

DESKTOP REVOLUTION

Sound quality is back on the table with Focal's XS Powered Desktop Monitor

by KEN KESSLER



In little more than a decade, computer downloads, streaming and especially the iPod forever revolutionised the way we listen to music. Whether or not the move from large, impressive and sociable sound systems to the selfishness of headphones is good or bad is irrelevant: the genie is out of the bottle. What is indisputable, along with a pending epidemic of damaged hearing, is the decline in interest in sound quality per se. For the post-iPod generation, sound simply does not matter as much as convenience.

In an attempt to make iPods a source of sound to share with

more than just the individual wearing the earbuds, a genre of low-fi 'docks' grew up around the ubiquitous music player. Invariably, most are dire plastic constructs with sound quality somewhere between a telephone and the built-in speakers on flat-panel TVs – ie, deplorable. But rear-guard action has proved successful, with Bowers & Wilkins (B&W) selling hundreds of thousands of its Zeppelin dock.

But even that clever device denies the listener one important element of modern sound playback: a wide stereo 'soundstage'. The separation of

music into two channels (left and right), provides a spread of sound that more realistically emulates the way real music is heard. Single-piece systems cannot do this, because the user is unable to separate the left and right speakers far enough apart to create the sound illusion of width.

Of late, though, there are signs of awareness that there is better sound available from either headphones or even the better one-piece docks like Zeppelins. And it was B&W who led the way with MM-1 powered speakers, an antidote to the near-mono of the

Zeppelins. Now, B&W's great French rival Focal has joined the fray.

Like the MM-1, the Focal XS Book is a two-piece desktop monitor system comprising two speakers with built-in amplification. And it addresses the two concerns most 'normal' music lovers – as opposed to hardcore audiophiles – find so unappealing about audio separates: size and price.

Unabashedly styled to look good on either side of an iMac, MacBook Pro or Air, the XS Book avoids the compromises of most desktop systems. The speakers are what enthusiasts



LOUD ENOUGH, DEEP ENOUGH, CLEAR ENOUGH, AND YOU CAN SEPARATE THE SPEAKERS AS FAR APART AS YOU LIKE.

would call 'proper hi-fi', despite diminutive dimensions. Focal, after all, is a huge company that makes its own speaker drive units, and it has experience with everything from in-car systems to professional audio to high-end hi-fi for fastidious enthusiasts.

Just why XS Book sounds so 'right' even when positioned only a few feet away, on one's desk, is a result of all the development work undertaken by Focal to develop what professionals call 'nearfield monitors', the speakers you see sitting on the mixing desks in studios. The XS also benefits from the technology of Focal's multimedia system – the Focal XS 2.1, a system that uses two small speakers plus a subwoofer. Where it differs is in being more compact, while still being capable of delivering satisfying bass.

Inside each stylish 281x114x200mm enclosure is an aluminium dome tweeter and a 100mm Polyglass cone

woofer. Combined, they cover a satisfying frequency range of 50Hz to 22kHz, and can deliver a healthy maximum sound pressure level of 96dB at 1m – more than enough to satisfy even an unreconstructed headbanger in an average-sized room.

In addition to the primary usage for maximising the sound quality of desktop or notebook computers, the XS Book is perfect for flanking a flat-panel TV, a huge improvement over the severely compromised speakers fitted to the majority of screens. Despite their size, there's ample bass even for films thanks to the vented port that augments the lower frequencies. Adequate power is ensured by the onboard 2x20 watt amplifier, providing plenty of punch, yet with the finesse needed to convey subtle details.

It's enough that the performance is so good: what will make the XS such a must-have for those after a compact solution

to better sound are the styling, simplicity and overall feel of quality. The curvy aluminium cabinets are strong and light, which benefits the acoustic properties of the system, ensuring fine dynamics and low colouration, while looking as contemporary as the iPhone or iPad that might feed them.

Because modern music lovers value ease-of-use, XS Book couldn't be simpler to set up and operate. The kit comes with a mains cable and the signal wires for the right speaker to feed the left speaker. The user has a choice of 'low level' and 'high level' sources, again with the correct leads supplied, so one connects a computer, a portable device or even the signal from a hi-fi separates system or home cinema. Everything operates through a single control: a multi-function knob on the top of the right-hand speaker allows control of volume as well

as power/standby, with a light indicating that the power is on.

With all of the cables provided, there are very few extras to consider. Stands will be made available for users who wish to position them on either side of a flat panel, and there's a tailor-made carrier bag for those who wish to transport them from home to yacht to parties – and transport them easily, we should add. For custom installations, the XS Book is compatible with the Omnimount AB2 standard for easy wall mounting.

Then there's the price: even if they didn't come with their own amplification, £299 per pair is a bargain. For the vast majority of listeners, the XS Book goes loud enough, deep enough, clear enough, and you can separate the speakers as far apart as you like. Calling it a desktop system is to exercise understatement. It's inspired. At the price, it's almost a miracle. ✪