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Help Desk: Despite "do-it-our-way" approach, Bose sounds good

By Al Gordon

Offhand, one would be hard-pressed to come up with a consumer electronics manufacturer whose products are both as coveted and as critiqued as Bose's.

To take a look at – or more accurately, give a listen to – the phenomenon, I recently tested three of Framingham-based Bose Corporation's signature products: the Wave Music System, QuietComfort 2 headphones, and iPod SoundDock. The products have created their own market niches and are the standard-setters in their categories. They are suitable high-end gifts for purposes ranging from Christmas to college graduations. You can make a lot of people happy by giving them something from Bose.

No good deed goes unpunished, though, so Bose has attracted some critics among hi-fi purists that its equipment is overpriced and not truly "musical." On the former, Bose list pricing is at the high end of its market segment. What really makes them pricey, however, is that the company relentlessly refuses to discount its prices, a rarity in consumer electronics. Any deals it offers usually involve bundling accessories with the product while the list price stands.

The issue of the Bose sound, on the other hand, is primarily a matter of taste. A Bose product typically will have pronounced bass and highs rather than neutral reproduction across the frequency spectrum. This is not truly high fidelity, but to my ears at least Bose products can offer an exciting sound, particularly a thumping bass that comes close to reproducing a concert experience. Think of it this way: Bose may not put you in the very best seat in the concert hall, but they do put you in an interesting location.

Enough generalities, let's look at how the specific goods stack up.

The Wave Music System (\$350 for an AM/FM radio; \$500 for CD and radio) is the latest incarnation of the product that created a market for expensive clock radios that until then no one knew existed. The second-generation model, introduced late last year, retains the sleek trapezoidal shape of the original and takes its

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minimalist design to the extreme: no controls on the unit at all. Everything is run by the Wave's "credit card" remote control. This approach works well; there is no difficulty in setting up the unit to do your bidding. However, I haven't dropped the remote yet while trying to hit the snooze alarm, and I can envision a little displeasure when it happens.

I had excellent results with the radio tuner, bringing in hard-to-get stations. Support for MP3 files also was welcome on the CD version; less happy was the elimination of dual alarms and a buzzer alarm option. Bose did retain its invaluable "ramp up" volume feature on the alarm – during the first 60 seconds after the alarm starts, the unit slowly increases the volume from zero to the level you set, which, trust me, is much more pleasant than being startled by a blast at high volume.

The QuietComfort 2 headphones (\$300) dominate the full-sized, high-end, noise-canceling headphones arena. Bose helped pioneer "active noise cancellation" technology – a sensor in the phones picks up external sounds and internal circuitry sends out canceling sound waves. This technique is most effective for constant but indistinct background noise such as the droning of airplane engines, the murmurings in an office, or the hum of your air conditioner. Discrete sounds – for example, if you can hear the words in a conversation nearby – won't really be cancelled out, although the headphones' "ear muff" design will help some.

Bose is famous for its "do-it-our-way" approach to customer options (one looks in vain for bass and treble adjustments on most Bose products); so does Apple Computer. So what could be a more obvious combination than Bose and the iPod? Hence, the SoundDock (\$300), which is exactly what it sounds like – a speaker system with a dock where you plug in your iPod, plus the inevitable credit card remote. The "our way" philosophy is manifest in the absence of either an auxiliary jack for other music sources or a pass-through to let you sync your iPod while in the unit. At this price, the absence of those features is annoying.

But not so annoying that you won't appreciate Bose's uncanny ability to produce "room-filling sound" from relatively small devices. When you crank up the volume to annoy-the-neighbors levels, the sound doesn't distort. If you are looking to build a music system around your iPod, the SoundDock is the benchmark.

Al Gordon is a Massachusetts-based media and political consultant who also writes about technology. You can read more of his articles at www.algordon.com/techblog.html and e-mail him at eagle@algordon.com.

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