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Men's Journal

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GEAR

Ten Ways to Get the Most Out of Your Digital Music

I. WARM UP YOUR SONG FILES WITH A DIGITAL-TO-ANALOG CONVERTER

There's a simple, easy way to make all that digital music you've bought in the past few years sound a hell of a lot better: Pick up a digital-to-analog converter. DACs convert song files to an audible analog form. If done poorly (every digital music player has at least a bare-bones converter), subtle errors in the rebuilding process will diminish audio fidelity. A good DAC creates a less harsh, smoother approximation of the original music and produces a sound

that's far warmer and detailed. The best part? It's simple to hook up. Just connect a DAC via USB to your computer, plug your DAC into your receiver, and let musical bliss ensue. The **NUFORCE ICON-2** [\$349; nuforce.com], shown here, makes songs sound sweeter and doubles as a headphone amp. If you have a bigger budget to play with, the **Bryston BDA-1** [\$1,999; bryston.com] oversamples the signal 128x for an even smoother, more organic sound.



2. GET A BETTER PAIR OF HEADPHONES

Dinner's done. Wife and kids are in bed. You've finally got the time to listen to some music without distraction. Good time for a session with *Beggar's Banquet*, yes — but maybe not a good time to hear it at 120 decibels from your floor-standing speakers. Solution: Spoil yourself with a pair of headphones that can realistically simulate the sound of a serious audiophile hi-fi. **AUDEZ'E** equipped its **LCD-2** [\$995; aloudio.com] with a push-pull magnetic structure honed by sound engineers to be among the most efficient and accurate cans ever made. The rosewood frames boast sloped ear pads wrapped in lambskin leather to keep them comfortable during extended listening. Don't want to spend that much? Pick up the Audio-Technica ATH-AD700 [\$160; audio-technica.com] headphones, which basically act like speakers that fit on your ears. A slight amount of sound will leak into the room, but the lack of pressure in your ear will make it seem as though you're listening out loud.

3. BREAK OUT THE VINYL (AGAIN)

Sales of new and reissued vinyl LPs are up — and not just because the album art looks so much cooler on 12 inches of cardboard than it does on your flickering computer screen. More listeners are riding vinyl's new wave because the sound is warmer, more realistic, and less sterile than the ultraloud, compressed digital music we've grown accustomed to. Turntables range in price from a few hundred

dollars to tens of thousands, but you don't need to spend a college fund to get great sound. The **REGA RPI** [\$445; soundorg.com] has an audiophile following, thanks to its back-to-basics emphasis on the essentials: Its motor design kills vibration, while the phenolic resin platter and precision main bearing ensure stability and consistency, all keys to getting quality sound out of your vinyl.



4. RIP YOUR CDS THE RIGHT WAY

If you're using iTunes to import CDs, a few simple mouse clicks can make the resulting song files sound much fuller and more alive. When you're in the program, go to the "iTunes" menu then to "Preferences." Under the "General" tab, find the "Import Settings" button. Click "Custom," and then choose a variable 320-kbps MP3 or AAC encoder. (MP3s are universally readable, but AAC files sound better.) If you are going to listen to the songs only on high-quality home equipment, choose the Apple Lossless encoder. All these options will result in larger files, but storage space is cheap (and getting cheaper).

5. BEAM SONGS FROM YOUR PHONE TO YOUR STEREO

Apple's newest home audio innovation, AirPlay, allows you to wirelessly stream your iTunes music from a computer, iPhone, or iPad to any compatible speakers or receiver from across the room — meaning you can control your entire music catalog from the couch. Relatively few systems offer built-in support, but a growing number of A/V receivers do offer the tech, such as **MARANTZ**'s hyperconnected **M-CR603** [\$750 with required firmware update; us.marantz.com]. If you already have a perfectly good older receiver near your TV and you're looking to get AirPlay, pick up an Apple TV [\$99; apple.com].



VINYL AND HEADPHONES: TRAVIS NATHORNE

6. GET AN IPOD DOCK THAT DELIVERS

Most iPod docks are little more than boomboxes with an iPod hookup, but a new wave of docks can transfer files from your device digitally and then use an internal digital-to-analog converter to rebuild the sound. Add in some powerful amplification and you've got a serious hi-fi setup. Take this **FATMAN CARBON TRINITY HYBRID VALVE AMPLIFIER**. Those glowing tubes to the right aren't just for show — they're part of a 25-watt-per-channel amplifier that feeds the included speakers, or any other speakers you choose. The tubes, paired with the internal DAC, provide a wide, full sound that's richer than any other dock we've heard [[\\$649; amazon.com](#)].



7. PUT YOUR TUNES IN THE CLOUD

The cloud — online services that can store and serve your digital music — allows you to listen to your music in more places and eliminates the possibility of losing your music when you get a new computer.

Services like **GOOGLE MUSIC BETA** and **AMAZON CLOUD PLAYER** let you upload your music collection to remote servers, using the Web or a mobile app to access the library. Both services are free (for now).

The **ITUNES MATCH** system skips the uploading and uses the 18 million-song iTunes library for remote listening at \$25 a year.

8. FILL YOUR HOUSE WITH MUSIC



Sonos systems make it surprisingly easy to turn your entire home into a hi-fi listening room. Its latest product, the **SONOS PLAY:3** [[\\$299; sonos.com](#)], is a small (11x5x6), powered, three-driver speaker that talks to your wireless network and pulls songs from the internet (or your digital collection) while you select them on a controller, phone, computer, or iPad — no receiver necessary. Each unit puts out enough

crisp, even sound to fill a large room — even one packed with people — and can be set to work with units in up to 32 rooms, either playing the same song everywhere at once or various songs simultaneously.

Compared with the confusing, contractor-installed, whole-home systems of the past, the Sonos unit offers an infinitely more usable, cheaper, and expandable way to get your entire house to sing.



9. BUILD THE ULTIMATE MINIMALIST HI-FI

Breakthroughs in digital amplification and speaker engineering make it possible to assemble a serious hi-fi system that won't steal half your living-room floor space. Start with the **WADIA 15iPOWERDAC MINI** [[\\$1,199; wadia.com](#)]. This 8x8x2 wonder box contains a preamp, a 50-watt-per-channel amplifier, and a USB DAC (with technology descended from Wadia's \$10,000-plus CD players) all in one. Wire it to the inexpensive (but awesome-sounding) **WHARFEDALE DIAMOND 10.2 BOOKSHELF SPEAKERS** [[\\$450 a pair; soundimport.com](#)], which feature an understated look backed up by a neodymium-driven tweeter and a woofer made of Kevlar. Then plug in your source to one of the Wadia's three digital inputs and proceed toward aural ecstasy.

10. UNLOCK AN ENDLESS CATALOG OF TUNES

All-you-can-listen subscription services — all starting at around \$5 a month — are the best deal in music. Want the best social experience? Go with **RDIO**. Looking for more songs and better sound quality? Pick **MOG**. Want the biggest library? Dive into **SPOTIFY**'s 15-million-plus tracks. All offer free trials.