

tips

Stands

Okay, so you've bought your new CD player, amplifier and speakers. Where are you going to put them? You thought maybe you would stick the CD and amp on that rickety bookshelf, and plonk the speakers on the floor either side of the telly?

Well, go ahead if you're happy living with a system that's not firing on all cylinders. If you want the full performance you've paid for you need to think about proper equipment supports. It might sound unlikely but it's easily demonstrated that hi-fi components respond favourably or otherwise to the surface upon which you place them.

Loudspeakers, unless you're using floor-standing types, work best on rigid stands that perform two important tasks. Firstly, they place them at the correct height, which is with the tweeters at ear-level when you're seated. Secondly, they prevent them from swaying in the breeze. If a loudspeaker and/or its support can wobble about, it will lose or confuse musical information. Stands are not luxuries, they're a necessity. Thankfully, they're not expensive and not all of them nowadays are pig-ugly.

What applies to loudspeakers also applies to CD players, record decks, amplifiers, tuners and any other black box with knobs on. A custom support counters the music mangling mischief caused by structure and air-borne vibrations. Think about it for a minute: you can put your ear against a wall and hear what someone is saying in the room next door, because their voice causes the wall to vibrate. Now, if a human voice can energise a few tons of bricks and mortar imagine the havoc that Guns'n'Roses cranked up to 120dB can wreak upon a poor little CD player's sensitive innards. (The technical reason for isolating components is that electrical devices capacitors, resistors and so on - often generate current when they're mechanically excited, which isn't desirable in a hi-fi.)

Both loudspeaker and equipment supports need setting-up properly if they're to work effectively. If the stands come flat-packed, you'll have to bolt them together. Make sure everything is done up tight. Fit the carpet piercing spikes and adjust them so that the stand is level and doesn't rock in any direction. (Don't worry about your carpet unless it's a very cheap and nasty specimen. Spikes will pass clean through the weave of a decent carpet and leave no lasting impression, unlike a piece of heavy furniture, which leaves a permanent dent in the pile).

Attach the speakers to the stand using either Blu-Tack or upward-facing spikes if they're supplied. If you're using the spikes, push the speaker gently onto them: don't overdo it or you could split the woodwork. Once the speaker sits level and doesn't rock, leave it alone. Some speaker stands (and some equipment stands) can be filled to deaden resonance - the stand vibrating and singing along with the speaker - and add mass. The instructions will tell you when during the assembly process you need to pour in the sand, lead-shot or aggregate filling material so be sure to read them before you start work!

If your room doesn't provide enough floor space for stands you can obtain dedicated wall-mounted supports for both speakers and your hi-fi components. You can also use isolation platforms to improve the performance of hi-fi separates that have to be placed on shelving. Isolating platforms can be used between the equipment support and components, or in situations where space limitations preclude a fully fledged stand. Try to avoid putting components on tables or sideboards however, as these tend to resonate with the output of the speakers. Equipment supports are designed to isolate the source components and amplifier from the energy coming through the floor from the speakers. What is essential is that equipment supports are rigid, so if you're bolting together a flat-packed design, make sure the bolts are tight. It's also important to ensure that the individual platforms are level and don't rock on their spikes. Care taken in setting up stands always pays off in terms of sound quality.