

tips

10 tips to make your hi-fi sound better

Want to improve the performance of your system, but a bit short on the ol' spondulicks? Well check out our top ten tips for making sure your system is truly singing.

1. Wire you still using those?

One of the best ways to improve your sound is to ditch those nasty cables supplied in the box and replace them with higher quality wires from a specialist manufacturer. You needn't spend a fortune to achieve some startling results. The same applies to loudspeaker cables. Using lengths of old doorbell wire will strangle your sound no matter how good your kit may be. Remember a system is only as good as its weakest link. Also, to avoid nasty hums and buzzes, keep interconnect cables well away from mains cables and don't tidy your excess speaker cable into neat coils. Finally, keep cable runs as short as possible and always use the same length of cable for each speaker. Signals take time to travel down a cable and even a delay of a fraction of a second can make an audible difference.

2. Two are better than one

If your speakers are designed to be bi-wired, go for it! It's how the engineers who built the product envisaged it being used, so you're more likely to get the sound they were aiming for. Bi-wirable speakers have a split crossover that keeps high and low frequencies apart. The idea is that rather than squeezing the whole frequency range down one wire, two separate signal paths exist all the way back to the amplifier for high and low frequencies. In theory this should give a purer signal as there is less potential for frequencies extremes to imprint modulation distortion on the rest of the frequency range.

3. Try different positions

Considering the remarkable difference in sound quality that can be achieved purely by positioning your speakers correctly, it's amazing how many people fail to follow a few basic rules. It's essential cabinets are placed equally in distance from your favoured listening position, and are the same distance apart, thereby creating a triangle. Meanwhile, tweeters should sit at the same height as your ears. Some speakers work better placed nearer the rear wall, while toeing-in can often drastically improve the stereo imaging and soundstage. Experiment until you get a performance that you are happy with.

4. Stands can deliver

Speakers should always be mounted on a solid, stable base. The best possible solution is a speaker stand. This way the speaker expends all its energy moving the drive units, i.e. making music, rather than trying to move the cabinet. Where possible, stands should be filled with sand or lead shot and speakers should be fixed to the top using Blu-Tack. If you own floorstanding speakers, spikes should always be used, as again, this will dramatically increase a cabinet's stability. If you have a wooden floor and are worried about it being damaged by the spikes, try placing five pence pieces under each one.

5. Support your team

It's just as important to keep your electronics on a solid, stable foundation. This is particularly true of source components, such as compact disc players or turntables. Such racks help to isolate the electronics, removing unwanted vibrations. These can, for example, cause the laser of a CD player to misread the data stored on any disc, meaning the internal error correction system will guess which bits are missing and fill in the blanks. Naturally, this has an effect on the sound quality. Moreover, equipment racks mean that all your components are level, which can help avoid skipping, thereby bringing out the very best performance.



6. Live in isolation

If you want even more isolation from vibrations a dedicated isolation platform might be the answer. These offer the very best protection from unwanted vibrations. Such designs often take the form of inflated 'bladders', which can be inflated to increase or reduce the stiffness of the suspension, or proprietary damping feet. Alternatively, if you don't fancy forking out too much of your hard earned cash, try placing squash balls (cut in half) underneath your system instead. This works in a similar manner.

7. Go for a good run

All hi-fi and home cinema kit benefits from a really good run-in. In fact, some speaker manufacturers reckon it can take several months of use for a new piece of equipment to really shine. You can speed this process up facing the speakers together and running them out of phase (reverse the positive and negative cables) for a few days. It's also a good idea to keep your system on all the time.

8. Keep it clean

Investing in a mains filter, a device that essentially 'cleans' your electricity, can bring dramatic improvements in sound quality. The majority of appliances that draw power corrupt the mains electricity supply. So for example your computer, fridge freezer, or even television, can have a negative effect on your audio equipment. The result is a heavily distorted waveform which is not good for audio performance. A mains filter is the perfect remedy.

9. Scrub your connections

While we're on the subject of keeping things clean, it also helps if every now and then you give your interconnect sockets a good scrub. Use isopropyl alcohol, which is available from chemists, to make sure you have perfectly clean connections. Some people even go so far as to polish the pins on their plugs! If you don't use banana plugs on your speaker cable and instead use bare wire, it's worth cutting off the exposed wire every six months, and stripping back a fresh section. This is because metal oxidizes in air, degrading the connection.

10. Get a good service

Just as the connections on the outside need to be cleaned, so those on the inside pick up dust and the performance will degrade as a result. Furthermore, moving parts such as CD/DVD transports can wear out, lasers get dirty and boards can short circuit. The simplest way to extend the life of your equipment and ensure that it continues to perform at its best is to get it serviced once a year. You could do this yourself but, unless you know what you're doing, you could do more harm than good.