

► **DETAILS**

**PRODUCT**

Arcam Solo Music

**ORIGIN**

UK/China

**TYPE**

One-box system

**WEIGHT**

11.5kg

**DIMENSIONS**

(WxHxD)

420 x 90 x 414mm

**FEATURES**

- Quoted power output: 2x 80W RMS (8ohm)
- Digital inputs: 1x coaxial; 1x optical; 1x USB; 4x HDMI
- AptX Bluetooth

**DISTRIBUTOR**

Arcam

**WEBSITE**

arcam.co.uk



# Music maestro

Arcam's iconic single-box Solo Music system is back – dramatically re-engineered and refined, says **David Price**

**E**ver since the year dot, designers have struggled to provide an elegant compromise between grown-up hi-fi performance and slimmed-down lifestyle packaging. It's not an easy thing to wrestle with, and many attempts have conspicuously failed. Traditionally, the idea of a credible compact sound system has been anathema to audiophiles. One of the last such popular systems was the Arcam Solo. Launched in 2005, it offered excellent packaging and a convincing sound from a single full-width chassis. It was a significant

product and proved a popular seller in a notoriously difficult market. So it is surprising that Arcam has taken so long to replace it, given the speed with which this section of the market develops. Perhaps it's because the company has been busy working on other designs, from its small, portable rSeries audio products to its large, full-size integrated amplifiers and receivers running the company's own Class G power output stages. Now – and not before time – we see the new Solo Music emerging, blinking into the sunlight, packed to the gunwales with all of Arcam's latest tech.

In hi-fi terms at least, its standout feature is the use of a Class G output stage, taken from one of the finest sounding amplifiers at its price, Arcam's FMJ A29. It gives 80W RMS per channel (8ohm) and 125W per side (4ohm) – which is more than generous for this sort of application. Class G isn't a new innovation, of course, but Arcam has spent a lot of time and research budget developing it into an effective and reliable system that brings many of the good points of Class A operation together with the power output capability of Class B. Now highly evolved, implementing it ►

here is a clear sign that the company is serious about the sound of the Solo Music system.

Alongside this, a Cirrus Logic CS42526 DAC chip sits at the heart of the Solo. It is capable of running at up to 24-bit/192kHz PCM resolution, but perhaps understandably doesn't sport DSD functionality – I think it's a bit too niche for this type of product. Interestingly, it does have a disc transport capable of playing back SACDs and CDs. The DAC can play through its coaxial, optical and USB (storage media) inputs, and there's aptX Bluetooth and UPnP streaming. Arcam always does good tuners and it offers both DAB (and DAB+ in some markets) and FM, too.

### Look to the future

Four HDMI inputs are offered for additional future proofing and features. This isn't just a gimmick, because even though the Solo Music is an audio product, it shows that Arcam recognises it will likely be a conduit for delivering high-quality sound from non-traditional sources such as TVs and games consoles, as well as more conventional hi-fi ones. There's the expected line input via RCA phonos around the back, and a 3.5mm mini-jack line input too. Toslink optical and coaxial digital audio inputs are also on the rear.

Although sound quality and flexibility are both essential, a product such as this has to be a pleasure to use – and completely fuss free while it's at it. The new range's industrial design was developed with Adrian Stokes of ASA Designers, working with Arcam MD Charlie Brennan, and the result is a product that feels classy and easy to use as well as looking very swish indeed. Generally, working the Arcam proves to be a pleasure, although the plasticky top-mounted volume control wheel doesn't quite manage to match the expensive feel of the rest of the

controls. The display could be better too; there's nothing particularly wrong with the two-line alphanumeric offering, aside from the fact that it seems a trifle small and dated when set beside the larger, front-mounted OLED affair from Naim's UnitiQute 2. In addition to the bundled multi-function learning backlit remote control supplied, there's a choice of the Arcam control app and a music streaming and control app – and the latter means that the size of the Solo Music system's own display is much less of an issue.

Getting going can be a worry with a complex product such as this, but it proves to be no problem at all – once you've connected up the plethora of aeriels it comes supplied with, including wi-fi, Bluetooth and DAB/FM. Switch the Arcam on and everything works as expected, with straightforward pairing while the DAB radio scans for presets on initial startup. The CD tray works nicely and doesn't feel cheap and the unit doesn't get too hot in operation, even when powering difficult loads over long periods. As such, it's a party-friendly one-boxer.

### Sound quality

Anyone that owned the original Solo Music system a decade or so ago won't be completely surprised to discover that the new version is no slouch in the sound quality stakes. It doesn't sound quite like its predecessor, however – showing that much development work has gone into the design right across the board. Whichever sound source you use, it's clear that the usual compromises you expect from a one-box music system simply aren't present. For example, plug a high-end DAC into its line input, then sit back and be amazed at how good it sounds for a one-box

**HOW IT COMPARES**

Since the original Arcam Solo Music arrived 11 years ago, there have been a number of gatecrashers to Arcam's one-box hi-fi party. One of the best is surely Naim's UnitiQute (£1,295), now in its second generation. This is a more oddball product than the Arcam, not least thanks to its half-width dimensions and austere black and green colour scheme. That's not to say it's a sonic slouch though, because this is a highly musical device that really gets into the groove. Ultimately, the Arcam is more powerful and better all round sonically, but the Naim has charm of its own.

The Solo Music's alphanumeric display isn't the best, but the performance certainly takes some beating

system. The amplifier section is excellent, and that's important as it's the one part of a single-box system for which excuses cannot be made.

The new Solo Music is smooth but powerful in nature – although that's not the whole story. You could actually say precisely the same about its predecessor, outwardly at least. However, once you get past the first few bars of any song you care to play, it very quickly becomes clear that the new model is substantially more musically convincing. Where its predecessor sounded like good hi-fi – admittedly an accolade for a product such as this – the new Solo Music is less musically standoffish and more emotionally committed. It puts its heart and soul into any tune, and gives a real sense of being right there at the musical event.

## Quite simply the best-sounding single-box system at or near its price

The Arcam box is able to maintain its feisty and fun demeanour across a wide variety of sources, with hi-res digital audio proving a particular pleasure. Kate Bush's sublime *Snowflake* charms me, the system showing its large reserves of power, and confident, nuanced and engaging sound. Tonally, it's pretty neutral, perhaps just a tad on the warm side of this, but certainly not euphonic. Those lustrous piano cadences prove a joy to hear, shimmering with rich harmonics and augmented by the physical scale the Solo is able to recreate. Indeed, even at high volumes, it remains composed and resolutely in control. It manages to keep everything together and serves up a confidently articulated and expensive recorded acoustic, inside

### IN SIGHT



- 1 Digital optical input
- 2 RCA analogue input
- 3 Bluetooth & wi-fi antennas
- 4 DAB & FM radio antenna socket
- 5 Speaker binding posts
- 6 4x HDMI inputs

### G WHIZZ

Class G operation is a way round the traditional problem of switching distortion. In a normal push-pull Class AB amplifier circuit, a transistor only conducts half (180°) of the signal waveform, leaving the paired transistor to cover the other half. The point where the two switch between one another is plagued by non-linearities, causing distortion intrusive to the human ear. That's why many high-end amplifiers run in Class A, keeping the output transistors constantly powered up – it gives lower distortion, but produces heat.

Arcam turns off the non-conducting transistor more slowly than in normal designs, using a mix of positive and negative feedback in the output stage. The output stage's supply rail voltages are varied according to the signal level; it uses multiple power supplies rather than just a single one, gradually bringing in the secondary supply as the dynamic load demands it. This means it operates in near Class A mode at low levels, but goes much louder in Class B when needed. This offers a cool-running amp that sounds similar to a Class A design at real-world volumes.

which sit Kate Bush's sublime vocals for everyone to enjoy.

CD proves to be an unexpected treat too, and there's certainly no sense that the disc spinner has been thrown in simply for convenience's sake. Simple Minds' *Theme For Great Cities* is positively engrossing, the Arcam taking control of the song's bassline in a commanding way and setting it behind those epic synthesiser fills and the scratchy rhythm guitar playing. It's not a great recording in the way that the aforementioned Kate Bush track is, but this makes little difference to the way it imparts the intensity and power of the music.

## The compromises you expect from a one-box system aren't present here

Indeed, its glass-clear midband proves ideal for picking through the slightly murky, low-budget, early eighties analogue recording – to convey the consummate musicianship of this great young Scottish band, just about to enter their creative nadir.

Indeed, across all sources – whether watching *Game Of Thrones* on Blu-ray via its built-in DAC, relaxing with my iPad playing ABBA's *Eagle* via iTunes and aptX Bluetooth, or listening to LBC on DAB radio – this system's transparency is a welcome yet slightly unexpected pleasure. Whatever you choose to play on the Arcam, and however you choose to play it, it doesn't introduce too much of its own

character to proceedings, preferring to step back and thump the music out with gusto and glee. This is something you emphatically cannot say about most one-box systems, from wherever they may hail.

Of course, the Solo Music is still mortal in hi-fi terms and not entirely blameless – it could be criticised for its slightly two-dimensional soundstaging for example – but at the price, it sounds a bit churlish. It's far better across all of its sources than you've a right to expect at the price.

### Conclusion

Surely the best-sounding single-box system at or near its price, the Arcam Solo Music has come a long way from its already auspicious origins, back in the middle of the last decade. You'll have to decide for yourself if you like its aesthetics and ergonomics, but I can think of nothing else at its price that boasts such fine sound and superb flexibility ●

### Hi-Fi Choice

#### OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY**  
★★★★★  
**LIKE:** Superb sound; build; finish; functionality
- VALUE FOR MONEY**  
★★★★★  
**DISLIKE:** Front panel display isn't great
- BUILD QUALITY**  
★★★★★  
**WESAY:** The most musically satisfying one-box system in its class
- FEATURES**  
★★★★★

#### OVERALL



## Q&A

**Nick Clarke**  
Chief engineer, Arcam



### DP: Why did you make the new Arcam Solo Music system?

**NC:** This is the successor to the original design that we launched a decade or so ago. It's built to deliver every element of real hi-fi in one sleek, consumer-friendly box, yet with no compromises. The new Solo Music system integrates advanced facilities allowing connection of almost every audio source in a modern household. Remember our motto is "Better Sound for More People". The Solo Music was a massively complex product for us that involved the entire Arcam design team covering all aspects of the electronic and mechanical design. We used Arcam's much-respected Class G power output stage for its excellent sound quality, power and proven performance combined with superb efficiency. It gives serious amounts of power, but runs very cool in normal operation.

### What digital platforms does the Solo Music use?

The digital-to-analogue converter is a Cirrus Logic CS42526. This chip was chosen as it is from the same family as the codec used in the current AVR range (AVR550, AVR850) and was originally selected because it offers class-leading sound quality. As for the CD player, the optical pick-up mechanism is a high-performance part sourced from Sony. Note that SACD is part of its specification because the format is still in demand in the Far East and among some disc enthusiasts in Europe. The radio's DAB core is the excellent Frontier Silicon Venice 9 DAB/DAB+/FM module.

### What loudspeakers does Arcam recommend to partner the Solo?

We say that the new Solo Music can drive almost anything of any shape and size! The power headroom is remarkable, especially for a one-box system. Look out for the new Arcam Muso Mini Monitors coming in September at around £500 a pair.

