Say What You Want...

VOICE ACTIVATION IS CHANGING THE WAY MANY PEOPLE INTERACT WITH THE INTERNET AND THEIR MUSIC COLLECTIONS, SAYS ANDREW EVERARD

"So where are we at with this voice-control thing? What can it do, and with what equipment? Well, we're somewhere between 'everyone's at it' and a 'constantly-evolving situation', and you can be sure that at the forthcoming CES 2018 in Las Vegas all things voice-commanded will be Big News"

Say what you want, but the Smart Home is finally becoming a reality. It's all down to what tech people call the 'Internet of Things' – one of those concepts we've been hearing about for yonks, but which now seems to be turning from vapourware to something more tangible. And it's affecting everything from home automation to the way we choose and play our music.

How things are changing was brought home to me by a clutch of seemingly unconnected recent events. I bought a new car that came complete with voice control of its 'infotainment system' (the stereo and navigation). However, having spent ages repeating voice commands to 'train' my last purchase some years back, only to find it responded erratically if at all, I just didn't bother with the whole palaver this time.

Why? Since then I'd been messing around with one of Amazon's *Alexa* units, a little puck able to answer voice questions with convincing accuracy, and play music from online libraries via a Bluetooth speaker, without any need for parroting a set script of commands. You just speak, in plain voice, and it (more or less) does just what you want. You've probably seen the TV ads explaining its capabilities, from messaging to through to online ordering (from Amazon, of course), and answering questions like 'What's the weather going to be today?'

Then came an announcement from VAG (parent of VW, Audi, Skoda and Seat, among others), that it would integrate *Alexa* into its vehicles over the next couple of years. Seat will take the lead, but expect it to spread at some speed, probably eventually making it into the group's premium brands (Bentley, Bugatti, Lamborghini and Porsche).

Other car manufacturers implementing Alexa include BMW, Ford and Hyundai, but those brands will be using an app on a smartphone connected to the vehicle; the VAG approach is to embed Alexa directly into the vehicle, which is no bad thing given how hit and miss current in-car voice control systems can be.

The final piece of the jigsaw came with a brochure I was writing for one of the big retail groups, which wanted a section on the voice-activated products it sold. As deadlines loomed, so did the gaps in the text waiting for updated information on new products: we changed things several times to keep up, but even after the thing had gone to press the announcements kept on coming, so what we ended up with was less of a 'shape of things to come', and more of an 'at the time of writing' snapshot.

Where Are We Now?

So where are we at with this voice-control thing? What can it do, and with what equipment? Well, we're somewhere between 'everyone's at it' and a 'constantly-evolving situation', and you can be sure that at the forthcoming CES 2018 in Las Vegas all things voice-commanded will be Big News.

Where we're at as I write this, some eight weeks before the event, is that there are two main eco-systems in the voice game: Amazon's *Alexa* and Google's *Assistant*. Both brands are able to access internet resources such as information, voice-messaging and online music libraries, as well as controlling 'smart home' items such as heating, lighting and security systems. And both have affordable entry points: the simple Amazon *Echo Dot* 'puck' is able to play music to Bluetooth speakers and costs around £50. The latest version of the *Echo* speaker (a self-contained music system that lacks Bluetooth) starts from around £90. (The *Echo Dot* has a small built-in speaker, but I'm not sure anyone would want to listen to music on it for any length of time.)

It's also worth noting that all these voice devices are mains powered *via* plugtop power supplies, so they're not quite as portable as the slick TV ads will have you imagine. For cordless operation you need the smaller *Echo Tap* portable Bluetooth speaker. However, the aftermarket has caught up with that drawback of the *Echo Dot* fairly quickly, and Amazon's own online shop can offer you the Vaux 'Cordless Home Speaker + Portable Battery for Amazon *Echo Dot Gen 2*', which sort of does just what the name suggests.

Made by a company called Ninety7, this £50 add-on is an upright tubular speaker very like Amazon's own *Echo*, except for a recess in the top into which the *Echo Dot 2* drops rather neatly, and hidden connections to hook up the Amazon puck to the speaker's onboard amp, drive units and rechargeable battery. True, the battery is only good for six hours, so close attention is needed to keep it topped up, but it's preferable to the fully-tethered operation of the Amazon device alone. (The company also makes a simpler *Dox* device, which has 10-hour battery capability but no speaker, and sells for about £20 less.)

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Google's *Home Mini* is the same price as the *Echo Dot*, again with a small speaker built-in, and the more powerful *Home* speaker itself is £129. Ninety7 is on the case with that too, having a *Loft* portable battery base for the Google *Home*, giving up to eight hours of untethered use for around £50. At the time of writing the *Dox* battery for *Echo* and the *Loft* base seem to be only available in the US, but I'm told UK supplies are coming.

Don't forget Apple's *Siri*, which listening intelligence can play music from your *iTunes* library using a phone or tablet, or indeed an Apple computer running the latest High Sierra operating system, which can of course be Bluetooth radio linked to a suitable speaker or a pair of headphones or whatever.

These are 'starter' devices, at least in audio terms, with the sound from the models with 'proper' built-in speakers good enough for use in a kitchen or other place where background music is required (*ie* about on a par with a reasonable Bluetooth speaker of the same size). However, things start to get more interesting when you see what other manufacturers with a more established audio pedigree are doing with these home automation/infotainment devices.

Bose, for example, has gone down the Google route, with models including its *SoundLink Revolve*, *Revolve+* and Color models which are able to access Google *Assistant* as well as *Siri* voice recognition facilities. Even more amusingly, it has recently released the latest iteration of its *QuietComfort* noise-cancelling headphones, much-used by frequent fliers, complete with Google *Assistant* integration. Use the *QuietComfort 35 II* headphones with the internet connection provided by your mobile phone, and you can not only stream music from online services, but also use the headphones to ask information services for directions, train times, weather forecasts and the like, using the considerable power of Google's search engine. True you'll look just as much of a Charlie walking down the street having a conversation with Google as you will when having a phone conversation. But the facility's there if you want it, along with all that streaming music.

Sony has also gone down the Google route with its *LF-S50G* wireless speaker, which comes complete with a subtle clock/timer display behind its speaker grille, and adds gesture control to the voice activation. Hardly surprising, then, that Sony's 'lifestyle' press image for the device shows it in use in a kitchen (one of those spotless kitchens only ever seen in lifestyle brochures!).

Other Google adherents include JBL, with its *Link* range of speakers, and Panasonic, which has launched its own *GA-10* speaker complete with Google Assistant built-in. But JBL's parent company Harman International (now part of Samsung) has illustrated

the dilemma faced by audio companies when it comes to these voice-control systems; the JBL *Link* speakers may have Google *Assistant* onboard, but Harman/Kardon's *Allure* speaker packs *Alexa*. I think it's called hedging your bets, but I'm sure the reality is that some kind of higher strategy is in play!

Going further with Amazon *Alexa* integration are some of the multi-room wireless systems now flooding the market (as I explain elsewhere in this issue). Both Sonos and Yamaha's *MusicCast* systems now feature interoperability with the Amazon devices, with Sonos having already launched its *One* speaker with full *Alexa* voice capability built-in. And the company has great plans going forward – as the marketers say: right now you can use all of its current speakers with an *Echo Dot* as the control point, as you do with the Yamaha system, using the facility for downloading 'skills' to the voice-control device.

However, it's a pretty safe bet that the near future will see the same level of integration visible in the *One* being rolled out to other models in the Sonos range. You won't find too many people willing to take a bet against there being *Three* and *Five* models not too far off, but there's another little point worth noting in the Sonos announcements about the *One* speaker: it will also support Google *Assistant* some time in 2018.

What has all the makings of a format war right now, with products in the Amazon or Google camps, and some hedging of bets (as Harman is doing), could well give way to a future where 'smart' audio products are platform-agnostic, and able to play nicely with either system – or indeed any others that happen to come along.

One day, deciding which platform or devices you address could be no more than a matter of whether you say '*Alexa*…' or 'OK Google…' (or even 'Hey Google…'). But what do we say if and when the two systems come even closer together?

After all, 'Oi you!' does sound frightfully uncouth…