

# MAXIM

GEAR

## HOW TO GET \$6,500 OUT OF A \$650 SOUND SYSTEM

Your system is only as good as the weakest link.

ROY FURCHGOTT · JUN 9, 2015

The biggest cost in most high-end sound systems comes from trying to overcome crummy room acoustics. You can save tons while getting velvety-rich sound by simply removing room acoustics from the equation—that's as simple as using [headphones](#). But to get the most out of your headphones, you need a quality source of music and equally excellent amplifier. Your system sounds only as good as its weakest link.

The good news: because you aren't driving mondo speakers, you can skip the exotic \$6,500 meg-watt receiver, and for a tenth of the cost, get a set up that treats your ears like they were Willie Nelson in a Colorado weed shop.

### DAC Attack

For you to hear digital music, it has to be converted from zeros and ones back to the sound wave it was originally—that requires a Digital-to-Analog Converter. The one that comes in your music player or computer isn't a very good one. But you can replace it with something like the [Schiit Modi 2 Uber](#), a high quality DAC that makes music more clear, defined and smooth—almost like it was spinning on virgin vinyl. And yes, Schiit is pronounced the way you think.

### Ear Force

Pump that richer sound through a clean, powerful amp like the [Schiit Magni 2](#), which includes a gain switch so it's quieter for sensitive headphones or more powerful for hard-to-drive cans (I'm lookin' at you, orthodynamic headphones). It also has outputs for powered speakers, so you can rock a small room. But if your headphones have the phone-sized 3.5mm plug, you'll need an adapter; the Magni 2 takes a 1/4-inch jack.

## **Cans Do**

Headphones are a matter of taste, but you can find something excellent for less than \$300. If you have roomies, enclosed headphones like the [Audio Technica ATH-MSR7](#) isolate you from outside sound and do beautiful things for a fuzzed-out guitar. Closed headsets tend toward heavier and muddier bass, though. Open back headphones, like the [Grado SR325e](#), let room sounds in but tend to be a little more neutral and accurate; suitable for anything from Bach to The Black Keys.

## **MP Cheese**

Your system is only as good as the weakest link, which is now your MP3s. This gear will only make the awful sound more apparent. When buying music (or ripping) the best bet is to go for the highest bit rate available. When possible, buy music in a “lossless” format, like FLAC. You can buy lossless recordings from sites like HDtracks, BandCamp, and Rhino Records, among others. Then set some money aside. When you hear your old favorites in a whole new way, you’ll want to replace your whole collection.

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