

# first reviews

The best of the very latest AV hardware

## Tannoy Arena

Looks and ability – it's a great no-compromise system

**Verdict** ●●●●●

**We say...**

It's not exactly the only 'designer' speaker system out there, but with a fine sound, eye-catching styling and plenty of flexibility, the Arena system is one of the best of its kind

The world of home cinema divides into two camps: those who want the best sound and don't care what the system looks like, and those who are a bit fussier about the visual impact of a set-up in their room. The former group is likely to go for a system of massive speakers, usually with big floorstanders on the front-left and right channels, and will be happy with great swathes of 'black ash' vinyl or – if they're lucky – a nice light wood finish; the latter will be seduced by one of the huge range of 'designer' speaker packages available from all the leading names, such as KEF's KHT-series 'eggs', or Mordaunt-Short's Genies.

As one of the longest-established speaker companies, Tannoy is rooted in the former camp, as is clear from the excellent Sensys system we tested in our March issue. While it hasn't exactly avoided the 'designer' sector of the market, the Arena system marks a major departure for the company. Previewed at the 2004 *What Hi-Fi? Sound & Vision Show*, the Arenas have arrived a little later than planned. The people at Tannoy's Coatbridge factory in Scotland decided to wait until things were just right, rather than prematurely rush into the market with a less refined product.

As soon as you encounter the Arenas close up, it's clear the decision to hold was a prudent one. The little speakers look gorgeous, and while some elements of their styling will divide opinions – we've

already heard the optional floorstands compared with sci-fi props and '60s ashtrays – it's impossible to argue with the quality that runs throughout the range, from the speakers themselves to the smallest piece of mounting hardware. Add on the floorstands or the table supports/brackets and they extend the shape of the speakers, becoming part of the design to the extent that separate grilles are provided for use with these mountings, while a range of interchangeable rubber front pieces is available to further customise the look of the speakers beyond the basic choice of high gloss silver, white, black or bronze finishes.

The speaker enclosures themselves are made of cast aluminium, providing a non-resonant platform on which the drive unit can work, with the grilles standing off slightly from the main housing to give an unusual but effective look.

### THE FACTS

**Sensitivity** 86dB/2.83W/m, Both (satellites and centre)  
**Frequency response** 80Hz–54kHz (satellites and centre); 29–150Hz (subwoofer)  
**Crossover** 1.75kHz (satellites and centre)  
**Power handling** 15–100W (satellites and centre), subwoofer has internal 300W amp  
**Dimensions (h/w/d)** 18.7x13.4x17.5cm (sats), 13x24.5x15cm (centre)  
**Weight** 2.5kg (sats), 4kg (centre), 14kg (sub)  
**For more details** 01236 42099  
[www.tannoy.com](http://www.tannoy.com)

The drive unit used throughout is a new miniature version of the company's famous Dual Concentric design, which places a small treble driver at the centre of a larger unit handling midrange and treble. The idea is that the two work together to give a 'point source' of sound, with none of the dispersion problems of a traditional design in which the treble driver is mounted above or below the mid/bass unit.

But while the Arena driver is small (its mid/bass cone is just 10cm across), it's highly developed: the 19mm titanium dome tweeter in the centre goes up to a claimed 54kHz, as part of Tannoy's WideBand design, while the bass goes down to 80Hz. The crossover between the two drivers is at 1.75kHz, meaning the tweeter – in fact a Super Tweeter – covers a wide frequency range, making it well suited to the demands of DVD-Audio and SA-CD material.



The centre speaker uses the same drive unit plus an additional 10cm bass driver, and has its low frequencies tuned with a rear-venting port – the port on the satellites is front-venting. Good terminals for bare wires, spade connectors or banana plugs are provided, and the optional stands/brackets for all the speakers have built-in cable management, hiding the terminals for a neat installation. The basic 5.1-channel system comes with 20 metres of cable.

Underpinning the little speaker is an unusually slim sub, using a 25cm drive unit in a 20-litre sealed enclosure. It's driven by an internal 300W BASH amplifier, combining the technology of conventional Class AB amplification and Class D designs, allowing high power in a small package. Controls are provided for gain, phase and level, along with an LF extension control allowing a balance to be obtained between ultimate extension for music, and speed and impact for movie effects. At its maximum music setting, the sub claims extension

the other speakers are simple to attach using the Allen keys provided.

And the Tannoys sound very good indeed. Some 'designer' speakers can be a little thin and edgy, with the subwoofer having to work hard to cover the low-end deficiencies of the satellites, but there's no sign of that here. Yes, the sub runs quite high – or at least it does the way we set it up – but there's a smooth, seamless integration that consistently maintains the illusion that all the low stuff is coming from those small speakers. The WideBand design, the beautifully controlled dispersion and imaging of those Dual Concentric drivers gives the system an uncanny ability to focus effects, spreading sound around the room while keeping it knitted tightly together.

Time for some fun with our favourite 'torture' tracks. The plane crash near the start of *Flight of the Phoenix* sounded gutsy and room-shaking – that sub is really good – while the launch sequence from the new remastered edition of *Apollo 13*, complete

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down to 29Hz, which is going some for so compact an enclosure. Other convenience features include a switch to take the internal crossover out and leave the roll-off to your receiver's internal circuits, plus automatic power on/off, while the line input and mains connection are concealed on the base of the sub for a tidier look.

The £1199 5.1 package includes all the speakers mentioned plus grilles and cables, but additional satellites can be bought at £199 apiece to build 6.1 or 7.1-channel systems. The centre channel is £249 when purchased separately, and the subwoofer £449, meaning that the package saves a handy £295. The desk/wall mounts for the satellites will set you back £149 a pair, £249 a pair for the floorstands, and £79 for the centre-channel mount.

The system is pretty simple to install and set-up. After some experimentation we hiked the crossover point up to 100kHz on our reference TAG McLaren Audio processor, as this seemed to give a better integration than the 80Hz recommendation, and we set the LF extension control to its midpoint for listening to music and movies. Those things aside, the whole set-up took about 30 minutes: the floorstands come fully assembled, and the stands and brackets for

with DTS soundtrack, is truly breathtaking. OK, so there are more powerful systems around, such as our furniture re-arranging £7000 PMC reference rig, or Tannoy's own Sensys speakers that will relieve you of the best part of £2000 – but the breadth, depth and sheer impact of the sound the little Arenas can deliver is nothing short of a revelation. The subwoofer has plenty of power on tap, while the clarity of the smaller speakers is perfectly suited to bringing out all the ambience that sweeps you into the fast-paced action.

With the claustrophobic fire sequences of the thrilling *Ladder 49*, starring John Travolta and Joaquin Phoenix, the Arenas crowd the sound in on you, and when you switch to the desert ambience of *Phoenix*, things are just as natural-sounding. What's more, the Tannoys perform incredibly well with music, both stereo and multichannel: we had a lot of fun spinning a variety of SA-CD titles from rock to classical through the Arenas, and could quite happily live with the sound on offer.

The £1199 tag puts the whole package at the top of the range when it comes to 'designer' speakers of this kind, a long way above the KEF KHT2005.2s and the Mordaunt-Short Genies. Fortunately its style and sound more than justify that price.

## AT A GLANCE

### Tannoy Arena

#### Value for money ●●●●●

Pricier than some of the obvious 'style speaker' rivals, but the quality throughout and the performance more than justify the price. This is a fine all-round choice wrapped in stylish clothing.

#### Sound quality ●●●●●

Yes, you could get a better sound from a more conventional 'square box' package at this price, but the Tannoy system is one of the best-sounding set-ups that also has style on its side, with plenty of punch for movies and a smooth, involving presentation of music.

#### Build quality ●●●●●

Tannoy has taken a lot of time to get the Arena concept right and it's paid off in the feeling of solidity and the beautiful finish here. The way the stands and speakers integrate is particularly impressive.



#### SUBWOOFER FINE-TUNING

There are controls for gain, phase and level, along with an LF extension control allowing a balance to be struck between maximum extension for music, and speed/impact for films.



#### SET-UP OPTIONS

The Arenas are available with a variety of mounting options, including this stylish bracket that can either be used for wall mounting, as shown here, or used as a table-top or shelf stand. They'll set you back £149 a pair.



#### CENTRE SPEAKER

The centre speaker uses the same 10cm driver as the satellites, and is fitted with an additional 10cm bass driver. Its low frequencies are tuned with a rear-venting port, as opposed to the front-venting design of the set speakers.