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Sonodyne Malhar Hi-Fi Wireless Music System Review: Blast from the past

Ameya Dalvi

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This vintage looking speaker may be missing a couple of modern features but it does pack a serious punch.

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Pros

- Vintage design, rugged build quality
- Powerful sound with good detail
- Loudness and bass good enough for mid to large-sized rooms
- Ease of use
- Multiple audio inputs
- Full-function remote control

Cons

- Lacks high-end Bluetooth codec support
- No sound customisation at all
- Could have used a couple of modern features

Price: Rs 31,999

Rating: 3.75/5

Wireless speakers come in all shapes and sizes and some even with smart functionality or voice inputs. The Sonodyne Malhar that we have for review today prefers to keep things simple and almost turns back time by a few years. Despite that, it would be rather unfair to call it just a wireless speaker, and the company rightly prefers to call it a high-fidelity music system. This may not be a product for all but there's a lot to like about it.

If you have been thinking about a portable Bluetooth speaker, that's not what we have here. Of course, it is Bluetooth 5.2 compliant and you can move it around; it weighs 'just' 8 kgs. But a permanent spot in the room would be a better idea, and it needs to be plugged into a power socket at all times. The Malhar is fitted with four active speakers and two passive radiators. To be specific, it has two 5-inch glass-fiber cone woofers, two 1-inch silk-dome tweeters with Neodymium magnets and two 5-inch passive radiators for bass.



Image Credit: Firstpost | Ameya Dalvi

Collectively they can deliver up to 180 Watts of sound output thanks to a Class D amplifier inside. The stated frequency response ranges between 40 Hz to 20 KHz. With the key specifications out of the way, it's time to tell you what's good and what's not about this wireless speaker or Hi-Fi music system from the 50+ years old renowned Indian audio brand.

What we liked about the Sonodyne Malhar

The vintage design looks really cool

It has a rectangular boxy design like the speakers of yore. A rugged wooden (MDF) cabinet with a glossy finish houses all the drivers and other circuitry. The woofers and tweeters are covered with metal grilles, adding to the vintage look. The uncovered passive radiators on the side also all to the aesthetics. Long story short, we liked the Malhar's design and it made us a tad nostalgic. We got a black variant for review which looks sober. It comes in three more colour options which I believe would look cooler due to the distinct contrast with the black speaker grilles.



Image Credit: Firstpost | Ameya Dalvi

Powerful sound output with ample detail as well as bass

The Sonodyne Malhar makes good use of its size and components and delivers a powerful sound output. It is loud, punchy, with ample bass and excellent detail in audio as long as you play it loud enough. The soundstage is reasonably broad too. While you can use it for some soft nighttime listening, one can get the best out of it only beyond a particular loudness level where the three major frequency

Soft listening is fine for vocal-heavy tracks or classical music. But for bass-heavy tracks, the bass feels slightly dominant and vocals as well as some instrument sounds seem a bit recessed till you push the volume higher. At the right loudness, it sounds great across various genres of music. It is loud enough and has ample thump for a mid to large sized room and one can easily use it for a house party. Another thing to note is that its performance on wired inputs is a notch or two higher than on Bluetooth.

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has an optical in, a 3.5 mm aux input, Bluetooth 5.2 and one can also play audio through a USB drive. If you still have your old 'legal' MP3 collection, you can put it on a drive, plug it into the USB port and enjoy. The performance through USB is quite good, and even if you switch off the speaker, you can resume from the last track you played when you turn it back on.

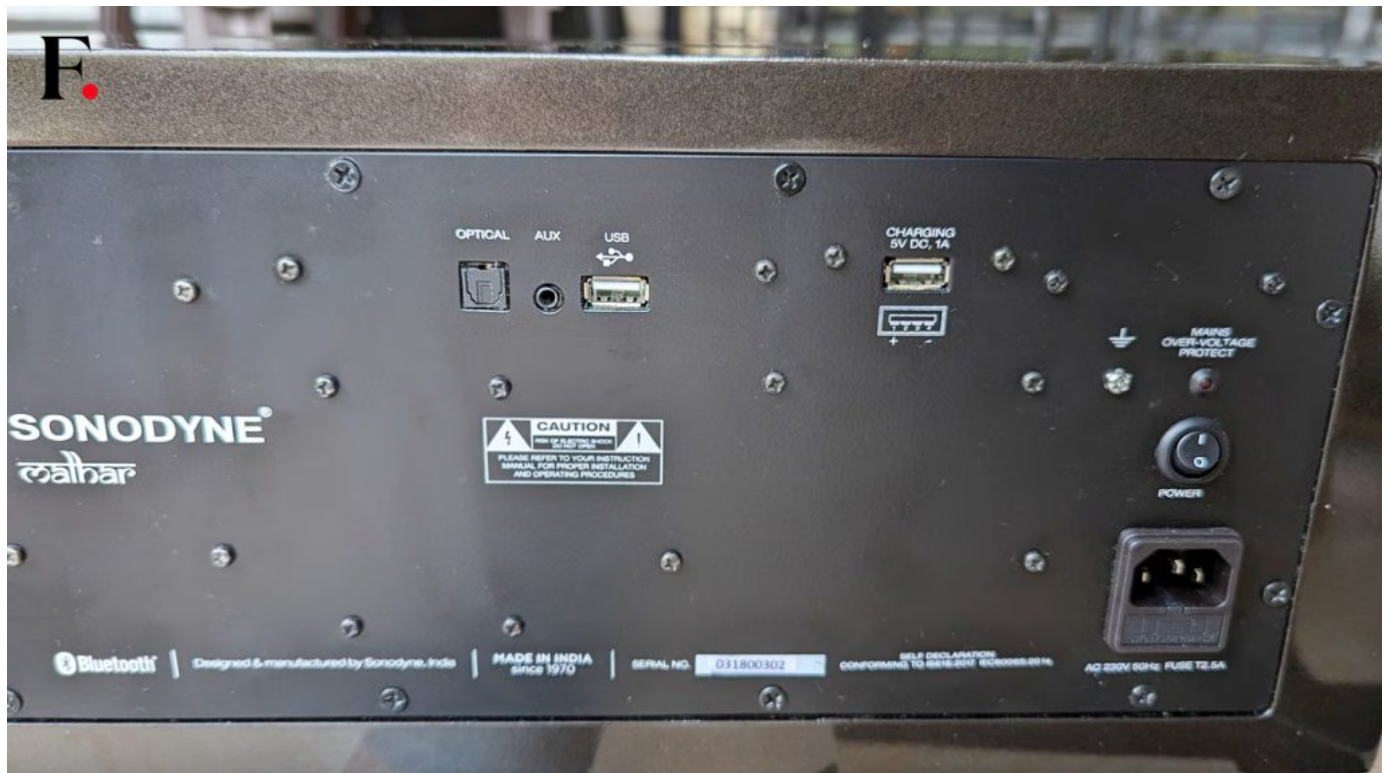


Image Credit: Firstpost / Ameya Dalvi

Do plug it into the right USB port though. There's a second USB port but that has been provided to charge devices like wireless earphones or smartwatches or even smartphones if you aren't in a hurry to juice it up briskly.

Easy to use and comes with a full-function remote control

One of the best aspects of the Sonodyne Malhar is its simplicity. There's hardly

indicator, one for each input and function. It's hard to go wrong with that. The company bundles a neat looking compact infrared remote control that gives you access to all the inputs and functions from the comfort of your seat. Yes, I may have a small issue with the remote that you will soon discover, but it covers all the key bases.



Image Credit: Firstpost | Ameya Dalvi

What rains on its parade

No sound customisations at all

This point may sound somewhat contradictory to the previous one but it is what it is. Yes, sound tweaks or equalisers may feel intimidating for some but it is always great to have the option to finetune the audio to one's taste. While the Sonodyne Malhar is tuned very well out of the box, something as basic as bass and treble controls would have worked well here and added to its old world charm along with the functionality. I wasn't even suggesting a full-blown companion app with a multi-band equaliser, but just a couple more buttons on the remote wouldn't have diminished its ease of use.



Image Credit: Firstpost | Ameya Dalvi

Scant Bluetooth codec support

We did not find the mention of the Bluetooth codec used here and we safely assume it's SBC. A speaker of this class (and budget) certainly deserves a bit more bandwidth on the wireless front. While the speaker has multiple inputs, it is highly likely that Bluetooth will be the most commonly used option in this age. And its sound quality over Bluetooth is a notch or two lower than the wired options including playing audio from USB. A better codec like aptX or LDAC could have probably got more out of this product.

Could have used a couple of modern features

We do understand that the theme is retro but I would have liked to see some modern tech for connectivity, especially given its selling price. And I don't just mean the aforementioned codec support. Two things that would have benefited the Malhar are HDMI input and a Bluetooth remote instead of IR. The speaker is powerful enough to be used with TVs as a soundbar alternative. While you do have connectivity options like optical and aux inputs and even Bluetooth, HDMI would have yielded best results.

The desire for a Bluetooth or even a RF remote control instead of IR stems from a habit developed due to the use of smart TVs and streamers like the Amazon Fire TV Stick over the past few years. They have Bluetooth remotes that one can point anywhere, and not necessarily at a receiver, before pressing a button. With the Malhar, I had to take that extra effort and at times the input wouldn't register

from sharp angles. I may be nitpicking but a Bluetooth remote would have also allowed one to control the device from an adjacent room within the wireless range.



Image Credit: Firstpost | Ameya Dalvi

Sonodyne Malhar: Price and verdict

The Sonodyne Malhar is priced at Rs 31,999 and comes with a 2-year warranty. It does miss out on a few modern features like support for high throughput Bluetooth codec, Bluetooth remote or HDMI ARC input but it hits the bullseye with its sound quality. It is certainly not an alternative for a portable Bluetooth speaker or a party boombox, however, it can play both those roles well and with a touch of class.



Image Credit: Firstpost / Ameya Dalvi

If you are just looking for either of those things, you can get a lot of options for less than half its selling price. But if you are someone who appreciates the finer detail in music and looking for a high fidelity speaker with a fairly balanced sound output and a handful of connectivity options, the Sonodyne Malhar is something you should strongly consider.