



# A sound choice

Bring your TV viewing to life with home cinema kits that are big on sound, not price

**W**atching a film on TV can be underwhelming when compared with seeing the same film in the cinema. A lot of this is to do with the sound.

Speakers placed round the walls of a cinema bombard you with sound giving the impression that you're in the thick of the action. This is an experience that TV speakers fail to reproduce.

A home cinema system tries to recreate the big-screen experience in your living room. The surround-sound information used by cinemas is also held on DVDs, so a suitable system can decode it and feed it to speakers in your living room.

The simplest and cheapest route to home cinema is to buy a kit that contains all you need. A kit usually includes an amplifier, six speakers, cables and, usually, a radio tuner and DVD player.

Some kits offer an option of wireless rear speakers to reduce cabling. We've tested a mixture with and without wireless speakers to get an idea of any shortcomings.



**Plunging into the world of home cinema needn't cost a fortune. Our cheapest Best Buy, the Philips HTS3154 (£140) is more than £450 cheaper than the most expensive home cinema system that we recommend, the Sony DAV-IS10 (£599).**



## 'IT MAKES YOU FEEL MORE INVOLVED'

**Lucy Elmes, 26, public relations account executive**

Lucy loves watching sports, films and music programmes on TV and DVD, but had never tried a home cinema system. We gave her Panasonic's SC-PT860EB for a month to see how she liked it.

Lucy found the system easy to set up. Cables are colour coded and speaker volumes automatically set. However, she wasn't impressed that the kit didn't include a Scart or HDMI cable, meaning that she had to go back to the shops before hooking it up to her TV.

'To spend over £300 on a home cinema system and then fork out another £20 for a cable is annoying.'

Lucy found the system easy to use with clear instructions. Hooking it up and using an iPod via the docking station was simple as well.

The quality of surround-sound and effects impressed her, the stereo sound less so.

She watched a variety of DVDs and surround-sound programming from Sky and said of the home-cinema system: 'It makes you feel more involved.'

But Lucy added: 'Having a home cinema system is a nice addition, but I wouldn't say that it's essential. I'd probably upgrade our TV before splashing out on surround-sound.'

## Expert view

**Our expert Dave Holes looks at wireless systems and the impact of Blu-ray**

■ Many of us are reluctant to clutter our homes with more cables. Because of this, home cinema systems have evolved with wireless rear speakers out of the box, or as an option.

The longest cables are needed to power the rear speakers, so doing away with these is an attractive idea. With

a wireless system you won't need cabling to the amplifier, but you will still need a nearby mains socket and power cables to power your rear speakers.

■ The rise of high-definition Blu-ray DVD has had an effect on the home cinema market.

A few Blu-ray kits, such as the Samsung HT-BD2R, have

been launched. Even the cheaper kits currently cost close to £1,000, which is probably too much for most of us to afford.

However, prices are already falling and we'll no doubt see Blu-ray become the dominant force in home cinema in a few years.



PHOTOGRAPHY CHARLES BEST, JOHN TRENHOLM



## 71% JVC TH-D5 £245

This was the clear winner in our tests thanks to great surround-sound effects.

The stereo sound when playing CDs is less impressive, but perfectly acceptable. It also comes with a DVD player and a reasonable FM/AM tuner.

We found this system straightforward to set up and the instructions are relatively easy to follow.

It has both Scart and HDMI outputs and a headphone socket.

There's even a USB input, so you'll be able to attach a memory stick to the system.

The speakers deliver around 10W of output per channel in surround mode – plenty for most rooms. It was cheapest online.

**WORTH KNOWING** DVD picture quality is excellent but can judder in slow motion or in fast forward.

Available Online Tuner FM/AM RDS Yes Digital input Optical USB Yes Full automatic set-up No Wireless rear speakers No



## 69% Philips HTS3154 £140

You don't need to spend a fortune to get decent sound, as this simple Best Buy proves. It delivers good quality and decent surround-sound effects. The amplifier lacks a little power, delivering only about 5W to each speaker. But this is fine for the average living room.

You can preset up to 40 radio stations and there is a USB input for connecting a memory stick. However, there's no digital input

so you can't connect it to a Sky box or any other surround-sound source.

The manual is helpful and detailed, making it quite easy to set up. The system was cheapest online when we checked.

**WE FOUND** The DVD picture quality is excellent.

Available Online Tuner FM/AM RDS Yes Digital input None USB Yes Full automatic set-up No Wireless rear speakers No



## 69% LG HT903TA £300

Stereo and surround-sound from the floorstanding front and rear speakers is good and surround effects are excellent.

Unusually, this has a separate DVD and tuner section that sits on a supplied stand while the amplifier is in the subwoofer.

The DVD player's picture quality is good. You can preset up to 50 FM radio stations and it copes well with weak station signals. However, you won't be able to get AM radio.

There's no headphone socket, but you can connect a USB memory stick. It will link to a Sky or Freesat receiver, so you can make the most of surround-sound programmes. Setting speaker distances is confusing, but once set-up, it's quite easy to use. It was cheapest at Argos.

**WE LIKE** It uses very little power in standby, just 0.6 Watts.

Available Argos Tuner FM RDS Yes Digital input Optical USB Yes Full automatic set-up No Wireless rear speakers No



## 69% Pioneer DCS-370 £217

We were impressed by the sound from CDs and DVDs with this system and the surround-sound effects are excellent.

DVD images are clear and slow motion is smooth going forward and back, though a bit too quick in search mode.

There's a Scart and HDMI output as well as a USB port and a headphone socket, but the system lacks a digital input for connecting an external

surround-sound source, such as a Sky box. The remote is clearly labelled, but the display is quite hard to read. It was cheapest online when we checked. **WORTH KNOWING** Power output in surround mode is limited, but should be enough for a normal living room.

Available Online Tuner FM/AM RDS Yes Digital input None USB Yes Full automatic set-up No Wireless rear speakers No





## 69% Sony DAV-IS10 £599



If you don't want speakers that dominate your living room, you'll like the Sony's five tiny ones (4.5x5.5x4 cm). These deliver very good surround-sound and acceptable stereo.

The larger than normal subwoofer takes on some of the role normally played by the other speakers, so it's crucial for it to be in the right place. You can't put it below a table, for example, as you

can with a more conventional 5.1 system. You get FM and AM radio, and MP3 players can be connected although you will need a Digital Media Port adaptor to be able to do this. It was cheapest at John Lewis when we checked.

**WE LIKE** It consumes little power in standby and in use.

**Available** John Lewis **Tuner** FM/AM **RDS** Yes **Digital input** Optical and Coaxial **USB** No **Full automatic set-up** Yes **Wireless rear speakers** No



## 68% Panasonic SC-PT560EB £350

This produces some of the best stereo sound we've heard from a home cinema system. We were also impressed by the surround-sound quality and effect. You can wall-mount the front speakers.

You can link the system to an iPod, there's a headphone socket and a USB input.

The DVD player takes DVD-Ram discs and picture quality is good, but you can't resume watching

from where you stopped. You have to set the speaker volumes and delay times manually, but once that is done, the system's easy to use. It was cheapest at Comet when we checked.

**WE FOUND** Wireless rear speakers cost £100 more.

We haven't tested them.

**Available** Comet **Tuner** FM **RDS** Yes **Digital input** Optical **USB** Yes **Full automatic set-up** No **Wireless rear speakers** Optional

MODEL		SPECIFICATION							WHICH? TEST PERFORMANCE				
		PRICE (£)	TUNER	RDS	DIGITAL INPUT	USB INPUT	FULL AUTOMATIC SET-UP	WIRELESS REAR SPEAKERS	TUNER PERFORMANCE	SURROUND SOUND EFFECT	SURROUND SOUND QUALITY	STEREO SOUND QUALITY	DVD PICTURE QUALITY
1	JVC TH-D5	245	FM, AM	✓	Optical	✓			★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★
2	LG HT903TA	300	FM	✓	Optical	✓			★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
3	PHILIPS HTS3154	140	FM, AM	✓	None	✓			★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★
4	PIONEER DCS-370	217	FM, AM	✓	None	✓			★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★
5	SONY DAV-IS10	599	FM, AM	✓	Coaxial;Optical		✓		★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★
6	PANASONIC SC-PT560EB	350	FM	✓	Optical	✓		Opt	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
7	SAMSUNG HT-X715	372	FM		Optical	✓	✓	Opt	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
8	PANASONIC SC-PT860EB	343	FM	✓	Optical	✓		Opt	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★
9	PHILIPS HTS3568	294	FM	✓	Optical	✓			★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★
10	LG HT503TH	245	FM	✓	Optical	✓			★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★
11	SAMSUNG HT-TZ215	250	FM, AM	✓	Optical	✓			★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
12	PIONEER DCS-580	420	FM, AM	✓	Optical	✓	✓		★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★
13	SONY DAV-DZ660CEK	342	FM, AM	✓	Coaxial;Optical	✓	✓		★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★
14	SONY DAV-DZ260	130	FM, AM	✓	Coaxial;Optical	✓	✓		★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★
15	SONY DAV-DZ860W	450	FM, AM	✓	Coaxial;Optical	✓	✓	✓	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★
16	SONY DAV-IS50	531	FM, AM	✓	Coaxial;Optical		✓	✓	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★
17	PANASONIC SC-PT460EB	200	FM	✓	Optical	✓			★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★
18	LG HT953TV	649	FM	✓	Optical	✓			★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★
19	SAMSUNG HT-TZ315	274	FM	✓	Optical	✓			★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★





## 68% Samsung HT-X715 £372

The Samsung HT-X715 produced outstanding stereo and surround-sound in our tests. Surround effects are great, too. We tried it with wireless rear speakers (SWA-4000), that cost £100 more.

Picture quality is good and it also plays DVD-Audio discs. You can hook up a USB-compatible device such as a memory stick, there's a headphone socket and Bluetooth to link it to compatible

audio devices.

Automatic set up of speaker volumes and delay times works only with non-wireless speakers. The system's quite easy to use, but the wireless speakers use a lot of power in standby. It was cheapest at Currys.

**WE FOUND** Fan noise is audible.

**Available** Currys **Tuner** FM **RDS** No **Digital input** Optical **USB** Yes **Full automatic set-up** Yes **Wireless rear speakers** Optional



## Features explained

### Speaker types and what those system numbers mean

- **2.1 SYSTEM** Two front speakers and a subwoofer. The idea is to reduce wiring. Electronic processing tries to create a pseudo surround-sound effect. Never as good as 5.1.
- **3.1 SYSTEM** As above but with extra front centre speaker.
- **5.1 SYSTEM** Three front speakers, two rear and a sub-woofer. The best for full surround-sound effect.
- **7.1 SYSTEM** Two more rear speakers. Doesn't greatly add to surround effect.
- **SPEAKERS** Range from tiny satellite speakers to wall-mountable bookshelf-style and floorstanding ones.

### ■ SURROUND-SOUND

Home cinema systems deliver surround-sound effects if they're fed with a surround-sound signal. Blu-ray discs and modern DVDs have 5.1 surround information but TV material is limited. Some Sky and Freesat shows have it, but not Freeview. The effect is most obvious in action scenes, but it's also used for ambient effects, such as chatter in a bar.



		SCORE(%)
SETTING UP AND TUNING	EASE OF USE	
★★★★	★★★★	71
★★	★★★★	69
★★★★	★★★★	69
★★★★	★★★★	69
★★★★★	★★★★★	69
★★★★	★★★★	68
★★	★★★★	68
★★★★	★★★★	67
★★	★★★★	66
★★	★★★★	66
★★★★	★★★★	66
★★★★	★★★★	66
★★★★★	★★★★	65
★★★★★	★★★★	64
★★★★★	★★★★	63
★★★★★	★★★★★	63
★★★★	★★★★	62
★★	★★★★	62
★★★★	★★★★	62

### USING THE TABLE

The more stars the better.

### Specification

**Price** For Best Buys we give the cheapest widely available high-street price. If we couldn't find them at major shops, we give the most common online price. Prices for other models are a guide. **Tuner** Whether a system picks up FM or AM radio. None picks up digital radio. **RDS** Radio Data System shows details

such as station names.

**Digital input** Lets you connect to a source such as a Sky receiver.

**USB** A USB input lets you connect to a flash drive or memory stick.

**Full automatic set-up** A microphone placed at your sitting position allows the system to set speaker volumes and delay times.

**Wireless rear speakers** Whether standard or an option.

### Test performance

**Tuner** How well weak stations are picked up

and unwanted noise eliminated. **Surround-sound effect/surround-sound/stereo sound quality/DVD picture quality** From our expert panel's views. **Ease of use** Includes remote control, instructions and using the system.

### Score

This ignores price and is based on:

Performance	70%
Ease of use	15%
Features and connections	10%
Power use	5%

## WIN BEST BUYS

### Two home cinema packages to be won

Be the envy of your friends by winning a Panasonic Viera 32L2D80 TV and SC-PT560EB home cinema kit. To enter, tell us what discs the SC-PT560EB take? a) DVD-Ram discs b) VCR tapes c) Records

Enter online at [www.which.co.uk/bestbuycompetition](http://www.which.co.uk/bestbuycompetition) or on a postcard to 'Best Buy April 09', Which?, PO Box 44, Hertford, SG14 1SH. Include your name, address and postcode, daytime phone number and Which? membership number (your user name on your membership card). Entries received by 16 April 2009 will be entered. Competition open to current Which? members. One entry per household. Usual rules apply. See [www.which.co.uk/bestbuycompetition](http://www.which.co.uk/bestbuycompetition) for full rules.

## Home cinema set-up



**Which? expert Dave Holes shows you how to set up a home-cinema system**

Our easy step-by-step video guide shows you how to get great sound from a home-cinema system, including tips on dealing with odd-shaped living rooms. Visit [www.which.co.uk/setupahome-cinemasystem](http://www.which.co.uk/setupahome-cinemasystem) for more information.



## Contacts

**JVC** 0870 330 5000; [www.jvc.co.uk](http://www.jvc.co.uk)  
**LG** 0870 873 5454; [www.lge.co.uk](http://www.lge.co.uk)

**Panasonic** 0844 844 3852  
[www.panasonic.co.uk](http://www.panasonic.co.uk)

**Philips** 01293 776675  
[www.philips.co.uk](http://www.philips.co.uk)

**Pioneer** 0870 600 1539  
[www.pioneer.co.uk](http://www.pioneer.co.uk)

**Samsung** 0870 726 7864  
[www.samsung.co.uk](http://www.samsung.co.uk)

**Sony** 0870 240 6354; [www.sony.co.uk](http://www.sony.co.uk)