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The 10-speaker 5.1 surround system in the Acura RL produces great sound and includes an enhanced version of XM Satellite Radio with real-time traffic updates.

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The TL's "5.1 Surround Sound" offers stunning realism thanks to six channels that present more complete separation than the typical four. But to enjoy it you'll have to pony up for the latest hi-fi medium: DVD-Audio discs.

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We've never been fans of the iDrive control interface in the current 7 Series, but we can't argue with the quality of its

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Top 10 Sound Systems in Cars Over \$30,000 for 2005

By Scott Memmer

[Email](#)

So here we are at the big show. The pièce de résistance. The steak and lobster, the crème brulee, of car stereos. Although the Mark Levinson system in the Lexus LS 430 remains a standard bearer in this group, new technology is making its way into the high-end bracket in the form of true 5.1 surround sound, something that used to be limited to home theater systems. Although you need to load up DVD Audio discs (still relatively uncommon compared to CDs) to have your music played back through all six channels, a pair of automakers, Acura and Cadillac, have installed such systems in their newest models. The results are nothing short of excellent. Of course, even if you don't opt for one of these cutting-edge systems, rest assured that you'll enjoy a rich listening experience in any of the vehicles on this list. Given the somewhat subjective nature of reviewing sound systems (and our aversion to splitting hairs when rating the best of the best), there is no fixed order for this list.

[Acura RL \(Bose\)](#)

Worlds ahead of the old RL in both driving dynamics and technology, the 2005 model features a standard 5.1 surround sound Bose system that provides real six-channel playback for DVD Audio (DVD-A) discs and has software that mimics surround sound for traditional CDs. It's also MP3-compatible. Ten speakers are arranged throughout the big sedan, and total wattage is 260. The stereo also uses noise canceling technology to filter out excess wind or road noise (of which there is very little to begin with), and this feature works whether or not the stereo is turned on. Satellite radio is also part of the deal, and besides offering a wide selection of music, the RL's XM setup teams up with the navigation system to provide real-time traffic updates.

[Acura TL \(Panasonic\)](#)

Although smaller and less expensive than the RL, the TL also comes standard with 5.1 surround sound, in this case, a Panasonic system developed with the help of Elliot Scheiner, a Grammy-winning music producer who has worked with Sting, Queen and the Eagles. Although its 225 watts and eight speakers (including a subwoofer and a pair of tweeters) might sound ordinary by today's standards, load up a DVD-A disc and you'll feel like the singer and guitarist are passengers in the car when listening to rock tracks. Additionally, those with expansive CD libraries will be heartened to know that regular CDs also sound great in this system. The TL's system does not accommodate MP3s, but XM Satellite Radio is included.

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Harman Kardon sound system.



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With 5.1 surround sound, 300 watts and 15 speakers (four of which are nestled in the front seats), this Bose system is certainly worthy of Cadillac's revitalized STS flagship.

BMW 7 Series (Harman Kardon)

BMW is surprisingly mum on this world-class audio system. Visiting its corporate Web site yields only the barest description, so we can't tell you as much as we'd like to about the inner workings here. However, we *can* tell you that every time we listen to it, it really amazes us. This Harman Kardon Logic 7 system sports 13 speakers (including *two* subwoofers), surround sound simulation, Digital Sound Processing (DSP) and an in-dash six-disc changer. Not to be overlooked, it also pushes out 420 watts of pure Harman Kardon power.

Cadillac STS (Bose)

Cadillac's newly redesigned flagship, the STS, can be had with a 5.1 Bose sound system that distributes music through 15 speakers, four of which are nestled in the driver and front-passenger seats to ensure an intimate listening environment in this full-size sedan. Total output measures 300 watts, and the system can play DVD-A, CD and MP3 formats. Satellite radio (XM) is also standard.

Chrysler 300C (Boston Acoustics)

The Chrysler 300 marks the first application of factory-installed Boston Acoustics audio components. They include six speakers and a subwoofer, and the results are very pleasing. The top-of-the-line 300C can be had with an optional 380-watt system that includes MP3 capability and an in-dash six-disc CD changer (the standard system has 288 watts). Bass response is wonderful and warm and is not prone to distortion. Low bass tones are kept tight and unmuddled by a subwoofer that offers just the right amount of punch. Highs and midrange sounds are also reproduced very well, and highs, mids and lows are separated nicely. The only flaw we've found is that at moderate to high volumes, the highs occasionally "squeak." Compared to the Mark Levinson system in the Lexus, this system can sound a bit mechanical at times, but considering the 300C's low-\$30Ks price, this one's tough to beat.



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Just about any type of music you can name sounds great in the Chrysler 300C's optional Boston Acoustics system, and it's hard to beat the car's low-\$30Ks price.

Jaguar XJ-Series/XJR (Alpine)

To put together the system for the XJR, the Jaguar people worked with the engineers from Alpine. What they came up with was the Alpine Premium Sound System, consisting of 12 total speakers, 320 watts of clean Alpine power and CD players both in-dash and in the trunk. Although it falls just short of the LS 430's Mark Levinson, this one certainly deserves a spot in the top 10.



[\(Enlarge photo\)](#)

Ergonomics are not a strong point for the Alpine system in the Jaguar XJ-Series, but sound quality is excellent for all but the heaviest rock tracks.

Land Rover Range Rover (Harman Kardon)

The British have long been known for producing some of the most accurate and discriminating loudspeakers on the planet. Meet the 2005 Range Rover. With an amazing output of 710 watts (improved from 510 watts from 2004) total system power fed through 14 Harman Kardon including a 10-inch subwoofer in the rear, you would think this HK Logic 7 system would just about tear your head off, but you would be wrong. In fact, the exact opposite is true. With a refinement and charm that is nothing short of world-class, the sound system in the Range Rover rivals anything in its class. Pass the tea and crumpets, Laddy; they don't get much better than this one. Listening to this fine Harman Kardon system, you'll think you're in the Royal Albert Hall.



[\(Enlarge photo\)](#)

If you must have concert hall quality sound in a rugged SUV, then the Range Rover is the one you'll want to get.

Lexus LS 430 (Mark Levinson)

This system, introduced in 2001, still has no rival, at least not in the OEM market. One could make a valid argument that certain



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It really doesn't get much better than the incredible Mark Levinson system in the Lexus LS 430.



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A superb Bose stereo complements the Cayenne's superb driving dynamics on pavement.



[\(Enlarge photo\)](#)

Even with its ergonomic miscues, there's no denying that the Volvo S80's stereo sounds phenomenal.

aftermarket equipment would outperform this gear, and that would be a valid argument. However, such an install would entail thousands of dollars in installation charges and cutting holes where one might not want holes. All told, this system compares favorably with the aftermarket, and has the advantage of being built seamlessly into the LS 430's interior. It consists of 11 speakers, 240 watts of clean RMS power and a sound second to none. Audiophiles will note that Mark Levinson uses the true RMS rating, which legitimizes this system's quality, as opposed to the peak power rating that other makers use. Another nice attribute of this system is that, even without the benefit of six-channel separation, it will reproduce any source material accurately and obediently. In other words, all kinds of music, from Nat King Cole to Tupac, sound excellent on this system. Take it for a test-drive; you'll be most impressed.

Porsche Cayenne (Bose)

This 350-watt, 14-speaker arrangement is almost as good as the vehicle in which it resides. Designed in conjunction with the engineers from Bose, the system not only blares loudly, but has an excellent surround sound circuit built into it. With 14 speakers and eight separate channels of customized equalization, we guarantee you'll literally be surrounded by music in the cozy cabin of Porsche's one and only entry in the SUV segment. With low-profile woofers in the front doors, and a powerful 100-watt subwoofer in the rear, you won't be wanting for bass either. The Patented Bose Nd woofers are a special lightweight design for extra-quick attack on percussion and bass. Additionally, the system comes with Bose's AudioPilot Noise Compensation Technology, which monitors the sound inside the cabin, continually adjusting the audio input to compensate for unwanted wind and road noise.

Volvo S80 (Dolby Pro Logic)

No top 10 sound system list would be complete without a Volvo vehicle included. Innovators of Dolby Pro Logic II Surround Sound circuitry for automotive use, the system in the Volvo S80 may neither be the most powerful in the test nor have the most speakers, but at 300 watts and with only 10 drivers (one of them being a 25-watt centerfill jobber), this setup will astound you with its sonic clarity and warmth, not to mention its incredible soundstage. Volvo has never been into the flash or pizzazz, but with one of the least expensive vehicles in the test, this one still makes our top 10 list. Be sure to order the upgraded system, Option 000446, the HU-850 Audio System with in-dash six-disc player.

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