

tips

Home cinema separates vs all-in-one systems

There's no denying that one-stop home cinema solutions, or 'home-cinema-in-a-box' packages as they are also known, have improved in recent years.

While they can be great for kids bedrooms or small areas, they still don't cut the mustard in terms of audio and visual quality, when compared with a home cinema separates set up. 'But why?' we hear you cry.

Well let us explain...

It's all a question of quality

While it is hugely tempting and massively convenient to buy an entire system in just one box from one manufacturer, you would be doing your eyes, ears, and most importantly your wallet, a serious disservice.

You see, particular manufacturers have particular strengths and weaknesses. DVD players and amps we rate often seem a bit disappointing when used with speakers from the same brand. For example, multi award-winning marque Toshiba has a hard-earned and well-deserved reputation for building great DVD players, but you wouldn't buy speakers from the company. Why? Well, it doesn't make them! You'd be better off going to an established speaker brand such as Mission or Mordaunt-Short, who have specialised in such products for years.

It's for that reason that a careful combination of flavours, as in all the best recipes, can produce something truly special. If you mix and match correctly you know you will be getting the very best performance, and therefore value, in each particular department.

All-in-one home cinema systems also fall down in one area that, at first glance, seems like a bonus – their compact size. Imagine all those electronics crammed in together, electronically interfering with each other. There's no space for a suitably sized toroidal transformer, so where's all the power needed for the real home cinema experience going to come from?

Home cinema separates are better endowed

The feature count on home cinema separates far outweighs that on 'all-in-one' systems. For example, separates DVD players often come with stunning new technologies like progressive scan, vastly improved connectivity, such as component outputs, and sometimes, THX specification. The latter can also be found on home cinema separates receivers, which also take in a raft of DSP modes, along with extended surround sound capabilities that move well beyond the usual Dolby Digital and DTS 5.1, to DTS-ES, Dolby Digital EX and, quite regularly now, seven channels of power. Meanwhile, with 24-bit/192kHz processing power you find yourself in the realms of next generation audio formats, namely DVD-Audio and SACD.

Separates systems are easily upgradeable

An obvious flaw with all-in-one home cinema systems concerns upgrades. What happens when you decide after several years listening that, although your DVD is a dream machine, your amp is something of a wimp? Well nothing. Unfortunately, you've got to lump it, as you can't separate the two. The only alternative is to throw away your beloved DVD player just to get a better power source.

This is just as true, if something breaks down. With an all-in-one home cinema system you lose the whole set-up, whereas with separates only one of your much loved units has to leave the building.

With separate components you can judiciously improve your set up over time, upgrading a particular component when you feel it is necessary, without having to ditch the rest of your system. What's more, a separates system can grow as big as you want with the addition of any component you desire.

You get what you want with a separates set-up

It can be very hard to purchase an all-in-one home cinema system that gives you precisely what you want or need. For instance, you might want a system that not only gives you great performance with movies, but also offers the very best in compact disc playback. Equally, you might want a DVD player that also records, or a speaker system that offers a ferocious amount of low frequencies. It is rare indeed to find an 'all-in-one' set up that gives you all this. For this sort of balance you really need to carefully select a system for yourself.

Separates can look cool too!

Who says a separates system has to be a bulky, barrage of black boxes and clutter of wires? Although some people plump for a one-stop, home cinema solution because of the sleek styling, most of the latest home cinema separates equipment looks just as good as it sounds.