

Blind-listening Group test

ONE-BOX SYSTEMS £1,200-£1,600

Boxing clever

Can single-box 'style systems' deliver fine sound alongside their beguiling looks?

Richard Black believes they can...

ONE-BOX SYSTEMS are getting ever more popular, and it's not hard to see why. Of course, dedicated gear-heads can never have too much equipment, but many others seemingly have no desire to live their lives surrounded by piles of electronics!

Fair enough, but no audiophile worth his salt will be in a hurry to throw quality to the wind in the name of saving a few square feet of hi-fi rack space.

What's really given the one-box phenomenon legs in recent years has been the fact that an increasing number of these little beauties demonstrably offer real sonic ability – while they may still not *quite* match traditional hi-fi separates, they're now, at least, in the same ball park.

Reasons for this range from the continuing miniaturisation of electronics, to the application of audiophile best practice in the design of these style systems. One thing that's made this possible is the rise in the quality of high-power integrated circuits; several of the units in this group use power ICs for their output, and

modern ones are an order of magnitude better than those of a few years ago in terms distortion and noise.

Then there's the rise of switch-mode power supplies and switching power amps, used by some of the units on test here. While these don't necessarily save on space, they can help keep things compact by requiring much less heatsinking and thermal management.

The latest one-box systems no longer need any special pleading to compete

The upshot of all this is that the latest one-box systems no longer need any special pleading to compete with hi-fi separates. And as we become more accustomed to multiple digital sources (MP3 players of every kind, computers/streamers, set-top boxes, in addition to good old CD), the logic of using a single box as DAC and integrated amp looks ever more attractive. Read on to see how they do...

ON TEST



Arcam Solo Neo £1,400 p25
The latest version of Arcam's highly popular 'Solo' range is highly specified, with full streaming capabilities (wired and wireless) in addition to CD and DAB/FM radio. It can play music from most portables, although one feature it doesn't offer is digital interfacing to iPods. With plenty of analogue inputs, it's well-equipped to deal with legacy formats, too.



Aura Note Premier £1,495 p27
The smart, distinctive looks of this unit will surely appeal to the fashion-conscious, but there's a lot more to it than just a pretty face. The top-loading CD transport is a pleasure to use and quick, too. There's no streaming, but you can connect a computer via USB, while portables are also catered for. There's FM radio, and even AM too, but no DAB.



Cyrus Streamline £1,600 p29
Alone among this group, the Streamline has no CD transport, though you could easily connect any CD spinner to one of its several digital inputs. It doesn't have any analogue inputs either, but when it comes to modern sources it's well provided, with streaming and digital connectivity for portables, including the iPod range.



Elipson MC3 £1,300 p34
The highly distinctive MC3 offers a less unusual, but still impressive, list of features, including a slot-loading CD transport, DAB/FM radio and the usual USB/MP3 functionality. Connection to a computer relies on a wireless dongle, which is an ingenious solution. Power is provided by B&O's latest 'IcePower' modules.



Myryad Mi £1,295 p33
The long lived 'Music Integrated' is kitted out with CD, DAB/FM radio and both analogue and digital inputs, but doesn't have either USB or streaming capabilities. Some internet connectivity is possible via an iPod/iPhone, using Myryad's 'M-Port', but in general computer connection relies on the computer having a digital output.



Rotel RCX-1500 £1,195 p35
In one particular respect, this unit stands out: it has the highest-powered amplifier by quite a margin. It also has plenty of input options, including full streaming capabilities, CD, DAB and FM radio and one each of analogue and digital inputs. It interfaces digitally to iPods and, of course, plays music from other brands of portables.





Myryad Mi £1,295

Super user interface, neat packaging and great sound make this the star of the show



DETAILS

ORIGIN:
UK/China
TYPE:
One-box system
WEIGHT:
5.6kg
DIMENSIONS:
(WxD) 350x87x330mm
FEATURES:
• Rated output 50W (8 ohms)
• 3 line inputs
• 2 optical digital inputs
• DAB/FM antenna input
• M-Port
• Speaker output
• Optical digital output
• Recording output
• MP3 input and headphone output
DISTRIBUTOR:
Armour Home Electronics
TELEPHONE:
01279 501111
WEBSITE:
myryad.co.uk

The elder statesmen of the one-box system breed these days, the Myryad Mi has no way of connecting to a computer. It will, however, connect via its 'M-Port' to an iPod or iPhone Touch, which gives it some of the internet connectivity that some others lack.

You can, for instance, use services like Spotify via an iPhone. It's a mixed blessing; Apple products famously have a nice user interface, but you have to tie one up as a basic data-forwarding device when you could, with a fully Ethernet-enabled streamer, use that boring router box parked out of sight near your phone master socket.

And the Apple user interface isn't such a big attraction, when the one built into the Mi is so lovely. It's not a full touchscreen, but it's not far off: indeed, strictly it is a touchscreen but a rather limited one, with touch-sensitive, context-sensitive buttons at fixed positions. It lights up in colour and shows things in large type, including CD-TEXT information read off suitably coded CDs.

The large type of the display means you can read what's going on from across the room. The lack of USB is offset by the ability to read MP3 CD-ROMs. Three line inputs are provided, plus two digital (optical). Power amplifier and power supply are both switching designs.

Sound quality

The Mi quickly established itself as one of the definite successes of the listening session. Our panel immediately warmed to it from the outset and found no reason to change their mind. It has a convincingly direct presentation and a knack of getting stuck in to music that can easily fool you that you are listening to fancy hi-fi esoterica.

A few minor details give the game away, however. There isn't quite the sweet clarity in the treble, for instance, that the very finest kit can offer, but on the other hand we're not sure any of the rival one-box systems in this *Blind-Listening Group Test* could teach the Mi much in that department.

Stereo imaging is good, but possibly not the most precise in terms of depth, and maybe one could occasionally wish for slightly more inner detail in complex recordings, but as systems at this price go there are really no legitimate grounds for complaint.

Among other admirable qualities, the Mi happily blends smoothness with insight, steering well clear of harshness, but never afraid of music with real bite. This made it equally adept in the rather angular sounds of Pink Floyd and in the luscious classical orchestration of Dvorak. It has good bass extension with well-balanced weight, tunefulness

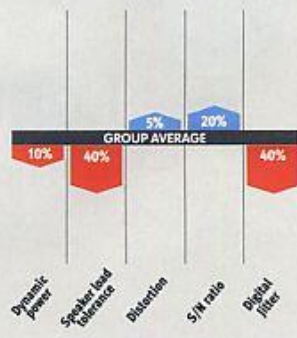


ON TEST

This is a genuinely 'digital' amplifier and Myryad's choice of D2A Class D modules ensures a reliable 60W/105W 8/40hm power delivery with very little headroom under dynamic conditions – a feature of PWM amplification. The Mi is phase inverting on line (tape) out, but not through the power amp. Response is limited to just over 20kHz by the 48kHz sample rate, peaking slightly at +0.4dB into 8ohm but rolling gently away to -1.7dB into 40hm loads. It's designed to be 'flat' into 60hm. Midrange distortion is low for this technology at ~0.03% and the 85dB A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW) remains competitive with analogue amps.

CD performance has been slightly refined since the Mi's launch in 2008, the A-wtd S/N now just over the 16-bit standard at 98.4dB and low-level linearity true to ±0.1dB over a full 100dB dynamic range. Peak level THD is low at 0.0008% but jitter remains high at 1800pssec. PM

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Good bass and treble extension; fine lateral imaging

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Image depth a little limited; lacks computer connectivity

BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Great with CD; useful connectivity to Apple portable devices

FEATURES
★★★★★

OVERALL



Blind-listening verdicts

Richard Black is suitably impressed by the quality of this month's one-box system selection, but there can only be one winner...

More perhaps, than with items such as CD players, amplifiers and loudspeakers, purchasers are likely to be swayed by the feature counts of one-box systems. None of these units has everything (though the Rotel comes pretty close), and they all offer a different subset of the facilities one might look for in such a device. Only one (Cyrus) lacks a CD player, but that is perhaps the easiest role to fill. On the other hand, the systems devoid of streaming capabilities could easily be enhanced by the addition of a Logitech Squeezebox Touch, which via its digital output is eminently suited to upgrading quality

equipment like the Aura and Myriad systems, for example.

Similarly, there are ways around the lack of analogue or digital inputs on one or two other units, so in a sense the issue of features isn't *that* critical. That, then, leaves us looking mainly at sound quality...

We ended up with some similar scores across the group, but sonic differences still exist. For instance, the Arcam has plenty of subtlety and detail, but isn't as vibrant as it might be. This makes it less immediately exciting than some, though we certainly found it an eminently listenable piece of kit in the long run. The Aura is also quite civilised, though a touch of treble

coarseness detracts somewhat from the appeal of its strongly defined bass.

If anything, the Cyrus is even more detailed, at least in the way it throws out a stereo image. Again though, it could do with just a little more impact in the lower half of the spectrum. Elipson's MC1 brings some real punch and liveliness to the party, an apt term to use for a very 'foot-tapping' unit that also brings out plenty of detail. We did have a few reservations about its treble though, which could be cleaner. Finally, the Rotel is also a lively unit, perhaps a little shy of detail now and then, but well specified and significantly more powerful than the others when all is said and done...



WINNER

We felt that the sound from the Myriad Mi was overall the most satisfying here. It has excellent extension both up and down, and a beautifully judged balance between detail and vigour. Above all else, this is the system that gets the pulse racing and keeps it there. It's a million miles from music centres of the 1970s and '80s, and amply proves the point that high levels of integration are no enemy of lively and satisfying sound.

RESULTS AT A GLANCE

Make/model	Arcam Solo Neo	Aura Note Premier	Cyrus Streamline	Elipson MC1	Myriad Mi	Rotel RCX-1500
Price	£1,400	£1,495	£1,600	£1,300	£1,295	£1,195
Sound	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Value	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Build	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Features	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Conclusion	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
	Great for background music, but ultimately lacks some insight and bite	Visually striking with some good performance levels, plus a decent feature set	A practical way to access modern digital sources, with sophisticated sound to match	Stands out visually and sonically, with sound that comfortably transcends expectations	Does a very good job of playing CDs and adds useful connectivity to Apple portable devices	Comprehensively featured and easy to use, with attention-grabbing sound

Key features

	Arcam Solo Neo	Aura Note Premier	Cyrus Streamline	Elipson MC1	Myriad Mi	Rotel RCX-1500
CD included	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Radio included	DAB/FM	FM/AM	-	DAB/FM	DAB/FM	FM/AM
Analogue inputs	4	2	0	1	3	1
Digital inputs	Opt.	2 opt.	3 elec.	Opt.	2 opt.	Opt./elec.
Streaming	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Output power	38w	50w	30w	60w	50w	100w

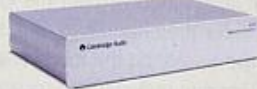
STREAMER: Logitech Squeezebox Touch £239

This is simply the nicest way to access music stored on your computer or online. The touchscreen interface and well-thought-out menu structure make it a breeze to navigate. It's the perfect add-on for any digital kit that lacks streaming capabilities.



PHONO STAGE: Cambridge Audio Azur 640P £100

None of these systems includes a phono stage. Luckily, dedicated phono amps exist for exactly this situation, and this is one of our favourites. With either moving-magnet or moving-coil cartridges, it gets a great sound out of vinyl, despite its budget price.



LOUDSPEAKER: Tannoy Definition DC8 £2,200

One standmount that has impressed us is Tannoy's latest incarnation of its Dual Concentric design, using a tweeter mounted at the centre of a woofer to give the best possible spatial alignment of drive units. This gives communicative sound with great coherence.

