, Awards 2023 ★★★★★

The Vertere DG-1 is up against some mighty competition, but given what we've heard it can go into any such comparisons with confidence.
Speed 33⅓, 45rpm **Size (hwd)** 13 x 38 x 37cm



£2000 to £10,000

VPI Prime £4200

Awards 2015 ★★★★★

A confident-sounding package that can organise with the best and maintain composure even when faced with the most challenging music.
Speed 33⅓, 45rpm **Size (hwd)** 18 x 54 x 40cm



VPI Prime Signature £6000

February 2018 ★★★★★

This upgraded version of the standard Prime builds on that model's strengths, with more insight, stronger dynamics and a lovely stability.
Speed 33⅓, 45rpm **Size (hwd)** 18 x 54 x 40cm



Vertere Acoustics MG-1 MkII/Mystic £9300

Online ★★★★★

Renders sound with a combination of precision, agility and dynamic dexterity that we haven't heard bettered by any rival near this price.
Speed 33⅓, 45rpm **Size (hwd)** 18 x 54 x 40cm



£10,000 and above

Clearaudio Innovation Wood/DaVinci V2 £15,900

2010 ★★★★★

This gorgeous, mind-blowingly expensive turntable is so good, we've been using it as our reference deck for years now. Extravagant, but it's worth it.
Speed 33⅓, 45, 78rpm **Size (hwd)** 14 x 47 x 39cm



Linn Klimax LP12 £18,670

July 2017 ★★★★★

A mightily expensive deck that has the unmistakable feel of real quality. It's startlingly better than previous LP12 turntables.
Speed 33⅓, 45, 78rpm **Size (hwd)** 14 x 45 x 36cm



SME Model 20 Mk2/Series V £25,950

November 2024 ★★★★★

Beautifully made and a pleasure to use, it sounds at home with all genres of music. The performance of the Model 20 Mk2 is as insightful as they come.
Speed 33⅓, 45rpm **Size (hwd)** 17.5 x 44 x 35cm



WIRELESS SPEAKERS

FREE YOUR MUSIC WITH ONE OF THESE STREAMING WONDERS

View offers
whf.cm/BBWirelessSpeakers**Tribit Stormbox Micro 2 £60**

April 2023 ★★★★★

It's quite astonishing just how much you get out of this little speaker; an enthusiastic and capable performer at this ultra-budget price.

Size (hwd) 10 x 10 x 4.3cm **Battery** 12 hours

"There's energy in spades... voices in particular shine through the Micro 2: they are clear and detailed"

Apple HomePod Mini £99

Best home wireless speaker under £100, Awards 2023 ★★★★★

It's much smaller and more affordable than expected, but the most surprising thing about the HomePod Mini is its superb sound.

Size (hw) 4 x 14cm **Battery** No

"It's clear that the HomePod Mini comfortably outperforms its size and price"

JBL Flip 6 £130

May 2022 ★★★★★

Another resoundingly five-star product, with sonic upgrades in terms of clarity and breadth across the frequencies over its Award-winning forebear.

Size (hwd) 17.8 x 6.8 x 7.2cm **Battery** 12 hours

"For a nominal price hike over the launch price of the Flip 5, there's certainly more detail here, too"

Sonos One SL £149

March 2020 ★★★★★

A Sonos One without the smarts, the SL (unlike the Play:1) will pair with a One to make a stereo pair – but it sounds great as a standalone as well.

Size (hwd) 16 x 12 x 12cm **Battery** No

"The sonic performance, streaming options and app support are among the best we've tested at this level"

JBL Charge 5 £160

Best portable wireless speaker under £200, Awards 2023 ★★★★★

The Charge 5 is as good a sound as you can get in a portable speaker for under £200. It improves sonically and aesthetically over its predecessor.

Size (hwd) 9.6 x 22 x 9.4cm **Battery** 20 hours

"When it comes to rugged, portable, no-nonsense Bluetooth speakers, some product lines have consistently impressed us"

Ultimate Ears Megaboom 3 £170

Reviewed online, 2018 ★★★★★

The rugged, weather-proof Megaboom 3's sleek design and improved sound are worth your time, especially at under £200.

Size (hwd) 23 x 9 x 9cm **Battery** 20 hours

"An enthusiastic sound that favours excitement while still keeping an eye on balance"

Audio Pro Addon C3 £180

Best home wireless speaker £100-£250, Awards 2022 ★★★★★

A smaller version of the talented and similarly-featured C5, this petite Audio Pro sets itself apart by being battery-powered and portable.

Size (hwd) 12 x 22 x 14cm **Battery** 15 hours

"By multi-room speaker standards, this is a remarkably refined performance"

JBL Xtreme 4 £330

October 2024 ★★★★★

It hasn't rewritten the rule book for Bluetooth speakers, nor has it rested on its laurels. It's just a superb all-round performer that's difficult to fault.

Size (hwd) 15 x 30 x 14cm **Battery** 24 hours

"For such a chunky speaker it produces a fantastically refined sound."

Dali Katch G2 £349

Best portable wireless speaker over £200, Awards 2023 ★★★★★

Dali Katch G2 is simply the classiest and best-sounding speaker of its kind you can buy for the money. Sonically, it is nothing short of a delight.

Size (hwd) 14 x 27 x 5cm **Battery** 30 hours

"As we increase the volume, we find the Katch G2's room-filling sound neither loses clarity nor errs toward harshness"

Up to £100

£100 to £250

£250 and above

£250 and above

Audio Pro C20 £450

June 2024 ★★★★★

The performance up for grabs here is so authoritative, and so detailed, it offers a taste of hi-fi in wireless speaker form.

Size (hwd) 20 x 41 x 22cm **Battery** No



"While its wide, open soundstage fills our test room with ease, this isn't a speaker that is all about showing its muscle above all else"

Naim Mu-so Qb 2nd Generation £749

Best home wireless speaker over £500, Awards 2023 ★★★★★

The greatest value here is not found in the features or design, but in a sonic performance that will effortlessly dispense of any one-box rival near this price.

Size (hd) 17 x 14cm **Battery** No **Voice assistant** Siri



"The overall presentation is muscular but lean; there's plenty of bass weight, but balance is never skewed"

Naim Mu-So 2 £1299

September 2019 ★★★★★

We're surprised just how much sonic progression the Naim Mu-so 2 brings over the original – Naim says that 95 per cent of the Mu-so 2 is new.

Size (hwd) 12 x 63 x 26cm **Battery** No



"Musicality is still at the heart of the Mu-so 2's performance as a soundbar"

Sonus Faber Omnia £1599

May 2022 ★★★★★

If you value openness and clarity, the Omnia is one of the finest of its kind you could hand over music duties to. And one of the best looking too, to our eyes.

Size (hwd) 13 x 65 x 28cm **Battery** No



"Close your eyes and you don't need to stretch your imagination to believe the sound is coming out of a pair of standmounters"

Linn Series 3 £2950

April 2020 ★★★★★

The most expensive wireless speaker we've ever tested also happens to be the best. It's hardly a bargain, but we are left convinced of its appeal.

Size (hwd) 30 x 25 x 21cm **Battery** No



"The Series 3 may not look like it, but make no mistake, this is proper hi-fi"

Amazon Echo Plus (2018) £140

January 2019 ★★★★★

The 2nd-gen Plus is Amazon's flagship smart speaker, and it finally has the sonic talents to match its smarts – especially at this price.

Size (hwd) 15 x 10 x 10cm **Battery** No **Voice assistant** Alexa



"Its sonic performance makes it worthy in isolation"

Amazon Echo Dot (5th Generation) £55

August 2023 ★★★★★

The 5th Generation of Amazon's affordable smart speaker may be small and sweet, but it's more than capable of punching above its weight.

Size (hwd) 10 x 10 x 9cm **Battery** No **Voice assistant** Alexa



"The sonic experience is remarkable when you also consider the Dot's remarkably slim price tag and unobtrusive design."

Sonos One £199

Awards 2017 ★★★★★

Essentially a Play:1 with Alexa. The odd software niggle at launch, but one of the best wireless speakers around just got smarter.

Size (hwd) 16 x 12 x 12cm **Battery** No **Voice assistant** Alexa



"The soundstage is spacious and impressively organised, with vocals given plenty of breathing room"

Apple HomePod 2 £299

Best home wireless speaker £100-£300, Awards 2023 ★★★★★

Smarter, more flexible and better sounding than before; for avid Apple users, the HomePod 2 is arguably the best speaker of the type you can buy.

Size (hd) 17 x 14cm **Battery** No **Voice assistant** Siri



"Of course, it's the sound we're most interested in, and the new HomePod delights in this regard from the off"

Sonos Era 300 £449

Best home wireless speaker £300-£500, Awards 2023 ★★★★★

With its huge scale of engaging sound, wide range of features and seamless Sonos experience, the Era 300 is an impressive speaker that can do it all.

Size (hwd) 16 x 26 x 18.5cm **Battery** No **Voice assistant** Sonos, Alexa



"The first impression we get with the Era 300 is of scale. The spread of sound is immense"

Smart speakers



HOME CINEMA

BLU-RAY PLAYERS

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Panasonic DP-UB150EB £129

March 2020 ★★★★★

A highly competent machine at an impressively low price, this 4K Blu-ray player represents a big step up from streaming your UHD content.

Compatibility 4K Blu-ray, Blu-ray, DVD, CD **HDMI out 1**



Sony UBP-X700 £199

Best 4K Blu-ray player under £250, Awards 2021 ★★★★★

This 4K player delivers a stunningly natural picture for an affordable price. It'll be tough to knock this Sony off its perch.

Compatibility 4K Blu-ray, Blu-ray, DVD, SACD, CD **HDMI out 2**



Panasonic DP-UB820EB £299

Best 4K Blu-ray player, Awards 2023 ★★★★★

Delivers on multiple fronts, supporting all major HDR formats, delivering a hugely immersive and impactful picture, and all backed up by strong audio.

Compatibility 4K Blu-ray, Blu-ray, DVD, CD **HDMI out 2**

PRODUCT OF THE YEAR



Up to £500

HOME CINEMA AMPLIFIERS

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Sony TA-AN1000 £999

Best home cinema amplifier under £1500, Awards 2023 ★★★★★

Sony has delivered an AV amp that has reignited the same excitement that we felt with its last model, here with additional dynamics, scale and accuracy.

Power 7 x 85W **Dolby Atmos** Yes **HDMI in/out** 6/2

PRODUCT OF THE YEAR



Denon AVC-X3800H £1499

Best home cinema amplifier over £2000, Awards 2022 ★★★★★

Despite being more expensive than its predecessor, the AVC-X3800H's updated feature spec and new and improved sound make it an excellent buy.

Power 9 x 105W **Dolby Atmos** Yes **HDMI in/out** 6/3



Arcam AVR 5 £2000

September 2022 ★★★★★

While it lacks some of the functionality and usability of the competition, the AVR5 delivers an impeccable sonic performance.

Power 7 x 60W **Dolby Atmos** Yes **HDMI in/out** 7/2



Yamaha RX-A6A £2299

October 2022 ★★★★★

With its exhaustive feature set, this is the 'choose-your-own adventure' of AVRs, with a completist approach to almost every aspect of its configuration.

Power 9 x 150W **Dolby Atmos** Yes **HDMI in/out** 7/3



£500 to £2000

Denon AVC-X6800H £2799

July 2024 ★★★★★

Denon delivers on its trademark sound characteristics with a clearer and punchier model, topped off with an improved user experience.

Power 11 x 140W **Dolby Atmos** Yes **HDMI in/out** 7/3**Marantz Cinema 30 AV receiver £4000**

September 2024 ★★★★★

Delivers the refinement you would expect with all the crispness and punch you could desire, and the latest tech specs, too. A rare all-rounder of an AVR.

Power 11 x 140W **Dolby Atmos** Yes **HDMI in/out** 7/3**Arcam AVR31 £4799**

Best home cinema amplifier over £1500, Awards 2023 ★★★★★

If future-proofed features are as important as having the very best sound quality, the AVR31 is an ideal choice to make your home cinema sing.

Power 7 x 100W **Dolby Atmos** Yes **HDMI in/out** 7/3**PROJECTORS**

BECAUSE A MASSIVE PICTURE IS HOME CINEMA

View offers
whf.cm/BBProjectors**BenQ W1800 £1099**

Best projector under £1250, Awards 2023 ★★★★★

BenQ's decision to focus with the W1800 on what we guess could be considered good old-fashioned home cinema values pays off handsomely.

Throw ratio 1.13-1.46:1 **Inputs** HDMI x2, USB 2.0 **Speakers** Yes**Epson EH-TW7100 £1599**

Best projector £1250-£2000, Awards 2023 ★★★★★

The Epson EH-TW7100 stretches the limit of what can be considered a budget big screen device, but it more than justifies its price.

Throw ratio 1.32-2.15:1 **Inputs** HDMI x2, USB 2.0 x2 **Speakers** Yes**Hisense PL £1999**

Best ultra-short-throw projector, Awards 2023 ★★★★★

With its clean, punchy and solid image, the Hisense PL1 is a gem at this price. It's a TV alternative that actually lives up to its promise.

Throw ratio 0.25:1 **Inputs** HDMI x2, USB 2.0 x2 **Speakers** Yes**Epson EH-TW9400 £2899**

Best projector £2000-£4000, Awards 2023 ★★★★★

The perfect compromise if you want a super-sized faux-4K picture on a budget. The picture vibrancy and sense of depth are impressive.

Throw ratio 1.35-2.84:1 **Inputs** HDMI x2, USBx2 **Speakers** No**Sony VPL-XW5000ES £5999**

Best projector £4000-£10,000, Awards 2023 ★★★★★

Despite being Sony's cheapest 4K laser projector ever, the XW5000ES manages to deliver gorgeously cinematic and detailed pictures.

Screen size up to 200in **Inputs** HDMI x2 **Speakers** No**Sony VPL-XW7000ES £14,990**

Best projector over £10,000, Awards 2023 ★★★★★

The VPL-XW7000ES is a simply stunning projector. It is even capable of surpassing the typical 'real' cinema experience.

Screen size up to 200in **Inputs** HDMI x2 **Speakers** No

SET-TOP BOXES

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Humax Aura from £249

Best PVR, Awards 2023 ★★★★★☆

As a Freeview PVR, the Humax Aura is solid, but its useability foibles and lack of Netflix give pause for thought.

Tuners 3 Storage 1TB/2TB Ultra HD Yes

AWARD
WINNER



PVRs

Sky Q 2TB from £199

Best subscription box, Awards 2023 ★★★★★

Sky has overhauled its TV package with Q and made it more enticing and versatile thanks to 4K support, but it comes with a high price tag.

Tuners 4 Storage 2TB Ultra HD Yes

PRODUCT
OF THE YEAR



Subscription
boxes

SOUNDBARS

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Sony HT-S2000 £349

May 2024 ★★★★★

If you want clearer, more dynamic and direct sound from your TV at a price that won't put you off, then this Sony really is an easy sell.

Size (hwd) 6.4 x 80 x 12cm Inputs Optical, HDMI eARC Sub No



Up to £500

Sonos Beam (Gen 2) £449

Best soundbar under £500, Awards 2023 ★★★★★

A compact soundbar that pumps out an exceptional sound for its size and price. Now with Dolby Atmos capabilities. Impressive.

Size (hwd) 7 x 65 x 10cm Inputs Optical, HDMI ARC, AirPlay Sub No

AWARD
WINNER



£500 to £1000

Dali Katch One £649

Best soundbar £500-£1000, Awards 2018 ★★★★★

Great for music, even better for films, this tidy soundbar delivers all the sound your living room is likely to need.

Size 7 x 86 x 17cm Inputs HDMI, Optical, 3.5mm Sub No



Sonos Arc £899

Best soundbar £500-£1000, Awards 2022 ★★★★★

The Arc is a stunning performer, delivering one of the most immersive Dolby Atmos experiences we've heard from a soundbar.

Size 9 x 114 x 12cm Inputs HDMI, Optical, ethernet Sub No



Sony HT-A7000 £1199

Best soundbar £500-£1500, Awards 2023 ★★★★★

A powerful, musical and immersive single soundbar that succeeds where even many multi-speaker systems fail.

Size (hwd) 8 x 130 x 14cm Inputs HDMI x2, opt, USB Sub No

PRODUCT
OF THE YEAR



Sennheiser Ambeo Soundbar Plus £1299

February 2023 ★★★★★

If you want a Dolby Atmos soundbar that creates a vast room-filling sound from a compact chassis, the Ambeo Plus has to go on your shortlist.

Size (hwd) 7.5 x 105 x 12cm Inputs HDMI x3, opt, RCA line in Sub Opt.



£1000
and above

Samsung HW-Q990D £1699

August 2024 ★★★★★

A hugely compelling package. If you want something approaching 'proper' Atmos sound without buying an amp and 12 speakers, it has to be shortlisted.

Size (soundbar, hwd) 7 x 123 x 14cm **Inputs** HDMI x2, wi-fi, BT, AirPlay **Sub** Yes

**Sennheiser Ambeo Soundbar Max £2199**

Best soundbar over £1500, Awards 2023 ★★★★★

This is the best soundbar we've tested, and the best way to get surround sound into your room without filling it with loads of individual speakers.

Size (hwd) 14 x 127 x 17cm **Inputs** HDMI x4, opt, RCA line in **Sub** No

AWARD WINNER



SPEAKER PACKAGES

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whf.cm/BBSpeakerPackages**Wharfedale DX-3 HCP £499**

Best speaker package under £500, Awards 2023 ★★★★★

The DX-3 HCP delivers sound above and beyond what most soundbars are capable of while being half the price of most models that we recommend.

Size (hwd) Centre speaker 12 x 31 x 12 cm **Finishes** 2

AWARD WINNER



"All of the sound effects are detailed and placed accordingly, without sounding cluttered or claustrophobic"

Q Acoustics 3010i 5.1 Cinema Pack £895

Best speaker package £500-£1000, Awards 2020 ★★★★★

The subwoofer needs a bit more kick, but this fantastic sub-£1000 5.1 package delivers a clear, well-balanced and expressive performance.

Size (hwd) Centre speaker 15 x 43 x 22 cm **Finishes** 4



"This compact set really hits the spot with its great clarity, integration, expression and ample bass weight"

Wharfedale Diamond 12.1 HCP £999

Best speaker package £500-£1000, Awards 2023 ★★★★★

Large enough to provide cinematic scale with a wide soundfield, but affordable enough to be accessible, this is a fine choice for music and film.

Size (hwd) Centre speaker 15 x 43 x 22 cm **Finishes** 4

AWARD WINNER



"The Wharfedale Diamond 12.1 HCP is essentially the Audrey Hepburn of home theatre speaker packages"

Sony HT-A9 £1159

January 2021 ★★★★★

Successfully combines the ease and streaming features of a soundbar with the consistency and immersion of a traditional surround package.

Size (hwd) Speakers 31 x 16 x 15cm **Finishes** 1



"The wide dispersion of the HT-A9's speakers is instantly striking and undeniably effective"

Q Acoustics 3050i 5.1 Cinema Pack £1275

Best speaker package £1000-£1500, Awards 2021 ★★★★★

Add in floorstanders to the above, and this speaker package hits the sweet spot with an infectious musical and powerful performance.

Size (hwd) Centre speaker 15 x 43 x 22 cm **Finishes** 4



"It's worth stressing just how talented the 3050i 5.1 Cinema Pack is. It's an instant hit"

Wharfedale Diamond 12.3 HCP £1299

Best speaker package £1000-£1500, Awards 2023 ★★★★★

Wharfedale's Diamond 12 range delivers another top performance with this dapper 5.1 package that's mature, stylish and practical.

Size (hwd) Centre speaker 18 x 48 x 21cm **Finishes** 4

AWARD WINNER



"This is a detailed and dynamically responsive system that delivers beyond its price point"

Elac Debut 2.0 5.1 Home Theatre System £1499

October 2019 ★★★★★

This Elac package is a real match-winner, whether for your two-channel or the full surround. You'll be hard pushed to find better at this price.

Size (hwd) Centre speaker 18 x 54 x 22cm **Finishes** 1



"What's astonishing is the realism of the soundscape – a delightfully balanced audio image that lets the equipment melt away"

Dali Oberon5 5.1 £1699**Best speaker package £1500-£2000, Awards 2023 ★★★★★**

These are clever performers: lean, attractive, interesting and unfussy. And those words stand for both the aesthetics and the acoustics.

Size (hwd) Centre speaker 16 x 44 x 30cm **Finishes** 4

"There's surprising authority and power to this relatively diminutive package as well..."

Q Acoustics 5040 5.1 Home Cinema £2475**February 2024 ★★★★★**

Q Acoustics has delivered an excellent home cinema package for those who value convenience and an exciting, lively sound.

Size (hwd) Centre speaker 16 x 43 x 24cm **Finishes** 2

"While it doesn't always follow that a great stereo pair becomes a great surround package, that certainly is the case here"

Bowers & Wilkins 606 & 607 S3 £2496**Best speaker package over £2000, Awards 2023 ★★★★★**

We are taken aback by how good this package sounds as a whole. Clear, detailed, rich and dynamic – this speaker system ticks all of our boxes.

Size (hwd) Centre speaker 16 x 48 x 25.5cm **Finishes** 3

"If you have the space, then you should consider opening your home to this outstanding KEF package"

Wharfedale Evo 4.4 5.1 £2799**Best speaker package over £2500, Awards 2022 ★★★★★**

Large it may be, but packed as it is with sophisticated speaker technology, we think the Evo 4.4 5.1 system represents superb value for money.

Size (hwd) Centre speaker 25 x 75 x 35cm **Finishes** 3

"It immediately prompts us to question whether there is any need for Dolby Atmos"

ATC C1 5.1 £3595**Awards 2016 ★★★★★**

We'd like a bit more authority in the bass, but we're delighted by the detailed, agile sound, focused surround steering and power on offer.

Size (hwd) Centre speaker 16 x 41 x 28cm **Finishes** 2

"For small to medium-sized rooms, we can think of no better alternative"

PMC Twenty5.23 5.1 £10,290**Best speaker package over £5000, Awards 2019 ★★★★★**

Analytical and fun in equal measure, this gorgeous PMC system – also our current reference speaker package – is entirely worth the high asking price.

Size (hwd) Centre speaker 17 x 55 x 31cm **Finishes** 4

"The greater insight and texture make this one of the most lifelike reproductions of the human voice at this price"

VIDEO STREAMERS

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Amazon Fire TV Stick 4K £50**Best video streamer under £100, Awards 2020 ★★★★★**

Despite some caveats, this 4K device supports all HDR formats and delivers excellent picture quality for a very affordable price.

Resolution 2160p, 1080p, 720p **Storage** 8GB **4K** Yes**Google Chromecast with Google TV £60****Best video streamer under £100, Awards 2023 ★★★★★**

With a new remote and super-smart UI, Google's latest Chromecast video streamer is the complete package.

Resolution Up to 4K HDR, 60fps **Storage** n/a **4K** Yes**Apple TV 4K £169****Best video streamer over £100, Awards 2023 ★★★★★**

It has a fantastic UI and design, a huge library of 4K HDR content, and the best picture and sound performance at any price. Siri is useful, too.

Resolution 2160p, 1080p, 720p **Storage** 8GB **4K** Yes

£1000 to £3000

£3000 and above

Up to £100

£100 and above

Games consoles

Sony PlayStation 5 £450

Online ★★★★★☆

The PS5 has some unexpected tricks up its sleeve that make it feel like a real generational upgrade - and there's a cheaper option without discdrive.

Resolution 4K, 120fps **Storage** 825GB SSD



XBox series X £449

Online ★★★★★☆

It feels more like a refinement than a true generational leap, but the Xbox Series X is still an excellent 4K gaming machine.

Resolution 4K, 120fps **Storage** 1TB SSD



TELEVISIONS

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Up to 43in

LG OLED42C3 £1199

Best 40-43in TV and Best gaming TV, Awards 2023 ★★★★★

It's only marginally better than the C2 it replaces - but that is still good enough for the OLED42C3 to be the best 42-inch TV we have tested.

Type OLED **HDMI** 4 **Resolution** 4K **Operating system** webOS23



"It is much easier to get the C3 looking its best than it is most other TVs"

48in to 50in

Amazon Fire Omni QLED £450

Best budget 48-50in TV, Awards 2023 ★★★★★

Budget TVs are hard to get right, but the 50in Omni QLED succeeds thanks to a consistent, considered performance and impressive feature set.

Type QLED **HDMI** 4 **Resolution** 4K **ARC/eARC** eARC



"A surprisingly consistent and considered performer that provides a very satisfying and authentic picture"

50in to 60in

LG OLED48C3 £1199

Best premium 48-50in TV, Awards 2023 ★★★★★

To put it plainly, there's no better-specified TV available at this size. And it delivers crisp, well-defined pictures with awesome contrast.

Type OLED **HDMI** 4 **Resolution** 4K **ARC/eARC** eARC



"The inky blacks of OLED plus the C3's particularly bold approach make for an image that's packed with punch"

Philips 55OLED808 £1399

March 2024 ★★★★★

The effort that Philips has put into this TV is clear to see: if you're in the UK and in the market for a new mid-range OLED, you simply must consider this set.

Type OLED **HDMI** 4 **Resolution** 4K **ARC/eARC** eARC



"Fascinating dystopian vistas are rendered with depth-enhancing solidity, but without any realism-busting exaggeration"

Sony XR-55X90L £1599

September 2023 ★★★★★

If your budget won't stretch to an OLED, this is a superb option that delivers consistently cinematic and cinematically consistent results.

Type LCD **HDMI** 4 **Resolution** 4K **ARC/eARC** eARC



"Everything we watch over days of testing is beautifully detailed and sharp"

Philips 55OLED907 £1999

May 2023 ★★★★★

While it is certainly expensive for a 55-inch TV, its pictures rock and its impressive sound largely negates the need for a soundbar.

Type OLED **HDMI** 4 **Resolution** 4K **ARC/eARC** eARC



"Another huge attraction of the 55OLED907's pictures is how refined they look"

Sony A80L (XR-55A80L) £2399

Best premium TV 55in and larger, Awards 2023 ★★★★★

With its deeply impressive ability to combine the spectacular and the subtle, the A80L more than holds its own against rivals with fancier panel technology.

Type OLED **HDMI** 4 **Resolution** 4K **ARC/eARC** eARC



"All of these qualities combine to make an image that is brilliantly solid with a lovely three-dimensional feel."

TCL 65C845K £849**Best budget TV 55in and larger, Awards 2023 ★★★★★**

Sees TCL bringing to Europe the combination of aggressive pricing and excellent performance that made the brand so successful in the US.

Type QLED **HDMI** 4 **Resolution** 4K **ARC/eARC** eARC

"Its pictures really do jump off the screen with an intensity far beyond anything else we have seen at the same price"

Sony X95L (XR-65X95L) £2199**October 2023 ★★★★★**

Sony's improved light control takes everything from black levels and contrast to colour and even detail consistency to another level.

Type MiniLED LCD **HDMI** 4 **Resolution** 4K **ARC/eARC** eARC

"Takes Sony's Mini LED picture quality to a gorgeous new level that gives even OLED TVs plenty to worry about"

LG OLED65C4 £2700**June 2024 ★★★★★**

A surprisingly large upgrade on the uncharacteristically dull C3 of last year, the C4 has laid down the gauntlet for its rivals in dramatic fashion.

Type OLED **HDMI** 2.1 4 **Resolution** 4K **ARC/eARC** eARC

"The C4 springs into life, delivering a bright and vibrant picture yet balanced picture that is crisp but clean"

TCL 85C805K £1579**September 2024 ★★★★★**

This set manages to combine the sheer size of its 85in pictures with excellent gaming support and genuinely cinematic and immersive picture and sound.

Type Mini LED **HDMI** 4 (2 x HDMI 2.1) **Resolution** 4K **ARC/eARC** eARC

"Even more pleasing to the eye is the way the TV can deliver so much brightness right alongside startlingly deep, rich black tones"

Philips 65OLED809 £2099**October 2024 ★★★★★**

With capable audio and a solid suite of gaming features, this is well worth considering for any TV buyer looking for an OLED that won't break the bank.

Type OLED **HDMI** 4 (2 x HDMI 2.1) **Resolution** 4K **ARC/eARC** eARC

"If you take the time and tweak its picture settings, the OLED809 can deliver an excellent home cinema experience"

Panasonic TX-65MZ2000B £2999**February 2024 ★★★★★**

Panasonic has managed to give its superb OLED flagship an MLA-powered brightness boost without diminishing its accuracy or authenticity.

Type MLA OLED **HDMI** 4 (2 x HDMI 2.1) **Resolution** 4K **ARC/eARC** eARC

"Equally as impressive is the amount of detail that the MZ2000 digs up in the brightest parts of the picture"

Sony A95L (XR-65A95L) £3699**January 2024 ★★★★★**

With super-bright content, the A95L will knock your socks off; with everything else, it's merely superb – and it sounds great for a TV, too.

Type QD-OLED **HDMI** 4 (2x HDMI 2.1) **Resolution** 4K **ARC/eARC** eARC

"We have put this Sony up against pretty much every other TV you might be considering; it is, with very little doubt, the best of the lot"

LG G3 (OLED65G3) £3500**June 2023 ★★★★★**

The first OLED TV to feature Micro Lens Array (MLA) technology is a dazzling upgrade on the already excellent TV it replaces.

Type MLA OLED **HDMI** 2.1 4 **Resolution** 4K **ARC/eARC** eARC

"The G3's greater brightness capabilities become even more obvious as you move up the picture presets"

Samsung QE65S95D £3599**June 2024 ★★★★★**

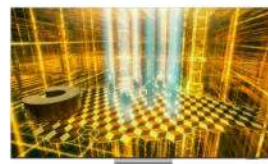
Samsung's third-generation QD-OLED is a superb TV that ups the technical ante while simultaneously improving balance and consistency.

Type QD-OLED **HDMI** 2.1 4 **Resolution** 4K **ARC/eARC** eARC

"The first thing that hits you is how bright it is. Not just by OLED TV standards, but by the standards of any current mass-market TV technology"

Samsung QN900D £6500**July 2024 ★★★★★**

The QN900D rewrites the upscaling rule book to remind us in no uncertain terms that 8K TVs don't have to be fed 8K content to make a difference.

Type QLED Mini LED **HDMI** 2.1 4 **Resolution** 8K **ARC/eARC** eARC

"The precision with which it adds the tens of millions of extra pixels required to turn 4K and HD into 8K feels almost mystically impressive"

50in to 60in

65in and above

8K TV

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Unleash bold sound with the **Pro-Ject Debut Revolve**—acrylic platter, Ortofon 2M Blue cartridge, and built-in phono stage for style and substance. **Exclusive to Peter Tyson.**

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0191 285 7179



BUYER'S GUIDE

BEST BUYS

The only products worth considering

PORTABLE HEADPHONES

BIN THE BUNDLED BUDS AND INVEST IN BETTER SOUND

View offers
whf.cm/BBHeadphones

SoundMagic E11C £50

Best wired in-ear headphones under £100, Awards 2023 ★★★★★

The latest version of Soundmagic's budget in-ears continues to impress with a full-bodied, energetic and informative sound.

In-line controls Yes Cable length 1.2m



Beyerdynamic Soul Byrd £69

April 2019 ★★★★★

You'll struggle to find a better pair of in-ear headphones costing less than £70 than these Beyerdynamics.

In-line controls Yes Cable length 1.2m



Klipsch T5M Wired £70

Best wired in-ear headphones £50-£100, Awards 2021 ★★★★★

Not only do they have some of the most comfortable tips around, but these T5M Wires also show a maturity that's rare at this price.

In-line controls Yes Cable length 1.3m

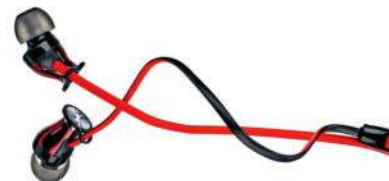


Sennheiser Momentum M2 IEi £70

Best in-ears £50-£100, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

You wouldn't think anything so small could sound quite so good – not for just £70. But they are wonderfully smooth, expressive and balanced.

In-line controls Yes Cable length 1.3m



Shure Aonic 3 £190

Best wired in-ear headphones over £100, Awards 2023 ★★★★★

Breathtakingly musical and comfy to wear, the Shure Aonic 3s set a new benchmark for in-ear headphones at this level.

In-line controls Yes Cable length 1.2m



Austrian Audio Hi-X15 £99

Best wired on-ear headphones under £100, Awards 2023 ★★★★★

An analytical pair of headphones, but they still manage to make music entertaining – they extract bags of detail but keep the soul of your music intact.

Type Closed Connection 3.5mm Weight 255g



Grado SR80x £130

Best wired on-ear headphones £100-£200, Awards 2022 ★★★★★

Grado hasn't torn up its own rulebook and revolutionised its legendary headphones. At this money, the SR80 model remains the best in the market.

Type Open Connection 3.5/6.3mm Weight 240g



Røde NTH-100 £149

Best wired on-ear headphones £100-£200, Awards 2023 ★★★★★

The Røde NTH-100 outperform our previously high expectations comfortably; if you can live with a long cable, they are outstanding value.

Type Closed Connection 3.5mm Weight 350g



In-ears up to £250

On-ears up to £150

Austrian Audio Hi-X50 £199

May 2021 ★★★★★

If you're looking for well-designed wired on-ear headphones for portable or domestic use, these Austrian Audios should be at the top of your shortlist.

Type Closed **Connection** 3.5mm **Weight** 285g

**Beyerdynamic DT 700 Pro X £219**

April 2022 ★★★★★

Beyerdynamic might officially be aiming the DT 700 Pro X at content creators and producers, but we think they are a great option for music fans, full stop.

Type Closed **Connection** 3.5mm **Weight** 350g

**Grado SR325x £330**

Best wired on-ear headphones over £200, Awards 2023 ★★★★★

Successors to our 2020 Award winners prove that evolution is a more reliable way of making things better than headline-grabbing design revolution.

Type Open **Connection** 3.5mm/6.5mm **Weight** 340g

**Beyerdynamic Amiron £415**

Best wired on-ear headphones over £400, Awards 2022 ★★★★★

Beyerdynamic has produced a pair of headphones that sound as good as they feel. Be careful though; their open-backed nature leaks sound.

Type Open **Connection** 3.5mm/6.3mm **Weight** 340g

**Grado RS1x £800**

November 2022 ★★★★★

Four generations in, the top Reference Series model is more entertaining (and exotic) than ever before.

Type Open **Connection** 3.5mm/6.3mm **Weight** 320g

**Beyerdynamic T1 (3rd Generation) £899**

February 2021 ★★★★★

The latest T1 over-ears are a step up in performance and compatibility from their predecessor; among the best headphones at this price.

Type Open **Connection** 3.5mm/6.3mm **Weight** 360g

**Sony MDR-Z1R £1650**

April 2017 ★★★★★

The finest closed-back headphones we have heard. Feed them with quality electronics and there is no doubt the Z1Rs will shine.

Type Closed **Connection** 3.5mm/6.3mm **Weight** 385g

**Sennheiser HD820 £1999**

October 2018 ★★★★★

Probably the best-sounding closed-back headphones we have heard. They have lots of detail, plenty of punch and a strong bass performance.

Type Closed **Connection** 4.4mm/6.3mm/XLR4 **Weight** 360g

**Focal Utopia £3499**

June 2017 ★★★★★

With these cans Focal has aimed for the moon and reached it, delivering one of the finest pairs of headphones we have heard.

Type Open **Connection** 6.3mm **Weight** 490g

**Sony WF-C500 £59**

Best wireless earbuds under £80, Awards 2023 ★★★★★

Sony has managed to bring a lot of what makes its expensive true wireless in-ears such a success without cutting too many corners too obviously.

Controls Yes **Battery** 10 hours (20 hours with charging case)



On-ears £150 to £1000

£1000 and above

Wireless
up to £200

Sennheiser HD 250 BT £60**Best wireless headphones under £150, Awards 2022 ★★★★★**

Underestimate these headphones at your peril. Sennheiser's ultra-affordable and durable headphones do not disappoint sonically for the price.

Controls Yes **Battery** 25 hours**Earfun Air £55****Best wireless in-ears under £75, Awards 2020 ★★★★★**

If you're looking for inexpensive, good-sounding waterproof buds, the Earfun Air are tough to beat.

Controls Yes **Battery** 7 hours (35 hours with charging case)**Google Pixel Buds A-Series £99****October 2021 ★★★★★**

Everything their pricier Pixel Buds 2 provided as far as smart abilities go, but with a performance that stands up with the best in the market at the price.

Controls Yes **Battery** 5 hours (plus 19 hours via charging case)**Panasonic RZ-S500W £100****Best wireless earbuds under £150, Awards 2021 ★★★★★**

The RZ-S500W make for a classy debut as Panasonic's first noise-cancelling true wireless earbuds. Detailed presentation and fine noise-cancelling.

Controls Yes **Battery** 6.5 hours (plus 13 hours via charging case)**Sony WF-C700N £100****Best wireless earbuds £80-£200, Awards 2023 ★★★★★**

Sony adds another pair of excellent-sounding wireless earbuds to this super-competitive sector. For the money, their abilities make them a no-brainer.

Controls Yes **Battery** 7.5 hours (15 hours with charging case)**PRODUCT OF THE YEAR****Sony WH-CH720N £100****Best wireless headphones under £150, Awards 2023 ★★★★★**

Sony has done it again. With their pleasing build quality and punchy sound, the WH-CH720N justify their place in the market with consummate ease.

Controls Yes **Battery** Up to 50 hours**AWARD WINNER****JBL Live Pro 2 TWS £130****May 2023 ★★★★★**

Not shy in coming forward, especially in the lower frequencies where there is plenty of power on tap, the JBL Live Pro 2 TWS deliver a solid, robust sound.

Controls Yes **Battery** 8 hours (plus 22 from case)**JBL Reflect Flow Pro £160****March 2022 ★★★★★**

Putting big, bold ticks in the boxes of style and sound quality, these sport earbuds are easy to recommend, with a comfortable, secure fit.

Controls Yes **Battery** 10 hours (plus 20 from case)**Grado GW100x £169****July 2023 ★★★★★**

We have dubbed Grado the kings of open-back headphones. With the excellent and hugely listenable GW100x, that crown remains firmly in place.

Controls No **Battery** 46 hours**Sennheiser Momentum True Wireless 3 £219****August 2022 ★★★★★**

The True Wireless 3 keep the momentum going strong. Five years into the true wireless game, Sennheiser is as competitive as ever in this space.

Controls Yes **Battery** 7 hours (28 with case) **Noise-cancelling** Yes

Sony WF-1000XM5 £259**Best wireless earbuds over £200, Awards 2023 ★★★★★**

If you are looking for the clearest and most detailed sonic performance on the market right now, the WF-1000XM5 produce it – by quite some distance.

Controls Yes **Battery** 8 hours (24 with case) **Noise-cancelling** Yes**Bose QuietComfort Ultra Earbuds £259****February 2024 ★★★★★**

History repeats itself with Bose's new flagship wireless earbuds – they nail comfort, noise-cancelling and sound quality.

Controls Yes **Battery** 6 hours (24 with case) **Noise-cancelling** Yes**Sennheiser Momentum 4 Wireless £300****November 2022 ★★★★★**

Highly competitive in the sound and features departments at this price, the latest Momentums keep the legacy alive despite a less luxurious appearance.

Folding No **Battery** 60 hours **Noise-cancelling** Yes**Bowers & Wilkins Px7 S2e2 £379****January 2024 ★★★★★**

Class-leading insight and a more compelling balance over their forebears, with a fine sense of style; the Px7 S2e are a wonderfully complete package.

Folding No **Battery** 30 hours **Noise-cancelling** Yes**Sony WH-1000XM5 £379****Best wireless headphones over £150, Awards 2023 ★★★★★**

Redesigning its premium noise-cancelling headphones wasn't without risk, but the Sony WH-1000XM5 are a sonic triumph.

Folding No **Battery** 30 hours **Noise-cancelling** Yes**Apple AirPods Max £549****Best wireless headphones over £300, Awards 2021 ★★★★★**

There's no denying that they cost a lot more than typical products in this class but, if sound quality is king, there's equally no denying that they're worth it.

Folding No **Battery** 20 hours **Noise-cancelling** Yes**Bowers & Wilkins Px8 £599****January 2023 ★★★★★**

Hugely capable performers that justify their price with a combination of build and sound quality that cheaper alternatives just can't match.

Folding No **Battery** 30 hours **Noise-cancelling** Yes**Focal Bathys £699****January 2023 ★★★★★**

Focal blends Bluetooth into its high-end headphones recipe with great success. Highly recommendable if you're after portables at this price.

Folding No **Battery** 30 hours **Noise-cancelling** Yes**Mark Levinson No. 5909 £999****March 2023 ★★★★★**

Perceived value may not get top marks, but sonic value certainly does – and that's really what matters. Mark our words, these headphones really wow.

Folding Earcups fold flat **Battery** 34 hours **Noise-cancelling** Yes**T+A Solitaire T £1200****November 2023 ★★★★★**

The most convincing wired/wireless hybrids we have heard. In a league of their own for those who prioritise convenience and sound quality equally,

Folding Yes **Battery** 35-70 hours **Noise-cancelling** Yes

PORTABLE MUSIC PLAYERS

TREAT YOUR TUNES TO A DEDICATED MUSIC PLAYER

View offers
whf.com/BBPortableMusicPlayers

Up to £1000

Sony NW-A55L £160

Best portable music player under £250, Awards 2020 ★★★★★

Sony hasn't carried out an update for the sake of it; the refresh is justified by squeezing more performance into a budget price than ever before.

Hi-res 32-bit/384kHz, DSD Weight 99g Storage 16GB (plus microSD)



"If you're looking for a sonic upgrade over your phone, the Sony will offer it across the board"

Cowon Plenue D3 £279

Best portable music player under £500, Awards 2021 ★★★★★

This is a talented player that betters its previous generation counterpart for detail, separation and transparency. An impressive, tiny box of tricks...

Hi-res 24-bit/192kHz, DSD 128 Weight 103g Storage 64GB



"Cowon has added Bluetooth, a volume wheel and a dual DAC to its player and released another class leader"

Astell & Kern A&norma SR35 £799

Best portable music player, Awards 2023 ★★★★★

The A&norma SR35 may not exactly be dressed for its not-insignificant price, but there's no uncertainty over whether it performs to it.

Hi-res 32-bit/384kHz, DSD256, MQA Weight 184g Storage 64GB



"It's a very likeable presentation, with a tonal balance slightly on the rich side and a combination of power and finesse that feels mature"

£1000 and above

Astell & Kern Kann Alpha £1099

April 2021 ★★★★★

A powerful and talented machine, we cannot fault its sonic chops. The stylish, rock-solid build is (just) small enough to take with you on your travels

Hi-res 32-bit/384kHz, DSD256 Weight 316g Storage 64GB



"Listening to downloaded hi-res music on the Kann Alpha is truly a joy"

Astell & Kern A&futura SE180 £1399

Best portable music player over £1000, Awards 2022 ★★★★★

If you're looking for an excellent-sounding player without spending thousands, the A&futura SE180 is among the best we've come across.

Hi-res 32-bit/384kHz, DSD 256 Storage 256GB (plus 1TB via microSD)



"Another example of Astell & Kern getting the performance balance between informing and entertaining spot on"

Astell & Kern A&futura SE200 £1799

Best portable music player over £1000, Awards 2020 ★★★★★

Astell & Kern has managed to set a new performance benchmark for the price with the A&futura SE200.

Hi-res 32-bit/384kHz, DSD 256, MQA Weight 274g Storage 256GB



"The SE200 delivers the music faultlessly. It captures fine details and dynamic fluctuations and conveys it on a crystal clear canvas"

Headphone jargon busted

Read more at...
www.whathifi.com/advice



What's the difference between the various on-ear headphones? Our jargon buster explains the various types, and why you might want to choose one particular model over another

1. First, the most popular headphone design: the **over-the-ear** model, also called circumaural. These cup your ears completely, usually with semi-air-tight earcups that help minimise both sound leakage from your headphones into the outside world and the intrusive effects of ambient noise.

2. Supra-aural or **on-ear** designs tend to be smaller and lighter than circumaural models and, as the name suggests, they sit on your ears rather than over them. Some listeners find them lighter and easier to wear for extended listening, but they do tend to allow in more sound from outside.

3. Available in both circumaural and supra-aural types, **closed-back** headphones are the optimum choice for cutting out external sounds altogether. They'll also deliver more bass weight than other headphone types, because the closed earcups prevent bass leakage.

4. **Open-back** headphones are vented designs that allow sound out through apertures in each earcup, reducing internal sound reflections and helping to create a more natural listening experience. More sound will leak out into the surrounding environment, and you'll also suffer more ambient noise intrusion.

5. **Semi-open** headphones, as the name implies, combine the characteristics of both closed and open-back designs. When done well, they can be a 'best of both worlds' solution, but equally, they can often fall between two stools.



SMARTPHONES

SUPERB MUSIC AND VIDEO PLAYERS THAT MAKE PHONE CALLS TOO

View offers
whf.cm/BBMobilePhones

Apple iPhone 15 Pro Max £1199

Best smartphone over £500, Awards 2023 ★★★★★

A punchier picture and smoother sound make the iPhone 15 Pro Max an unparalleled portable movie and music machine.

OS iOS 17 Size (hwd) 160 x 77 x 8.3mm Storage 256GB-1TB

PRODUCT
OF THE YEAR



"Subtle tweaks to picture and sound quality have added dynamism and refinement to a delivery that was already superb"

iOS

Samsung Galaxy Z Fold 6 £1799

November 2024 ★★★★★

Best described as an OLED TV that will fit into your pocket, this would be an ideal AV companion for a long-haul flight or road trip.

OS Android 14 Finishes six Storage 256GB-1TB



"The sharp outlines result in a picture oozing three-dimensional depth; comparatively it makes the iPhones look somewhat flat"

Sony Xperia 1 V

September 2023 ★★★★★

This is a phone for AV enthusiasts. If you are serious about taking your movies and music on the go, you will be hard pressed to find a better alternative.

OS Android 13 Size (hwd) 165 x 71 x 8.2mm Storage 256GB/512GB



"The Sony does a good job of replicating the environment of the original recording, with its rich and natural presentation"

Android

Sony Xperia 10 V £349

Best smartphone under £500, Awards 2023 ★★★★★

It may not offer cutting-edge specs and the camera isn't class-leading, but this is comfortably the best budget phone on the market for movies and music.

OS Android 13 Size (hwd) 153 x 67 x 8.3mm Storage 128GB + microSD

AWARD
WINNER



"Its picture and sound performance are hard to believe when we take into account how little it costs"

Amazon Prime Video tips, tricks and features

Read more at...
www.whathifi.com/advice

Whether you're a Prime professional or just thinking of signing up, you'll want to get the most out of the service. Here are a few tips and tricks on how to do exactly that.

Setting up a 'Household' account

Amazon Prime Video will recommend content based on your viewing history - but what if you're really into crime thrillers, your other half loves romantic comedies and the kids love cartoons? The answer is by linking together two Amazon accounts that will both have access to Prime Video. Go to Your Account > Shopping Programmes > Amazon Household. There you can add another adult or profiles for children, and then click 'Create Household'.

Parental Controls

You can set up a four-digit PIN on the web by going into the 'Settings' of the Prime Video section and also in the mobile app's settings.

Streaming Ultra HD video

On Amazon's TV app there's a category populated with Ultra HD content. You can also search for '4K' or 'Ultra HD' in the search bar.

However, the results might not be complete - you can tell for sure if a TV show or movie is 4K only by clicking on it. Unfortunately, if you're on a mobile device, this doesn't show up at all.

Streaming HDR video

HDR video - and Dolby Vision on compatible televisions - is more difficult to spot than 4K. Amazon's search function is also incomplete - when typing in 'HDR' it recommends *The Man In The High Castle*, but leaves out other HDR shows. Much like finding 4K content, it's a bit trial and error - clicking on shows to see if they come up with the HDR or Dolby Vision symbol seems the best way to find out.

Downloading shows

For those using tablets or smartphones, you can download content to your device for offline viewing. On select films and TV shows, you can tap the download arrow to save it to your device. Your offline titles can be found in the 'Download' tab in the menu at the bottom of the mobile app.

Changing resolution

If you want to save on space, try changing the quality of the download. Go to the app's settings and click on 'Download Quality'.

There, you can switch between three tiers: Good, Better or Best. And if you want to ensure content is downloaded only over wi-fi (saving you from using up your precious mobile data), there's a toggle for that too.

X-ray vision

X-Ray grants access to actor biographies, trivia and other information overlaid on your show. Tap anywhere on the screen on iOS, Android or Fire devices to bring it up.

De-registering devices

Rather than allowing someone else access to your streaming service if you sell or give away your device, go into the app's settings on another device and click 'Registered devices'.



STREAMING APPS & SERVICES

THE BEST WAY TO GET YOUR STREAMING FIX

Music apps

Spotify from free

December 2016 ★★★★★

Its accessibility, ease of use, huge catalogue and more mature music discovery are reasons why Spotify remains at the top of the pile.

Sound quality Up to 320kbps Ogg Vorbis **Offline playback** Yes



Tidal from £10/month

Best music streaming service, Awards 2023 ★★★★★

One of the few streaming services to offer lossless audio, Tidal's exclusive content and curated playlists make it stand out.

Sound quality Up to 1411kbps lossless **Offline playback** Yes



Disney Plus from £7.99/month

Best video streaming service, Awards 2023 ★★★★★

This is a polished and personal streaming service that fans of Disney's output, both children and adults, are bound to enjoy.

Resolution Up to Ultra HD **Offline playback** Yes



Video apps

Amazon Prime Instant Video from £5.99/month

Best video streaming service, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

With an extensive catalogue geared towards new releases as well as 4K and HDR content, this is a great service.

Resolution Up to Ultra HD **Offline playback** Yes



Netflix from £5.99/month

Best video streaming service, Awards 2020 ★★★★★

Without doubt one of the most satisfying streaming services, with excellent new and original content, it runs on practically every platform available.

Resolution Up to Ultra HD **Offline Playback** Yes



Sky Stream from £26/month

January 2023 ★★★★★

Provided you have a decent broadband connection, Sky Stream delivers exactly the dish-free Sky experience consumers have been waiting for.

Resolution Up to Ultra HD **Offline Playback** No



TABLETS

VIDEO, GAMES AND MUSIC ON A PORTABLE SCREEN

[View offers whf.cm/BBPortableMusicPlayers](http://whf.cm/BBPortableMusicPlayers)

Up to £500

Amazon Fire HD 8 £349

Best tablet under £150, Awards 2023 ★★★★★

There are lots of people who just need a good, affordable tablet. For those people, an Amazon Fire tablet is the obvious choice; it's also the right choice.

OS modified Android **Size (hwd)** 137 x 193 x 11mm **Storage** 32 or 64GB



Apple iPad £499

Best tablet £150-£750, Awards 2023 ★★★★★

The iPad 10th Gen packs small yet meaningful upgrades into a modernised chassis, coming together to create a well-rounded and versatile tablet.

OS iPadOS 16 **Storage** 64GB, 256GB **Finishes** Silver, blue, pink, yellow





ACCESSORIES

ANALOGUE INTERCONNECTS

DON'T SKIMP ON CABLES: THEY'RE A TOP-VALUE UPGRADE

[View offers whf.cm/BBAudioCables](http://whf.cm/BBAudioCables)

Chord Company C-Line £63/m

Best analogue interconnect under £100, Awards 2023 ★★★★★
Few entry-level interconnects at the price come close to offering the sonic enjoyment that Chord has produced with this cable.
Balanced/Single-ended Single



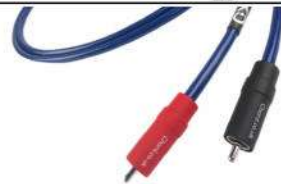
QED Performance Audio 40 £40/m

Best analogue interconnect under £50, Awards 2017 ★★★★★
Few rival interconnects are as good as this QED when it comes to detail resolution and precision. It's nicely made too.
Balanced/Single-ended Single



Chord Co ClearwayX ARAY Analogue RCA £130/m

Best analogue interconnect over £100, Awards 2023 ★★★★★
Evolution of a well-regarded interconnect that reveals greater texture, control and dynamics from your system's performance than before.
Balanced/Single-ended Single



Up to £150

AV & HI-FI RACKS

HI-FI KIT CAN ONLY SOUND ITS BEST WITH THE PROPER SUPPORT

[View offers whf.cm/BBAVHiFiRacks](http://whf.cm/BBAVHiFiRacks)

Atacama Elite ECO 24 £300 per shelf

November 2023 ★★★★★
The cumulative upgrades in absolute audio quality that a rack like Atacama's Elite Eco 24 Reference offers is worth it to our minds and ears.
Width 600mm **Modular** Yes **Cable management** No



"An essential luxury if you want the best support for your hi-fi system. This appealing rack is worth investing in"

Atacama Apollo Storm 6 £390

February 2018 ★★★★★
Another class-leading support from Atacama that's cheaper than its Award-winning sibling. It lets your kit perform at its best.
Width 590mm **Modular** Yes **Cable management** No



"Want to give your system adequate support for a decent price? Atacama has you covered"

Hi-Fi Racks Omnium8 £478

Reviewed online, 2018 ★★★★★
Hi-Fi Racks has made the Omnium8 about as flexible as possible. You can specify everything from finish to shelf spacing and upright shape.
Width 57cm **Modular** Yes **Cable management** Yes



"As configurable an equipment rack as we've come across"

Atacama Evoque Eco 60-40 SE £600

Best equipment rack, Awards 2023 ★★★★★
The SE stands for Special Edition, while significant improvements in the Eco 60-40's design and dampening mean it works better than ever.
Width 600mm **Modular** Yes **Cable management** No



"If you're of the opinion all hi-fi racks are created more or less equal, think again"

Up to £500

£500 and above

HEADPHONE AMPLIFIERS

HOW TO GET THE VERY BEST FROM YOUR CANS

View offers
whf.cm/BBPhonoAmps

Headphone
amplifiers

Pathos Aurium £895

August 2013 ★★★★★

A top-class choice for amplification, but you'll need a source and a pair of headphones of similar quality if you want the best from it.
Inputs Line-in x3, XLR **Outputs** Line-out, XLR, 6.3mm headphone



"The sound is a seductive combination of transparency and grip"

MAINS PRODUCTS

A CLEAN POWER SOURCE IS VITAL FOR INTERFERENCE-FREE HI-FI

View offers
whf.cm/BBMainsProducts

Mains
products

Tacima CS947 £35

September 2015 ★★★★★

Great value, the highlight being how well it allows for greater detail, attack and dynamics. For the price, it's a brilliant entry-level purchase.
Type Block **Mains filter** Yes **No. of plugs** 6



Russ Andrews X6 £381

September 2015 ★★★★★

No matter what the source material, the X6 helps unearth a revealing well-integrated listen, allowing your kit to be as explicit as it can be.
Type Block **Mains filter** Yes **No. of plugs** 6



PHONO STAGES

EVERY RECORD DECK NEEDS A PHONO AMP

View offers
whf.cm/BBPhonoAmps

Up to £200

Edwards Audio Apprentice MM £90

Awards 2017 ★★★★★

A fine entry-level phono stage that will deliver a crisp and exciting sound from any good price-compatible moving magnet cartridge.
Type MM **Dimensions (hwd)** 5 x 16 x 11cm



Russ Andrews® X-BLOCK

"By allowing your electronics to give their best, this mains block is worth every penny"

"will provide an enhanced performance for any Hi-Fi"



Paul Rigby

GROOVY
8/10



Find out more at
www.russandrews.com/xblocks
or call us on 01539 797300



60 DAY MONEY BACK GUARANTEE

Rega Fono Mini A2D Mk2 £110

April 2024 ★★★★★

It is the quality of the sound that continues to impress. Quite simply, we haven't come across a better-sounding alternative at this entry level.

Type MM Dimensions (hwd) 3 x 10 x 10.5cm

**Graham Slee Gram Amp 2 Communicator £180**

July 2018 ★★★★★

A gem of a phono amplifier that has stood the test of time. It offers class-leading levels of detail, brilliant timing and a sweet sound.

Type MM Dimensions (hwd) 5 x 12 x 19cm

**Musical Fidelity LX2-LPS £199**

April 2018 ★★★★★

Though it's not as versatile as the Rega Mk3, the LX2 delivers a more engaging performance thanks to its open, full-bodied sound.

Type MM, MC Dimensions (hwd) 4 x 17 x 19cm

**Rega Fono MM Mk5 £220**

Best phono stage under £300, Awards 2023 ★★★★★

The secret to the Fono MM's success really comes down to its performance. Judged by sound quality, it remains the one to beat at this level.

Type MM Dimensions (hwd) 4.5 x 18 x 15cm

PRODUCT OF THE YEAR

**Cambridge Audio Duo MC/MM £249**

July 2018 ★★★★★

This is a well-equipped MM/MC phono stage that even has a headphone output. Its sound quality is right up there in the leading pack.

Type MM, MC Dimensions (hwd) 5 x 22 x 16cm

**Moon 110LP v2 £495**

Best phono stage £300-£1000, Awards 2023 ★★★★★

The Moon 110LP v2 is certainly musically satisfying. If you're in the market for a quality affordable phono stage, this little box is well worth auditioning.

Type MM, MC Dimensions (hwd) 4.2 x 13 x 17cm

AWARD WINNER

**Musical Fidelity MX-VYNL £699**

Best phono stage over £500, Awards 2019 ★★★★★

A superbly made unit, that's nice to use and, most importantly, sounds lovely. As good a phono stage as we've heard at this price.

Type MM, MC Dimensions (hwd) 5 x 22 x 22cm

**Vertere Acoustics Phono-1 MkII L £1350**

Best phono stage over £1000, Awards 2023 ★★★★★

The MkII L is clearly a step ahead, so new buyers should not hesitate to go for this version. Given a source and system of appropriate talent, it shines.

Type MM, MC Dimensions (hwd) 5.5 x 21 x 23.5cm

AWARD WINNER

**Cyrus Phono Signature/PSX-R2 £2290**

May 2016 ★★★★★

Partnered with the PSX-R2 power supply and a suitably talented turntable, the Signature sounds great. It's a top-class phono stage.

Type MM, MC Dimensions (hwd) 7 x 22 x 36cm

**Burmester 100 Phono £8840**

March 2018 ★★★★★

One of the finest phono stages available, the 100 is an understated, but brilliant performer that has a fluid and dynamic presentation.

Type MM, MC Dimensions (hwd) 10 x 48 x 35cm



Up to £200

£200 to £500

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Cartridges

Goldring E3 £90

Best cartridge under £100, Awards 2023 ★★★★★

This is a wonderfully balanced and entertaining moving magnet cartridge that will work well with a wide range of record players.

Type MM Tracking weight 2.0g

AWARD
WINNER



"The sound it delivers is clear, informative and fun. We can't ask much more than that"

Sumiko Rainier £160

Best cartridge £100-£250, Awards 2023 ★★★★★

This Sumiko is a little gem. Set it up with care and have a little patience, and you'll find this to be one of the best performers anywhere near this price.

Type MM Tracking weight 1.8-2.2g (2.0g recommended)

AWARD
WINNER



"Get in some hours of use and the presentation blooms into something that's surprisingly musical and engaging"

Ortofon Quintet Blue £359

Best cartridge over £250, Awards 2023 ★★★★★

Given a suitably capable system we have no doubt the Ortofon Quintet Blue will impress. It's a well-balanced design with no obvious weaknesses.

Type MC Tracking weight 2.3g

AWARD
WINNER



"There's plenty of attack here as basslines are punched out with glee and no shortage of passion"

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Up to £10/m

Chord Company C-Screen £5/m

June 2018 ★★★★★

The C-Screen possesses the fantastic ability to mirror a system's punch and drive. What it does, it does better than anything else at the price.

Single or Bi-wire Single



QED XT25 £6/m

May 2018 ★★★★★

Features the same characteristics as the more expensive XT40, displaying the kind of transparency that's difficult for its rivals to match.

Single or Bi-wire Single



Atlas Equator 2.0 (2018) £7.25/m

Reviewed online, 2018 ★★★★★

A nicely built speaker cable that promotes a wonderfully clean and detailed delivery – it's an affordable and easy way to spruce up your system.

Single or Bi-wire Single



Tacima™ CS947 Great value Mains Conditioner!

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CS947, Sept 2015



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QED Reference XT40i £11/m

May 2020 ★★★★★

If you're looking to upgrade your system by investing in speaker cables this side of £15 per metre, you should hear what difference this can make.

Single or Bi-wire Single

**AudioQuest Rocket 11 £12.50/m**

Best speaker cable under £15/m, Awards 2021 ★★★★★

If you're looking for a flexible and transparent speaker cable, this is a great option for the price. It works well with a wide range of systems, too.

Single or Bi-wire Both

**Chord Company Clearway X £15/m**

July 2022 ★★★★★

The cable you want is the one that degrades the music signal the least.

Judged in that way, the ClearwayX must count as a huge success.

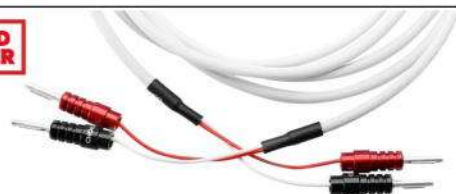
Single or Bi-wire Single

**Chord Company RumourX £18/m**

Best speaker cable, Awards 2023 ★★★★★

With the RumourX plumbed-in, our systems deliver a crisp, clean, dynamic presentation. We're impressed at the musically cohesive nature of the sound.

Single or Bi-wire Single



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whf.cm/BBSpeakerStands**Atacama Moseco 6 £150**

Best speaker stand, Awards 2023 ★★★★★

A speaker stand that impresses with how weighty and dynamic it allows systems to sound. Considering the price, it's something of a steal.

Height 60cm **Fillable** Yes **Finishes** 4 (pole), 3 (base panel)



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Q Acoustics 20 speaker stands £200

September 2014 ★★★★★

Designed with QAs' Concept 20 speakers in mind, the clever construction and elegant design ensures other speakers give their best too.

Height 66.5cm **Fillable** No **Finishes** 2



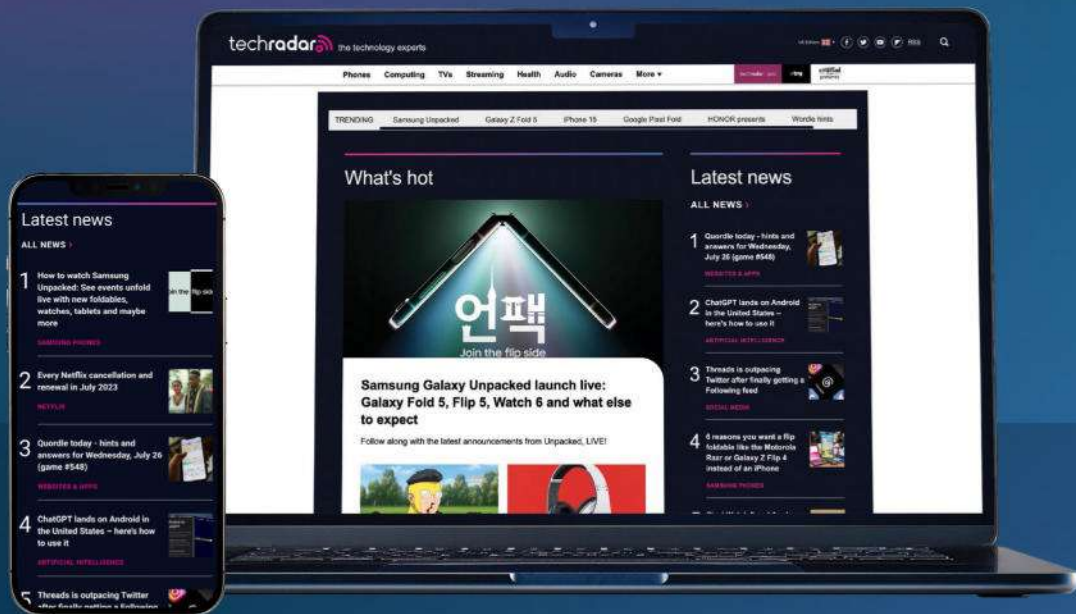
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Speaker stands

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FIVE NEW DANCE MUSIC ALBUMS TO GIVE YOUR SYSTEM A WORKOUT

We make it our business to listen to a wide variety of music when we are testing audio products, and that includes dance music. Dance music (please don't say EDM) encompasses a real range of music and a whole host of genres - nobody loves sub-genres like the dance-music industry - from deep house to dub techno, drum'n'bass to breaks. We're new music obsessives here at *What Hi-Fi?* too, and nothing makes us happier than finding a fresh dance track to have on repeat. And it does tend to be tracks - as more and more artists bow to the algorithm and forgo the full-length LP. Still, as our briefest of lists here proves, there are plenty of great dance music albums still being released.

Electronic music can sometimes be overlooked by audiophiles, which feels like a mistake bearing in mind that so much of it is made by producers who obsess over every detail of every instrument and sound. Here then are five of our new favourites that are sure to test all the key areas of your hi-fi set-up's sonic performance.

BRILLE TRIPLE TRANSIT

Praveen Sharma, aka Brille, first found fame as one half of Sepalcure (alongside Machinedrum). Now he is branching out on his own, and with *Triple Transit* delivers an album full of squelchy bass lines, broken beats and skewed synths. The album ticks off various tempos and moods, from introspective downtempo cuts to more upbeat, dancefloor-orientated tracks. The production levels are high, so there is plenty for any hi-fi system to think about, whether it's mastering the timing when dealt a flurry of hi-hats or delivering the detail and focus necessary to highlight the low-end rhythms.

SALUTE TRUE MAGIC

If you're in the northern hemisphere and struggling with the impending arrival of shorter days and colder nights, then here's the perfect musical antidote. Salute's debut album channels disco, Daft Punk, UK garage and plenty more, to deliver an energy-filled album of polished, poppy dance tracks with one eye on the club and another on the charts. Disclosure, Karma Kid and Leilah are just some of the guests to appear, helping to vary the feel and flow of the album, but rest assured the feel-good sound remains fairly relentless (in a good way). A great test of timing, it's sure to seek out any brightness in your system, too.

SKEE MASK RESORT

Skee Mask's *Compro* was widely lauded as one of the best albums of 2018. The prolific artist followed this up with 2021's *Pool*, which was a collection of new tracks and previously unreleased older tracks. Both are excellent and well worth anyone's time, but you would do just as well to start with this new long-player, *Resort*. The artist's sound remains clear, combining ambient atmospheres and melancholic sounds with uptempo drums. Much like the label upon which it is released, Ilian Tape, the overall sound is rooted in techno and brings with it a suitably clean and punchy delivery. There's scale, subtlety and plenty of panning sound effects, which also makes it ideal listening through a decent pair of headphones.

JAMIE XX TRUE WAVES

There was a time when a review wouldn't be published in *What Hi-Fi?* without a reference to a track on the debut album by The xx (if this passed you by, check it out immediately). Jamie, Romy and the rest of the band went on to explore other projects, however, which in Jamie xx's case saw him increase the energy and shuffle from the stage to the dancefloor.

After 2015's *In Colours*, Jamie is back with a set of accessible and anthemic dance tracks, full of sneaky samples, intricate drums and top-tier guest appearances (The Avalanches, Robyn and The xx). Expect scale, dynamics and interesting vocals - provided, of course, that your system can communicate it all successfully.

TIM REAPER & KLOKE IN FULL EFFECT

Hyperdub is one of the most influential underground music labels, responsible for seminal releases from the likes of Burial, Dean Blunt and Laurel Halo. But this is the label's first jungle album and it comes from two key players in the resurgent scene.

Many of these tracks may sound, at first listen, like they could have been released 30 years ago when jungle first emerged - especially if you're old like us and own a lot of those records - but they also sound fresh, full of new ideas and expertly produced. Most importantly, they sound great. Textbook breakbeats are met with moody pads and ravey vocal snippets. Whether you're new to the genre or familiar with the foundational producers, we challenge you to not get caught up in the euphoria of tracks such as *Continuities* and *Juice*.

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