



Ken Stone's *Final Cut Pro* Web Site

December 7, 2009

## **Focal XS 2.1 Multimedia Sound System**

[www.xs-focal.com](http://www.xs-focal.com) - \$599.95

Review by [Steve Douglas](#)

The professionals know better, after all they have been at it for many more years than most and frequently have the budgets to allow for a serious studio setup. The rest, and probably the majority of editors and shooters spend a great deal of time buying the latest and greatest computers, software and camcorders but frequently forget about the most important thing in any movie, the audio. In fact, most audiences can be fairly forgiving when it comes to less than stellar video, but distorted, poor sounding audio brings about a stampede for the exits. I have been fortunate to be asked to judge several international underwater film festivals, as nature work is my genre. While I often expect it, it often surprises me as to how little attention is paid to the audio of many submissions. The music is often too loud smothering the narration, or the audio is clipping far past distortion levels. Sometimes it's just the opposite, the background music is barely discernable and the narration is booming. And then there are the times when the audio just doesn't really fit the video in theme or mood. Not paying proper attention to correct audio levels is one thing, but not having a decent set of speakers to monitor your audio with is a whole different ballgame.

As with home theater speakers, speakers should be colorless yet very few of them are. Some will have a pronounced high end, some a stronger bottom end while others will be directional and not best listened to when off axis. How often do you hear car stereos blasting with a booming bass? Annoying isn't it? One reason, at least for me, is that the bass never really sounds like a bass note should. That type of speaker unfortunately lacks any hint of real musicality. Back in the 70's JBL 100 speakers were all the craze for their high efficiency and strong bottom end. I hated them, again, there was no musicality to the speakers.

While there is really no excuse for using the \$15 cheapo computer speakers found at Office Depot, it is perfectly understandable that many, especially in today's economy, can not afford to purchase expensive studio monitors which can run into the thousands of dollars. Never the less, monitoring your video's audio is of great importance and may ultimately be a deciding factor as to how well your productions are received.



Don't let their small size fool you. They pack a solid musical definition for you to monitor by.

The Focal XS 2.1 Sound System comes in with both an excellent price as well as the superior sound qualities that are missing from so many home computer systems. While it wouldn't be fair to compare this system to multi-thousand dollar studio monitors, I find that the Focal XS 2.1 Multimedia speakers will surpass most of the speakers currently found in many editing bays and stack up nicely even against those ultra expensive audio monitors.

The two satellite speakers have a very small footprint yet are rated at 2 x 30 watts RMS for each speaker. RMS refers to a speaker's power rating and tells you just how much A.C. power can be handled by the speaker's voice coil without being damaged. I recall my father buying a cheapo stereo that was rated at 150 watts. What he didn't realize is that the rating was IPP or some other bogus form of power statistic. This amounted to about 15 watts of true power handling capability. The only true rating one should go by is to make sure the rating is stated at RMS continuous power and beware of misleading advertising from your nearest stereo outlet.

In addition to the speakers, the 2.1 system comes with a USB wire/cable, remote control, the power supply cord, jack cable to use with an iPod and the owner's manual. Set up was simple, the left channel speaker connects to the woofer model using the standard RCA plug and the right channel connects to the computer. You complete the setup by going into the Mac Pro's System Preferences/Sound/Output tab and

highlighting the Focal Speakers.

While Santa hasn't presented me with one yet and Apple isn't throwing any my way, the right channel supplies a dock for both listening to and recharging your iPod and the system allows for syncing with iTunes as well. Several adapters are included to correspond to your specific iPod and put it in the dock. No cable is needed, as your iPod will recharge directly off the dock, which you can control with the remote. The small remote supplies the functions you would want whether using the iPod or just setting speaker volume or turning the power on and off.

Since I was only interested in how these speakers performed in the editing bay I stayed focused on that. If you are a high volume kind of person, these speakers will not disappoint. They could be heard clearly on the other side of the house and into the street. What's even more important is that, even though I don't blast my music, I did not notice any clipping or distortion at these volumes. With a frequency response for the left and right speakers at 150Hz to 20kHz you plainly get the full spectrum of your audio source. Each of these speakers is 2-way shielded and comes with a 0.75" Mylar dome tweeter and a 3" paper cone mid-bass. These are housed in an aesthetically pleasing and solid design. You really wouldn't imagine that any speaker so small could produce such high quality audio. Anything below the 150Hz is handled by the hefty (18 lbs) ported subwoofer, which has its own power rating of 70 watts RMS and a frequency response of 39Hz- 150Hz. I know of several large and expensive stereo speakers that don't reproduce with that kind of range. Turned up a bit in volume you can feel the bottom end just as you would with your home theater's subwoofer.



The rear of the Focal XS subwoofer has the necessary inputs and the bass level control. I set mine at a shade past 12 o'clock.

At the same time, the speakers reach down low enough in their frequency response that you minimize the localization of the sub itself. For those who may not know, this is very desirable as you should not be able to audibly designate where deep bass is coming from.

The excellent stereo separation surprised me, as the soundstage was considerably wider than I had expected from such small monitors. Individual instrument imaging was clear, as were the vocals. With the sub placed out of the way on the floor beneath my editing table, the Focal XS 2.1 Sound System was plainly designed with perfect integration in mind. Clearly, this is no thrown together system just to get product out and sold.

My bottom line is if budgetary limitations prevent you from going to that whole other financial level of high end studio monitors, than this is a darn great compromise. There is no more sour feeling than getting buyer's remorse, and you won't once you have integrated the Focal XS Multimedia 2.1 speaker system into your editing bay. With a little burn in time, these speakers mellow out into a brilliant blend of power and, most important, musicality.



Steve Douglas is a certified Apple Pro for Final Cut Pro 7 and underwater videographer. A winner of the 1999 Pacific Coast Underwater Film Competition, 2003 IVIE competition, 2004 Los Angeles Underwater Photographic competition, and the prestigious 2005 International Beneath the Sea Film Competition, where he also won the Stan Waterman Award for Excellence in Underwater Videography and 'Diver of the

Year', Steve was a safety diver on the feature film "The Deep Blue Sea", contributed footage to the Seaworld Park's Atlantis production, and productions for National Geographic and the History channels. Steve was a feature writer for Asian Diver Magazine and is one of the founding organizers of the San Diego UnderSea Film Exhibition. He is available for both private and group seminars for Final Cut Pro and leads underwater filming expeditions and African safaris with upcoming excursions to Kenya, Yap, Lembeh Straits, Indonesia, Wakatobi Resort and Bali. Feel free to contact him if you are interested in joining Steve on any of these exciting trips. [www.worldfilmsandtravel.com](http://www.worldfilmsandtravel.com)

[\[Top\]](#)

**copyright © Steve Douglas 2009**

© 2000 -2009 Ken Stone. All rights reserved. Apple, the Apple logo, Final Cut Pro, Macintosh and Power Mac are either registered trademarks or trademarks of Apple. Other company and product names may be trademarks of their respective owners.

All screen captures, images, and textual references are the property and trademark of their creators/owners/publishers.

*[E mail](#)   [Subscribe](#)   [Home](#)*