

Arcam Solo

Arcam Solo. \$2499

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Before going any further, I'd like to make an apology. I'm sorry. Really, awfully sorry. You see, I'm British. And that means I was born with the word "sorry" already forming on my lips. Apologising is a way of life for Brits, part of a dedication to manners that also manifests itself in the sound of a good deal of British audio equipment. Plonk a CD into an Arcam system and you'll hear what I mean.

"A-hem. Errrm, sorry for interrupting, but if you don't mind awfully, here's some music." It's politeness made audible. Music presented in a manner calculated not to startle the horses. Or servants.

That, I have to say, has been pretty much my entire experience of Arcam over the years. There's detail and finesse and, well, all the things that should be there, but it just isn't my cup of Darjeeling. Sorry.

Offended? You won't be

So what about Arcam's new Solo? Well, it's an Arcam CD73 that's been stuffed into a neat box along with a one-chip amplifier and tuners for FM and DAB (not very useful in NZ, that one).

Aesthetically the single box is understated. The satin silver finish

and neatly balanced layout of controls eschew ostentation but betray just a little too much of the stylist's pen. That said, it will fit nicely into most modern interiors and is highly unlikely to offend.

What the Solo does very well indeed is make music fun



Build quality is excellent; the Solo's front panel is a solid alloy casting with sensuously rounded corners. A blue display (which can be dimmed or turned-off altogether) and nicely tactile buttons reinforce the impression.

Only partially useless

Functionally, the Solo offers CD replay, FM radio, the DAB tuner I couldn't use and four auxiliary inputs. Interestingly, one of these is accessed via a 3.5mm jack on the front panel, especially for iPods and MP3 players.

On the output side, there is a 50w amplifier with binding posts for a pair of speakers and two, separately controllable pre-amp outputs, one each for two zones meaning the Solo can be used as the basis of a simple multi room system.

The remote is a disappointment, distinctly tacky compared to the rest of the system. It is, however, the only way to access the second zone, the tone controls and something called Bass Correction. This, for want of a better description, is a variable loudness button, intended to beef-up the sound from small speakers. Indeed.

Funk and Arcam? Surely not

Not wishing to give the Solo too easy a time of it, I dropped Jamiroquai's *Funk Odyssey* into the CD drawer and went straight for *You Give Me Something*. The Solo certainly did give me something. JK's vocoder rhythms and driving percussion were rocking in a way that I really hadn't expected. Moving on to *Feel So Good* and yes, I did. This was fun. Fast bass with a hard attack to keep the rhythms tight, but plenty of detail at the top. Not that the Solo is about crude boom and tizz. The seductive mid-range and softly detailed highs that form such an important part of the Arcam sound are still there.

This becomes apparent with the

huge choral expanse of Prokofiev's *Alexandr Nevsky* (Claud Abbado and the LSO, DG447 419-2). It's a testing piece for any system, and can sound quite shouty. The Solo managed to convey not only the scale of the piece, but it allowed the choir to counterpoint the orchestra's brass-heavy brutality, flowing softly over the entire soundstage.

Largely due to the lamentable state of FM broadcasting quality in New Zealand it was hard to draw any useful conclusions about the Arcam's tuner. Certainly it locked on to stations well, untroubled by interference. But highly compressed music of any style really doesn't do the Solo justice. A shame, for which someone else should be apologising.

Democracy at work

Overall the Solo's presentation is remarkably democratic. Everyone gets to be heard, regardless of their original place in the mix. The downside is that vocals can be quite forward and some, previously discreet details can become a little distracting.

Finding a point of comparison in the market is tricky. There are very few separates that will do as well for \$2,500. But there is the Linn Classik, another one box-er, for around \$2995. I like the Linn's aesthetics and most of all, I like its performance. But it does have one of the most appallingly designed remote controls I've ever come across. So it gets a bit of a kicking from the Arcam, if only because of the ergonomics.

What the Solo does very well indeed is make music fun. There's gravitas and sophistication when you need it, as one would expect from Arcam, but there's also drive and sheer exuberance that makes you want to get up and twitch a bit before mumbling a self-conscious apology and sitting down again. And that's just not cricket. Sorry.—*Matthew Masters*

