

TEST BENCH

EDITED BY MARK HARRIS

STYLE HI-FIS

Just sit back, listen – and above all enjoy the view

Hi-fi systems are now often bought for their looks — and their digital ability — as much as their sound. We cast an eye and an ear over six

Stereo systems have evolved from a rack of ugly boxes you might want to hide in a corner to high-tech artworks taking centre stage in the living room. As buttons get shinier and cases get smaller, though, do today's stylish hi-fis sound as good as they look?

Although all these stereos play CDs and have traditional FM radios, the explosion in popularity of digital music means that you will often also find iPod docks, DAB radios, memory card readers and even wireless music connections on board.

There are stylish hi-fis to suit locations from a spare bedroom to an open-plan lounge. We tested three systems with loudspeakers built in and three with conventional, separate speakers.

The all-in-one Bose, Philips and Roth systems will suit smaller rooms. In larger rooms, the Teac, Arcam and Bang & Olufsen will shine. You can mount their speakers on the wall or on stands (ideally 6ft-9ft apart) to really appreciate the fact that your CDs are in stereo. The bigger drive units of these speakers handle higher volumes with ease and make the all-in-one units sound asthmatic.

The Roth Alfie plays DVDs as well as CDs, making it a basic one-box entertainment centre (just add a television), while the Teac, Arcam and Bang & Olufsen include a DAB digital radio. DAB gives a wider range of stations than FM and is much easier to tune, but offers poorer sound quality.

The Philips has a built-in hard drive for storing digital copies of your CD collection, and even the ability to send music wirelessly to a speaker station in another room. It works well but takes some setting up. All the systems offer at least one auxiliary input, so you can plug in a cassette deck or a dock (from £20) for an MP3 player.

The Roth has a built-in iPod dock that lets you control the player through the hi-fi's remote control, and Arcam and Bose offer optional (but expensive) docks to do the same. Finally, the Teac and Arcam have USB sockets for memory pens to play digital MP3 and WMA format files, and the Bang & Olufsen has an SD memory card slot. It and the Teac can record CD or radio as digital files.

Although style is a matter of taste, build quality is not — and here the units differ wildly. The Arcam is most impressive, sporting a thick aluminium fascia and strong steel case. The all-in-one designs proved easy to get going, simply plugging in the power cable and radio antennae. The Teac and Arcam needed their speakers wiring in — a two-minute job. The Bang & Olufsen was the most fiddly, with its socketry concealed in the interests of aesthetic purity.

Ultimately, however, most of these hi-fis fall short of the sonic excellence you could enjoy with a similarly priced system made up of a separate amplifier, CD player, tuner and speakers. Factor in ease of assembly, ease of use and easiness on the eye, though, and you might decide to downsize your sonic expectations in favour of some stylish easy listening.

JARGON BUSTER

DAB (Digital audio broadcasting, also known as digital radio). A radio system with more stations and content than FM, but patchy sound and reception

MP3, WMA Popular digital music files for playing tunes on portable players and computers

Secure Digital (SD) A memory card that can store digital music files

USB A standard socket for connecting memory devices that store digital music

Wi-fi Wireless technology in computers (and some gadgets) for transferring files

Reviews by David Price. Prices include Vat but not delivery



The latest hi-fis are a swish alternative to the traditional large, ugly, in-your-face systems

DAB HAND

★★★★★



Arcam Solo Mini and Muso speakers — typically £950, or £930 from www.hispek.com

Brilliant blend of fine design and superb sound

The box-like (90 x 230 x 350mm) Solo Mini houses a CD player, DAB/FM radio and a 2 x 25W amplifier. It deserves a prize for clarity as nothing other than essential controls, a large display and CD-loading slot disturb its smart silver metal finish. Matching Muso speakers have superb aluminium casework, magnetic metal grilles, and rubber mats for a secure footing. Together they make sweet, smooth music and sound more like high-end hi-fi than a humble lifestyle system. Optional iPod connectivity comes via Arcam's fine but pricey rDock (£170), or use the USB socket for MP3/WMA playback. The remote control is plasticky, with no illumination. The Arcam is costly but it raises the performance bar for stylish systems.

GLASS WITH CLASS

★★★★☆



Bang & Olufsen BeoSound 4 and BeoLab 4 speakers — £2,530 from www.bang-olufsen.com

Inspired styling, but you pay for it

Waving a hand before the zinc-bodied BeoSound 4 makes its glass cover lift gracefully to reveal well laid-out controls, a CD drive, a DAB and FM radio and a memory-card slot for playing and recording digital files. The matching BeoLab 4 loudspeakers (not pictured) are small and rugged but require a power supply each — you'll need three mains sockets altogether. The optional Beo4 remote, another object of minimalist beauty, is costly at about £150. The sound is clear and powerful, even at room-filling volumes, but it can't compete with the Arcam at less than half the price. Impressive to look at and use, but the 280 x 310 x 240mm BeoSound is more a work of art that plays music than a stereo that looks good.

MINI MOVIES

★★★★☆



Roth Audio Alfie — typically £400, or £360 from www.themp3company.co.uk

Great value do-it-all design

The Alfie may look like a clock-radio, but it packs a DVD/CD player, FM/AM radio and pop-out iPod dock in its compact (390 x 105 x 255mm) case. It also includes stereo speakers, a subwoofer and a large display. DVD picture quality is fine for a bedroom television, and CDs sound smooth, particularly when the treble is boosted. More impressive is the Alfie's tight, strong bass, even at high volume. But it's not totally effortless to use, as its touch-sensitive controls and muddled remote are both overcomplicated. Other demerits include the lack of DAB, average radio sound quality, and just one line input, although these are excused by the low price. Overall, then, a flexible, all-in-one home theatre stereo system.

WIRELESS CONNECTION

★★★★☆



Philips WACS7500 — typically £700, or £680 from www.laskys.com

Fiddly, feature-packed multi-room system

This large (614 x 72 x 272mm) audio centre distributes music without wires. Its base unit holds an 80GB hard drive that can store up to 1,500 albums of digital music, copied from its built-in CD player. Music is sent via wi-fi to up to five speaker stations (one supplied, then £200 each) around the home, and it can link up with an iPod, a USB device or a wireless home network — to play internet radio, for example. Sound is great for an all-in-one, with crisp highs and powerful bass. But using the plasticky Philips requires regular reference to the instruction book and endless button-pushing. It's versatile and powerful but too complicated unless you really need music in every room.

ROCK STEADY

★★★★☆



Teac CR-H255 and LS-H255 speakers — typically £340 or £315 from www.digitaldirect.co.uk

Sweet-sounding, versatile miniature hi-fi

This petite (215 x 110 x 359mm) Teac looks, feels and sounds like a scaled-down separates system. Its controls are very responsive and its bright display is one of the best here. There's a USB socket for playing or recording WMA/MP3 files, and a handy input — for attaching an iPod dock, say. Four more inputs and a connection for a subwoofer (not supplied) should please music fans. The Teac makes sweet music through its CD player, with its clean and punchy sound beating all but the Arcam and Bang & Olufsen. It comes well supplied with FM/AM and DAB tuners. Only the cluttered remote and fiddly timer detract from a cracking, well-built package.

WAVE GOODBYE

★★★☆☆



Bose Acoustic Wave Music System II — £885 from www.bose.co.uk

Lovely to use, overpriced and under-specified

With its striking Star Wars styling, this chunky (269 x 460 x 188mm) table-top system has the best CD and FM/AM sound quality of the all-in-ones, with power and clarity to spare. Controls are neatly laid out, and the large backlit display is easy to read. Its credit-card remote feels crisp and has decent range, but the plasticky case disappoints in view of the price, as does the lack of both DAB radio and tone controls. Despite integrated handles, the 6.5kg Bose is barely portable and the battery pack is a costly £95 option. There's only one stereo input, although you can buy an optional iPod connector (£99) and five-CD changer (£299). The ultimate clock radio, perhaps, but too expensive for what it is and does.