

ICE-A, ICE-A, ICE-A

In Car Entertainment means more than a night out with the blonde from next door: mega-watt amps, Surround Sound, compact disc players – all are part and parcel of the ICE scene today. CC investigates...

The UK's in-car entertainment market is currently showing signs of being even more competitive and prolific than ever before. And, as the ICE scene heats up, it's becoming obvious that the demands being made upon the product manufacturers mean they have to either come up with the goods – or move out!

With over 40 different car audio brand names being distributed throughout the UK it's not hard to understand the reasons why competition is fierce and that pressure is so often put on the distribution companies to ensure they achieve their sales targets. Failure to reach the required number of sales could mean a manufacturer re-assessing its products' position in the market place and eventually withdrawing them if improvements can't be made.

This threatening situation is now being made even more difficult for some of the Japanese companies who are feeling the adverse effects of their own currency, the Yen, which makes their products more expensive and less competitive by the time they're imported into Great Britain.

A recent loss to the UK market has been what was going to be the cheapest available CD player, a Sharp unit costing £320. Sadly, this has now been withdrawn from the Sharp range of products due to the currency problem.

Other manufacturers have felt the current situation is not only worthy of individual product withdrawals but in the case of Mitsubishi and Fisher, distribution of their whole range of car audio products has ceased. Drastic action indeed from these two popular hi-fi companies but they're certainly not the first to fall foul of the stiff competition in the UK and are hardly likely to be the last.

There are companies,

however, that can boast their success in the UK and none more so than Clarion which recently announced that business has trebled over the last three years. So it has decided to spend £1.7 million on new offices and warehouse facilities in Swindon. It is also predicted that a UK factory will be the next step in Clarion's expansion in Europe – could this be the answer to solving the currency crisis?

Even with the loss of the £320 Sharp CD player, the compact disc market and its technology has continued to flourish. Marked improvements have been made from those early days where vibration seemed to be a major concern for in-car CD. The latest players now use electronic error correction systems that, when combined with new laser damping and suspension methods, make vibration problems a thing of the past.

The most recent step forward for in-car CD players has come with the introduction of the CD/tuner. Although Becker has had one available for some time its price of around £1900 has precluded any real enthusiasm for trading-in your cassettes for CDs. New CD/tuners from Alpine and Panasonic could well change all that, and with price tags of £750 and £630 respectively look like fair competition for some of the best similarly priced cassette/tuners.

Of course it's also true that many of the digital audio enthusiasts are waiting for the arrival of DAT (digital audio tape) before committing to the CD medium. Well, they may not have long to wait as recent news from Japan is that Matsushita, known for its Panasonic and Technics products, has launched its first domestic DAT recorder – price in Japan is equal to about £825. There are as yet no plans for marketing overseas, but the unit, known as the Technics SV-D1000, will doubtless offer some of the DAT enthusiasts a ray of hope.

Clarion is one company who, while openly advocating DAT in preference to CD, is now set to launch a CD player in a new range of products in May this year. The company does however, still seem slightly reluctant to offer a CD player and believes that 'in-car CD has a very specialised market' – and DAT hasn't, we suppose?

Another surprise from Clarion for its May launch is the 986MX tuner/cassette unit which contains just about every feature that Clarion has to offer. It includes a new look electronic fascia panel with diversity tuning, CATS anti-theft coding, Dolby B and C, and much more.

The latest tuner/cassette from Panasonic is also set to offer a few surprises, not least of which is DBX which has previously only been seen on Trio's KRC949D. Panasonic's new baby is called the CQ-F50 and can be seen in our product round-up.

Talking of Trio it's as well to know that the company has changed its name and in future all products will be branded Kenwood. This will be less of a surprise to many of the hi-fi enthusiasts who already know that all Trio products have, in the past, originated from the Kenwood Corporation of Japan and only been re-branded Trio for use solely in the UK.

This move represents some significant benefits to the UK subsidiary which can now call upon the full power and resources of the Kenwood Corporation to include the UK in its World-wide promotions. It also means immediate access to certain products that previously couldn't be imported due to the branding. Although all future equipment will carry the Kenwood logo, the company's headquarters in Middlesex will be known as Trio-Kenwood UK Ltd.

In an attempt to breathe a new lease of life into car stereo systems there's a feature known as Surround Sound. While

technology manages to improve the quality of modern equipment there's been little done to alter the inherently bad acoustics and sound structure of a motor car. Surround Sound is a new listening format designed to make the confines of your car sound less like a small metal box and more like an auditorium during a live musical performance.

It may all sound a little too ambitious but recent news from Japan is that it's becoming a major feature in the domestic market and is now being considered for use by many of the major brand names. Ironically, while it's usually the Japanese equipment that leads the in-car market for innovation, we find that on all British company called Troy Ambisonic has already launched a Surround Sound processor built specifically for the car.

Enhancing the stereo image in a car is no mean task and Troy's efforts have certainly not escaped the notice of Renault which, as of next month, is happily recommending the system in its Accessory Boutique brochure for ICE options. To find out what Renault already knows we put one of Troy's processors into a test vehicle and took it out for a drive. The results spoke for themselves.

A review of the latest in-car technology wouldn't be complete without a mention of the car telephone. And, what better time to do that than now as it's recommended that all cellular car 'phone subscribers get themselves a copy of the new Highway Code.

Guidelines within the code tell drivers not to make and receive calls using the handset while driving on busy roads. It seems so obvious really, but there you are, some people need to be told. The point is that a well-installed 'hands-free' facility should be available allowing drivers to keep both hands on the steering wheel – except when changing gear!