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HOME ENTERTAINMENT

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Pity poor Ferrari. Everyone talks about how fast the company's cars go, how precisely they handle, and how sexy they look. But few people ever mention one of Ferrari's greatest accomplishments—despite the awesome capabilities of its products, they work just like any Honda, Hummer, or Hyundai. A 75-year-old grandmother can step straight from her spongy General Motors sedan into Ferrari's new 515-horsepower 575M Maranello and make it to Sunday services in record time. If you can handle a stick shift, you can handle a Ferrari.

Sadly, the same cannot be said for high-performance home theater sound systems. Even experts sometimes slam down the remote in frustration, unable to figure out why their surround-sound processor refuses to budge from its DTS ES-Discrete + THX Ultra2 Music mode. We have faced many embarrassing moments when visiting manufacturers could not figure out, say, how to make the Dolby Digital 5.1 soundtrack of a DVD player emerge from their state-of-the-art speakers—and our experienced editors proved equally unable to solve the problem. These systems pile complexity upon complexity. Most now require the use of at least eight speakers, and some are practically unusable without the addition of a \$10,000 touchscreen remote.

Hope is on the horizon, though. A new breed of super-simple systems has emerged, promising the excitement of surround sound in user-friendly packages. These products employ just one, two, or three speakers to create a surround-sound effect, and many are no more difficult to operate than a 1985 CD player.

Of course, they have their limitations—a \$300 all-in-one product can no more match the performance of a \$20,000 audio system than a Chevy Cavalier can out-

sprint a Ferrari. Wisely, most manufacturers of these super-simple systems make no such claims. In fact, they pitch these systems mainly for use in bedrooms and vacation homes, not in full-blown home theaters. But can such stripped-down devices yield a satisfying sound?

That is just what we decided to find out. We abandoned the luxury of our own high-end audio systems, settled down in front of a 20-inch Sony TV, and put three of today's most promising all-in-one surround systems to the test. Let's see if two serious audio snobs can survive grandmother-friendly sound.

Do those **all-in-one surround-sound** contraptions really work? Three of today's simplest systems **face four demanding ears.**

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THE FUN MACHINE We technical types often miss the forest for the trees. We love big-budget action blockbusters packed with stunning visuals and frantic soundtracks, even if the dialogue makes the *Star Wars* scripts seem as erudite as *Sideways*. We enthuse about a fantastic music recording but overlook the fact that the artist was deservedly booted off the major labels 20 years ago. In short, we forget to have fun. But with Sherwood's \$399 VR-670 Hollywood-at-Home system, this mistake is impossible to make.

Fun is what Hollywood-at-Home is all about. Ten minutes after you slit the tape on the box, you are listening to a satisfying system that is almost foolproof to operate.

The sleek main unit incorporates a DVD player, an AM/FM tuner, and amplifiers; in the right light, it looks more like a Bang & Olufsen product than like something you'd pick up at Best Buy. It comes with two speakers that look like the plastic mediocrities accompanying most home-theater-in-a-box systems, but actually sound OK. A small subwoofer with a built-

B&O ON A BUDGET

The main unit from Sherwood's VR-670 Hollywood-at-Home system echoes some of the style we normally associate with Bang & Olufsen electronics. The unit incorporates a DVD player, a stereo amplifier, limited source switching, and Dolby Headphone processing.

in 100-watt amp rounds out the system.

The main unit has an audio input that lets you pipe the sound from your TV through the VR-670. It also has audio inputs and outputs labeled "tape." We wonder what function these might serve until we read on the Internet that people used to record sound on ribbons of tape covered with a rust-like substance. Who knew?

The speakers do not look like much, but inside, each one has a separate woofer and tweeter—a rare find in such an inexpensive system. At first, they do not sound like much, either, but turning the treble control on the main unit down 4 decibels brings out their best. With the system thus tweaked, everything sounds pretty good, including dialogue, sound effects, and

instruments in music recordings. The surprise is the woofer, which proves far more robust than we expect. It does not reproduce deep bass—one could hardly expect such a small box to perform Herculean tasks—but what bass it does produce sounds powerful and clean. The system plays loud enough to rock a small bedroom or the den in your mountain condo.

The unit plays in stereo when you load a CD or a DVD, but activating its Dolby Virtual Speaker technology creates a convincing surround-sound effect. It also features Dolby Headphone processing, so you will hear surround sound even when you plug in a set of headphones. The DVD player itself performs pretty well, producing a sharp picture in either its interlaced or progressive-scan picture mode.

Hollywood-at-Home is not intended for audio connoisseurs, yet we find this system so gratifying that we continue using it long after we finish our evaluation. It's fun, easy, affordable, and stylish—the Mazda Miata of all-in-one systems.

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