

Design for life

If you're of the opinion that all-in-one systems are pure lifestyle product, **Ed Selley** thinks he may have discovered the system to change your mind

Two-channel audio has seen a period of tremendous change over the last decade or so and the shape and function of many components has evolved dramatically. Despite this, there are some conventions that seem curiously durable. One of the most resilient is that for truly sparkling performance, you need to construct a system where each function is provided by a specific component.

German brand AVM does not subscribe to this particular point of view. While the company produces a

range of separate audio models, it has made something of a speciality of single-chassis systems to which you simply need to add a pair of speakers. Any pretence that these are mere lifestyle trinkets will probably last no longer than it takes to unbox an Evolution CS 5.2. Believe it or not, this isn't even the halfway point of AVM's all-in-one range, it is firmly in the category of serious hardware.

How serious? How about a claimed power output of 330W per channel into 8ohm? With this sort of heft to hand you can safely assume that AVM

doesn't envisage the CS 5.2 being used to sit in the background playing lift music. This potent amplification provides the motivation for a CD player, a UPnP network client with integrated Tidal support, an FM tuner, digital and optical inputs and a trio of line inputs – although quite what you'd find to connect to them given the CS 5.2 already does everything you might expect is one to ponder.

Power is nothing without control, of course, so the good news is that AVM has tied this extensive functionality together with a slick control app that ▶

COMPONENTS

AVM CS 5.2

The Evolution CS 5.2 (to give it's full name) claims 330W per channel, CD, UPnP streaming and numerous digital and analogue inputs all wrapped in a heavyweight metal chassis.

PMC TWENTY5.24

The stunning twenty5.24 is a two-way floorstander that mates a 170mm midbass driver with the latest version of PMC's trademark transmission line complete with 'Laminair' vents.





allows you to harness this impressive feature set without making the front panel look like something from a Cold War radar installation. Instead, it is a rather lovely piece of minimalism. Little details like the symmetry between the two beautifully weighted main controls, which is mirrored in the power button and headphone socket, give it a visual elegance that is frequently lacking in rivals. AVM doesn't just understand the notional benefits of good industrial design, it clearly cares deeply about it. Being German, I don't need to tell you it's built like a piece of lab equipment.

Partners in rhyme

This heady combination of enormous power, flexibility and elegance unsurprisingly hasn't gone unnoticed by PMC, which now distributes AVM in the UK. When you consider the twenty5.24 speaker that completes this system, the similarities between the two companies start to make a lot of sense. This two-way floorstander is as visually elegant as the electronics, but like the AVM there is also some real cleverness and engineering prowess to be found just under the skin. In fact, the scope of PMC's ambitions for the twenty5 range was sufficiently wide that what started life as the replacement for the original

twenty series has gone on to become a separate range in its own right.

PMC's use of transmission lines to augment bass response is one of the calling cards of the company and the twenty5 models have the latest development in the form of the 'Laminair' ports visible on the front panel. As well as looking like the diffuser on a supercar, these ensure that the air that leaves the

A massive wall of sound that turns music into a physical, visceral experience

transmission line is dispersed correctly. This allows the 'g weave' midbass driver to extend down to a healthy 27Hz. No less notable is the extraordinarily low 1.8kHz crossover between this driver and the tweeter, which PMC has applied to all of the twenty5 models.

Aesthetically, the PMC is a fine match for the AVM. Historically, the company has concentrated more on the internals of the speakers than it has the outside. The twenty5.24 by contrast is a genuinely lovely piece of industrial design. The sleek,

Above left: PMC's unburstable drivers receive a very elegant enclosure indeed

Above centre: It might look simple, but the AVM is seriously sophisticated

Above right: Extensive connectivity allows for further system building

unadorned cabinet with its distinctive rearward lean for time alignment is finished to a superb standard (shown here in walnut) and helps the PMC floorstander feel like a proper piece of furniture that will complement any environment or partnering equipment. As a system it conveys a distinctive but very likeable character. This is a system that clearly means business, but doesn't sacrifice any convenience or pride of ownership to achieve that. This is equipment that you'd be happy to have out on display in your surroundings.

A question of scale

You will find yourself even happier to listen to it, though. The overarching trait from the first minute you hit the play button is the confidence and scale it demonstrates. It's important to stress that this isn't simply the ability to sound big, but more the know how to impart a realistic sense of a performer and the space they are in. The pared-back Fink's *Sunday Night Blues Club*, is not a huge recording by any stretch of the imagination – most of the time it is no more than Finian Greenall with his guitar and minimal backing – but the AVM and PCM combine to create the space he is in and turn it from a

recording into a performance. His superb vocal turn is effortlessly captured too – anyone concerned by the amount of work that the tweeter is being asked to undertake won't take too long to be brought round to the company's way of thinking.

How low can you go?

Towering over everything is the bass response, however. As you might expect, the twenty5.24 driven by 330W has no shortage of low-end drive, but it's the delicacy that truly impresses. *Tribulations* by My Baby has a simple kick drum underpinning Cato van Dyck's lovely vocals. It's not intended to be sternum-rattling bass, more a means of keeping time as anything else. The PMC delivers it as an unambiguously real instrument. The impact of the strike and the decay until the next one is something that is conjured into being with such effortless realism it does more than anything else to create the sense of being there that sees you forgetting the mechanics of what's making the music and focus on the music itself.

Of course, this pairing has one party piece that is rather more attention grabbing. The reserves of headroom that the AVM has into the speakers is simply outstanding. You can play



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Underworld's *Cowgirl* at the sort of levels where the output from the twenty5.24 is a perceivable force in the room and the only possible area of strain is your relationship with your neighbours – and the effect is utterly addictive. This isn't volume for volume's sake – the sort of dull noise you'd expect from a PA system. It is

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instead a massive, seemingly effortless wall of sound that turns music into a physical, almost visceral experience. It is perfectly possible to listen to it at low volumes, but I'm willing to bet that you'll find yourself edging that volume slider on the app ever upwards, revelling in the sheer grunt you have at your disposal.

Combine this with the range of functionality that the Evolution CS 5.2 offers and you have a system that delivers this staggering performance via pretty much any contemporary format that you could reasonably expect. The retention of the CD mechanism combined with the

well-implemented streaming module allows any would-be owner to transition at their own speed into network audio, enjoying the relative merits of both. No less impressive is the phono stage, which turns in a wonderfully rich and involving performance. The more time you spend with the AVM, it becomes clear that this isn't a set of features compiled as a box-ticking exercise. The CS 5.2 has all these functions because AVM can deliver them exceptionally well.

Your flexible friend

And it's the sheer all-round ability of this system that stands out more than anything else. It offers enormous flexibility and the user friendliness that an all-in-one should specialise in. It then goes on to deliver a performance that I'm honestly not sure I could better were I given the same budget and left to choose whatever components took my fancy. This is an all-in-one system that delivers on all the positives an all-in-one should, but it's also one of the most complete all-round audio systems available for anywhere near the price. Multiple boxes might look smart, but the future is looking like it comes wrapped in a single chassis ●