



# From Hollyoaks to Hollywood

Bringing the silver screen experience into your living room doesn't have to cost blockbuster prices

For as little as £100, you could change the way you watch (and listen to) TV forever. In our latest test of home cinema kits, the bargain Philips HTS3154 (6) performs admirably against its higher-priced rivals.

A home cinema kit is the easiest way to bring the sound and picture quality of the movies into your home. A kit usually contains an amp, six speakers, a radio tuner and DVD player.

We tested 34 models and we highlight 16 of the very latest in the table on p68. Visit [www.which.co.uk/homecinema](http://www.which.co.uk/homecinema) for details of all the models.

## Setting up

Correctly locating the surround speakers is critical, to get the best from your system. In a square room with the TV located along

one wall and the sofa on the opposite side, the front speakers should be placed on either side of the TV, with the centre speaker below the screen. The rear speakers sit just behind and to the left and right of the sofa, with the sub-woofer along one of the walls.

To see diagrams showing how to cope with different layouts, visit [www.which.co.uk/homecinema](http://www.which.co.uk/homecinema) or check 'Surround sounds', *Which?*, July 2007, p44.

## Wireless future

One of the problems with home cinema kits is the number of cables you need to wire them up. To cut down the clutter, we'll probably see more kits with wireless speakers in the future.

An alternative is the Denon DHT-FS3 X-Space (right), which is unique among the systems we

tested. It consists of a single bar-shaped cabinet which you place below your TV screen, and a separate sub-woofer. It crams six mini-speakers into the cabinet with amplifiers to drive them, and gives the impression that there are speakers located all around you. This avoids the need to run lots of cable round the room.

However, in our tests we weren't overly impressed. Sound quality was good but surround-sound was less impressive.

If you are looking for a home cinema kit but don't have much space, check 'Which should you choose?' on p68.



## 72% Panasonic SC-PT550 £280

This top-performing 5.1 system has excellent stereo sound, which few others could match. Crucially, it dealt well with surround-sound effects well. Each speaker can deliver more than 50W of power, which is ample even in a large room.

The kit, which features tall, floor-standing speakers for the front channels, is easy to set up and use. The simple instruction manual helps.

DVD picture quality is a notch down on the best but still pretty good. Cheapest online.

**WORTH KNOWING** Attaching the cables to the speakers is a little tricky as the clamps are fiddly.

Available Online, specialist retailers **Tuner FM RDS** Yes **Sky/Virgin box input** Yes **USB** Yes **Speaker output** 50W

WHICH? BEST BUY



## 70% Samsung HT-X250 £300

The Samsung is up there with the best when it comes to stereo playback from pop and classical CDs. Crucially, it also delivers the goods in full surround-sound mode when playing back blockbuster DVDs.

DVD picture quality, while not as good as the best on test, was perfectly acceptable.

The FM tuner lacks RDS and there's no AM reception. It's fine with strong stations but may struggle a bit with weaker signals. Cheapest online.

**WORTH KNOWING** It takes a long time to load and read a DVD when you insert the disc.

Available Online, specialist retailers **Tuner FM RDS** No **Sky/Virgin box input** Yes **USB** Yes **Speaker output** 20W

WHICH? BEST BUY

## Jargon buster

### Translating the language of home cinema into plain English

■ **2.1 SYSTEM** This kit has only two front speakers and a sub-woofer to reduce clutter and wiring. Electronic processing creates a pseudo-surround-sound effect.

■ **3.1 SYSTEM** Variation on 2.1. An additional front central speaker is included.

■ **5.1 SYSTEM** Conventional setup, with three front speakers, two rear and a sub-woofer. Best for full surround-sound effect.

■ **RADIO DATA SYSTEM (RDS)** Basic models just show the station name you're tuned to. More advanced models switch to traffic alerts when they're broadcast on other stations.

■ **SATELLITE SPEAKERS** The smaller surround-sound speakers that you place around your living room.

■ **SUB-WOOFER** The larger single speaker that provides the deeper

bass notes for surround-sound effects. Its position is less critical.

■ **SURROUND AMPLIFIER** This decodes the surround-sound information and drives the speakers. This unit is often combined with a DVD player and radio tuner.

■ **TUNER** The radio often built into the surround-sound amplifier. All the tuners receive FM broadcasts, but only some receive AM.



## 71% JVC TH-D5 £245

A 5.1 system from JVC that delivers great surround-sound effects and solid sound quality.

WHICH?  
BEST BUY

The kit is quite easy to set up, with conveniently located sockets, and the instruction manual is relatively straightforward to follow.

The DVD player's picture quality is excellent. However, the tuner is not one of the best performers in our test. Cheapest online.

**WORTH KNOWING** DVD picture quality can be a little juddery in slow motion or when searching in fast-forward.

Available Online, specialist retailers **Tuner** FM/AM **RDS** Yes **Sky/Virgin box input** Yes **USB** Yes **Speaker output** 10W



## 70% JVC TH-D7 £389

Another model featuring floor-standing speakers, this JVC produced good results in our surround-sound tests, but the stereo sound quality is only satisfactory.

WHICH?  
BEST BUY

General DVD viewing is great, but the search facility can make the picture a bit jerky.

The magnet in the centre speaker could cause some colour distortion in your picture, so if you have a CRT TV don't place it too close to the screen. Cheapest online.

**WE LIKE** The sub-woofer was one of the loudest on test.

Available Online, specialist retailers **Tuner** FM/AM **RDS** Yes **Sky/Virgin box input** Yes **USB** Yes **Speaker Output** 10W



## 69% Philips HTS3154 £100

The Philips kit proves you don't need to spend a fortune to get a quality system. It's a simple 5.1 system that delivers good sound quality and decent surround-sound effects.

The DVD picture quality is excellent, with outstanding slow-motion pictures in both forward and reverse.

The tuner clearly picks out stations, offers 40 presets, but has only a basic RDS. Cheapest at Currys and Tesco.

**WORTH KNOWING** The manual is helpful and detailed, with a good colour guide, making this kit quite easy to set up.

WHICH?  
BEST BUY

Available Online, high street and specialist retailers **Tuner** FM/AM **RDS** Yes **Sky/Virgin box input** No **USB** Yes **Speaker output** 5W



## 69% Pioneer DCS-370 £380

Our listening panel were impressed with the sound quality from both CDs and DVDs on this 5.1 kit, which features floor-standing speakers. The surround-sound effects are also excellent.

DVD pictures are clear and slow-motion images are smooth in forward and reverse. But when using the search mode, it tends to zip through scenes rather too fast. Cheapest at Comet and Currys.

**WE LIKE** Bass and treble can be easily adjusted, and the tuner has advanced RDS capabilities.

WHICH?  
BEST BUY

Available Online, high street and specialist retailers **Tuner** FM/AM **RDS** Yes **Sky/Virgin box input** No **USB** Yes **Speaker output** 6W



## 70% Philips HTS3154 3357/12 £180

This system delivers reasonable stereo sound on pop and classical CDs but it really excels on film surround-sound tracks, where it's up there with the very best.

It's also straightforward to set up, although, like some other models, it has tall floor-standing speakers for the rear channels, which won't suit all living rooms

The DVD player is good and features excellent slow motion. Cheapest at Argos, Comet, Currys and Tesco.

**WE LIKE** At £180, it's our second cheapest Best Buy.

Available Online, high street and specialist retailers **Tuner** FM/AM **RDS** Yes **Sky/Virgin box input** Yes **USB** Yes **Speaker Output** 18W

WHICH?  
BEST BUY



## 69% Sony DAV-IS10 £430

The Sony distinguished itself with great surround sound delivered, amazingly, by five tiny speakers. If you're looking for a system where the speakers won't dominate your living room, this is an excellent choice.

Stereo sound quality when playing CDs was acceptable but is much better when used in surround-sound mode for DVDs.

It also comes with an FM/AM radio tuner with 30 presets. Cheapest at Argos, Comet and John Lewis.

**WE LIKE** Like several other Sonys on test, this has low power consumption.

WHICH?  
BEST BUY

Available Online, high street and specialist retailers **Tuner** FM/AM **RDS** Yes **Sky/Virgin box input** Yes **USB** No **Speaker output** 15.5W

## Which should you choose?



### Best for easy setup

**SONY DAV-IS10 £430** Like a few other kits on test, this Best Buy (8) can automatically set itself up. It comes with a microphone that you place in your listening position. Test tones are fired from each speaker and the processor cleverly works out how far away they are and sets the system up.

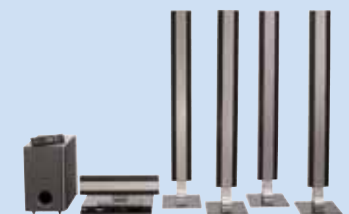
### Best for small room

**SONY DAV-IS10 £430** If you're short on space yet still want top-quality sound, this system (8) delivers great surround sound through five tiny satellite speakers. The larger sub-woofer has taken on some of the work normally done by the satellite speakers, which makes its placement rather more crucial than usual. For example, you can't place it below a table.



### Best on a tight budget

**PHILIPS HTS3154 £100** This worthy Best Buy (6) costs only £100. This system, with tuner and DVD player, can't match the Panasonic (1) for stereo sound, but it punches above its weight where it matters most and delivers impressive surround sound.



### Best for home cinema recording

**LG HR902TA £480** This kit (9) has excellent sound quality and narrowly missed being a Best Buy. It features a built-in DVD recorder and 160GB hard-disk drive that can be used to record and store video or audio tracks.

MODEL		PRICE (£)	SPEAKERS
1	PANASONIC SC-PT550	280	5.1
2	JVC TH-D5	245	5.1
3	JVC TH-D7	389	5.1
4	PHILIPS HTS3357/12	180	5.1
5	SAMSUNG HT-X250	300	5.1
6	PHILIPS HTS3154	100	5.1
7	PIONEER DCS-370	380	5.1
8	SONY DAV-IS10	430	5.1
9	LG HR902TA	480	5.1
10	SONY DAV-DZ20	175	5.1
11	PANASONIC SC-PT150EBS	119	5.1
12	DENON S-102	800	2.1
13	JVC TH-U1	200	3.1
14	SONY DAV-X10	699	2.1
15	ACOUSTIC SOLUTIONS DS534	100	5.1
16	WHARFEDALE DS-5957	80	2.1

## Don't Buy

**Wharfedale DS-5957 Home Cinema Kit**



At £80, the Wharfedale (16) may be cheap, but it's no bargain. With the worst surround sound on test, no tuner and poor instructions, we believe that this is one to avoid. For only £20 more, you can buy the top-performing Philips HTS3154 (6) so, even if you're on a budget, there's no need to compromise on quality.

## How we test



Using *The Matrix* and *Handel* to test our kits

### Classic scenes and classical sounds

To assess their surround-sound abilities, our experts watch film scenes rich in surround effects, such as the pod-racing scene from *Star Wars* – *The Phantom Menace* (above, left) and the helicopter shoot-out from

*The Matrix* (right). We also test stereo sound with tracks ranging from Pink Floyd's *Another Brick in the Wall* to opera by Handel. A raft of technical tests backs up these subjective ratings (see table for more details).

### OUR RESEARCH

When choosing home cinema kits to test, we consult manufacturers, market intelligence reports and industry experts, then check availability on the high street and online. We include top-sellers and new releases from the most popular brands, those with innovative features and interesting models from lesser-known brands.

### Contacts

**Acoustic Solutions** 0871 230 7747  
www.acousticsolutions.com

**Denon** 01753 680568; www.denon.co.uk

**JVC** 0870 330 5000; www.jvc.co.uk

**LG** 0870 873 5454; www.lge.co.uk

**Panasonic** 0844 844 3852

www.panasonic.co.uk

**Philips** 0870 900 9070; www.philips.co.uk

**Pioneer** 0870 600 1539

www.pioneer.co.uk

**Samsung** 0870 726 7864

www.samsung.co.uk

**Sony** 0870 240 6354; www.sony.co.uk

**Wharfedale** 0845 458 0011

www.wharfedale.co.uk

CATION		WHICH? TEST PERFORMANCE							SCORE %
TUNER BANDS	AUTOMATIC SETUP	TUNER	STEREO SOUND	SURROUND EFFECT	SURROUND SOUND	PICTURE	SETTING UP AND TUNING	EASE OF USE	
FM		★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	72
FM/AM		★★★	★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	71
FM/AM		★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	70
FM/AM		★★★★	★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	70
FM		★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	70
FM/AM		★★★	★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	69
FM/AM		★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	69
FM/AM	✓	★★★★	★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	69
FM/AM		★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	67
FM/AM		★★★	★★★	★★★★★	★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	65
FM		★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	64
FM/AM		★★★★	★★★	★★	★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	60
FM/AM		★★★★	★★★★	★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★	★★★★	59
FM/AM	✓	★★★	★★★	★★	★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	55
n/a		n/a	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★	n/a	★★★★	★★★★	53
n/a		n/a	★★	★	★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★	39

## USING THE TABLE

The more stars the better.

## Specification

**Price** For Best Buys we give the cheapest widely available high-street price as we went to press. If we couldn't find them at major high-street retailers, we give the most common online price. Prices for other models are a guide to what you might pay. Visit [www.which.co.uk/shopping](http://www.which.co.uk/shopping) for the latest prices. **Speakers** 5.1 systems come with six speakers. 3.1 has four speakers. 2.1 systems come with three. **Automatic setup** ✓ indicates that the system uses a microphone temporarily placed at the listening position to perform all delay and volume adjustments automatically.

## Test performance

**Tuner** Based on the ability to pick up weak stations and eliminate unwanted signals and noise. **Stereo sound** Expert panel assessment of sound quality when used as a stereo system.

**Surround effect** Expert panel view of the surround-sound effect. **Surround sound** Expert panel assessment of sound quality when used in surround-sound mode. ★★★★★ means audio was faithfully reproduced with little distortion. **Picture** Expert panel view of DVD picture quality. **Setting up and tuning** How easy it is to set up the tuner, DVD player and amplifier and to electronically adjust the system to the layout of the room. **Ease of use** Includes instructions, remote control and using the system and its components once all is set up.

## Score

This ignores price and is based on:	
Performance	70%
Ease of use	15%
Features and connections	10%
Power consumption	5%

## How to buy

Before you part with your cash, here are some tips to help you buy your ideal home cinema system



### ■ CABLES

Setting up six speakers around your room can be very disruptive as you'll need to run cables to each one. 2.1 systems are less disruptive, but you'll be compromising on surround-sound effect. Speaker sizes vary enormously. If you've got a small room, consider a Best Buy with small speakers such as the Sony DAV-IS10 (8).

### ■ SEPARATES

Most kits come with a built-in DVD player and tuner. If you already have these items, you may want to consider a kit that doesn't come with these. All our Best Buys have both. See [www.which.co.uk/homecinema](http://www.which.co.uk/homecinema) for more on separates.

### ■ BOX FRIENDLY

Some films on Sky or Virgin are broadcast in surround sound. If you want to be able to hear this, you'll need a kit that you can connect to your set-top box. Not all Best



Buys can do this. Avoid the Philips HTS3154 (6) and Pioneer DCS-370 (7), if this is important to you.

### ■ IPOD FRIENDLY

Some kits have special USB inputs so that you can connect an MP3 player. All Best Buys except the Sony DAV-IS10 (8) offer this.



### ■ WARRANTY

When buying in a shop or online you may be offered an extended warranty. However, Which? research shows that these are generally not worth paying extra for.

## WHICH? ONLINE

Check out our website at [www.which.co.uk/homecinema](http://www.which.co.uk/homecinema) for more information and for 41 models previously tested. This information is regularly updated with new models, availability and prices.