Audio equipment

Explore easy ways to enjoy better sound with your TV

With growing interest in the multichannel sound tracks on DVD and Blu-ray discs and in high-definition TV programs, manufacturers are trying to pump up TV sound quality without bulking up slim LCD and plasma sets. Some TVs provide decent audio from their built-in speakers, but few rival the quality of even a basic sound system.

One of the easiest, most effective audio upgrades is an old standby: hooking up a TV to a stereo receiver and two bookshelf speakers. Another simple, relatively new enhancement is a sound bar that houses several speakers in a slim enclosure that you can wall-mount or place on a shelf above or below your TV. Many are self-powered, so you can connect them directly to a TV (or a cable/satellite box or DVD player), with no receiver required.

Basic options like those won’t give you true multichannel surround sound, but you will get better sound quality than that offered by a TV’s built-in speakers.

To step up to multichannel surround sound with minimal fuss and cost, consider a home theater in a box (HTIB). Such systems package a receiver with the speakers needed for 5.1 (sometimes 6.1 or 7.1) surround sound. Many include a DVD player, and a few high-priced systems have Blu-ray high-definition disc players. Other newer features include auto room calibration, wireless surround speakers, iPod docks, and satellite-radio capability.

HTIB systems usually cost much less than components bought separately and are easier to set up, thanks to color-coded cables and jacks. Unless you’re a serious audiophile listening to music critically, you’ll probably find the sound satisfying.

However, an HTIB isn’t the best choice if you want lots of oomph for a large room or a noisy party. On most systems, you can’t add or replace speakers. Also, you might not be able to connect video devices other than a TV to the receiver.

Build your own

Component systems built around a receiver offer more power, features, and expandability than HTIB systems, and they might offer superior music playback. But it takes more time and effort to buy and assemble the components, and they can cost much more than a packaged system.

A stand-alone receiver usually has more inputs and outputs than the receiver in an HTIB system. Almost all now have multiple HD-capable connections, so they can switch between a cable box and Blu-ray player and carry high-def video as well as multichannel audio. Some let you listen to different sources—say, the radio and a CD—in separate rooms.

Most audiovisual receivers offer 7.1-channel surround-sound decoding, amplification for each channel, and an output for adding a powered subwoofer. You need the appropriate speaker setup to get the full effect of 6.1 or 7.1 channels.

More models, usually higher-priced ones, support high-resolution audio formats such as Dolby TrueHD and DTS-HD Master Audio. Most Blu-ray discs use at least one of those high-res formats.

Front speakers are used for stereo music playback; in a home-theater setup, they provide much of a movie’s sound. A center-channel speaker delivers dialog. Rear speakers, also called surround speakers, deliver ambient effects such as crowd noise and special effects. A subwoofer carries the lowest tones, such as bass instruments and movie explosions.

If you don’t want to match separate speakers, consider a package. A 5.1 system usually includes front and rear pairs of small bookshelf or satellite speakers, a center-channel speaker, and a subwoofer.
Home-theater-in-a-box systems
Most new models are 5.1-channel systems that come with two front, one center, and two rear surround speakers, plus a subwoofer. A 6.1 or 7.1 system would include an additional one or two rear speakers. There are also 6.1- or 7.1-ready models that allow you to add extra speakers. All models in this Select Ratings are recommended.

Select Ratings  Home-theater systems
Best choices from our tests of 11 models.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recommendation Rank</th>
<th>Brand &amp; model</th>
<th>Price</th>
<th>Overall score</th>
<th>Test results</th>
<th>Digital-audio inputs</th>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Onkyo HT-ST5000</td>
<td>$400</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Panasonic SC-BT100</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>Poor</td>
</tr>
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Recommendation
Best choices from our tests of 11 models.
- **Onkyo HT-ST5000**
- **Sony HT-DDGW700**
- **Yamaha YHT-690**
- **JVC TH-G40**
- **Panasonic SC-BT100**

Systems with a disc player:
3  **Yamaha** $600
4  **JVC** $280 CR Best Buy

Receivers
A digital receiver serves as the hub of your entertainment system, connecting video sources such as a TV, cable or satellite box, DVD player, DVR, and more, as well as audio components. More models now support 6.1 or 7.1 channels, so you can enhance surround sound with additional rear channels. Many include newer features, such as iPod docks and tuners for XM or Sirius satellite radio or HD radio. Some support high-resolution audio formats used on Blu-ray discs. All the models in Select Ratings are recommended and have Dolby Digital and DTS 5.1, auto room calibration to simplify speaker setup, universal remote, output for a powered subwoofer, digital and coaxial analog-audio inputs, optional iPod dock, headphone jack, and two-year warranty.

Select Ratings  Receivers
Best choices from our tests of 9 models.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Recommendation Rank</th>
<th>Brand &amp; model</th>
<th>Price</th>
<th>Overall score</th>
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Best for use with a Blu-ray player:
1  **Yamaha** $500
4  **Sony** $350

These 7.1-channel receivers have built-in decoding for the Dolby True HD and DTS-HD Master Audio high-resolution surround-sound formats found on Blu-ray movies. They also support Dolby Digital and DTS, used on DVDs and HDTV programs. They offer fine overall performance. Common features include auto-calibration circuitry (plus microphones) for setting speaker levels in your room. 1 can send a second audio source to another room, is XM- and Sirius-ready, and has 7.1-channel analog-audio inputs. 4 has no analog audio inputs but has more HDMI inputs.

Best values for general use:
2  **Onkyo** $225
3  **Yamaha** $300

If you don’t need high-resolution audio support, a more basic receiver can save you money. The Onkyo lacks satellite-radio compatibility and an onscreen display, but it supports 7.1 channels as opposed to the Yamaha’s 5.1.
Sound bars
Some sound bars include circuitry that can simulate surround sound, while others provide only the front channels. Most models have all the A/V connections you need, plus amplification. Some have a separate subwoofer for deep bass. A 5.1 system provides prematched speakers for a full surround setup. We tested several sound bars and recommend the following:

**Fine choices for different budgets:**
- Marantz eS7001 SSX $1,300
- Sony HT-CT100 $275

**Speakers**
You can use bookshelf speakers for the front and rear pairs. Many new bookshelf speakers are better than older models at handling deep bass without buzzing or distortion. Any bass-handling limitations would be less of a concern if you pair the speakers with a subwoofer for deep bass. A 5.1 system provides prematched speakers for a full surround setup. We tested about 20 speakers and recommend the following:

**Bookshelf speakers (prices per pair):**
- Infinity Primus PI62 $200
- Bose 501 Series V $330
- Polk Audio RTiA1 $300
- Sony SSB3000 $75

The Infinity has very good sound, with very good bass. The Bose, which uses direct and reflected sounds, and Polk Audio also have very good sound. The Bose, which uses a horizontal "landscape" design, had the edge in bass, while the Polk Audio had a better midrange response. The Sony offers good performance at a low price, though highs can seem a bit bright and nasal.

**5.1-channel speaker package:**
- Harman Kardon HKTS 15 $295 CR Best Buy
- Polk Audio RM705 $450
- Bose Acoustimass 6 Series III $630

All had very good overall sound and satisfying bass. The well-priced Harman Kardon had a bit smoother midrange and treble, while the Polk Audio has better upper-bass response. The Bose scored similarly but costs considerably more.

**Sound bars**
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The Marantz packs six speakers, digital amplifiers, and surround-sound processing circuitry into a stylish enclosure. You can attach a Blu-ray player or cable box via HDMI, a separate audio output lets you add a powered subwoofer (not included). The compact, low-priced Sony combines an ultra-slim sound bar housing three speakers that provide front channels with a separate powered subwoofer. All connections, including three HDMI inputs, are on the subwoofer.

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