

Review: Focal XS 2.1-Channel Multimedia + iPod System

April 20, 2009 by [Dr. Macenstein](#)

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Guess what? Your current iPod speakers suck. No, I don't need to know what you're using, because I know what you're NOT using, and that's the problem. What you *should* be using are the [Focal XS speaker](#) (that is, assuming you have \$600 burning a hole in your pocket).

"\$600 for iPod speakers!" you say? Yup. Focal, makers of high end studio speakers are breaking into the high-end iPod/computer speaker market with the very nice Focal XS, and for well-to-do audiophiles, they come temptingly close to justifying their \$600 price tag.



Design

Much like the "Apple Tax", a not insignificant portion of the money spent on the XS's goes towards the design. And while a glass martini chair like the one pictured above in not required, it is implied that these

speakers are being marketed more towards the design conscious than Joe iMac. From the moment you attempt to lift the 20-something-pound box, you know you're getting something special. Opening the box reveals a very Apple-like packaging experience.

Each of the two satellite speakers is crafted with a brushed steel stand designed to match your iMac or cinema display, and the actual speakers themselves are made from shiny black anodized aluminum. An included magnetic remote is designed to stick onto either stand, although odds are you'll favor the left, as the right stand has a built-in iPod dock at its [base](#) which makes clipping a bit more difficult.



Speaking of “bass”, the stand alone subwoofer, which makes up for about 18 pounds of the system’s weight, is crafted with a matching black exterior. The 70W sub also powers the two 30W satellites, for a combined 130W of audio goodness. The satellites connect to the rear of the sub with some fairly heavy duty cables, the thicker of which connects to the right speaker which also houses the iPod dock/volume controls. This cable allows the dock to act as a USB pass-through system when connected to your Mac so an iPod can sync with your Mac while in the cradle. If you would rather not sync the iPod, and instead just listen to music, a “Sync/Audio” switch on the rear of the dock allows you to select your preference.

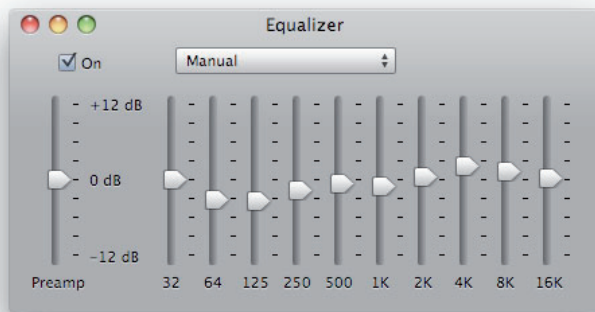
While the dock may cause you to think of the Focal XS as merely an iPod speaker system, in reality the system was designed first and foremost as a 2.1 computer speaker system. You can connect the XS to your Mac via an included USB cable, and the speakers automatically show up in your Sound preference pain. Personally, I do not own an iMac, and my Mac Pro is relegated to my basement, but I found the XS complimented my MacBook Pro quite nicely when sitting on a Rain stand.



Above: *OK, I don't have a fancy glass chair, but the speakers still look nice even when connected to a MacBook Pro.*

Sound

The Focal XS sounds very much like the expensive speaker system it is. Pretty much all music types sound clear and well produced, although we did notice the mid-range was just ever so slightly muddled when listening to certain rock tracks. We were somewhat surprised to find that the satellites speakers almost completely lack any type of bass at all. All bass duties are handled by the sub, which has a bass knob located on the rear of the unit. With the knob turned all the way down, we found the satellites were not quite as "bright" as we would have hoped given that they basically ignore the bass altogether. While leaving iTunes set to a "Flat" EQ setting worked well in general, we came up with the iTunes EQ preset below which we found helped out with the midrange/brightness.



For the most part we left the bass knob set to about 8/10 of the way up which we found to be a great setting for most songs. At low volume levels, the bass does not really "thump" the way many people like to set it these days, but as you crank up the volume, the bass ramps up nicely and if you listen to your music loudly, as do I, you will be very pleased with the XS's bass. The 6.5" bass driver faces down in the sub, which may explain why it doesn't come through at low audio levels. Unfortunately, the knob's placement on the rear of the Sub (which is meant to be placed UNDER your desk) makes per-song bass adjustments a bit annoying. It might have been better if the bass knob could have somehow been moved to the dock satellite, which is easily accessible.



Extras

The XS comes with a small remote with decent, but not amazing range nor range of functions. You can use the remote to skip and pause tracks, as well as adjust volume, but that's about it. Unfortunately the remote works only with your iPhone's iPod app. While you can play internet radio such as Slacker and Pandora through the XS, hitting the skip buttons on the remote will launch the iPod app. The biggest benefit to the XS in my mind is its ability to be used as either computer speakers, iPod speakers, or both. There is also a mini stereo input as well so you can play a source such as an external CD or DVD player if you'd wish.

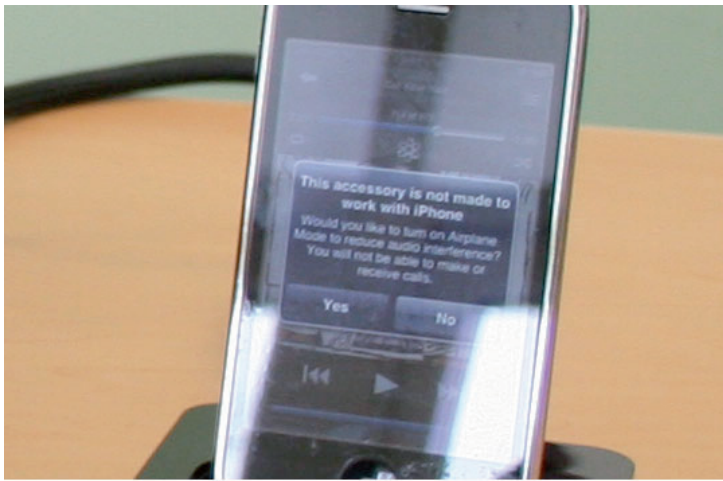


Issues

All issues I have with the XS are minor save for one - price. Yes, you are getting quality design, parts, drivers, etc, but to spend \$600 on a 2.1 speaker system is likely something not many of us can do in general, and at this moment in particular. We've reviewed Bowers & Wilkins' Zeppelin iPod Speakers which also floated in at \$600 and did not provide the iPod syncing ability, nor the added benefit of physical speaker separation which the Focal XS does, and I would rate the XS above the Zeppelin in terms of overall sound quality. The Zeppelin has the added benefit of portability, however, making it a bit more versatile a system if you wished to move your music from room to room.



My more minor quibbles include the aforementioned bass knob placement, and the fact that despite boasting the “Works with iPhone” certification (and it does), connecting the iPhone brings up the “This accessory is not made to work with iPhone. Would you like to turn on Airplane mode to reduce audio interference?” screen. This is just a minor annoyance, but one that happens *every time* you dock your phone, so it gets a bit old. Obviously this is not a problem for regular iPod users. Incidentally, you can hit NO so that you can still receive calls and texts, and the speakers work just fine, although we did notice a faint hum when no music was playing which disappeared (or was drowned out) when rocking.



Above: Works with iPhone? Yeah, it does, but someone tell that to the iPhone.

Conclusion

As a gadget addict, writing reviews on tech products is a bit of a double edged sword. On the one hand you get to test out some pretty cool gadgets before laying out your hard earned cash on them, yet on the other hand every once in awhile you review something like the XS that is so cool you just want to run out and get it, but you know you can't afford it. **The XS's look amazing, and sound better.** If you are a wealthy individual, or a poor person who values audio clarity over fiscal responsibility (and I am borderline with your there) then I would have no problem recommending the Focal XS. If you do not consider yourself an audiophile however (my wife for example, doesn't hear any real difference between AM and HD radio) odds are you will not appreciate the audio subtleties that the XS delivers.



Price: \$600

Pros: Awesome sound, cool design, iPod dock built-in, works as computer or iPod speakers, remote (although not all that involved)

Cons: Expensive, bass really only shines at mid to high volumes, iPhone users must click off "Airplane mode" warning each time the iPhone is docked

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