

# Bargain beats

At home or in the dorm, the Dayton Audio B652 speakers and DTA-1 amplifier offer an education in low-budget audio

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College students aren't the only ones experiencing a back-to-school recalibration. With one or more kids dorm-bound, parents are preparing for the post-Labor Day extra space, and quiet, around the house.

Let's not even discuss the financial pain. No, here's a starter-kit back-to-school audio system that should make everyone happy, including parents, for less than \$85. Today's micro-shopping spree takes us to Parts Express of Springboro, Ohio, a hangout of electronics hobbyists and do-it-yourselfers. I've been auditioning two products from the company's Dayton Audio brand: the Dayton B652 speakers (\$39.80 a pair) and the DTA-1 amplifier (\$44.80), which produce remarkable fidelity for the money.

The trendy back-to-school choice might be a Beats Pill or UE Boom portable Bluetooth speaker, each \$200. The Dayton duo sounds better than either for a fraction of the price, though they don't travel quite so well. The B652, a conventional bookshelf speaker with a 6.5-inch polypropylene cone woofer and 5/8-inch polycarbonate dome tweeter, has been a longtime Internet rave.

This year it became the lowest-priced speaker ever reviewed by *Stereophile*, a magazine that covers high-end audio. (Given their price, the somewhat flawed measured performance was judged "actually quite remarkable.") But soon those raves turned to online forum potshots after rumored manufacturing changes left the speakers sounding like, as one poster on Parts Express' own Tech Talk forum called it, "garbage."



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Dayton Audio B652 speakers, top, and DTA-1 amplifier.

Rich Taylor, Dayton Audio's brand manager, explained that "toward the end of last year, we, unfortunately, had a manufacturing problem where some 'dull' tweeters entered into the production."

Parts Express offered exchanges on all unsatisfactory B652 pairs, and the current production run assuredly sounds like the originals. As in: These are quite likely the best speakers you have ever heard for less than \$40.

The B652s are not quite a foot tall, about 7 inches wide and 6.5 inches deep, a surprisingly small home for a 6.5-inch woofer. These speakers, dressed in a simple black vinyl wrap over particle board, do nothing spectacularly: Despite the oversize woofer, bass output is no better than a cheapo surround speaker in

a prepackaged home theater system. The tweeter's best quality? It's nonirritating to the ear.

But the B652 distributes a generous sound field and gets the midrange right; these are excellent speakers for vocals, folk and chamber jazz, though may not be suited for headbangers and rap fans without a subwoofer. (Dayton's Sub-800, at \$89, is one of the best buys in audio.)

Final grade: For less than the cost of a Physics 101 textbook, an A.

The DTA-1's appearance — perhaps a half-pound, rubber-coated electronics truffle unearthed somewhere in Springboro? — does not, in any way, suggest this mound of plastic 6 inches wide, 4 deep and 2 high is an amplifier. But the DTA-1 was a ringer for a \$30 Sonic Impact T-amp from

almost a decade ago.

That T-Amp, so-called because of the Tripath chip that powered it, is no longer made: Both the company and chipmaker are out of business. But Parts Express liked the amplifier so much it revived the design.

"It's virtually identical," Taylor says, "with the exception of some component changes for longevity, but very minimal."

The Dayton amplifier also uses a different chip — the still-available TA2024, which Taylor says has more "refined fidelity to discerning ears" than the original. It still runs on a power adapter or, for portability, eight AA batteries.

This is low-power operation. It outputs 9 watts at 0.04 percent distortion but starts to get ugly at only 15 watts (and 10 percent distortion). The D652, and most speakers, need only a few watts at moderate volumes.

The DTA-1 has an oversize volume dial, tiny spring-clip wire connectors and a single audio (3.5 millimeter) connection. For mom and dad, it makes a convenient, always-on wireless system when used with an AirPort Express Wi-Fi base station. (The DTA-1 never consumed more than 1.6 watts, at louder volumes, during my audition.) Connect the AirPort Express to your home network and to the DTA-1, then play music wirelessly from an iPhone, iPad or laptop.

Final grade: Give it a T (as in Tripath). For more power and superior construction, try Dayton Audio's 50-watt DTA-100a (\$89).

**Information:** Parts Express ([parts-express.com](http://parts-express.com); 800-338-0531).