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**TEST VERDICT****THE WINNER****Epoz Aktimate Micro**

£260 ★★★★★

A good pair of desktop speakers, coupled with a decent source, can take you into proper hi-fi territory – and the excellent **Epoz Aktimate Micros** are only too happy to get you there in some serious style

**W**hen was the last time you listened to music straight from your computer's built-in speakers and thought "Wow, it's like the performance is in my room!". No, us neither. So it's worth investing in a pair of decent speakers for your desktop.

It's hard enough to find the right balance between price, design, size and performance with full-size speakers. Scale things down to desktop size and it's even more difficult. Manufacturers are faced with construction constraints, higher component costs and resigning themselves to the fact that the laws of acoustic physics are unbendable.

But the three makers on test here have proved that these compromises need not end any chance of getting great performance from small speakers.

B&W's bijou MM-1s have been favourites of ours since they arrived in our testing rooms back in our June 2010 issue, picking up two Awards since. But while they were streets ahead back then, rivals have now overtaken them. There's nothing wrong with the MM-1s; they're still the same excellent speakers they

were, with a nice, detailed, weighty sound. But they don't have the oomph or dynamic ability of the Focal XS Books.

We were enamoured with these when we gave them their *First Test* last month. Their scale is immense given their size, and their presentation, while perhaps not as refined as the B&Ws', is far more engaging. Sure, they're bigger, but the trade-off is better all-round sound.

**The Aktimate Micros put a near-permanent grin on our faces. Their zesty, punchy sound makes them a great addition to your desktop**

At the top of the heap, though, is the Epoz Aktimate Micros, which put a near-permanent grin on our faces. Their zesty, punchy sound – not to mention their fantastic finish – makes them a great addition to your desk. Their integrated dock also means you could use them as a dedicated, iPod-based system away from the office. And all for £260.

**SYSTEM BUILDER**

Perfect partners for the Aktimate Micros

**SOURCE**

Apple iPod Touch 32GB  
£249 ★★★★★

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Talk 3 speaker cable  
£4/m ★★★★★

**STREAMING SERVICE**

Spotify Premium  
£9.99/month ★★★★★

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**Facts & figures**

**B&W MM-1**  
£400 ★★★★★

Claimed power output 4 x 18W • Inputs Line in, USB  
• Outputs Headphone • iPod dock No • Dimensions  
(hwd) 17 x 10 x 10cm • Weight 0.85kg each



**Epoz Aktimate Micro**  
£260 ★★★★★

Claimed power output 2 x 40W • Inputs Line in, USB  
• Outputs None • iPod dock Yes • Dimensions  
(hwd) 24 x 14.5 x 20cm • Weight 3.5kg each



**Focal XS Book**  
£300 ★★★★★

Claimed power output 2 x 20W • Inputs Line in, RCA  
phono • Outputs None • iPod dock No • Dimensions  
(hwd) 28 x 11 x 22cm • Weight 2.6kg each

They manage to move a fair bit of air, these XS Books - and they remain tight and composed with it



#### LIVING WITH IT

The XS Books are relatively easy to position; we found they sounded their best with the grilles off, and with a slight touch of toe-in.

## Focal XS Book

£300 ★★★★★

**Focal is best** known for its dedicated hi-fi speakers, so it's something of a surprise to see it branching out into desktop territory. Nevertheless, think 'computer speakers' and you'll probably have an image in your head that looks something like the XS Books.

These slim, curvy units come with smart-looking grilles for the style-conscious. We took them off to reveal the 1.9cm aluminium dome tweeter and 10cm polyglass mid/bass driver and front-firing bass port - and got slightly improved stereo imaging as a result.

The right-hand speaker houses the electronics, which comprise a 3.5mm line-in socket, a stereo phono connection and the output to the left channel. On the top you'll find the combined on/off and volume control.

In keeping with the Books' stylish, businesslike design, we felt it appropriate to play something equally sleek from the get-go. One listen to Kraftwerk's *Expo 2000 (Kling Klang Mix 2000)* later, and we were a happy bunch. They manage to move a fair bit of air, these speakers, and remain tight and composed with it - kick-drums and basslines are handled with panache, although they can get a little rounded off during more complex sections.

#### A precise, composed soundstage

They have a nice way with vocals, though - Sia's performance on *Breathe Me* is breathy and emotional, if not the last word in fine detail. It isn't the most dramatic performance we've heard, but it's certainly a commendably easy one to

listen to. That's due in no small part to the precise and well-composed soundstage, which securely places instruments within it.

The XS Books are comfortably at home with classical music, too - more so than any of the other speakers on test here. Haydn's *Symphony No. 8 in G Major* is a rich suite for strings that could get disorganised and shouty in the wrong hands, but the Focals treat it with kid-gloves, separating all the musical strands with aplomb.

All that, and they won't dominate your desk, either.

#### Rating ★★★★★

**FOR** Sweet, detailed sound; weighty bass; can go very loud; lovely looks

**AGAINST** Bass could be snappier

**VERDICT** The XS Books are an admirable marriage of style, value and performance - and therefore a must-audition proposition

**LIVING WITH IT**

The MM-1s' compact dimensions and lack of any bass ports mean they're unfussy about positioning: a boon for tiny desks.

**Musical and with surprising low-frequency push, the MM-1s do a great job of separating instruments**

**B&W MM-1**

**£400** ★★★★★☆

**Put someone in** a blindfold and sit them at your desk; play *Please Read The Letter* from the Robert Plant/Alison Krauss collaboration *Raising Sand* through a pair of MM-1s, and then ask them to tell you what kind of system they're listening to. Chances are they'll say many things before they utter the words, "a pair of PC speakers".

**Premium product, musical sound**

These compact, stylish speakers have won an Award for the past two years with good reason. Pitched resolutely at the premium end of the desktop speaker market, build and finish is about what you'd expect for your £400, with no obtrusive switches or dials (the controls are concealed on the central metal band). Frills are few, save the

pebble-shaped remote control. Input-wise, all you get is a 3.5mm jack and a USB input - which, to be honest, is as much as you need.

Great design apart, the MM-1s' sound is completely at odds with their size. Musical and with surprising low-frequency push, they do a great job of separating the individual instruments in dense recordings, as well as clinging doggedly to detail when the music demands.

Put on a WAV of Tracy Chapman's *Fast Car* if you want proof - vocal nuances and hand-squeaks on guitar necks sing through. Make no mistake, these are hi-fi speakers - they're just small.

They aren't fussy about placement, either - a good job considering their intended role. Their driver construction

has 2.5cm aluminium-dome tweeters backed by tapered tubes that absorb rear-firing radiation, as well as 7.5cm woofers. There are no bass ports to complicate matters, so you can back them right up against your wall without harming their sound.

So, why only four stars? A listen to the competition here made the decision relatively easy, if surprising. The B&Ws, while still great speakers (and don't get us wrong, you'll be pleased with them should you buy a pair) are nonetheless pipped for sheer excitement and value for money by their rivals in this test.

**Rating** ★★★★★☆

**FOR** Stylish; compact; weighty, detailed sound; well balanced across the frequency range

**AGAINST** Pricey; lacking a little drama compared with others

**VERDICT** The MM-1s are an excellent buy - but more exciting speakers are now available