

ADD A TOUCH OF CLASS TO YOUR MP3 MUSIC

Stand-alone speaker systems lend hi-fi quality to portable tunes. David Price listens to five of the best



BEST FOR JAZZ AND BLUES
QUAD 11L-A ACTIVE £599

These 13in-high speakers boast 100W of amplification, but no gimmicky remote controls or custom covers — these are purpose-designed hi-fi. No other speakers on test delivered such a rich and warm sound, making them ideal for atmospheric jazz and soul. For best results you will need stands, but a switch that reduces bass and speaker vibration means they still work well on bookshelves or desks.

Verdict: Gloriously rich and natural performance — but you pay for it.

★★★★★
www.iaguk.com



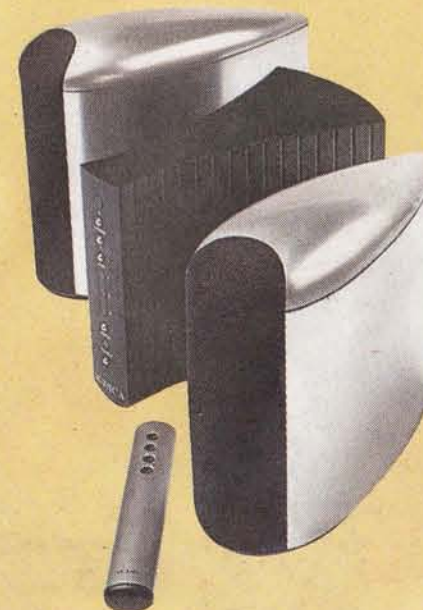
BEST BUY

BEST FOR CLASSIC ROCK
AKTIMATE MINI £399

The gloss black or white cabinets are sturdy, and the same can be said for the sound: despite the lack of a subwoofer, the built-in 40W amp helps the AktiMate Minis thump out the heaviest rock tunes at high volume without a hint of distortion. There is finesse and subtlety too, with a particularly delicate quality to female voices. The downside is that these 12in-high white speakers are of a bland design, but at least they blend in with most living rooms.

Verdict: Brilliant all-round sound, ideal for larger rooms and party duties.

★★★★★
www.aktimate.com

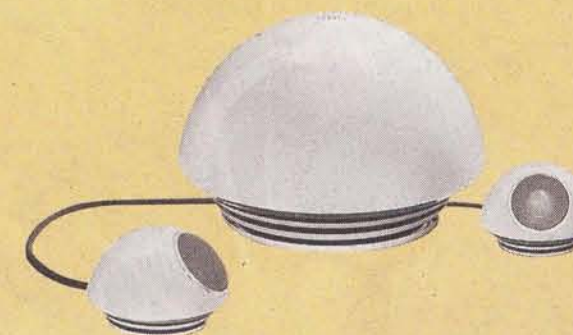


BEST FOR INDIE ROCK
AUDICA MPS-1 £99

The amp and two speakers fit together to form an all-in-one system, or you can pull out the speakers for wider stereo imaging. Built from polished aluminium, the central 25W amp is well connected with three line inputs, plus USB and Firewire sockets. It will drive the speakers to surprisingly high volumes, but the Audicas are best on delicacy and detail, better able to capture the melancholic feel of indie bands rather than rock dinosaurs. However, there's little bass power.

Verdict: Compact and good-looking, and now available at less than half their original price.

★★★★☆
www.richersounds.co.uk



BEST FOR POP MUSIC
JBL SPOT £75

A 24W amplifier/subwoofer central unit drives two 4in-wide satellite speakers which have interchangeable black or white covers (other colours can be bought separately). At 6W per satellite it's not the most powerful system, but its punchiness and pin-sharp clarity suit pop music well. However, it can't deliver really low bass or fill large rooms with sound, so is best kept for smaller spaces. And the treble isn't as delicate as some others here.

Verdict: A bouncy and enjoyable sub/sat package with adaptable looks.

★★★★☆
www.jbl.com



BEST FOR CLASSICAL
ADAM AUDIO A5 £399

Unusual "ribbon-design" treble units make the A5s well suited to classical music, with a delicacy that communicates the atmosphere and scale of a full orchestra. The large bass units integrate well, giving a natural feel with great impact — thanks to a fine 25W amplifier that doesn't distort even on the crescendos. The result is a big sound from medium-sized (11in high) speakers. The utilitarian styling won't be for everyone, however.

Verdict: Excellent high-end speakers that are sophisticated enough for classical, yet punchy enough for punk.

★★★★★
www.unityaudio.co.uk

JARGON BUSTER

Active speakers

All these speakers are "active", which means they come equipped with a built-in amplifier, so you don't have to get involved with any other hi-fi kit in order to get them functioning. You simply connect one speaker to the other, and feed the pair a music signal, typically through a 3.5mm mini-jack plug and socket (although the Quad and Adam speakers are fitted with higher-quality RCA phono connections for which you'll need a different lead costing about £6).

Power

Speaker power is measured in terms of watts (W) per channel. However, that doesn't provide a straightforward indication of how loud the speakers actually sound. The addition of a subwoofer, for example, affects the total volume.

There is also the quality of the amplifier to be considered. As an example, if the amplifier puts out 50W but causes sound distortion when it's approaching that maximum output, some of its rated power can be considered to be effectively unusable. Because of this, a good, lower-power unit may well be preferable to a bad but higher-output one.