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Music Factsheet 17: Sound systems in studios

Introduction

This article contains some practical advice on choosing and installing a sound system in your studio. No dancer will be inspired by tinny, flat-sounding music, so the most basic requirement for playback in the dance studio is that students can hear an engaging and dynamic sound above the level of ambient noise, regardless of their position in the studio. Amplification requirements will therefore be different for a room which is used exclusively for ballet and one which is also used for modern and tap. As a general rule, domestic hi-fi systems can be used in small to medium-sized ballet studios whereas large ballet studios and multi-purpose rooms will be better served by a more powerful PA (Public Address) system.

All-in-one portable hifi systems

The simplest playback setup for a dance studio consists of a **CD player** or **mp3 player**, an **amplifier** and some **loudspeakers**. A standard portable hifi system has all of these components in a single enclosure. Such a unit may be suitable for the very smallest of studios but would be limited in sound quality and **power output**.

Standalone Hi-fi components

A more effective system consists of 'standalone' **hi-fi components** or '**separates**'.

The first question you'll be asked in a hi-fi shop is 'How powerful would you like your system to be?' Unfortunately there is no easy answer to this question. Amplifier power is measured in watts and there are so many ways of defining and interpreting amplifier power that these numbers can be misleading. A pair of fairly substantial (approx 30x20x25cm) mid-priced (£100 to £150) "bookshelf" hi-fi loudspeakers of at least 100 Watts RMS per speaker, combined with a similarly-priced amplifier of at least 40 Watts RMS per channel, should be adequate for most medium-sized studios.

Buy a basic model of CD player from a reputable manufacturer. The subtle improvement in sound quality from an expensive CD player will be totally lost in a dance studio environment. The option to replace just the CD player in a system of separate components is useful, as **the moving parts in a CD player tend to wear out relatively quickly** if it is used every day. (The occasional use of a lens cleaner will maximise the life of your player.) **Amplifiers and loudspeakers**, on the other hand, will often work perfectly well for ten years or more if they're not pushed beyond their limitations. If you hear distortion through your system (the sound appears 'fuzzy' and ill-defined), your amplifier or loudspeakers are being overdriven and the volume should be turned down. Particular care should be taken when using music with a lot of bass energy as this can be particularly damaging to loudspeakers.

PA (Public Address) Systems

A **PA system** is similar in principle to a hi-fi separates system. The components tend to be more durable and higher powered than their hi-fi counterparts and are therefore more suitable for noisy environments (tap and modern classes), large rooms, and situations where the equipment needs to be portable. They are typically sold in musical instrument and music technology stores and will be perhaps 50% more expensive than the hi-fi separates system outlined above.

Avoid the cheapest PA systems, which tend to be very limited in sound quality and are aimed mainly at DJs and aerobics instructors. You'll want quality as well as power for your studio so make sure you listen to your chosen system in the shop before you buy. P.A. loudspeakers are heavy and need heavy-duty wall mounts or stands. If you intend to move your equipment around, buy **passive** rather than **active** speakers as these will be considerably lighter. PA components tend to be reliable except when pushed to their limits. If your music system is going to be used by other teachers, you may want to consider an amplifier with a limiter to ensure your loudspeakers aren't driven excessively.

Frequently asked questions

mp3 player (iPod etc) or CD player?

mp3 players have the advantage that **they don't skip when your dancers jump** (or jump when your dancers skip), and you can store your entire RAD CD collection in one tiny unit. However, iPods can be more fiddly to use than CD players and tend not to have remote controls. Some CD players (such as the Tascam CD-200i) give the best of both worlds with a built-in iPod dock. A dock (which charges your iPod as it is being used) is not vital though, and a stereo mini-jack to phono lead is a simple way of connecting your iPod to the auxiliary inputs of a hifi amplifier. Bear in mind that in order to transfer music to an iPod in this way for commercial use (i.e. in the context of dance classes rather than for your personal and private

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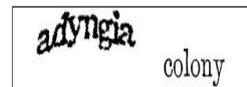
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Some brands to consider

Portable hifi JVC, Sony, Panasonic, (Portogram for varispeed equivalent)

CD players Tascam/TEAC, Denon

Hi-fi components Denon, Sony, Mission, JBL

PA components Yamaha, Behringer, Peavey, Mackie

Please note that the above list is for guidance only. The RAD does not actively endorse any products made by these manufacturers.