

SPEAKERS

that will knock your socks off

Whether you want to annoy the neighbours or simply just enjoy the beautiful sounds of high fidelity, there are a few really good speaker sets available locally for your PC. This month we roped in two audiophiles to test these four speaker setups. **By Alex Jelagin and Neo Sibeko**

If you are one of the many people who spend vast amounts of time in front of the PC watching movies, listening to music, making VoIP calls, and just about do everything on the PC, then your audio equipment should be fairly important to you. How you listen to your audio can have a dramatic effect on your movies and music.

As such, careful consideration should be made, and your equipment should be matched as best as possible. It is very rare that one needs to spend vast amounts of money on their sound card and speaker system to get the best audio experience possible within a given budget. Usually, the best results can be had by matching the right set of speakers with the sound card you already have.

Most high-end motherboards these days feature the Intel Azalia Codec, which is powered by various chips, the most popular being the Realtek series of chips. They vary in quality and capability, but taking the ALC 889/889A chips for instance, these are usually found on the motherboards that have optical outputs for audio, support high sampling rates of 96kHz/24-bit, and can support anything from DTS to Dolby Digital audio-processing technologies. If the on-board audio controller on your computer uses any of these technologies, and you make use of the optical output through to your speakers, where the signal is then

decoded, the speaker set you choose is even more important, because the path which your audio signal takes is already optimised; and where all the difference will be is at the end, where it is decoded.

Skimping on speakers will make the listening experience less than adequate. However, if you choose wisely and spend a good deal of time shopping around, you won't only save money, but also end up with an audio setup that rivals many standalone home theatre setups costing many times more.

For those who make use of the analogue outputs, there is greater room for compromise, because whatever the speakers lack, you can somehow make up for with the sound card - and the reverse holds true as well. However, the best experience will always be with matching the right speakers with your room acoustics and sound configuration.

When buying the speaker system, it is always important to test it with music you are familiar with. That way you cannot be convinced by salesmen who may sometimes carefully pick the music that highlights only what the speaker system is good for, and music that doesn't test the full range of the speakers. So, if you have a portable media player or a CD, it is best to take it with you and listen to the speaker system and decide using music or a movie that you are familiar

MEET THE REVIEWER

Introducing Alex

This cyber-hippie listens predominantly to very deep trance, which is heavy in bass, but also rich in other frequency bands, though often lacking in vocals. The nature of the music is rhythmic more often than melodic, and relies heavily on the pure reproduction of beats and unconventional tones. It seldom features any traditional instruments. He practically lives on his PC, so can often be found watching movies or playing games – the easiest way to find him is by listening for the excessive bass that he is fond of, or for the resulting rattling of windows (something that annoys him intensely!). When he takes a break from his trance, you can sometimes observe him enjoying industrial or heavy rock, the likes of Rammstein and Rob Zombie. His current setup at his PC is a little more modest than he would like, consisting of the affordable, yet surprisingly impressive Logitech X-51 surround system that he has had for a couple of years.

Final Pick

Having played around with these, and being due for an upgrade, I am completely sold on the Creative Gigaworks G500. Hey, they have "Giga" in their name! But seriously, they deliver the sound volume and quality that I am after. Also, the set has that nifty controller, which means I will never have to touch the speakers themselves in order to make an adjustment, meaning that I won't risk shifting them – I am quite particular about my speakers standing "just so". The only downside I foresee is the fact that I will very seldom be able to enjoy their full potential, at least not without accompanying complaints from my neighbours!

with. Another important aspect of buying PC speakers is that most of the things you will be listening to will be in stereo and not in surround sound. So how the two front speakers sound should be more important to you than the rear channel speakers. Test the up-mixing capabilities of the speaker set before you purchase. If the up-mixing enhances the music, then chances are that music that is recorded in surround sound will sound even better, and movies will likely come alive with the set. If there's any glaringly obvious shortcoming, then it's best to look for another set.

Distortion is also a major oversight for many people when buying speaker systems for their PCs, especially with regard to the subwoofer. What you should be listening out for is a subwoofer that is very accurate and responds very quickly, so it doesn't end up with everything sounding like a low rumble of indistinguishable noise. While power rating is very important to subwoofers, it isn't the most important factor; in fact, the subwoofer with the lowest power rating here was easily the best.

With all the above, picking the right speaker system for your needs and budget should be a little easier, and among the four sets tested here, there should be one to suit your needs.

DEDICATED AUDIO CARDS VS. ON-BOARD AUDIO

On-board audio has come a long way since the days of crude 2-channel sound processors on the PC. Today, it is sometimes near impossible to tell the difference between on-board audio and dedicated, discreet audio cards. However, that is not to say there isn't a difference. If you consider the ASUS Xonar Essence ST, it is without question the most powerful sound card you can find on the PC platform, bar none. The sound that this card produces doesn't 'exist' on any motherboard; and if you are serious about your audio, then pairing this sound card with any of the speakers here will result in an even better experience than we had. The question for many, however, will be whether the difference in quality between such a sound card and a fairly high-end, on-board audio solution powered by the Realtek ALC 889A chip, for example, would warrant spending that much more on a dedicated sound card. The truth depends on many factors, but for the vast majority of people, the difference just isn't big enough and, as such, it is best to invest in a great speaker system before the sound card, as the difference is easier to appreciate and your money is better spent that way.



MEET THE REVIEWER

Introducing Neo

In evaluating any speaker set, be it high-end or low budget sets, I have always looked for a sound that would inspire me to listen to a song more than once. Not many sets are able to do that, but surprisingly enough there was one particular set here that did. Not all speakers are going to be good at all things, and the best set isn't necessarily the one that is average throughout all genres, but it could be one that excels in one area, but does well enough in others to not deter too much from the listening experience. The following sets were tested using music from Common (*So far so Good*), right through to Dianna Krall (*A Case of You*), Bobby McFerrin (*Invocation*), Julius Pappa (*'round my mind*) and finally, music from the Cinematic Orchestra's *Ma Fleur* CD (*That Home*).

Final Pick

I was very surprised at the set I ultimately picked as the set I would probably spend money on. Indeed, the Creative Gigaworks G500 set was the one I spent most of my time with, but it is the Razor Mako 2.1 system that I would probably choose to live with on a day-to-day basis.



Divoom X-Force 5

RRP: R999 | DISTRIBUTOR: Esquire 0861 70 00 00 | ONLINE: www.esquire.co.za

NEO: The Divoom X-Force 5 speaker system was certainly a surprise. The cheapest in the entire roundup, I had very low expectations from the set. However, I was pleasantly surprised to find that this set exceeded all expectations. The satellites are average at best compared to

the other sets, and they don't particularly stand out. However, the long-throw subwoofer is what makes this set a cut above the rest. The bass is simply incredible, especially for dance, hip-hop, or other bass-heavy music. Listening to audio from movies on the set is equally impressive. The sound is relatively

bright and some may prefer a more natural audio experience, but this can be remedied with installing better quality satellites. If you are not too concerned with such detail, however, this is a great speaker set. It looks great and sounds even better. Paired with a high-end sound card, or any other audio-processing

equipment, the X-Force 5, despite lacking THX certification, gives all the other systems some tough competition and in some instances outperforms them. There really isn't anything to fault this unit on, given the price you are paying. They are far better than expected, and as such earn a respectful score from me.

Sound Clarity: 3.5 | Loudness: 3.5 | Versatility: 5 | Overall: 4

SPECIFICATIONS

Power Rating: 100W (total)

Signal to Noise Ratio (SNR): >95db (0.05% THD)

Inputs/Outputs: 4 x RCA (stereo); 2 x Mic

Hardware Decoding: None



Sound Clarity: 4 | Loudness: 3 | Versatility: 4 | Overall: 4

ALEX: Previously, I had mostly experienced Divoom's small products – devices such as speakers designed for use with portable players and mobile phones. My previous experiences with these have invariably been positive, so I was quite interested to take a look at these higher-end 2.1 speakers

– and was not disappointed! The volume output was good, though not exceptional, but when I checked pricing later, I realised that these speakers offer very good value for money. Frequency response, however, is very good, with credible bass. Compared to the other speakers in this roundup, this one delivers a little less "oomph,"

but comes in at a much lower price. This device is also one of the most versatile in this group test: it has a built-in AM/FM radio, has two stereo inputs, two 6mm microphone inputs (karaoke, anyone?), and antenna inputs. The visual design is very appealing: slick black with smooth curves, backlit rotary volume knob, and

elegant tall slender satellites. These satellites are very directional, so these speakers are best suited to accompany a PC on a desktop, for example, rather than room-filling. These speakers lack bass/treble controls, so again this makes them suited to use with a PC, which can control those elements through software.

Razer Mako

RRP: R3,600 | DISTRIBUTOR: Frontosa 087 80 55 999 | ONLINE: www.frontosa.co.za

NEO. The Razer Mako unit is without a doubt the most interesting set of speakers I tested in this entire roundup. Besides the fact that they are the most unique-looking speakers, the sound produced is unlike all the others. The satellite speakers that the Mako uses make use of a downward-firing

design, which is apparently the most optimum design for speakers of this kind. Whether this is what contributes to the very 'warm' sound of the sound or not, I can't be sure. However, one thing is certain: this set provides a higher quality sound than all the other speaker systems here. They are not

ideal for everything, but where they fall short, it's a matter of preference rather than a specific and quantifiable shortcoming of the unit. Where the set isn't so impressive is how the subwoofer sometimes muffles out the low tones, removing clarity from the signal. This can dull the audio experience,

especially with house/dance or acid jazz. For everything else, however, it will be hard to fault the Mako set. It would have been great if one had some sort of EQ control instead of just volume and subwoofer levels, but most people will not miss that level of control. The Razer Mako is a truly impressive set.

Sound Clarity: 4 | Loudness: 4.5 | Versatility: 4 | Overall: 5

SPECIFICATIONS

Power Rating: 300W (total)
Signal to Noise Ratio (SNR): N/A
Inputs/Outputs: 2 x Aux-in (stereo); 2 x RCA (stereo) / Headphone
Hardware Decoding: THX



Sound Clarity: 4.5 | Loudness: 4 | Versatility: 4 | Overall: 4

ALEX. It seems that Razer don't only make mice and keyboards – here we have a very impressive set of speakers, which also happen to look really good and unique. It is a 2.1 set, with all three major components (subwoofer and two satellites) styled in enigmatic, understated, but super-cool

black domes. The satellites are supposedly omni-directional, but this is only partially true – they do certainly have a distinctly louder 'front' side, even though the grills trace the speakers' entire circumferences. However, they are still well suited to filling a room. The system is controlled by a funky touch-sensitive disc,

with 'glowy' bits, though this takes some getting used to before it becomes comfortable. It also serves as an optional in-line input, though there are also two separate stereo inputs, allowing this disc to be a separate remote control. It includes a bass control. Sound quality is excellent, and volume fairly impressive. Being

a 2.1 system, this one is best suited to being attached to a PC, or to a home theatre, where a surround sound system can't easily be installed for whatever reason (room shape or cabling restrictions, for example). Also, given their uniquely cool looks, wherever you set these up, you want to show them off!

Creative Gigaworks G500

RRP: R3,299 | DISTRIBUTOR: Rectron (011) 203-1000 | ONLINE: www.rectron.co.za

NEO: Creative is not new to high-end speaker systems, and with the Gigaworks G500 it shows. From the packaging, connectors and everything else, the speaker system is quality. While the control unit is very simple and maybe even disappointing a little, it does

everything you would need it to. The real magic of this unit is in how it plays very specific music types and how it handles movies. Without question, it is the speaker set with the most impact when watching movies. The responsiveness is nothing short of amazing. Where

music is concerned, this unit excels at music that doesn't rely solely on thumping bass, but more subdued low tones and hi hats. If you appreciate your various forms of Jazz music, the Creative set is the best bar none. The way in which it delivers the audio is impressive, to say the least,

and encourages you to keep listening; and as a result, it is the speaker system I spent the most time with, even after the testing was done. Where it doesn't perform so well is in dance/house music. The sound is 'uninspired', but other than that, it's a fantastic surround sound set.

Sound Clarity: 4 | Loudness: 5 | Versatility: 3.5 | Overall: 4.5

SPECIFICATIONS

Power Rating: 310W (total)

Signal to Noise Ratio (SNR): 85db

Inputs/Outputs: Aux-in (stereo); 1 x front stereo in, 1 x rear surround, 1 x Sub/Centre; Headphone

Hardware Decoding: THX, Dolby Surround



Sound Clarity: 5 | Loudness: 5 | Versatility: 4 | Overall: 5

ALEX: I haven't (pardon the pun!) been hearing the Creative name very much in the context of speakers for some time, now. However, their products are still out there, if somewhat less visible than they once were. The Gigaworks G500 5.1 speakers are something of a beast. For starters, they have

a rugged, heavy-duty sort of styling. This is both an aesthetic element, and a functional one – the system is truly sturdy. I like the removable grills on the satellites, allowing them to be cleaned, or even optionally to be left off, if you prefer that look. The subwoofer is almost intimidating in its size, and boasts two bass-reflex tubes.

There is a wired remote control that provides complete controls, including the ability to adjust the various channels separately. Stereo-to-surround up-mix is available, so these speakers can be used with stereo audio sources. Upon testing, I found the volume the G500 delivers to be window rattling – and that was before I

connected the centre and rear satellites! At all volume levels, frequency response and clarity were exceptional. Inputs consist of 6-channel and stereo, providing some versatility. These speakers shine in every regard, and can be used for just about anything, as long as you don't mind their almost industrial appearance.

Logitech Z-5400 Digital

RRP: R3,199 | DISTRIBUTOR: Rectron (011) 203-1000 | ONLINE: www.rectron.co.za

NEO. Most people reading this roundup will be familiar with Logitech speaker systems, and some may have even owned several units released around the same time as these. This set was the predecessor to the Z-5500, but it is still a good 5.1 surround sound set, offering some of the most popular audio-

processing technologies available today. The control unit allows you to select from various audio modes, from Dolby Pro-Logic, Dolby-Pro-Logic II, Dolby Surround, and other such formats. The control unit of this set is easily the most versatile out of all the speaker systems available here. It allows one to customise the audio experience to a

far greater degree, from stereo-expanding modes, surround sound modes, treble, bass levels, and a host of other options. The listening experience with this set can be a hit-and-miss affair, more so than on any other unit. For watching movies, it is excellent and does well enough in all other situations to not leave itself lacking in any one obvious

way, but not memorable either. Having said that, it is probably the most balanced set in this entire roundup in terms of matching the speakers, the subwoofer, and the amount of control one has over the audio signal. Definitely worth considering if you are in the market for a high-end 5.1 surround sound system for the PC.

Sound Clarity: 4 | Loudness: 5 | Versatility: 3 | Overall: 4

SPECIFICATIONS

Power Rating: 310W (total)

Signal to Noise Ratio (SNR): >95db

Inputs/Outputs: 2 x RCA (stereo); 1 x front stereo in, 1 x rear surround, 1 x Sub/Centre/Optical In; Headphone

Hardware Decoding: THX, Dolby Digital, DTS



Sound Clarity: 5 | Loudness: 5 | Versatility: 4 | Overall: 4.5

ALEX. Logitech has something of a reputation for making quality peripherals – a well-deserved reputation. One of the things the company is good at is making its products look really, really good. So I was quite surprised when I looked at this lot and found the styling to be rather antiquated, and not even

in the 'retro' sense. The system is done up in black and matte silver, but the latter somehow looks somewhat unfinished. However, that's where any complaints end! The overall design is really good. Though it may sound like a minor thing, if you have ever connected multi-channel speaker systems, you are familiar with the hassle of wiring

and connecting, so the fact that all the wires plug into the control box, rather than the sub, really rocks! This means that you can tuck away the sub wherever it is you want it, but manage the inputs where you manage the controls – exactly the way things should be done! The sound is also very, very good, indeed, with zero distortion and

excellent volume. The features are also comprehensive: multiple Dolby modes are available, as well as individual channel-pair controls, and stereo-to-surround up-mix. The control box has a blue-lit LCD display, and there is a wireless remote with full functionality. This is another speaker set capable of handling anything you throw at it.