

TEST VERDICT

THE WINNER

Rega DAC system

£1760 ★★★★★

There were some very strong systems here – for fans of every type of audio technology. But it's the Rega combo that triumphed thanks to its versatility, great value and top-notch hi-fi performance



WHAT HI-FI?
SOUND AND VISION
TEST WINNER

The Rega system can turn its hand to a variety of sources – and won't fail to fill your room

So, eight systems, and each one makes some kind of worthwhile case for itself. This can only be good news for the judicious consumer, as is the fact that there are three entirely different set-ups here for comfortably under a grand. As usual, though, some systems are more equal than others.

Of the five four-star systems here, it's the Marantz/Boston combination that's the most perturbing. We had high hopes for this set-up, given that all three components had already scooped five-star reviews (and, in the case of the electronics, Awards to boot), but in practice it turned out to be a little less than the sum of its parts. We're all for unity of purpose, but in this instance, each component's good-mannered, refined presentation leads to a sound that's ultimately too polite.

Affordable, but high quality

The DAC-based NAD/PSB system has more than a touch of the Marantz/Boston's politeness to it, but it's the rather slapdash reproduction and integration of its treble frequencies that sees that fifth star go west. We're all for a wireless DAC, though, and if you don't object to trading the last morsel of audio performance in favour of sheer convenience you're well-served here, particularly by the electronics.

The third of the most affordable options, the Cambridge Audio/Mordaunt-Short trio, is a brilliantly affordable way to get into a bit of music streaming, but its slightly one-dimensional sound and lack of aesthetic unity ultimately see it miss out.

A fair bit further up the scale, price-wise, we find the Yamaha three-way. We'll never get tired of extolling the virtue of Yamaha's current range of electronics. Come the Revolution, we'll insist that every amplifier should feature rocker switches like the A-S2000 – but for nearly £4000, a system needs a degree or two more bite and low-end rigour than this system delivers... even if it does include the best-looking music streamer currently on the market.

Even pricier is the Audiolab/Wharfedale set-up, but at least it has scale on its size both in terms of

The Rega is capable of room-filling scale and has bags of talent besides. At comfortably less than £2000, it's quite a proposition

looks and sound. Our admiration of the M-DAC just grows and grows, and the Jade 5 speakers are great value, too – but its amplification's relative lack of guile lets this system down.

All three of the five-star performers are corking set-ups in their own right and, interestingly, top marks are spread between systems built around a CD transport, a DAC and a music streamer respectively. Properly applied, all three technologies have plenty to offer.

The Cyrus/KEF partnership initially looked a bit of a mismatch, but in practice it's got synergy in spades. If you aren't militant about the amount of shuddering bass presence you require,

this is an exciting, energetic listen with an upgrade path promising a lifetime of improvement and expenditure.

The most expensive system in the *Supertest* is also, in terms of absolute sound quality, the best. The Naim/Neat set-up has pretty much everything going for it: the electronics are built with bank-vault levels of solidity, the speakers offer big presentation from small enclosures and the overall sound is simultaneously detailed and considered, vivid and dynamic.

The lesson this system teaches is that convenience needn't be at the expense of performance – though where perceived value is concerned, this set-up suffers compared with the Yamaha offering. (But then *everyone's* perceived value suffers compared with the Yamaha system).

Something for everyone

We're all about value for money, though, and the best pound-for-pound system here is the Rega. It's not (strictly speaking) a system, we'll grant you – but regardless of whether you make most use of its USB, digital, line-level or moving-magnet phono inputs, it'll never fail to stir you.

Its tidy proportions make it a decent proposition, decor-wise, but it's capable of room-filling scale and has bags of talent besides. At comfortably less than £2000, it's quite a proposition.

So, identify your budget, select the sort of technology you're most interested in and there's a one-make system to suit you. Even if some look more like systems than others...

Facts & figures



Marantz/Boston Acoustics
£880 ★★★★★

Marantz PM6004

£310 ★★★★★
Type Integrated • Power 45W • Inputs 5 x line level, MM phono • Outputs: Line level, 2 x speakers, headphone • Remote Yes • Size (hwd) 11 x 44 x 37cm

Marantz CD6004

£310 ★★★★★
Type Integrated • Inputs None • Outputs Coaxial, optical, RCA • Size (hwd) 11 x 44 x 34cm

Boston A26

£260 ★★★★★
Type Standmount • Sensitivity 87dB/W/m • Impedance 8 ohms • Max power handling 150W • Biwirable No • Finishes 2 • Size (hwd) 33 x 21 x 27cm



Cyrus/KEF
£2050 ★★★★★

Cyrus 6XPD

£1250 ★★★★★
Type Integrated • Power 40W • Inputs 6 x line level, 2 x coaxial, 2 x optical, USB • Outputs Line level, 2 x speakers, headphone, preamp • Remote Yes • Size (hwd) 7x22x36cm

Cyrus CD Transport

£750 ★★★★★
Type Transport • Inputs None • Outputs Coaxial, optical • Size (hwd) 8 x 22 x 36cm

KEF Q300

£450 ★★★★★
Type Standmount • Sensitivity 87dB/W/m • Impedance 8 ohms • Max power handling 120W • Biwirable Yes • Finishes 3 • Size (hwd) 36 x 21 x 30cm



Cambridge Audio/Mordaunt-Short
£880 ★★★★★

Cambridge Audio 350A

£250 ★★★★★
Type Integrated • Power 45W • Inputs 6 x line-level • Outputs Line-level, 2 x speakers, headphone • Remote Yes • Size (hwd) 9x43x34cm

Cambridge Audio NP30

£400 ★★★★★
Inputs Ethernet • Outputs Coaxial, optical, RCA • Max MP3 data rate 24 bit/96kHz • Server UPnP • Tuner No • Size (hwd) 7 x 27 x 29cm

Mordaunt-Short Aviano 1XR

£230 ★★★★★
Type Standmount • Sensitivity 88dB/W/m • Impedance 8 ohms • Max power handling 100W • Biwirable Yes • Finishes 3 • Size (hwd) 28 x 18 x 27cm



Yamaha
£3900 ★★★★★

Yamaha A-S2000

£1500 ★★★★★
Type Integrated • Power 90W • Inputs 5 x line-level, XLR, MM/MC phono, USB • Outputs Line-level, 2 x speakers, headphone • Remote Yes • Size (hwd) 14 x 44 x 47cm

Yamaha NP-S2000

£1400 ★★★★★
Inputs Ethernet • Outputs Coaxial, optical, RCA, XLR • Max MP3 data rate 24bit/192kHz • Server UPnP • Size (hwd) 7 x 44 x 44cm

Yamaha Soavo 2

£1000 ★★★★★
Type Standmount • Sensitivity 88dB/W/m • Impedance 6 ohms • Max power handling 120W • Biwirable Yes • Finishes 3 • Size (hwd) 38 x 22 x 35cm



Naim/Neat
£4700 ★★★★★

Naim Nait XS

£1500 ★★★★★
Type Integrated • Power 60W • Inputs 5 x line-level • Outputs 2 x line-level, speakers, pre-amp • Remote Yes • Size (hwd) 7x43x30cm

Naim ND5 XS

£1950 ★★★★★
Inputs Ethernet, coaxial • Outputs Coaxial, optical, RCA • Max MP3 data rate 24bit/192kHz • Type Server UPnP • Tuner Internet • Size (hwd) 7 x 43 x 30cm

Neat Petite SX

£1250 ★★★★★
Type Standmount • Sensitivity 86dB/W/m • Impedance 8 ohms • Max power handling 200W • Biwirable: Yes • Finishes 6 • Size (hwd) 31 x 20 x 18cm



NAD/PSB
£805 ★★★★★

NAD C316BEE

£260 ★★★★★
Type Integrated • Power 40W • Inputs 5 x line-level • Outputs Line-level, speakers, headphone • Remote Yes • Size (hwd) 8 x 44 x 29cm

NAD DAC1

£295 ★★★★★
Type DAC • Inputs None • Outputs Coaxial, RCA • Size (hwd) 4 x 14 x 7cm

PSB Image B5

£250 ★★★★★
Type Standmount • Sensitivity 89dB/W/m • Impedance 6 ohms • Max power handling 150W • Biwirable No • Finishes 2 • Size (hwd) 32 x 18 x 24cm



Rega
£1760 ★★★★★

Rega Brio R

£480 ★★★★★
Type Integrated • Power 50W • Inputs 4 x line-level, MM phono • Outputs Line-level, speakers • Remote Yes • Size (hwd) 8x22x31cm

Rega DAC

£500 ★★★★★
Type DAC • Inputs USB, 2 x coaxial, 2 x optical • Outputs Coaxial, optical, RCA • Size (hwd) 8 x 22 x 27cm

Rega RS3

£780 ★★★★★
Type Floorstander • Sensitivity 89dB/W/m • Impedance 6 ohms • Max power handling 100W • Biwirable No • Finishes 3 • Size (hwd) 80 x 22 x 25cm



Audiolab/Wharfedale
£4150 ★★★★★

Audiolab 8200MB (x2)

£950 each ★★★★★
Type Mono • Power 250W • Bridgeable No • Inputs Phono, XLR • Outputs None • Size (hwd) 15 x 22 x 38cm

Audiolab M-DAC

£600 ★★★★★
Type DAC • Inputs 2 x coaxial, 2 x optical, USB • Outputs Coaxial, optical, XLR, RCA, headphone • Size (hwd) 6 x 25 x 25cm

Wharfedale Jade 5

£1650 ★★★★★
Type Floorstander • Sensitivity 87dB/W/m • Impedance 6 ohms • Max power handling 200W • Biwirable Yes • Finishes 3 • Size (hwd) 106 x 25 x 40cm



DAC SYSTEM
£1760

REGA R83
£780
★★★★★

REGA DAC
£500
★★★★★

REGA BRIO R
£480
★★★★★

REGA SYSTEM

On balance, it's not all that surprising that Rega should choose to pair its two compact boxes of electronics with an equally compact pair of floorstanding loudspeakers. Tiddly dimensions haven't held back the Rega Brio R amp (a Best Buy Award-winner at the end of 2011) or the Rega DAC (unfortunate to lose out, Awards-wise, to Audiolab's supernatural M-DAC), so the RS3 loudspeakers shouldn't be underestimated just because they stand a diminutive 80cm high and are less than 23cm wide.

Deliciously accomplished

Each slim little speaker houses three drivers - a forward-facing tweeter and midrange driver, and a side-firing 13cm bass driver. The Brio R amp features four line-level inputs, a spectacularly effective moving-magnet phono input and a remote control, but none of the tone controls, headphone output or switching for a second pair of speakers that some might deem essential.

The DAC, meanwhile, is equipped to deal with 24-bit/192kHz information via either of its pairs of digital optical and digital coaxial inputs. It has a USB input too, as well as a raft of filtering options.

As far as performance goes, the Rega combination is just deliciously accomplished. A high-res file of REM's *Country Feedback* has all the necessary

bite and rasp, absolutely sky-high detail levels and is presented on an open, precise and three-dimensional soundstage. Timing is lucid and unforced, tonal variation is extensive and utterly convincing, and the Rega set-up understands and describes the attack and decay of individual notes or hits as well as anything we've heard at this sort of money. It dispatches even the heftiest dynamic variances with an effortlessness that's almost dismissive.

As far as preferences go, the Rega has just a couple. The RS3s, for instance, are happier (by which we mean sound sturdier and more purposeful) fairly close to a rear wall. And the DAC gives of its best via its optical input (although detecting the audible differences between optical and coaxial-sourced music is a lengthy job and only for obsessive-compulsives). Otherwise, this set-up is pretty undemanding.

Explicit but fair with all music

If forced to criticise, we'd say the system isn't absolutely flawless where outright authority is concerned, but in every other respect - and particularly where structure and integration are concerned - it's admirable. 'Explicit' is a word we returned to again and again during testing: music is almost naked in the Rega's hands. But it's not prissy - poorly

recorded music is given every chance by the Rega, rather than being dismissed.

It's pretty obvious by now that we rate this Rega system highly. Each individual component is extremely competitive in its own right, but working in unison they reach an entirely new level of performance. Of course it's not, strictly speaking, a system - there's no source here and, consequently, no music. But

A hi-res file of REM's *Country Feedback* has bite and rasp, sky-high detail levels, and an open, precise soundstage

whether you use a computer hard-drive, a digital disc-player of some description or a good old-fashioned record-player as your music-carrier, you can be sure it'll sound an absolute treat once the Rega gets its hands on it.

System rating ★★★★★

FOR Tidy proportions; interesting, focused spec; hair-raisingly musical sound

AGAINST Leave it with us - we'll have to get back to you

VERDICT Exciting, involving and absorbing, this system is quite some achievement



DAC SYSTEM
£4150

WHARFEDALE JADE 5
£1650
★★★★★

AUDIOLAB 8200MB
£1900
★★★★★

AUDIOLAB M-DAC
£600
★★★★★

AUDIOLAB & WHARFEDALE

If you like to measure your expenditure in terms of raw materials as well as sound quality, this could be the system for you. Between them, Audiolab and Wharfedale combine to deliver a set-up of imposing dimension, impeccable build quality and no little visual drama.

Award winners aplenty

At the front end loom Wharfedale's prodigious Jade 5 floorstanding loudspeakers, already recipients of the full five *What Hi-Fi?* *Sound & Vision* stars and big enough to demand a generously sized listening space. Audiolab's M-DAC has gone one better, making off with a coveted Product of the Year Award at the end of 2011 and setting a daunting benchmark for any and all digital-to-analogue convertors under the £1000 mark. Power (and plenty of it - 250W per channel, in fact) is delivered by a pair of Audiolab's chunky new 8200MB monoblock power amplifiers - two 8200MBs will just fit, width-wise, on a regular kit-rack shelf. As a visual statement, this system is a bruiser.

With the M-DAC receiving a 1411kbps FLAC file of Massive Attack's *Angel* via its USB input (high-res 24-bit/192kHz playback is available only via the coaxial input), and outputting to the 8200MBs via its balanced XLR sockets, our first impression of this set-up concerns the

sheer scale of its presentation. This combo is capable of a full-fat, wide-screen sound that will dominate all but the biggest listening rooms. Give it the breathing space, though, and you can revel in its unquestionable authority and control, implacable low-end extension, and uncomplicated punch and drive.

Listen longer, though, and it's the midrange reproduction that's revealed as this system's outstanding strength. Horace Andy's idiosyncratic vocal style and mighty vibrato is packed with detail and character, and the system has the stop/start accuracy and effortless midrange manoeuvrability to lay every scrap of information bare. The soundstage it establishes is securely described, and the set-up's barrel-chested dynamism and attack never threaten to overpower the more subtle aspects of a recording.

Amplification's somewhat subtle

Having long since established the speakers and DAC as authentic stars, we're bound to lay the blame for the overall system's four-star rating at the feet of the 8200MB power amplifiers. They're endowed with ample heft and power, but in absolute terms they're something of a blunt instrument. For all their ability to drive the Wharfedales into digging deep and hitting hard,

there's a relative lack of tonal variance to low-frequency information, while at the opposite end there's a rather relentless, easily riled quality to high-frequency reproduction. Selecting 'optimal transient XD' as the M-DAC's filter setting minimises these traits but it can't eradicate them.

This system is nearly ideal. Certainly the speakers and the DAC (a front-runner

Give this combo breathing space and you can revel in its unquestionable authority, control and uncomplicated drive

in our unofficial 'hi-fi product of the 21st century' office sweepstake) are among the very best around - if they were partnered with slightly more deft amplification we'd be looking at a properly outstanding combination.

System rating ★★★★★

FOR Visually impressive; bomb-proof build; punchy, driving, full-scale sound; stellar DAC

AGAINST Relatively subtle amplification; only for bigger listening rooms

VERDICT Admirable in numerous ways, but as a system it just fails to gel completely