

May the force be with you

We're going for some heavy-duty amplification next, with a monster THX-certified surround receiver from Harman Kardon

WE'VE INCREASED the budget considerably for our next system. Our aim is to deliver concrete improvements in sound performance, in terms of both home cinema and music reproduction. We're going to leave the picture alone for now: the combination of 36in Toshiba TV and Pioneer DVD player works well enough to stay on for a while.

So, it's time to get heavy with the amplification – and we do mean heavy, because the mighty AVR8500 receiver weighs in at a back-breaking 25kg. That's because of the sheer brute force packed into this massive receiver: each of its five channels of amplification is rated at 110W. What's more, the Harman Kardon's amplification has a huge amount of current, and whatever the load presented by the speakers you use, it'll cope. That's a good job, because our speaker ensemble – ATC's Concept One – has a comparatively low sensitivity of just 84dB/w/m, and so works best when powered by an amplifier that has plenty of control and authority.

Let's look at the Concept One in more detail. It's based around four SCM7 standmounted speakers for front- and rear-surround effects, and an ATC C1 centre-channel unit. A word of warning here: the C1 doesn't have the best magnetic shielding, and so can affect TVs rather badly with colour 'bloom'. It's best placed under your telly on a dedicated stand.

Bass is taken care of by an active subwoofer, which combines a 23cm downward-firing drive unit with a hefty 250W of output power.

Get this little lot wired and fired, and you'll be greeted by an extraordinary performance. The ATCs sound muscular and taut, and generate an almost 'professional' sound, one that teems with detail and accuracy. That's as true in stereo as it is in surround

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| TELEVISION | Toshiba 36ZD26P | £1600 |
| DVD PLAYER | Pioneer DV-656A | £400 |
| RECEIVER | Harman Kardon 8500 | £1800 |
| SPEAKERS | ATC Concept One | £2000 |
| TOTAL | | £5800 |

sound, by the way: this is a system for which no stereo apologies need be made. Try a well-recorded CD, such as John Coltrane's *A Love Supreme*, for a fine example of the precision we're talking about: every nuance and detail of his performance is presented crisply, and with impeccable timing. The same is true of DVD-Audio and SACD discs: if ever a set-up was going to convince you that the time is right to make the move to multichannel audio, this is it.

Of course, you don't buy a home cinema system just to play music, and the Harman Kardon/ATC combination has huge muscle when blasting out movie action, too. Try the street shoot-out in *Heat* to hear what we mean: those guns sound as realistic as you'd ever want them to be. Combine that weight, focus and drive with great pictures, and you've got a thoroughly coherent system.

PLAY THIS ON IT

Heat

Warner, Cert15

This is an excellent example of the surround-sound art, especially during the extended street shoot-out. As Val Kilmer, Robert de Niro and Al Pacino trade shots, you'll hear some of the most brutally convincing gun sounds ever recorded – especially so through this combo.

OR TRY THIS...

Bigger, better images

Epson EMP-TW100 projector £3617

There's little you can do to improve your screen size within a certain budget – because decent plasma displays, in our opinion, start at over £4500 – but if you're adamant that you want a big-screen picture without spending a fortune, there's an alternative: a projector. Epson's compact EMP-TW100 uses the Faroudja DCDi system to provide progressive-scan pictures from any incoming signal (TV, DVD,

whatever), so it'll work well with the Pioneer DV-656A. Don't forget that you'll have to budget for a decent screen as well.



Setting up this system

WIRE IT UP WITH

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|---|---------|
| Chord Company component-video cable | £99 |
| Atlas Compass digital interconnect | £40 |
| QED Qunex P-SW subwoofer cable | £22 |
| QED Silver Anniversary Biwire speaker cable | £8.50/m |

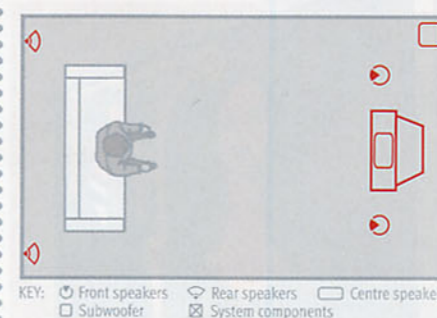
CONNECT IT

Make sure you biwire the ATC speakers: they'll deliver a more refined sound if you do, as well as sounding slightly tighter. Each SCM7 needs to be used on a good stand, too, preferably something fairly heavy – and remember, that could end up being costly. Try Partington Dreadnoughts (£100 a pair). Remember, too, that the centre-channel

speaker needs to be placed below the TV, in a good equipment support, rather than on top of the set. This is because the centre channel emits a powerful magnetic field that can cause an unsightly discolouration, called 'bloom', on your TV screen if it's positioned too close. A stand provides just the right amount of space between screen and speaker, and as an added advantage, it helps the speaker to sound better. The large, two-tier £400 Atacama Equinox AV6 rack is ideal.

TWEAK IT

You can choose to leave the ATC loudspeakers, unlike most moderate-sized designs, as 'large' in the onscreen set-up menus for the Harman Kardon if you prefer – they're dynamic enough to cope – but if you want to be



absolutely sure of your bass management, set each speaker to 'small' using the standard THX crossover point (80Hz) and then redirect all the remaining bass

information to the active subwoofer. This will ensure that when the action gets really intense, you won't put any undue stress on any speaker's main drive units.

POSITION IT

We've covered the centre speaker already, so let's talk about the main speakers. If you want your system to deliver great multichannel music, you should position the surround speakers fairly low, on stands such as the Partingtons we've already mentioned. If, on the other hand, home cinema is your main aim, then mount the rear speakers on taller stands, or even better, on wall brackets. The subwoofer is fairly unfussy about positioning, but it can be worth trying it out in a corner if you want to maximise its subjective output.