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## Audio & Electronics

# High-End Stock Stereo Sound-Off

## *A Test of the Top Name-Brand Audio Systems in Six Luxury Cars*

By Doug Newcomb Senior Editor, Technology, Electronically reprinted from October 6, 2009

**F**or decades the car audio aftermarket offered consumers the best possible sound and bang for the buck. But getting a high-end system installed in a car usually meant dropping several thousand dollars and waiting days or even weeks for the finished product to roll out of a stereo shop. Plus, the vehicle would likely be irrevocably altered, and the owner would have to deal with warranty issues and decide whether to rip the stereo out or sell it as is when it came time to part with the car.

While the aftermarket still offers the most flexibility and the absolute ultimate in sound quality, automakers' audio offerings have now ramped up to the point where the tables have turned. It's now possible to get great sound and better value from a stock stereo system. Although this applies across almost every vehicle segment, it's particularly relevant to luxury car shoppers.

Branded "premium" systems have been around since Bose first appeared in high-end GM cars almost 30 years ago, but the past few years have seen a proliferation of partnerships between luxury automakers and audio manufacturers. To find out how the best OEM audio brands compare, we gathered six vehicles with top-of-the-line systems and put them through a battery of listening tests over the course of several days.

The cars and systems are listed below in descending order of how they ranked in the test. We used a scoring system in which one to 10 points were assigned in seven sound-quality categories: clarity, tonal balance, timbre, tonal accuracy, sound staging, imaging and dynamics. We then added the points and averaged them to determine a total and a winner.

In addition to musical tracks designed to expose flaws in a system's performance, we also used non-musical tracks to test for sound staging, imaging, linearity and absence of noise (all of the systems aced the last category). For systems that played DVD-Audio — as opposed to only offering simulated surround sound — we also judged surround attributes. Finally, although we did our critical listening while sitting still, we drove each vehicle on a loop that included freeways and surface streets to gauge sound quality while on the go.

### **2010 Jaguar XFR/Bowers & Wilkins Score: 6.0**

The 2009 Jaguar XF launched with a 14-speaker, 440-watt Bowers & Wilkins audio system as a \$1,875 option, and it's standard on the new supercharged 2010 XFR we tested. While the system is impressive and is one of the best available, we found it lacking in several key areas when compared to the rest of the group we tested.

The most obvious was clarity, and in particular distortion-free bass extension. With many of our test tracks, deep bass and strong midbass sounded boomy instead of tight. Timbre was also flawed, causing acoustic guitars and vocals to sound unnatural, while high-frequency sounds such as cymbals had a slight harshness. Dynamics were also dull, giving some of our tracks a lifeless quality.

Although the XFR had an expansive and deeply layered sound stage, imaging was substandard, causing vocals to be side-biased, which was confirmed by our non-musical test tracks. In addition to a stereo setting, the system also has a three-channel mode that further widens the sound stage and slightly improves imaging, as well as an additional Dolby ProLogic II setting, although the latter gave the music an artificial sound.



## **2010 Aston Martin DBS Volante/Bang & Olufsen**

### **Score: 6.9**

As a convertible supercar among a group of luxury sedans, the Aston Martin DBS Volante was the odd man out in this group. And with a sticker price of \$282,500, it's more than seven times the price of the least expensive car in the test.

Its standard 13-speaker, 1,000-watt Bang & Olufsen BeoSound DBS system also stands out because it's optimized for both top-up and top-down listening. And as with B&O systems in certain Audis, it uses Acoustic Lens tweeters that lift off the dash for better sound dispersion.

As in the Jaguar, we found the bass to be a bit overbearing, but otherwise the sound was very detailed, with individual instruments clearly delineated in even the densest, most difficult tracks. The sound stage was a bit constricted — neither wide nor deep — and imaging was a bit fuzzy, as verified by our non-musical test tracks.

The system really shined on the open road with the car's roof opened to the sky. It's difficult for any stereo in a convertible to fight wind and road noise to deliver great sound, but the DBS Volante's does it better than any car we've heard. And while system response remained robust and amazingly accurate at high speeds, it must compete with the car's almost symphonic exhaust tone — and some would argue that the sweetest sound is when the stereo is switched off.

## **2010 Infiniti M45/Bose**

### **Score: 7.1**

Bose systems often get a bad rap, and in addition to overexposure, the ubiquitous brand does suffer from a lack of consistency across its broad range of OEM audio offerings. But the 5.1 Studio Surround system in the 2010 Infiniti M45 is an example of Bose at its best. The system consists of 14 speakers (Bose doesn't release power specs) and is part of the \$2,800 Advanced Technology package option.

The boomy bass we heard in the Jag and Aston was replaced by a smooth, controlled response on all but the most demanding music tracks. The system also consistently scored high on clarity, tonal balance, timbre and tonal accuracy, and it fleshed out nuances in the music that other systems mask.

The sound stage was narrow and not very deep. But even within this constricted stage, imaging was pinpoint accurate. Again, this was verified with our non-musical test tracks. The system also had good dynamics, but sounded slightly processed overall.

Of the systems that played DVD-Audio, the Infiniti's is the only one that uses a separate disc drive in the center console, as well as small speakers on each side of the driver and front passenger headrest to create rear ambience. And unless a listener tilts an ear toward the headrest speakers and purposely listens for sound produced by them, they otherwise provide a sense of surround coming from much farther away and add an authentic sense of space.

## **Hyundai Genesis 4.6**

### **Sedan/Lexicon**

### **Score: 7.3**

The 2009 Hyundai Genesis Sedan has shaken up the luxury car market by providing performance and features comparable to cars costing twice as much, as demonstrated by the 14-speaker, 500-watt Lexicon audio system in the Genesis 4.6 with the optional \$4,000 Technology package. While it barely edged out the Infiniti M45's Bose system for 3rd, it placed more than a full percentage point ahead of the B&W system in the \$80,000 Jag XFR.

The Lexicon system's strong suit was sound staging and imaging; it produced a stage as wide as the car's roof pillars and deeply layered. A flute solo in one of our test tracks that should image solidly in the center of the dash to pass muster actually floated out *in front* of the center channel speaker in the middle of the dash.

But the Lexicon system didn't have the clarity, tonal balance, timbre and tonal accuracy of the top systems, and it added a somewhat artificial sound to our music test tracks. Bass response was also a bit muddy and some high-frequency sounds such as cymbals and horns sounded a little brash.

Although the discrete surround performance of the Genesis was very impressive, it wasn't on par with the

other three vehicles that played DVD-Audio discs and didn't have the immersive sense of surround that the others produced. And when Logic7 surround processing was switched on to enhance the effect, artifacts were easily discernible.

### **Lexus LS 460/Mark Levinson**

#### **Score: 8.0**

Lexus set a new benchmark for OEM audio when it introduced available Mark Levinson systems almost 10 years ago, and the most recent 19-speaker, 450-watt Reference Surround Sound audio system raised the bar even higher when it debuted in the LS 460 in 2006.

It was difficult to find things *not* to like about this system. It was largely distortion-free. Tonal balance was silky smooth. Timbre and tonal accuracy were palpably lifelike. The sound stage was immense and imaging exact. Dynamics were crisp and well-controlled. Our listening notes revealed very few nits to pick, and they all were in relation to where it fell short of our top choice.

The optional \$2,530 system in the 2009 Lexus LS 460 L we tested is a prime example of why it now makes perfect sense to purchase an automaker's premium stereo at this level instead of going with an aftermarket system. And even if you're an avid audiophile seeking the nth degree of performance, you'd be hard-pressed to piece together your own system that performs this well at a similar price.

The Levinson system was also neck-and-neck with the winner in terms of DVD-Audio performance. Although each of the two top surround systems had its own distinct "voice," the differences in overall quality were subtle and more a matter of taste. If the Lexus has an edge, it's that the car's ultra-quiet interior makes it the best environment for listening to audio while on the road. It also had the best linearity scores of any car in the test, which is important for those who want to listen at lower volume without sacrificing the details of the music.



### **Acura TL/ELS**

#### **Score: 8.5**

The 10-speaker, 440-watt Acura/ELS Surround system that's part of the 2009 Acura TL with Technology package was our top choice, but not based on technical precision and point total alone.

Sure, clarity and tonal balance were near perfect, and timbre and tonal accuracy were strikingly authentic and background details were tangibly vivid. Bass impact had a visceral quality and dynamics were like those delivered at a live performance. Sound staging was easily the best of the bunch, with the width extending *outside* of the vehicle past the roof pillars, and a three-dimensional quality to the depth. Imaging was also precise.

But it had that ineffable quality that made us forget we were listening to a group of electronic components and speakers and let us simply enjoy the music. Objective analysis aside, sheer aural enjoyment is the ultimate goal of any audio system, and even after hours of listening to music in cars, we wanted to keep on jamming to the ELS system.

DVD-Audio surround was also the best of the bunch. The immersive quality of the system made us fall in love with our DVD-Audio test discs all over again. About the only downside was that low-level linearity was only poor to fair, while at midlevels it was good but not great.

### **The Pinnacle of OEM Audio**

To test and rank these systems, we picked them apart over several days of intense listening, but individually they represent the pinnacle of OEM audio offerings. While each one has its strengths and weaknesses, together they show just how far stock stereos have come — and prove that there's never been a better time to be a car audiophile.