



Move with the times

How do you balance established design with the changing requirements of modern hi-fi?
Ed Selley feels this duo shows how it's done



In the 'almost but not quite English' language of marketing, 'brand identity' is a very good thing. The idea that products you produce can be instantly recognised as one of your own is a desirable way of standing out. The hi-fi industry, consciously or otherwise, is rather good at this with many companies building product that is

recognisable on sight as the work of one specific manufacturer. What happens, though, when your brand identity is ideal for a certain type of product, but you need to apply it to something outside that window?

JBL has had to grapple with that particular question. It has a fine reputation for a particular breed of speaker that is generally on the hefty side. Its larger models are

held in considerable reverence in many circles and it's done a fine job of mining a rich vein of heritage in some of its other recent offerings. What you see here is recognisably a JBL model, but one that takes the fight to more conventional rivals.

The HDI-1600 is a two-way standmount speaker that occupies the amount of space you might expect a £2,000 cabinet to take up ▶

COMPONENTS

ARCAM SA30 £2,000

Arcam's flagship amp exemplifies all the company has been working on in recent years, combining its proprietary Class G amplification to provide 120W of power to a wide spread of inputs, with the added benefit of Dirac Room EQ software.

JBL HDI-1600 £2,000

The smallest member of the HDI Series that takes features from the larger and more ornate ranges, the HDI-1600 combines a 165mm aluminium mid/bass driver with a compression-loaded tweeter in a trademark JBL waveguide.

Picture credit: Shutterstock.com (background)

BEAUTIFUL SYSTEM
ARCAM/JBL



BEAUTIFUL SYSTEM
ARCAM/JBL

and it comes in a range of modern, finishes that complement its elegantly curved cabinet. The choice of an aluminium matrix mid/bass driver 165mm across is also entirely in keeping with what you'd expect from a speaker at this price point.

What's wonderful, though, is that even if you prised off the badge on the front, it wouldn't be difficult to hazard a guess at the origin of this speaker. The reason is the tweeter is pure, unadulterated JBL. It's a 25mm compression driver mounted in one of the company's patented waveguide enclosures. It's beautifully integrated into the design, looks very smart but most importantly provides the all-important visual clue as to who is responsible for it.

Convenience factor

For Harman Luxury Audio stablemate Arcam, looks aren't quite so key as to what makes its products immediately recognisable. Wrapped in its 'HDA' casework, the latest generation takes a few details that are recognisably Arcam and integrates them into something clean, smart and modern that is as happy in a full stack as it is mixed and matched with other

brands. Instead, what defines Arcam is the eschewing of the sort of hair shirt minimalism that many British rivals feel is obligatory. With the belief that we somehow need to suffer for our music (thankfully) declining, Arcam is now faced with rivals emulating its convenience angle. The SA30 is one of the most emphatic responses to this possible.

This Arcam/JBL setup is modern hi-fi really delivering on the on-paper promise

This means you get digital inputs – it's 2020, of course you do. What you also get is HDMI ARC to play nice with your TV and a full network audio implementation that works via Arcam's Music Life app and Roon. There's a phono stage, but where some fit a moving-magnet unit and decide it's job done, the SA30 also supports moving coil. Finally, Arcam has fitted Dirac room EQ software. We can get sniffy about the mechanics of such a thing, but the fact of the matter is this is a beautiful system

Above left: JBL's trademark drivers find a svelte new home in the HDI-1600
Above: The SA30 offers a superb choice of features

that can be made to work in a room belonging to anyone reading this. I know this because not only will it iron out any of the room gremlins, it comprises three very sensibly sized, beautifully finished and handsome boxes with a practical footprint. The combination of 120W of Arcam's trademark Class G amplification and a speaker that comes from a brand that pretty much owns the trademark of the word 'loud' means it shouldn't struggle with larger rooms either.

Reproduction system

Impressively, the execution is also thoroughly invigorating. I kick proceedings off with a track that is no less successfully reinvented. Suzanne Vega's live version of *Tom's Diner* takes the quirkiness of the original and renders it in a compellingly modern way. It's a magnificent recording that gives the system plenty of scope to show what it can do. The most immediate and arresting feature is that trademark JBL tweeter. On the HDI-1600, it handles everything above 1.9kHz and appears to revel in its workload. Vega is a tangible presence in the room. Her breath control and intonation is captured

in a way that all but eliminates the notion of this being mere reproduction.

This immediacy comes to define the performance across everything you listen to. Neither is it solely down to the JBL. Without the composure and grip the SA30 possesses, the sheer speed of this setup wouldn't be there. What's so lovely is that this is a very Arcam style of speed. There's no frenetic urgency, no feeling that Nils Wülker's considered trumpet work in *Go* is being forced. Instead everything starts and stops as it should, and flows beautifully from there. If you want ballistic, it has your back but only for as long as you need it to.

How low can you go?

The JBL has truly excellent bass for a standmount. There's a depth and punch to it that is entirely in keeping with the company and is, in its own way no less a piece of brand identity as the styling. *My Own Soul's Warning* by The Killers is a visceral and wholly immersive experience as a result. This is complemented by the Arcam's digital decoding, which is gloriously unshowy in going about its business. It never alters the tonal balance of the amp so you can use the SA30 across



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DETAILS

WEBSITES
arcam.co.uk
jblsynthesis.com

its full spread of inputs and the performance remains the same. It lends a completeness to the Arcam that serves as a gentle reminder that it was working with this functionality when rivals were still looking with suspicion at remote controls.

And then, like a chocolate garnish on an already pretty appetising cake, there's the EQ room correction software. Of course, you don't have to

This is a beautiful system that can deliver in pretty much any room

use it. Should you wish, the SA30 will work happily as nature intended, but the Dirac process is straightforward and seriously impressive in its scope. You can do everything from applying a full spectrum correction of the system to match a notional ideal (either Dirac's, Harman's or your own) to simply massaging out a single room node you can hear, or anything else in between. This isn't a Eureka moment where we forget everything we know about placement,

instead it's a complementary process that can handle issues that setup – however diligent – cannot. In short, the more I use it, the more I feel that this is the future for hi-fi.

Special delivery

What I also feel is a genuine sense of enthusiasm for how this system looks, feels and works. This is modern hi-fi really delivering on the on-paper promise. The idea that one amp can do a fine job of working with a turntable equipped with moving-coil cartridge in the afternoon before segueing effortlessly into boosting your TV sound in the evening (with volume conveniently operated by your TV remote control) and then finishing off the day with a spot of Tidal or Qobuz, is genuinely brilliant. Furthermore, all this has been done without diluting the virtues and identity of JBL and Arcam. Together they have simply adapted to the modern world without losing sight of what they are and what they stand for. By the lofty standards of systems that feature here, this looks positively sensible. But be under no illusions, it is one of the most complete and capable we've ever looked at ●