



# Room service

Is Denon's new HEOS multi-room system the challenger to Sonos that we've been waiting for? **Steve May** finds out

For many born again music enthusiasts, wireless multi-room has become the very definition of home audio. In this simplified connected world, it's functionality and ease of use, rather than a quest for infinitesimal nuance that appeals. Illustrate this trend with The March of Progress, and it would be early iPod docks reaching from the primeval ooze (rather than conventional two-channel systems), eventually evolving into the market-share devouring Goliath that is Sonos. Inevitably the big hi-fi brands now want in, none more so than Denon. After years of development and tweaking, HEOS by Denon (to give it its official monicker) is ready to take centre stage.

The HEOS family lands with a trio of active speakers and a couple of powerful system accessories. The diminutive fit-anywhere HEOS 3 speaker, priced at £249, provides an obvious starting point. Cutely, two can be paired in the HEOS app and used as a stereo pair. However it's the lounge-room HEOS 5 (£349) where

the system starts to show some sonic character. Leading the pack is the HEOS 7 (£499), designed for larger living rooms and family spaces.

Like Sonos, Denon doesn't offer specifications for any of its kit. Instead it points to 'the experience'. While this is frustrating if you want to compare like with like, it's understandable in context. This is Minecraft audio – build it as you like it.

The HEOS system is configured and driven from the app, available for Android and iOS. Integrated music services comprise Spotify, Deezer, Tunein radio and Napster. Denon recently inked a deal with Google that will enable users to Google Cast content (music, radio stations and podcasts) directly. You can also stream from your mobile or networked sources, be they NAS or PC.

File support is 16-bit friendly, but 24-bit does not compute. For the most part, the speakers will be handling Spotify and MP3s, 320kbps or less. HEOS' ability to deliver musicality from such sources is a key part of its appeal. AAC, ALAC and FLAC files also play back.

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Denon HEOS

**ORIGIN**  
China

**TYPE**  
Wi-fi enabled active speakers and multi-room audio system

**WEIGHT**  
HEOS 3: 1.9kg  
HEOS 5: 3kg  
HEOS 7: 4.5kg  
HEOS Link: 1.3kg  
HEOS Amp: 2.8kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
HEOS 3:  
130 x 272 x 165mm  
HEOS 5:  
294 x 209 x 166mm  
HEOS 7:  
479 x 203 x 164mm  
HEOS Link:  
155 x 74 x 150mm  
HEOS Amp:  
221 x 93 x 214mm

**FEATURES**  
• Connections: Ethernet; 3.5mm minijack; USB  
• Spotify, Deezer and Tunein radio streaming support

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Denon UK

**TELEPHONE**  
02890 279830

**WEBSITE**  
denon.co.uk

The design may be a bit Marmite, but we love it. Neither the HEOS 5 or 7 are intended for wall or ceiling mounting. Their natural habitat is shelving, tables, work surfaces – everyday locales that might equally suit a weeping fig. In short, they're easy to accommodate.

Each speaker has a dedicated Ethernet connection if you don't want to go wireless, aux 3.5mm minijack for local devices and USB port. The only on-body controls are volume and mute; there's no Power Off button, the speakers simply go into standby when not in use.

Providing system support is the HEOS Link (£299) and Amp (£399). The former is used to integrate a standalone system, for example an AV receiver. Small and chunky, it features analogue and digital in/outs, plus USB and Ethernet. The HEOS Amp can be used with everyday speakers to create a standalone system that's also part of the HEOS network.

Key to any multi-room audio system is ease of use – and HEOS pretty much has this nailed. Initial setup takes but a few moments. The system uses a standard wi-fi 2.4GHz network, and happily there's no MESH infrastructure to contend with. The speaker grabs its network connection via WPS or from a hard-wired mobile device. Just connect the two via minijack and follow the prompts on the app. All units convey their status through a colour-coded LED. Once networked they glow a happy blue.

## Sound quality

The standout speaker in the HEOS range is clearly the 7. Nothing quite prepares you for just how gargantuan a sound it can deliver. To say its output is prodigious is to call Godzilla a lizard. This isn't a bad thing.

Meet the family (from left): the HEOS 7, HEOS 5, HEOS 3, HEOS Amp and HEOS Link

Multi-room audio shouldn't be about tea parties and polite society; it's far more gregarious than that.

The soundtrack for Wes Craven's eighties horror yarn *Shocker* (MP3 320kbps) is packed with hair metal covers of genre classics (Alice Cooper's *No More Mr Nice Guy*, Iggy Pop's *Love Transfusion*) and the HEOS 7 riffs along with energy to spare. Gun's cover of *Word Up*, on the similarly rocky *Barb Wire* soundtrack album (MP3 320kbps), is equally well served. It opens with that familiar hook delivered via potent Class D amplification, before letting Cameo's classic riff off the leash. The HEOS 7 sounds gleeful. It's instantly clear this is a fun speaker to live with.

The HEOS 7 is also capable of preternatural bass. Eurodance classic *How Do You Do*, by Cascada (horrible low bit-rate, don't ask), thumps like a Jägerbomb hangover, but it's a beat that the big 7 positively relishes. Similarly Ansell Collins' reggae classic *Double Barrel* (from a CD rip of *Celebration: 25 years of Trojan Records*) has enough volume and low frequency extension to warrant honorary sound system status.

With so many choices, there should be a HEOS to suit every room



The HEOS 5 may offer half the capacity of its bigger brother, but it's no less musical. It doesn't drop quite as low, but still knows how to party. A 16-bit FLAC rip of Rush's seminal *2112* sounds surprisingly glorious, with crisp acoustic guitar and tingly highs. Significantly, Geddy Lee doesn't sound like a scalded cat.

Synchronicity between zones is superb. Differently zoned speakers

To say that the HEOS 7's output is prodigious is to call Godzilla a lizard

play out *sans* any discernible delay. Operational functionality is also good. Plugging a USB drive into any one of the speakers allows it to become a multi-room source. And, of course, you can stream disparate musical sources to multiple rooms simultaneously – Spotify to your den, MP3s from a NAS to the living room, local radio to the shed...

And if you suffer from any wi-fi notspots, Denon offers the dual-band

HEOS Extend, which at £79 represents a relatively low-cost way to extend the reach of the system.

## Conclusion

If ease of use, speaker design and musicality distinguish multi-room systems, then HEOS by Denon has set a refreshingly high benchmark. The HEOS 7 is an extraordinary hero product for the line, capable of room-filling energy. For most users though, the smaller HEOS 5 will hit the sweet spot. Beautifully designed, with moderated slam and a well-judged mid-range, it's a great fit for most average room sizes and popular music genres. The control app also serves the system well. In all, HEOS comes highly recommended ●

## CONNECTIONS



## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

**SOUND QUALITY**  
★★★★★

**VALUE FOR MONEY**  
★★★★★

**BUILD QUALITY**  
★★★★★

**FEATURES**  
★★★★★

**OVERALL**  
★★★★★

**LIKE:** Simple setup; HEOS 5 & 7 performance; system expandability

**DISLIKE:** No support for 24-bit audio; zone grouping on the app can be fiddly

**WE SAY:** HEOS by Denon is the streaming audio system to beat