

The sound of silence



As featured in
The CEO Magazine
For more info visit
theceomagazine.com



Volvo's flagship SUV has finally been made over, creating a machine that transports you away from the hustle and bustle of daily life, literally and figuratively.

WORDS **KARL PESKETT**

A female voice, slightly scratchy, singing a haunting tune isn't what you'd consider a recipe for becoming a YouTube hit, especially as it only lasts 10 seconds. With nearly a million views, however,

this recording of a woman warbling the French folk song *Au Clair de la Lune* is more remarkable than it first appears.

In 2008, American researchers digging through a Parisian archive discovered a series of

squiggles on a old piece of paper that had been filed away almost 150 years earlier. They were inscribed by Édouard-Léon Scott de Martinville, an inventor who had created a machine that could record sound waves as they passed through the air. Though it was only intended to visually study the recording and not play back the sound, the phonautograph, as it was called, predated Thomas Edison's 1887 phonograph by 17 years. The discovery of its etchings was a breakthrough, and this group of American historians (who collaborated through an organisation called First Sounds) figured out how to convert the squiggles back into sound waves. The resulting scratchy playback, the first sound to have ever been recorded, is now permanently archived on YouTube, available for all to hear.

Since the phonautograph, our recordings of sound and particularly music have certainly progressed. There was Edison's phonograph, which quickly became the standard for music for many years. Following on, we had sound on film, which recorded voices and music on the edge of filmstrip, and then electric amplification of vinyl records.

Four- and eight-track magnetic tapes soon followed, and due to their smaller, more durable format, a simple question was raised: could recorded music now be truly portable? Fitting any of the above methods to a car wasn't feasible; however, Sony popularised the compact cassette tape through its Walkman. Suddenly, auto manufacturers saw the potential for portable audio. Cassettes thus remained the norm for many years, but the digital age brought the compact disc with its crisp, high-quality sound, and it is still the standard for audio fidelity. But while having a six-CD stacker in your glove box used to be a feature to boast about, it is also fairly limiting in how much music you can choose from, which is why most people today use their phones, paired via Bluetooth. A standard phone can hold the equivalent of hundreds of CDs, with sound quality that's almost indistinguishable.

Because of this paradigm shift in listening standards, car-makers have had to follow.



Nothing demonstrates how far the world has come when a manufacturer wants to charge you to fit a CD player. Yet, that's exactly what Volvo has done with its new XC90. To have a CD player, you'll need to fork out an extra AU\$160. Not huge money, but given how music is now consumed, it won't be long before CD players aren't available at all. However, after you hear how an MP3 file sounds through the utterly brilliant Bowers and Wilkins stereo fitted to the XC90, you'll probably be ditching the compact discs quicker than you can say *Au Clair de la Lune*. >>

Inside and out, it's a beautiful-looking machine, which is no mean feat given the segment it's in.

This is a beautifully smooth and quiet machine, able to traverse different surfaces without letting too much rumble or thumping through.

With clear treble, bowl-shaking bass and enveloping surround sound, it takes a concert experience to a realistic level. The sound settings are completely customisable, too, so you can dial in a level that suits you. But the sound is only part of the XC90’s interior appeal.

Up front sits a huge 12.3-inch tablet interface in the dashboard centre. With intuitive gesture control, anyone who can operate an iPad can search through all the menus and options available. Swipe left from the home screen to access infotainment apps, swipe right to view a screen of virtual buttons for vehicle controls. Swipe down from the top and you can fiddle with various vehicle settings, such as the colour of the ambient lighting.

Directly in front of the driver is a massive TFT-based instrument display, and being completely digital, it’s able to display virtually any information you ask of it. Navigation can be shown not only on the huge centre infotainment screen but in between the dials, meaning less time with eyes off the road.

Look through the rest of the interior and you’ll notice the smooth hide across all seats, and with plenty of adjustment across seatback, squab, and bolstering, all shapes and sizes can be accommodated. It also smells like a Bentley Mulsanne inside—the tanning is beautiful. It’s a seven-seater, meaning the entire family can be catered for, and the outboard seats in the second row have integrated boosters, which saves having to fit a child seat for kids aged four and up.

Inside and out, it’s a beautiful-looking machine, which is no mean feat given the segment it’s in. SUVs tend to be based around a two-box design, with the edges rounded off, and though that’s true of the XC90, thanks to its stunning headlights and asymmetric grille, it’s arguably the most attractive SUV on sale to date.

Under that wide bonnet, where previous XC90s utilised inline six-cylinders, Volvo’s quest for efficiency means it now has a four-cylinder under the bonnet. If that sounds inadequate given this car’s two-tonne bulk,



the outputs from the 2.0-litre engine are a healthy 314 bhp with a heady torque figure of 400 Nm. How are those figures possible? You may be surprised to learn this diminutive motor is helped along by both supercharging and turbocharging. For low-end torque, the supercharger kicks off initially, giving it enough shove to get it hustled to 100 km/h in 6.5 seconds—not bad for a family bus. At higher revs, the turbocharger takes over, giving the XC90 plenty of power for overtaking or high-speed running. While this ‘twin-charging’ technique has been used before, never has it been so effective in its application. We do miss the good ol’ straight-six sound, however.

If you’re not giving it plenty of herbs, the XC90 can be very hushed and relaxed. It’s not quite as plush a ride as Audi’s Q7 (the Volvo’s closest competitor), but on the right road the XC90 feels lighter and more wieldy. Its grip is very good, and though it won’t challenge an X5 through a tight set of bends, the Bimmer can’t match the Volvo’s presentation or build quality. Nor is it as versatile.



Activate the Drive Mode button and the ride height increases, allowing you to take it off-road. Of course, it doesn’t have a low-range gearbox, but don’t let that put you off. Volvo’s expert work on the traction and stability control give this car more grip on slippery surfaces than its slippery shape would suggest. If you let the tyres down, it churns through sand and will widen the eyes of onlookers as you go sailing past them on the beach. Or you can leave the tyres and simply sail up a snowy mountain road, leaving the ESC to sort out traction at each corner, adjusting torque to every wheel individually using subtle braking of each wheel.

But where the Volvo really shines is refinement. This is a beautifully smooth and quiet machine, able to traverse different surfaces without letting too much rumble or thumping through. On city streets, you can immerse yourself in a cathartic state by simply turning off the radio, listening to the sound of silence as you cruise along unperturbed by the goings on outside. Step inside and you step away from the world for but a moment. But if you happen to drift off daydreaming, the car has got your back.

Remember, this is a Volvo, meaning safety is its number one priority. It’ll self park, it scans the road ahead for pedestrians, and it will brake

autonomously if you haven’t done so in time. It also warns you if you’re approaching a vehicle too quickly, or if you’re travelling behind too close. With radar-based cruise control, it can set a distance between you and the car in front, braking and accelerating itself to maintain that gap. Forget to check your blind spot when changing lanes? It’ll let you know. And if you happen to wander out of your lane slightly, it will gently nudge you back in, guiding the wheel to ensure you don’t clip a kerb. While it’s not quite a self-driving car, it’s the closest thing. However, if you’re not comfortable with all that tech taking over, simply swipe the big screen and switch it all off. You’re now in total control.

If diesel’s your fuel of choice, there’s a torquey oil-burner available as well. Perhaps more futureproof, though, is the XC90 T8. With both petrol and electric power on board, it can run on batteries alone and charge up from your home power point. In full electric mode, it truly is the sound of silence.

With a five-star crash rating, superlative comfort, plenty of power, well-judged suspension, and technology galore, the XC90 fancies itself as the ultimate family car. But sometimes it pays to leave the family behind and head out onto the open road. We all need to enjoy the peace and quiet. ■

