

# The Audience Is Listening

The newest home-theater-in-a-box kits fill an audio gap you probably didn't even know existed. DTS ES and Dolby Digital EX formats add a sixth channel (rear center) to traditional five-speaker surround sound, letting you hear conversations and explosions directly behind you. And while many current DVDs don't take advantage of this boost, it's the future of cinema, both at home and at the multiplex. When choosing your rig, remember it must handle video smoothly while emphasizing what you want most in audio: theater-style impact, high-quality music, or something in between. — Michael Gowan

## REAL VS. FAKE SURROUND SOUND

- **Dolby Digital** Each speaker channel is individually encoded for true 5.1 surround sound.
- **Dolby Digital EX** True 6.1 or 7.1 surround.
- **Dolby Pro Logic II** Each channel is processed from a stereo signal to simulate 5.1 surround.
- **Dolby Pro Logic IIx** Simulated 6.1 or 7.1 surround.
- **DTS** A rival to Dolby Digital — true 5.1 surround.
- **DTS ES** True 6.1 surround.

## HOW WE TESTED

We assessed systems with movies and songs:

- **Star Wars Episode 1: The Phantom Menace** The pod race; Pods zoom around the track.
- **The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring** The defeat of Sauron; A battle-strewn opening with a haunting voice-over.
- **Mozart, Concerto for Violin and Orchestra in G Major KV 216: 1. Allegro** Clear strings with a wide range of tonality.
- **Wynton Marsalis, "Soon All Will Know"** Popping trumpet and deep bass.
- **The Flaming Lips, "Yoshimi Battles the Pink Robots Pt. 1"** Rock in Dolby Digital.



## Denon DHT-485DV

Denon's system comes close to achieving affordable perfection. The DVD player produced exceptionally crisp images, finding details lost by other players. Movies sounded great, too: The subwoofer thumped with bass that never got muddy. Cate Blanchett's voice over at the beginning of *The Fellowship of the Ring* resonated with warmth and depth. The 485DV's small front speakers were a little wimpy for playing CDs, but the delivery improved when we engaged the subwoofer and surround speakers via the Pro Logic IIx Music setting. The large (17.1 x 5.8 x 16.4-inch) receiver accommodates plenty of analog inputs, including the six-channel direct plugs you'll need if you want to add DVD-Audio. But the system is a bit stingy with its digital inputs — it offers only two.

\$699, [www.usa.denon.com](http://www.usa.denon.com)



## WIRED

Lush video and excellent special effects made for a thrilling movie experience.

## TIERED

Small satellite front speakers didn't muster full-range scoustics on their own.

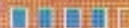


## Onkyo HT-S777C

**WIRED** The best for music, thanks to full-spectrum output (from highs to lows). Six-disc DVD player produced crisp video. Abundant inputs.

**TIERED** Boxy speakers and components won't win any beauty pageants. Tightly packed speaker jacks were hard to access.

\$700, [www.onkyo.com](http://www.onkyo.com)

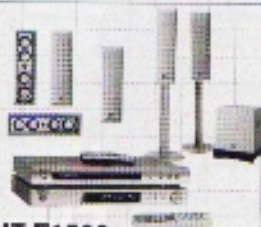


## Kenwood HTB-S715DV

**WIRED** Channel separation as good as Denon's. Easy to connect a game console through ports on the front panel of the receiver.

**TIERED** Dialog in movie soundtracks lacked depth. Limited amount of inputs. Tinny stereo music. Expensive for what it offers.

\$1,000, [www.kenwoodusa.com](http://www.kenwoodusa.com)



## Yamaha YHT-F1500

**WIRED** Well-distributed sound (though not as good as that from the Denon or Kenwood systems). Attractive onscreen display made setup easy.

**TIERED** Muddy bass and bright treble. Lacks extras like a disc changer and DVD-Audio player that would justify the high price.

\$1,000, [www.yamaha.com](http://www.yamaha.com)

