



Arcam FMJ C30/FMJ P1

If you have the resources to pay for truly awe-inspiring sound quality, get ready to clear the decks and make some space for these bristling blocks of power

I warn you now – if you fancy setting up this system in your home (and, sonically speaking, there's absolutely no reason why you should not), be prepared to make some changes, in terms of decor and room layout. I lived with this kit for a relatively short time but the combined weight of seven not-insubstantial monobloc power amps, one preamplifier and a DVD player began to drive my Soundstyle XS310 rack into the floorboards in under two hours.

This, of course, along with the prodigious sight of the mountain of equipment itself, leaves one open to accusations of decorative sabotage from anyone sharing one's living space. Luckily for me, the humbling sound of the system at work was enough to stay the hand of eviction... at least for now.

Recently, Arcam's AV8 preamplifier processor and P7 seven-channel amplifier combination has caused a medium-to-large sized stir in home cinema circles. Ostensibly, Arcam intends to take that performance onto the next logical step by utilising a dedicated preamplifier (with two eight-channel inputs) along with seven monstrously specified monoblocs to create a barnstorming home cinema leviathan.

This idea does ignore a glaring issue: there is, as yet, no DVD player that decodes eight-channel sound. It would be possible, naturally, to utilise Arcam's AV8 processor to take care of decoding duties, but where's

the fun in that? It may be better to think of this system as an uncompromised stereo set-up that also has soaring ability with multichannel movies and music.

Remarkably, Arcam has not produced a monobloc power amp before. As a concept, the P1 is simple: the latest current-drive amplifier technology, a vast power supply and massive heatsinking. Dial in copious power (180 watts into 8 ohms), separate the driver stage from the output stage and fine-tune until satisfied. Easy.

The monobloc and C30 preamp each utilise both single-ended phono and XLR balanced connections, and the preamp incorporates Arcam's brilliantly simple software, which allows input changes without variations in volume level. So, without the complexities of digital audio decoding or video switching, the system fundamentally comprises seven bristling blocks of power, with a volume control and input selector attempting to rein them in.

It was with a due sense of occasion (and trepidation) that, having attached a DVD player with acceptably effective decoding on board and warmed the power amplifiers thoroughly, I loaded *Kill Bill Volume 1* into the disc tray. Say what you like about Quentin Tarantino's fluff-and-gore orgy of violence as a film – as a demonstration DVD it's right on the money. Rapid effects steering, huge dynamic shifts, multi-layered

Although it takes up a fair amount of space, the Arcam system has a soaring ability with movies and music

dialogue and hugely overdriven sound (especially in the animated, *manga*-style interlude) sit alongside bright, shiny Japanese bubblegum pop and querulous Pan-pipe freakouts on a soundtrack that's brazen in its state-of-the-art pretensions.

The job that the Arcam system does with it is simply jaw-dropping. A glance at the specification tells you all you need to know about the brute power of this set-up but no technical data can prepare you for the precision or the effortless, unyielding control that seven channels of dedicated amplification (with front left and right channels biamped) bring to bear. The soundstage created is utterly convincing and vivid, with natural, neutral sound and an impression of limitless power and subtlety. Detail communication borders on the telepathic, while the system's ability to differentiate minuscule gradations of sound is truly extraordinary.

What's most impressive about the system's ability with movie soundtracks is the way it separates and locates items on the stage with razor-sharp precision. Detail definition remains exemplary even at the height of aural frenzy, and switches from silence to cacophony occur in an instant. Through all of these audio gymnastics, the C30/P1 set-up makes it clear that it's completely unruffled – there's plenty more in reserve; you merely have to ask for it.



NEED TO KNOW...

Price £9200

FMJ C30 PRE-AMPLIFIER

Phono cartridge input
Switchable for moving magnet or moving coil
Headphone output
Separate, dedicated headphone amplifier section
Inputs Seven (+one phono)
inc two recording loops
Size: 43x37x11cm
Weight: 9kg



FMJ P1 MONOBLOC POWER AMPLIFIER

Continuous power output:
180w (8 ohms, 20Hz-20kHz);
300w (4 ohms, 1kHz)
Size: 43x35x11cm
Weight: 12kg

Made by
Arcam
Pembroke Avenue,
Denny Industrial Centre,
Waterbeach,
Cambs CB5 9QR
Tel: 01223 203 200
www.arcam.co.uk

The system's grip and timing are ferocious, its barrel-chested, deep-breathing attack during moments of high crisis is dismissive in its exactitude. It's an insidiously addictive presentation that, frankly, left me deliriously hunting out other DVDs to light fires under.

Then, attention turned to multichannel music. First into the tray was Motorhead's *Ace of Spades* DVD-A. We all know that Motorhead are a one-trick pony, but there's no denying that it's quite a trick. Playing the title track, the Arcam again demonstrated its near-supernatural grip and control, transmitting Phil 'Philthy Animal' Taylor's relentless, staccato drumrolls with impeccable timing. Most revealing of all, and strangely touching, was Lemmy's vocal: sounding wobbly and drunk, the intimacy and sheer exposure of his voice made that most trite of hi-fi clichés, 'you could be in the same room as the performer', entirely appropriate. For a three-piece, Motorhead are a loud, loud act; the Arcam system can simultaneously transmit their scope and limitations in a luxuriously musical manner.

For a different – but no less frightening – kind of emphasis, I switched to the London Philharmonic's fierce DVD-A of Orff's *Carmina Burana*. Goaded by the conductorship of Zubin Mehta and augmented by the London Philharmonic Choir and Southend Boy's Choir, the orchestra sounded sweat-soaked through

the Arcam. The sheer scale, scope and sweep of the piece were absolutely towering, while the dynamic peaks and troughs rampaged through with unqualified, martial control. During everyone's favourite Old Spice/*The Omen* moments, the magnitude of the soundstage the Arcam presented was almost panic-inducing in its vibrancy and attack.

The Doors' *LA Woman* DVD-A was, then, an attempt to bring my heart rate back

a hiding, but in this instance I have to say that the heaps of praise are all warranted.

The Arcam is not a solution that will appeal to everyone and, indeed, it might be reasonable to suggest that there's a hint of overkill about it. But it is so sweeping in its range of talents, so voluptuous in its sound and so opulent in its presentation – so unerringly right – that any and all objections founder like waves against the dizzyingly tall

In terms of grip, grunt and poise, the Arcam system is talented almost beyond belief

to something approaching normal. An altogether more subtle performance was called for, and the Arcam didn't disappoint. The system was so revealing of vocal timbre, so eager to lay bare every nuance of the performance, that I can safely say I heard the recording as never before. Insight into fairly rudimentary recordings like this is almost indecent in its transparency, and in terms of grip, grunt and poise, the Arcam is talented almost beyond belief.

I'm painfully aware that, in places, this review is approaching gushing in its praise and so will endeavour to find fault with the system. Here goes: it's undeniably expensive, it's space-consuming... That could well be the extent of it. The *Bumper Book of Reviewer's Superlatives* may have taken

cliffs of its ability. Just bear in mind that, as I have said, the system requires a substantial commitment in interior decor terms – but, boy, you'll carry that weight a long time.

Simon Lucas

**Arcam FMJ C30/
FMJ P1
£9200**

The score

94%

Home Cinema verdict

It's expensive and big, but mightily impressive; this system exhausts our supply of superlatives