

Sound System Buying Guide

The Guide format is like an FAQ (frequently asked questions), with the answers taken together forming a great basis for picking your favorite components. With this information, you can come to Audio Systems (or go from store to store) and quickly decide which systems or components are best for you.

- 1. How can I tell a good system from one not as good? Or, What kind of stereo will give me pleasure for the longest time?**
- 2. Can I tell how good something sounds by reading a certain specification or group of specifications?**
- 3. Can I learn which product is best for me using online forums or reviews?**
- 4. I don't think I'll hear any differences in different components. I haven't been able to before when I listened to two different units.**
- 5. Is there some formula I should use to know how much to spend on each part of my system?**
- 6. Which part of the system is most important?**
- 7. I want a good system, but I can't afford to buy it all at once. What is the best way to start and then upgrade my system?**
- 8. Can I use a 100 watt amplifier with a 60 watt speaker?**
- 9. Can I hook my television, DVD, cable or satellite to my sound system?**
- 10. Should I buy separate components instead of a receiver or integrated amplifier?**
- 11. Should I get a surround sound receiver?**
- 12. Do I need a subwoofer to get good bass response?**
- 13. Do the audio cables make a difference in the sound?**
- 14. OK, now I know more than I did. But what if I still have more questions?**

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1. How can I tell a good system from one not as good? Or, What kind of stereo will give me pleasure for the longest time?

The short answer is: the kind that sounds the closest to the original live performance.

Let's go a little deeper, though. What is it about a live performance makes it really exciting? The best thing about the best live performances is the interaction between the performers-- each one doing their best, and listening to the playing (or singing) of the others to enhance the entire performance. Assuming the recordings are of really good performances, then, the best system will let you hear just how good the performance is. You will be able to hear the relationship of the various voices and instruments to each other. The rhythms of the performers will all propel the music, not break up the music's flow.

So, listen to the system as if it were a live performance. Which system plays the best performance from the players? The quality of the performance counts far more than the quantity of sound. If none of the systems do very well, try better equipment to move to a level that does thrill, excite, or move you. If your system is good enough, it will expand your musical horizons. You will be able to listen to and appreciate music that a mediocre system would blur together.

2. Can I tell how good something sounds by reading a certain specification or group of specifications?

No. No one in the world can tell exactly how an audio component sounds just by reading specifications. So, you just listen to the different contenders to see which one pleases you the most. In the same way, you have to drive cars, try mattresses, and play musical instruments to find out which is best. Fortunately, listening is fun, since you are doing exactly what you will be doing when you get home with your new component or system. You may be surprised how quickly you can tell which one you like best, when you listen to it.

3. Can I learn which product is best for me using online forums or reviews?

Well... only if you would take someone else's opinion for which ice cream you liked best: vanilla, chocolate, or strawberry. Or, if you would take someone else's opinion to determine your best friends or girlfriends/boyfriends. Reading opinions is interesting, but is no substitute for your own personal experience. In the end, only you can decide what is best for you, and you can only do that by personal comparison. With audio equipment, that means you have to hear it. If it doesn't really make much difference to you what you get, then fine... but it seems unlikely that you would be reading an audio equipment buying guide like this one.

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4. I don't think I'll hear any differences in different components. I haven't been able to before when I listened to two different units.

You'll probably be surprised to find that you can hear the difference between two units-- if it's quiet enough to hear (like it would be in your own home). This is the worst part of shopping in an electronics superstore. It's so noisy, you can't hear any differences between different components.

This is like buying a car without being able to drive it. Our experience is that anyone who can tell the difference between two brands of vanilla ice cream, can tell the difference between two different shirt fabrics, and so on, will be able to hear the difference between two different CD players or two different amplifiers or ...

5. Is there some formula I should use to know how much to spend on each part of my system?

No. Sometimes you will read an article advising you to spend so much on the speakers, so much on the amplifier, and so on. This kind of formula is so general as to be useless. A good store will be able to help you pick out a system that will give you the best sound for the money, considering your tastes, your room size, and the number of sources you are going to use.

6. Which part of the system is most important?

The source of the music (the CD player, LP player, or FM tuner (radio)) is the most important part of the sound system, because all the parts that follow the source in the chain depend on the information available initially. The next most important component is the amplifier, and then finally the speakers.

But wait, you say, I've always heard the speakers were most important. It's true that the speakers are the last component before your ears, and, of course, you can certainly hear differences in the performance of various speakers. Loudspeakers, though, are totally dependent on what is sent to them for their performance. Put another way, the loudspeakers do not know what note to play, they can only play 100% of whatever is sent to them from the source and amplifier. If the signal sent to the loudspeakers is not very good, then not very good is all you can get out of the speaker.

You'll find that good inexpensive speakers with a good source and amplifier will be more fun to listen to than more expensive speakers with a poorer source and amplifier. The more expensive speakers will show you even better what the problems are with the source and amplifier. Try it. A sound system that has good sound with small speakers is more fun than a system with mediocre sound, but using big speakers. That's the way it works.

7. I want a good system, but I can't afford to buy it all at once. What is the best way to start and then upgrade my system?

Not surprisingly, the best way to start a good system is with the most important part... the source. If you have a really good source component, the system will be enjoyable even with modest amplification and speakers. Then, as your budget allows, you can get a better amplifier, and later, the better speakers that complete your basic sound system. After the basic system is complete, you may want to add surround sound for movies, or perhaps sound for other rooms in your home.

By following this upgrade path (source to amplifier to speakers) you will

always have an enjoyable sound. On the other hand, if you get good speakers but skimp on the source or amplifier, the sound overall will be disappointing, because the speakers can only play the not-so-good sound of the source.

8. Can I use a 100 watt amplifier with a 60 watt speaker?

Yes. Loudspeakers are hurt more often with too little power, rather than too much power. In any case, if the speaker sounds like it is distorting, or in distress (making noises not related to the music), turn the system down. This simple rule is always effective.

9. Can I hook my television, DVD, cable or satellite to my sound system?

Sure, and you should, if you want better sound from video sources. You don't need a surround sound system to get better sound from TV and movies. Just think how much better your stereo amplifier and speakers sound than the 4 to 6 speakers found in TV sets. You'll get far more enjoyment out of a good video sound system because the voices and music will sound more realistic-- for the same reason a good audio system is so much more fun than a mediocre one.

10. Should I buy separate components instead of a receiver or integrated amplifier?

The best reason to get separates is that they can sound better than a receiver or integrated amplifier. On the other hand, the separates are almost certainly going to be more expensive than multiple components on a single chassis. The separates can sound better than multiple components on a single chassis because you get separate power supplies specific to the components task, less background noise by separating the circuits, and more space and budget for the circuitry. Obviously, you can only choose which is best for you by listening to see if the difference in performance is worth the difference in price.

11. Should I get a surround sound receiver?

Maybe. A surround sound receiver has everything you need for movie and TV surround in one box: all five (or more) channels of amplification, plus a decoder to send the different sounds to different speakers. Sounds appealing, right?

There are drawbacks, however. For the many people who listen to music as much or more than listen to movies, the overall quality of the sound is going to suffer by using a surround sound receiver. When you get this many items in one box, for a relatively low price, the quality of each part is not going to be that great. Stereo sound is only as good as the weakest link, so a receiver with several weak links will generally yield a mediocre result, compared to the same amount of money spent on a two channel system for music, dialogue, and sound effects.

Then, too, many movies do not have interesting surround sound information, so the money invested in the decoder and extra amps and speakers doesn't do anything useful. How are you going to use your system? If you will primarily listen to movies and TV, then a surround sound receiver may well be the best way for you. If you mix music and video, or prefer the highest quality sound without the effects, then you will probably enjoy a good two channel system more.

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12. Do I need a subwoofer to get good bass response?

One thing is certain-- most movies are a lot more fun with a good, powered subwoofer. A powered subwoofer has its own amplifier, just for the subwoofer. For several reasons, the powered type of subwoofer is the only one worth considering. Music reproduction with a subwoofer is generally better, but it is not improved as much as movie soundtracks. In the movie soundtracks, the bass is often not part of a musical event, but just a way to move your body around. In Jurassic Park, for instance, the footfalls of Tyrannosaurus Rex are just low frequency boomp, boomp, boomp.

Music, on the other hand, must have a lowest frequency sound and the harmonic structure to make it musical. For music, a loud bass sound is not good enough, because the bass sound is part of the higher frequency notes that make the sound of instrument or voice. If your system is primarily for music reproduction, a subwoofer is probably not necessary. If you want the best movie soundtrack sound, then you should get a subwoofer.

13. Do the audio cables make a difference in the sound?

Yes, they do. The cables that come with your components for free, as you might guess, are not the best cables. You don't have to spend a fortune on good cables, but you should regard the transfer of information from one component to the next as important. Ask us for recommendations, and try out some good cables when you get your system.

14. OK, now I know more than I did. But what if I still have more questions?

Please ask us! As you see, we specialize in home audio-video systems. We really enjoy our own systems and are happy to answer any questions you may have. You can send us an email, call us at 512-451-5736, or most useful of all, come in to see us.

We believe that every person wants the most for their money. In stereo systems, the most for your money means the closest to the original sound, for the amount of money spent, and with components that are reliable. While many companies make pretty good products, you don't want just "pretty good" for your sound system. You want the very best equipment for the money spent.

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