

Hi-fi nirvana under \$1,000?

How to get an audiophile-quality system at bargain prices

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Jan. 16, 2003 - After months of experimentation, and literally hundreds of boxes and wires hanging all over my living room, I think I've come up with a number of hi-fi components that, put together with an important addition, create an amazing sounding \$1,000 stereo system.

Anyone can go out and spend a grand or more on a stereo system. Cheap receiver, brand name speakers: it's easy to put together something that lights up pretty and sounds merely OK. Or, you can go on eBay and if you're lucky and know your stuff you might score big on some vintage equipment in mint condition. But, with a little work (mostly mine) you can come darned close to an audiophile-quality, two-channel system that will actually play music.

Notice I said two channel. Not everyone wants or needs a 5.1 or 6.1-channel home theatre system. They're nice, yes, but the idea here is to play and listen to music. And many inexpensive multi-channel set-ups I've heard are better at recreating movie effects. Plus, you'd be surprised at just how good a two-channel system can make TV and DVD audio sound.

THE ELECTRONICS

This part was easy. When it comes to extremely affordable electronics, I once again turned to my friends at Divergent Technologies and specifically their Antique Sound Lab division. A while ago I told you about their terrific \$99 Wave AV-8 amplifiers, a bargain at twice the price, and now there's a matching pre-amp.

The AV-8s are 10-watt mini monoblock amplifiers, that means you need one per channel; two for this dream system. They have tubes (like early amplifiers of the past) rather than transistors in their audio output stage. Audiophiles will argue whether they like tubes or transistors better, but I won't get into that argument here. In this case, the tubes sound terrific. Ignore their bargain-basement price. They are capable of providing some of the breadth and depth of music as it sounds in real life and that's no mean feat. For two amplifiers: \$198.

The new Wave pre-amp is also a big bargain. For \$199 you get what is basically a one-tube passive design. The tube acts as a buffer for the electronic signals inside the tiny box and doesn't impart much sound of its own. There are three sets of inputs for you to plug in your CD, DVD, tape deck or tuner and two sets of outputs to your amplifiers. Two outputs are in case you want to power speakers in different rooms. Alternatively, your speakers can be bi-amped: separate power amplifiers for the tweeter and for the woofer in each speaker cabinet.

The Wave pre-amp is very neutral sounding, especially for a pre-amp selling for under two hundred bucks. Using it is very straightforward, and the simple controls work as described. When matched to a pair of AV-8 amplifiers you have the basis for a good home stereo. So now, the running total is at \$397. The Wave preamp price is going up to \$249 (still a bargain). So, if you're interested now is the time to act.

Next up is the CD player. Actually, I've chosen a CD/SACD/DVD deck for my \$1,000 dream system. Sony's DVP-NX755V deck is pretty amazing for the price. This thin little box can play your CDs (even ones you've recorded yourself), Super Audio CDs (SACD), and DVDs (again, even the ones you've recorded yourself). The DVD player is a progressive unit, capable of up to 480p video output for your TV/monitor.

For \$249 (on Sony's Web site) you get a very good CD playback unit with a DVD deck thrown in. If you do some comparison shopping on the Web or in local stores, you might find lower prices. I did a quick Internet price check and found this unit selling for \$212 (I saw it as low as \$199 before Christmas). You might also save some money by finding a unit which eliminates SACD playback capabilities, but why not buy one that includes a great new format? Adding \$212, the running total stands at \$609.

How about an FM tuner? There are probably one or two good FM stations where you live and a good FM tuner could be a nice addition to your music system. Choosing this component was easy, you need a PAL. The late Henry Kloss designed the Portable Audio Lab for Tivoli Audio as a portable FM radio, but because it has stereo outputs, you can use it as an FM tuner through its headphone jack. When used as a tuner the sound is first-rate. PAL comes in many colors and best of all, sells for only \$129. You can also use the the thing as it was designed, as a portable radio with rechargeable batteries and a great-sounding, built-in speaker.

The total now stands at \$738.

THE SPEAKERS

The heart of all home music reproduction systems are the loudspeakers. They take the signals from all the electronics I've described above and actually bring the sound into the room.

This selection was very difficult to make because so many variables go into the decision making. After auditioning many inexpensive speakers, some so bad I had to turn them off after ten minutes of listening, I found one pair that was worth every penny. They also sounded great with the system I've just detailed above.

Paradigm makes speakers that range from small little things to large floor-standing boxes. For this dream system, we're going to talk about one of their tiny models. The Atom is a bookshelf/stand-mounted model that sounds a lot bigger than it looks. Despite its 0.75-inch tweeter and 5.5 inch woofer, a pair of Atoms can really fill a room, especially with 10-watts a channel coming from a pair of AV-8s.

No, you're not going to be able to move furniture with high levels of extremely low bass notes. And you won't be able to shatter fine crystal with notes coming from the tweeter. What you will be able to do is listen to music —and it'll sound like music. And isn't that the goal in the first place?

Here's the best part. A pair of Atoms has a manufacturer's suggested retail price of \$189. (Use the speakers on a bookshelf or on top of a cabinet and you don't have to spend extra for speaker stands.) That brings the running total for the system to \$927.

Looking toward the future, when you're ready for a home theater system, your Atoms could become the back channels. Add three more Atoms and a subwoofer and you have a great surround audio system.

THE SECRET INGREDIENT

But back to our under \$1,000 stereo system and the major twist that turns this system into something very special.

Sure, the Wave amps and pre-amp sound good out of the box, but with a few dollars more and a few minutes with a soldering iron you can kick everything up to the next level of quality.

What you need are Auricaps. These are affordable, super-duper-high-quality capacitors that are substituted for the inexpensive ones that come inside the units.

You need two for each amplifier and two for the pre-amp. They go in the audio output stage and are very easy to install. If you (or a friend) know how to use a soldering iron, it will probably take you longer to open and close the amplifier cases than to install the Auricaps.

It will cost you less than \$50 for the parts, and will add about \$1,000 of refinement to the sound quality of the entire system. Voices and instruments sound more real, enhancing the "you are there" sensation. I can't stress to you what a huge difference these little parts make.

Total system cost is now \$977.

The rest of the money needs to go for stuff like cables and wires. Expensive cables might sound better than less expensive ones, but you have to make a choice when you're trying to put together an audiophile system for under a grand. One suggestion: to connect your speakers to the amplifiers try Radio Shack 18-gauge, solid core hookup wire. It comes in spools of either red or black wire. A 60-foot spool of single-conductor wire sells for \$4.39 and you'll probably need at least two of them.

Depending on where you live, you might not have to pay sales tax if you buy online. But, then again there might be shipping charges involved, so you may have to do a little extra work to keep this from going over the magic \$1,000 price point.

If you're into vinyl, you can swap out the FM tuner and/or the CD player for Music Hall's MMF 1 turntable (\$180 online) and a phono preamp such as Sumiko's Phono Amp (\$199.99 online at musicdirect.com).

Whatever you do, know that you can actually buy an audiophile-quality system for less than \$1,000. Next time, I'll reveal

my dream system for those who have \$5,000-to-\$10,000 to spend on a stereo.

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