

multi-room audio systems

By Paul Diggin



With a multi-source system, a teen can listen to rock in his or her bedroom while mom relaxes to classical in the family room and dad bops to the oldies in the basement.

a multi-room what?

Multi-room or whole-house audio systems deliver music to different rooms from one designated location in the home. With such a system, homeowners can softly pipe their favorite dinner music into the kitchen, living and dining areas when entertaining, crank some upbeat tunes to energize household chores, listen to a ball game out on the patio, or even sing in the shower with accompaniment. Speakers are placed in the ceilings or walls and are designed to blend in with a home's décor to become almost invisible. Simple multi-room systems offer control of only volume in each room. Today's more advanced systems can control volume, which component you listen to (AM/FM Tuner, i-Pod, CD Player, XM or Sirius satellite, etc.) and which radio or satellite station, CD, CD track, i-Pod track, or TV station you listen to. You can also listen to different sources in different rooms at the same time.

where to begin?

As with any home entertainment project, it is helpful to begin by thinking about which features are most important to you and your family. Will a sound system be used in just two or three rooms, or in most of the rooms in the home? Do you want music for an outside deck or pool area? Will there be times when you will want to listen to different music in different rooms simultaneously? The best first step to take in installing a multi-room audio system is to discuss these questions and your various options with a professional installer.

If you want the capability of playing different music in different parts of the house at once, you'll need a multi-source system, which is a system that can distribute different sources (CD player, stereo receiver, music server, satellite music, i-Pod, etc.) to multiple rooms simultaneously. A multi-source system is especially useful for families with children and teens, for couples with different tastes in music, or for people with large music collections. With a multi-source system, a teen can listen to rock in his or her bedroom while mom relaxes to classical in the family room and dad bops to the oldies in the basement.

The next step in bringing a multi-room audio system to life is to plan or design space for an equipment closet, cabinet, or stand and to work with a system installer to decide where to place speakers and control keypads. The closet, cabinet, or stand, usually located on the home's main level, houses the source of the music system (e.g., audio controller, amplifiers, receivers, CD players, satellite receivers, etc.). A professional installer can guide homeowners in deciding where speakers need to be, how many speakers are required, and exactly where to place the speakers for the best sound quality. Most multi-room systems include keypads to control the music in each room. With some systems, you can even control various sources and zones with a remote control.

Every year, a multitude of new products and technologies flood the home entertainment world. Advertisements for flat screen televisions, music servers, wireless products, and home theater equipment can be seen everywhere. Quietly, amidst this sea of technology, multi-room or whole-house audio systems have advanced greatly, giving homeowners greater control, more choices, and better performance than ever before.



A multi-room or whole-house audio system is a great way to increase the enjoyment and comfort a home can offer. With the touch of a button, homeowners can create a happy, upbeat mood for entertaining or a soothing, relaxing environment in which to unwind.

house & home home technology

It is important to make sure that the installer will provide a control system, whether keypads or a remote control, that is easy for all members of your household to understand and operate. Once a system is in, the installer should take the time to show your family how to operate it. Many people think that any home electronic system with advanced features like the ones a multi-room system can offer will be too complicated to actually use and enjoy. This is definitely not the case. Many manufacturers, such as Niles Audio, B&K Components, and Matrix Audio Designs, offer equipment that is very easy to master. By spending just 30 minutes with a professional installer, homeowners can learn how to use their new system.

After the number and locations of speakers and equipment are chosen, you will need to choose the actual speakers and components. When choosing equipment for a multi-room audio system, it is best not to be product or brand name driven. Most of the best audio/visual systems and components are not brands that are widely known to most consumers. This is another area where a professional installer can advise homeowners. Most professional A/V integrators will favor one system but have one or two more to offer as well.

custom vs. off-the-shelf

The phrase “professional installer” or “custom installer” may intimidate many homeowners. Custom refers to a skilled professional who designs and installs audio/video systems for residential and/or commercial spaces. A professionally installed system is designed to meet a specific homeowner’s needs – to offer the best performance and the best look at the best price for a homeowner’s space and style. This differs from what is available in a retail store; an off-the-shelf system will generally be obvious in appearance and cannot serve multiple rooms or zones. Many consumers are drawn to discount “superstores” for their low prices and wide product selections, and for some homeowners and projects, this type of store can fulfill their needs. One thing to keep in mind, however, is that the staff found at these stores lack the expertise of professional installers and are often not capable of providing the quality service and advice available that an industry professional can offer.

For consumers who want a professional installer that can help them choose the best options available and explain the features and functions of each in laymen’s terms, a good place to locate a qualified custom installer is CEDIA. CEDIA, or the Custom Electronics Design and Installation Association, is a global trade association of companies that specialize in planning, providing, and installing custom electronic systems for the home.

what will it cost me?

The cost of a multi-room audio system depends on the size of your home, whether it’s new or existing construction, how many rooms or zones of audio you want, and the type (single source or multi source) of system you go with. For a simpler system with quality speakers, components, and volume controls or keypads,

you’ll likely be spending \$1,500 to \$2,000 per room. A more advanced system with multi-source control, two-way communication, advanced keypads, and high performance speakers will cost you in the \$2,250 to \$3,000 per room range.

A multi-room or whole-house audio system is a great way to increase the enjoyment and comfort a home can offer. With the touch of a button, homeowners can create a happy, upbeat mood for entertaining or a soothing, relaxing environment in which to unwind. An added benefit is that custom entertainment systems also increase a home’s value, providing a double return on investment.

Paul Diggin is Managing Director of Advanced Communication Technologies, a custom electronics integrator located in Hingham, MA.



A professionally installed system is designed to meet a specific homeowner’s needs – to offer the best performance and the best look.