

House music

GET READY TO UNLEASH YOUR TUNES AROUND THE HOME: T3 TESTS THE BEST MULTI-ROOM AUDIO SYSTEMS

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AFTER YEARS IN THE DOLDRUMS, HI-FI IS ONCE AGAIN CLAIMING ITS PLACE IN THE TECH SPOTLIGHT, DRIVEN LARGELY BY THE PHENOMENON THAT IS WIRELESS MULTI-ROOM AUDIO.

These systems are big news: high-street retailer John Lewis says that 70 per cent of all its audio sales are now wireless. All multi-room

systems tempt with the same broad mix of features. They stream from source devices like your smartphone, making cables a thing of the past. And they enable you to play your music through multiple speakers at the same time, or stream different tracks to different speakers.

But if you're looking to join the multi-room party, there's a catch: streaming hi-fi systems are not interchangeable. Buy one speaker on a whim and you're committing to a complete

ecosystem. So you need to choose wisely; not every multi-room system includes a natty portable for you to take into the bathroom or outside for that summer barbecue. And just how easy is it to integrate multi-room with an existing system or home-cinema set-up?

To help detangle the wireless-audio conundrum, we've selected three top multi-room systems from Sonos, Denon and Bluesound to put through their paces...



WHAT'S ON TEST...



1 **HEOS by Denon**
 This newbie provides sound hewn from a hi-fi heritage dating back over 100 years. But is it good enough to take the top spot?
Price: From £199
URL: denon.co.uk



2 **Bluesound**
 The first native 24-bit, high-res wireless-streaming system. But does the sound quality justify the high price?
Price: From £599
URL: bluesound.com



3 **Sonos**
 It's the brand that kickstarted the multi-room audio revolution - but does its PLAY range still cut the mustard?
Price: From £169
URL: sonos.com



→ TEST 01:

DESIGN

Because style is (almost) as important as sound quality

Getting the look that works best with your home space is crucial. And, while our three hopefuls offer similar functionality, they're worlds apart when it comes to design.

The HEOS by Denon range is a Marmite proposition, but its tapered tabletop speakers are on the right side of striking. The diminutive HEOS 1 is the newest addition. Cutely compact, it can be partnered with the HEOS Go Pack for six hours of battery-powered music – ideal for barbecues. The larger HEOS 5 features four digital amps and a host of custom-designed drivers. The flagship HEOS 7 offers an additional channel of wallop, plus a headphone amp.

Sonos's PLAY range is rather more classic. The dumpy PLAY:1, with its wraparound metallic grille, is surprisingly hefty, while the larger PLAY:3 is not unlike an aspirational PA speaker with its fanned, forward-facing drivers. The PLAY:5 is a ported tabletop design with a trio of forward-facing drivers. Its on-body controls are discreet, while the

The three offer similar functionality but are worlds apart design-wise

power chord is perfectly recessed into the base, making the speaker easy to park.

The Bluesound system is a different beast altogether, in that you need a separate device, the Bluesound Node, to be able to stream. There are two iterations of this: the regular model and the Pownode, which has an integrated two-channel amp. The former would typically be used with the brand's one tabletop speaker, the Pulse, while the latter not only streams but also connects, like any other amplifier, to conventional speakers. Bluesound provides its own sub/sat speaker combo, dubbed the Duo, as a natural partner. This 2.1 set-up comprises a pair of diminutive, high-gloss satellite speakers and a matching piano-black subwoofer. The standalone Bluesound Pulse is the equivalent of the HEOS 7 in terms of size and status. It dwarfs the PLAY:5, yet still looks elegant. Soft-touch controls and coloured lights offer cryptic clues as to the status of the player. Significantly, the Bluesound system offers native support for high-resolution audio.

HEOS BY DENON



The HEOS range's tapered design sits just on the right side of striking

SPECS

HEOS 1

PRICE: £199
CONFIGURATION: Two Class-D amplifiers, a mid-woofer and a tweeter
DIMENSIONS (H x W x D): 189 x 129 x 128mm
WEIGHT: 1.9kg

HEOS 5

PRICE: £349
CONFIGURATION: Four Class-D amplifiers, two tweeters, two mid-woofers and a passive radiator
DIMENSIONS (H x W x D): 209 x 294 x 166mm
WEIGHT: 3kg

HEOS 7

PRICE: £499
CONFIGURATION: Five Class-D amplifiers, two tweeters, two mid-woofers, a sub-woofer and two radiators
DIMENSIONS (H x W x D): 203 x 479 x 164mm
WEIGHT: 4.5kg

FEATURES

FILE SUPPORT: MP3, WMA, AAC (MPEG4), FLAC, WAV	SUPPORTED MUSIC SERVICES: Rhapsody, Pandora, Spotify, TuneIn, Tidal	WIRELESS SUPPORT: 802.11a/b/g/n, 2.4GHz/5GHz
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TO WI-FI OR NOT TO WI-FI?

If your home wireless is a stuttering Stanley, we have ways to make your music work

→ Obviously, all three systems are designed to wirelessly stream music across your home network. For many users, this will be the simplest way to install a system – just

follow the instructions to park your player online. However, speakers also come with Ethernet ports, enabling you to hardwire. A wired network will give you better

stability. Opt for Sonos and you can buy a Sonos BRIDGE, which plugs into your router. This then runs your audio system on a mesh network, again offering improved stability. If your Wi-Fi network routinely takes a hammering from online gaming and binge-watching Netflix, this is a solid investment.

BLUESOUND



Bluesound doesn't have the neatest ecosystem, but it still looks stunning

SONOS



The PLAY:1 is the most versatile speaker in the Sonos family

SPECS

PULSE

PRICE: £599
 CONFIGURATION:
 One woofer, two tweeters and two reflex ports
 DIMENSIONS (H x W x D):
 197 x 420 x 190mm
 WEIGHT: 6.1kg

DUO

PRICE: £899
 One subwoofer
 DIMENSIONS (H x W x D):
 375 x 246 x 401mm
 WEIGHT: 11.16kg
 Two satellites
 DIMENSIONS (H x W x D):
 213 x 129 x 181mm
 WEIGHT 2.45kg each

POWERNODE

PRICE: £599
 CONFIGURATION:
 DirectDigital amplifier
 DIMENSIONS (H x W x D):
 176 x 248 x 202mm
 WEIGHT: 1.9kg

FEATURES

FILE SUPPORT: MP3, AAC, WMA, OGG, WMA-L, FLAC, ALAC, WAV, AIFF	COMPATIBLE WITH: 16- & 24-bit audio SUPPORTED MUSIC SERVICES: Spotify,	Qobuz, Deezer, HDtracks, Tidal WIRELESS SUPPORT: 802.11b/g, 2.4GHz
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SPECS

PLAY:1

PRICE: £169
 CONFIGURATION:
 Two Class-D amplifiers, a tweeter and a woofer
 DIMENSIONS (H x W x D):
 161 X 119 x 119mm
 WEIGHT: 1.85kg

PLAY:3

PRICE: £259
 CONFIGURATION:
 Three Class-D amplifiers, a tweeter, two mid-range drivers and a passive radiator
 DIMENSIONS (H x W x D):
 132 x 268 x 160mm
 WEIGHT: 2.6kg

PLAY:5

PRICE: £349
 CONFIGURATION:
 Five Class-D amplifiers, two tweeters, two mid-range drivers and a woofer
 DIMENSIONS (H x W x D):
 217 x 365 x 123mm
 WEIGHT: 4.15kg

FEATURES

FILE SUPPORT: MP3, WMA, AAC, AAC+, OGG, Audible (Format 4), Apple Lossless,	FLAC, WAV, AIFF SUPPORTED MUSIC SERVICES: Spotify, SoundCloud, Deezer,	Tidal, Qobuz, Mixcloud WIRELESS SUPPORT: 802.11b/g, 2.4GHz; SonosNet 2.0
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GETTING CONNECTED

Don't want to stream your music? Well, you can just plug into your speakers instead

→ While you'll soon be beaming audio to your wireless system like a Hogwarts wizard, it sometimes helps being able to plug things in directly. All the HEOS players

sport local inputs for aux and USB. If you add a USB drive to any of the speakers when networked, you can play back the contents across the entire HEOS system.

Unfortunately, Sonos doesn't support local USB playback on its PLAY speakers, so you'll have to make do with streaming from a networked storage device. The Bluesound Powernode streaming amplifier offers chunky speaker binding posts and sub output, along with USB, Wi-Fi and Ethernet.

T3 Test 01 winner
SONOS

→ The iconic design of the Sonos system is a real crowd-pleaser. It's compact and effortlessly classy

→ TEST 02:

SETUP

Even your grandma should be able to get to grips with it

Happily, all three of the wireless systems on test are straightforward to install onto a home network. There's no need to spend hours reading manuals – simply follow the basic instructions and you'll have your system online and ready for streaming in next to no time.

A great wireless multi-room system needs an app that's both intuitive and fun to use. Sonos sets the standard here with a wonderfully unfussy app. Adding additional speakers to your network is simply a question of connecting a new speaker to the network and assigning it a named location. Once the app has taken you through the obligatory registration and firmware-update process, you can assign your music sources. There's a wealth of options, including Rhapsody, Pandora, Spotify, TuneIn and Tidal. To add a NAS to Sonos My Music, you'll need to download the Sonos desktop controller to your PC, then manually point the system at your networked share, which is a bit of a faff.

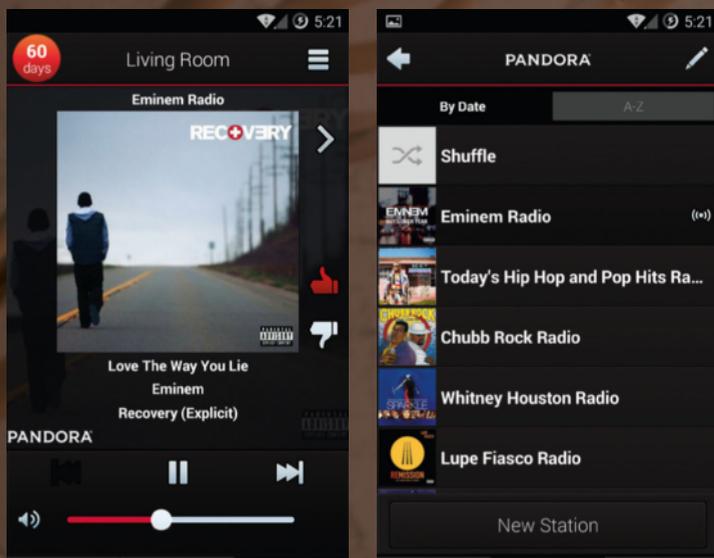
A great multi-room system needs an app that's intuitive and fun

Bluesound is equally well-appointed and easy to install. Configurable music services include Spotify, Qobuz, Deezer and Tidal. The app itself is a little dour compared to the others, though it's intuitive enough once you've played with it for a while.

To connect HEOS hardware to your home network, you'll need to link it to your smartphone with a 3.5mm cable and follow the Add Device prompts. Naturally, HEOS will stream tunes from a raft of music services, including Spotify, SoundCloud, Deezer, Tidal, Qobuz and Mixcloud, in either multiple zones simultaneously or individual zones as required. It's also DLNA-compliant, making it a snap to locate and find your network storage devices or PCs. Denon makes it easy to group speakers and assign zones. A 'pinch to group' feature on the app enables multiple locations to be grouped together on the fly, should you want to rock the entire house. Impressively, up to 32 HEOS units can be run on a single system.



When setting up a HEOS speaker, you'll need to hardwire it to your mobile device initially; after that, you can go wireless



With its cool 'pinch to group' room-set-up option and audio-tuning control, the HEOS app is both versatile and sophisticated

STAND TO ATTENTION

Don't just stick your speakers on a table – show them off to their fullest with a stylish mount

→ Sonos is supported by an unbeatable range of third-party accessories, all seemingly produced by UK outfit Flexson. Want to hang your system high? There's a £100 ceiling mount that holds either a

single Sonos PLAY:1 or a pair. Flexson also offers a £30 tilting wall mount, enabling you to angle the speaker from virtually any position. The bracket enables the PLAY:1 to swivel left or right, or be hung upside down.



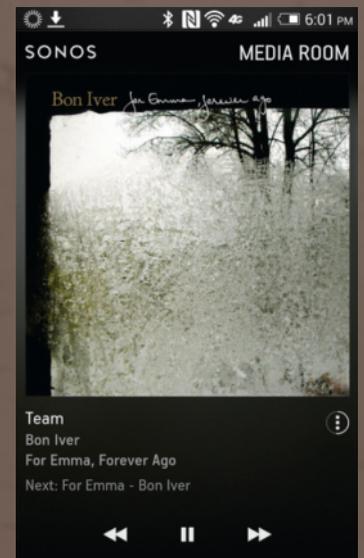
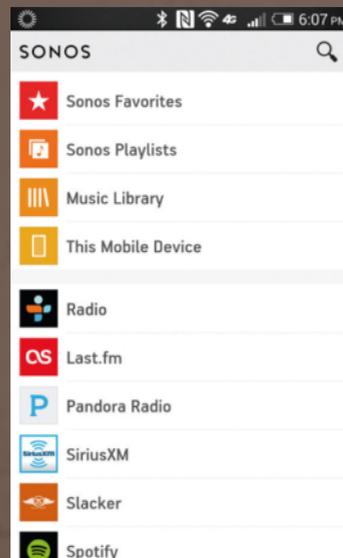
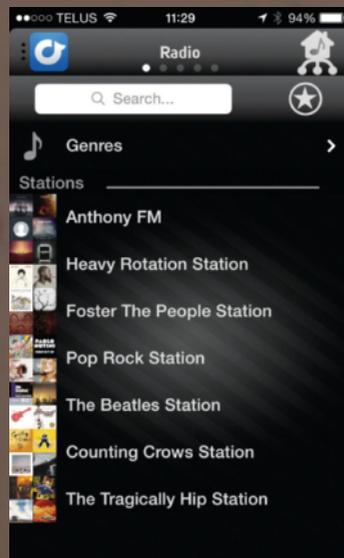
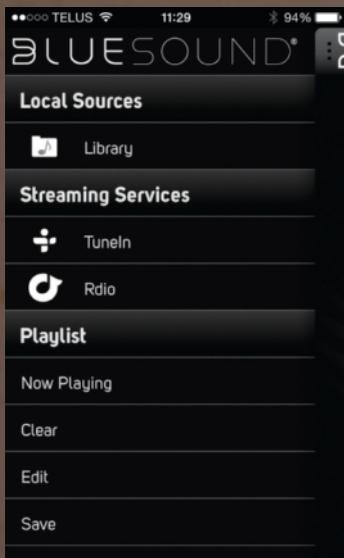
BLUESOUND

SONOS



All three Bluesound components have an array of connections, giving you ways to listen to music without wireless - and it's all easy to install

Setting up a Sonos system is wondrously simple, but there are no USB ports, so you won't be able to playback music locally from a USB drive



The Bluesound app is optimised for music lovers. Compiling playlists has never been easier, while browsing music sources is a doddle

If you're looking for simplicity of set-up, you won't go far wrong with the Sonos app. And system control is equally intuitive

PIMPING THE SYSTEM

Take your multi-room set-up to the next level of audio awesomeness with speakers galore

→ Both Sonos and Denon offer system-expansion potential. The Sonos PLAYBAR is a TV soundbar that also functions as another speaker on your Sonos network. Need more

bass? Take a listen to the Sonos SUB. The HEOS by Denon range can be expanded via the HEOS Link module, which integrates an existing sound set-up, and

source components, into the system. The optional Go Pack adds Bluetooth to the HEOS 1, ideal when there's no Wi-Fi.



T3 Test 02 winner
HEOS BY DENON

→ Thanks to its ease of use and inventive app design, HEOS by Denon wins this category by a pinch

→ TEST 03:

SOUND

This is the biggie: which of the systems takes the biscuit audio-wise?

All three of our wireless systems trounce the audio available from standalone Bluetooth speakers, but there are still big differences between them. In a showdown between HEOS and Sonos, it's Denon's prodigy that edges it. While the PLAY:1 is a budget barnstormer, both articulate and ballsy, the step-up Sonos boxes lose on points to Team HEOS.

The HEOS 7 positively thunders for attention. It's startling just how much bass it can produce. In a larger room, this is immense fun. But this prodigious bass is tempered by a rich mid-range, which makes it a great choice for a wide variety of musical genres. The HEOS 5 is more restrained but has a smooth delivery that nudges it ahead of the Sonos PLAY:3.

By way of comparison, the Sonos PLAY:1 is a stonking performer, only slightly limited by its physical size. The PLAY:5 is more gutsy but ultimately monophonic. Momoiro Clover Z's Kiss collaboration rolls but never really rocks. Perhaps surprisingly, the range-topping

The HEOS 7 thunders for attention; it's startling how much bass it offers

PLAY:5 is occasionally brittle for such a chunky speaker. The Kiss version of *Samurai Son* is sharper than a noseful of wasabi.

Neither Sonos nor HEOS supports 24-bit high-res audio files, although a high-level subscription to Tidal (£19.99 per month) will get you CD-quality music streaming.

For absolute performance, Bluesound takes the trophy. The Bluesound Pulse was the standout solo player in our test. It sounds big and bold, yet smooth and refined, and it outperforms all the Sonos and HEOS players in terms of sheer musicality. Its quality is not totally attributable to the fact that it'll play high-res sources, either (although that helps). Fed regular Spotify, it remains a notch above. Offering a stereo soundstage of appreciable width, you can forget you're listening to a one-box audio system. The player has a lovely mid-range that does great justice to voices but handles drama well, too. *Sugar Rush* by AKB48 is a joyous anthem granted additional gravitas by this player's weighty presentation.

HEOS BY DENON



The HEOS 1 might be the smallest in Denon's trio, but it's surprisingly powerful and can be taken outdoors when the weather calls for it



The HEOS 7 is the ideal speaker for starting a party, with huge amounts of bass when you crank up the volume (this can be controlled within the app)

UNLEASH THE BEAST

The Bluesound multi-room set-up is unique, with more sound output than any other here

→ The Bluesound Duo subwoofer and twin satellite-speaker package, coupled to a Powernode, is the odd man out here, but the benefits of two bookshelf speakers and

a thumping subwoofer are immediately apparent. The audio performance of the Duo is in another league. There's more than enough volume on tap from the Powernode to

drown conversation in an average-sized room.

Shudder Before The Beautiful by Nightwish sounds epic, while the bass on Aminata's *Love Injected* blooms with voluptuous force. Offering wide stereo separation and a subterranean bass extension, the Duo package is perfect for streaming audiophiles.

BLUESOUND

SONOS



Bluesound supports 24-bit high-res audio up to 192kHz, which, along with a wider array of speakers, gives it the edge in sound

Sonos's bigger speakers - the PLAY:3 and the PLAY:5 - can't quite match the equivalent HEOS speakers in outright performance



Though none of the systems are lacking in volume, the Bluesound is definitely the ideal big-room-filler of the group

You won't get high-res support with either Sonos or HEOS, but both systems have CD-quality Tidal integrated, so you can make the most of every decibel

THE POWER GAME

It's all about that bass, bout that bass, no treble... there's more to multi-room than watts

→ Neither Sonos nor Denon publishes tech specs for its hardware, so comparisons are tricky. For what it's worth, neither was found wanting for volume. Bluesound is a tad more

revealing. Its Pulse tabletop player claims 80W total output, delivered by a bi-amplified DirectDigital amp designed by NAD. The Powernode uses the same tech, rated at 2x50W.

Synchronisation between zones on all three of our tested systems is excellent. This is important for a smooth-sounding house party. HEOS uses proprietary low-latency tech, with MaxxAudio DSP optimisation licensed from Waves Audio. Sonos and Bluesound are less forthcoming on DSP specifics.

T3 Test 03 winner BLUESOUND

→ Bluesound takes Sonos and HEOS to school, with high-res audio support and top sonic performance

T3 Verdict

The overall winner is...

1st HEOS by Denon

PRICE: From £199 URL: denon.co.uk

T3 RATES: The HEOS 7 is a top performer for its size, with a bass output that borders on irresponsible - ideal for larger rooms. The mid-range HEOS 5 works well everywhere else. Multi-room management via the app is great.

T3 SLATES: The need to hardwire the speakers during set-up seems a bit naff.

24-bit high-res audio support would've been nice.

T3 SAYS: In terms of overall value for money, HEOS by Denon is our multi-room system of choice. Feature-rich and musical with local USB playback, backed by a solid app, it's a star performer.

T3 ★★★★★



2nd Sonos

PRICE: From £169
URL: sonos.com

T3 RATES: The epitome of tech cool, this is a fine wireless proposition.

T3 SLATES: The PLAY:3 and PLAY:5 lag behind their rivals.

T3 SAYS: This system is easy to use, and the PLAY:1 has the sound quality to match.

T3 ★★★★★



3rd Bluesound

PRICE: From £599
URL: bluesound.com

T3 RATES: The ability to go native with 24-bit high-res audio is a real benefit.

T3 SLATES: There's only one great speaker (the Pulse).

T3 SAYS: A great-sounding system, but it's not cheap.

T3 ★★★★★



FIVE WAYS TO MAXIMISE YOUR MULTI-ROOM EXPERIENCE

01 EXPAND YOUR MUSIC SOURCES

→ Don't just rely on a streaming service for your teenage kicks. Add a network NAS to your content sources to listen to all those CD rips you made before you discovered Spotify, Deezer and Tidal. If your choice of hardware allows it, we also recommend multi-rooming the audio from your TV. That way, you can keep track of *Game Of Thrones* while you rustle up a snack for yourself in the kitchen.

02 BEEF UP THE BASS

→ The small tabletop enclosures used by most of the multi-room

speakers featured here are never going to dive as deep as a big tower speaker (with the possible exception of the HEOS 7, which is just nuts when it comes to rumbles). Sonos buyers can supplement their systems with the excellent Sonos SUB. At £599, it's an expensive upgrade, but it brings apocalyptic bass to the multi-room party.

03 BATTERY-UP FOR BETTER SOUND

→ The diminutive HEOS 1 is a great-sounding speaker on its own, but we think it's worth adding the £79 Go Pack battery, even if you're not planning on

venturing outside. The speaker actually sounds better with the lithium battery attached - it's as if the additional weight tightens up the lower registers.

04 LISTEN TO HIGH-RES MUSIC

→ If you opt for the Bluesound system featured in our test, take advantage of the growing number of download stores that offer high-res audio tracks. Qobuz, Onkyo and Technics Tracks, to name but three, have

a wide variety of 24-bit FLAC tunes available - everything from remastered Iron Maiden to the best of Grace Jones. And the difference in quality is tangible!

05 MAKE SURE YOU PLAN AHEAD

→ The beauty of multi-room wireless audio is that your whole home system can function as one, so make sure the proprietary system you opt for has a speaker appropriate for the rooms you want to network.

TURN OVER TO DISCOVER THE MUST-HAVE EXTRAS TO PAIR WITH YOUR HEOS →



1 HEOS HOMECINEMA
 →Movie fans might want to marry their TV to their multi-room system. The stylish HomeCinema comprises a soundbar slim enough to integrate with most modern tellies, as well as a wireless subwoofer for extra slam. *T3* had a play and it's volume-tastic! £599, denon.co.uk



5 essential Denon HEOS add-ons →

Here's how to make *T3*'s favourite multi-room system even more amazing

2 HEOS 3
 →Yes, we've already spoken about it, but this monophonic mid-ranger can be partnered with a second HEOS 3 to form a funky-looking stereo pair. Don't plan on using them as TV speakers, though, as they suffer from a processing sound delay. £249, denon.co.uk



3 HEOS EXTEND
 →Good Wi-Fi is vital for glitch-free streaming. This dual-band extender will improve the range and reach of your network. £79, denon.co.uk

4 HEOS AMP
 →This amp enables you to create a networked music system using speakers and your choice of source components: great if you want a system for gaming as well as multi-room. £399, denon.co.uk



5 HEOS DRIVE
 →For pro-grade multi-room audio, Denon offers the versatile HEOS Drive. This is essentially a four-zone, eight-channel amplifier that can be integrated with cool home-automation systems from the likes of Crestron, AMX and Control4. £1,999, denon.co.uk



FIVE WAYS TO GET MORE FROM YOUR MUSIC

01 INTERNET RADIO
 →TuneIn, available on many multi-room systems, is the best service around for discovering global radio, from esoteric Japanese jazz to Finnish black metal. The world is your musical oyster.

02 MULTI-ROOM MAYHEM
 →Take your house party to the next level by introducing themed music zones – one of the joys of multi-room is the ability to play different tracks in different areas.

03 DEEZER GOOD
 →Multi-rooming is not just about music. Deezer offers over 20,000 podcasts and talk-radio shows, covering every area of interest, with titles like Monocle 24 and the *Financial Times*.

04 SUPER STREAMING
 →Push the performance envelope. Even without 24-bit audio support, you can stream Tidal and Deezer Elite, and enjoy 16-bit FLAC files at 1,411kbps.

05 MOOD MUSIC
 →Create a playlist to suit every occasion and mood (even your nan's birthday), import your own MP3s and learn the lyrics to your top tunes (Deezer, we're looking at you!).