

# FIRST TESTS

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VERDICTS ON THE  
LATEST KIT

Streaming system | £1999 | [whf.cm/SA30](http://whf.cm/SA30)

## Arcam SA30

Visually, this modest-looking unit seems to be nothing to get excited about. But this is one book you shouldn't judge by its cover

Not everything is desperate to be seen for what it really is. Some go to great lengths to conceal their true identity - speakeasy bars, masked singers, Bruce Wayne - while others, such as this Arcam SA30, simply don't feel compelled to show it off.

Based on its appearance, the SA30 could well slip into a line-up of Arcam amplifiers from the past few years. But, while there are few aesthetic clues, this Arcam is actually a fully fledged streaming system, a just-add-speakers product in the same vein as the Naim Uniti Atom.

### KEY FEATURES



AirPlay



Chromecast

**120W**

120W per channel

Complementing its widely heralded Class G stereo amplification (120W per channel) with streaming architecture as well as digital and analogue inputs, Arcam has further satisfied the 'complete stereo system in a box' concept it first offered in the Arcam Solo Music several years ago.

### Contemporary relevance

While the Solo Music revolved around disc playback, the SA30 is more *à la mode*. Providing it is hooked up to a network via ethernet or wi-fi (once you have screwed in the antennae), AirPlay

allows music to be streamed from iOS devices, while Google Chromecast functionality caters for similarly straightforward, one-touch streaming from compatible apps such as Spotify, Tidal, Qobuz, Deezer and TuneIn Radio.

There's also UPnP streaming, so that hi-res networked music from your NAS drive can be accessed through Arcam's dedicated MusicLife app or, alternatively,

Visually, the Arcam conforms to the HDA range of which it is part

**"It's a complete stereo system in a box. The Arcam's streaming abilities may steal the headlines, but it's the physical inputs that can make the SA30 the nucleus of a multi-source system"**

any third-party UPnP control app such as mConnect or BubbleUPnP. These are preferable alternatives in our opinion, Arcam's own software being fairly bare-boned. Room subscribers will see the Arcam as an endpoint option in the Room app, too. Not only is hi-res music supported by the Arcam's 32-bit ESS Sabre ESS9038 DAC, but MQA files, including MQA-formatted Tidal Masters, can also be played.

The Arcam's streaming abilities may steal the headlines, but it's the physical inputs that can make the SA30 the nucleus of a multi-source system. Digital connectivity features two opticals and

coaxials, one USB and an eARC-supporting HDMI. Turning to analogue, it has three pairs of RCAs plus compatibility with both moving-magnet and moving-coil cartridges. We think that list ensures pretty much any audio component or TV can be connected to it.

### A wide range of options

A pair of pre-outs allows the user to bypass the Arcam's power amplification for an alternative, while an RS232 connection accommodates integration into a smart home automation system. A front-panel 3.5mm output provides headphones listening, too.

Plug in a pair of speakers or headphones and away you go... almost. Arcam has built support for Dirac Research's proprietary Dirac Live room correction technology into the SA30, designed to correct the connected speakers' performance for the system, and reduce unwanted resonant frequencies introduced by the room.

All you, or your dealer, have to do is download the Dirac Live desktop application (Windows or Mac) onto your computer, follow the procedure (which includes connecting the supplied mic, using it to measure 13 positions around your living room) and the software calculates and corrects the colourations.

You're presented with a target-response curve, which you can easily manually adjust before it's loaded wirelessly onto the SA30. It's an encouragingly straightforward process,



Image Source: Arcam



Although it's a thoroughly modern unit, the SA30's visual design is conventional



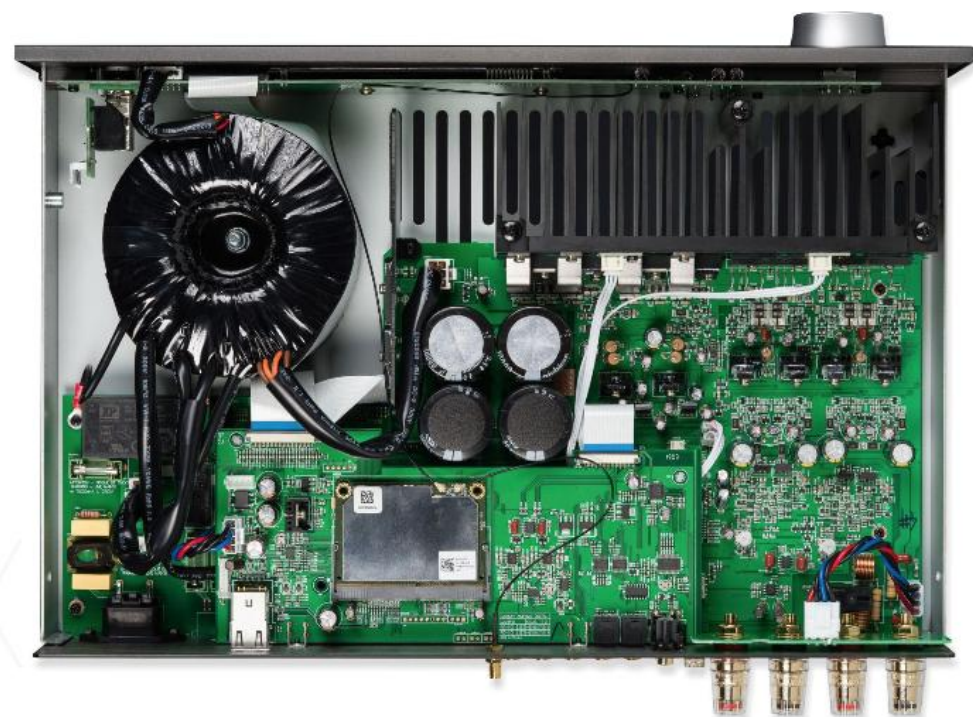
The array of buttons under the display control functions such as input and muting



The range of connectivity on the SA30 is so wide that we think pretty much any audio component or TV can be connected



More than digital: the SA30 supports turntables with MM or MC cartridges



The neat internal design shows off the generous power supply

and in our room does noticeably clean up the sound.

Naturally, in order to apply such room correction across inputs, the SA30 converts any analogue signals into a digital signal with its analogue-to-digital architecture, allowing it to be digitally processed before being converted back with its DAC. The Arcam's Analogue Direct mode, however, bypasses that, sending the inputted signal straight through to the preamp stage.

### Traditional housing

While the SA30 has embraced the modern world of streaming, its aesthetics are very much in line with those of traditional hi-fi. Housed in a full-width chassis, and employing circular controls (a conventional volume dial and power button) either side of a compact display, the SA30 embodies Arcam's established design approach. It conforms to the rest of the HDA component range it belongs to and away from the likes of Arcam's elegant Solo Uno streaming amplifier.

**"Colours In Space by Explosions In The Sky sounds fittingly cosmic, the Arcam capturing the dimension and dynamic scope of the striking soundscape"**

We imagine anyone who relishes orthodox hi-fi design will appreciate the SA30's aesthetic approach.

There's nothing that points to its streaming talents - no sizable screen on which artwork can be displayed, nor the increasingly common touch controls or presets. Even the array of buttons under the small LED screen sticks to standard functions such as menu, input switching, mute and balance.

### Anachronistic display

It's not ideal for visualising the track currently playing - watching letters slowly scroll across the display is about as visually painful as modern hi-fi gets - and we miss being able to occasionally glance at on-screen album covers.

Once the sound emerges though, all those visual concerns fade away. The

Arcam has all the sonic smoothness, scale and powerful muscularity we've come to expect from Arcam components and their Class G amplification. As we revel in its versatility - we stream our hi-res library from our Naim server, play Tidal and Spotify streams over Chromecast, and give our reference turntable a spin - we are thrown into the most consistently pleasant of easy-listening states.

The Arcam's rendition of L.A. Salami's *When The Poet Sings* is full and clear and detailed: the tender acoustic plucking is lush and convincingly tangible, and his conversational vocal is engagingly dynamic, with all the quirky intricacies that make his storytelling so compelling left intact.

The Arcam's appetite for vocals is exemplary. That pleasing clarity and subtlety is presented on a big, spacious



and tonally even canvas - one that puts space between the melodic electric strings and the acoustic strums they sit on top of, without sacrificing their intended interplay.

While fast and fluid, the SA30 doesn't quite have the rhythmic aptitude of the Naim Uniti Atom, which is the more gifted performer when it comes to tying together a pattern. But the Arcam's bigger, easier-going presentation will surely find favour with many listeners.

### Tone and atmosphere

The SA30 is willing to offer the scale, openness and low-end impact to communicate the sinister tone of Bon Iver's *We*, while also injecting the spaciousness necessary to keep the increasingly dense production nicely intelligible. It's this sort of scale that really gives atmospheric instrumentals their fair due. *Colours In Space* by Explosions In The Sky sounds fittingly cosmic, the Arcam capturing the dimension and dynamic scope of the striking soundscape.

You can't fault the display for clarity, even if there's no album artwork

Of the seven digital filters available, we prefer the default Apodizing, although the others, which include Brick Wall, Minimum Phase Fast Roll Off and Linear Phase Slow Roll off, all offer subtle differences and are worth trying.

The Arcam SA30 is a fine example of how well music streaming can be implemented into traditional hi-fi, and just how discreetly too. Thanks to its integration of Chromecast, AirPlay and UPnP streaming, all you require is a control device (such as a phone or tablet) and pair of equally talented speakers (such as the KEF LS50s, Revel Concerta2 M16s or Fyne Audio F50ls).

With the Arcam's wealth of connections, existing sources can also be easily accommodated and delivered thanks to the SA30's pleasingly open, smooth and detailed presentation.

It goes without some of the luxuries often adopted by modern streaming products - a fancy display, touch controls and fleshed-out dedicated app, for example - and ultimately, is outclassed by the class-leading competition when it comes to rhythmic ability. But the SA30 responds with a mature openness and clarity, and if that's how you like your music, you won't regret making it the heart of your system.

## WHAT HI-FI?

RATING ★★★★★

### SOUND

★★★★★

### FEATURES

★★★★★

### BUILD

★★★★★

### FOR

- Smooth, open detailed presentation
- Dirac Live room EQ
- Exhaustive connectivity

### AGAINST

- Dedicated app is basic
- Naim rival is more rhythmically talented

### VERDICT

A superb combination of Arcam amplification and modern-day music streaming