

The Bird Is the Word

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Just about a year ago, at CEDIA 2010, I heard a preproduction sample of one the most unusual and appealing compact audio systems I've ever encountered: the Bird system from the French loudspeaker manufacturer Focal. Several things about the system are striking, including its appearance, configuration, price, and, above all, performance. What makes the Bird so pleasingly unorthodox? On paper, the Bird system could be described as a self-powered, 2.1-channel

sat/subwoofer-type system with multiple analog and digital inputs, plus a wireless input (based on proven Kleer technologies), which seems straight forward enough. But while fundamentally accurate, however, this description doesn't entirely capture the true flavor of the Bird package, for reasons I'll explain.

When you first see the Bird rig, your eyes behold two small, fashionably styled satellite speakers (which look like smaller versions of the satellites from Focal's elegant Dome-series home-theater system), plus what appears to be a slim, matching integrated amplifier. But the neat trick is that those three pieces are all that you see, and all there is to see. Where's the subwoofer? We'll come to that key point in a moment, but now let me give you a hint: it's hidden in plain sight. Before I give you more information on its configuration, let me offer a few comments on the system's sound.

Judging purely by outward appearances you might reasonably expect this compact three-piece rig to sound, well, small, but that isn't the case. On the contrary, it sounds big—*really* big—as in the kind of “bigness” that implies rich, room-filling, nearly-full-range, spacious, focused, and three-dimensional sound. In short, these tiny components produce the sort of sound typically associated with systems based on moderately sized *floorstanding* speakers. To hear the Bird system is to experience a certain amount of audiophile-grade shock and awe. The mind reels a bit, sensing—correctly, as it happens—that there must be some sort of technical magic (or sonic legerdemain) at work to make this kind of performance possible. How does Focal pull this off?

The answer involves the fact the Bird system's integrated amp/DAC module is also something more: namely, a slim-line, self-powered woofer, complete with a user-configurable, built-in electronic crossover geared specifically for use with Bird-series satellite speakers. Thus, what at first appears to be a cooling vent on the face of the amp turns out to be a cleverly disguised ducted port, while the bottom panel of the amp provides a mounting panel for a downward-firing 6-inch woofer whose usable response extends all the way down to 42Hz (the -3dB point), or even a bit lower than that. While perhaps not qualifying as a true subwoofer (because there's not a lot of bottom octave output), this ingenious little one-piece amp/DAC/woofer module gives the Bird system much deeper and more solid bass output than any small monitor-type speaker you are likely to encounter, while managing not look like a woofer at all.



But apart from providing sheer bass output, the Bird woofer integrates with the system's satellite speakers in an oh-so-sophisticated way, which to my way of thinking is where the real sonic magic lies. As mentioned above, a built-in electronic crossover handles all woofer-to-satellite integration tasks, providing precise settings (which are adjusted via a row of rear panel-mounted DIP switches) that precisely match the low frequency characteristics of any of three available sizes of Bird satellites. The result is a system where, with the flip of a few switches (zero set-up expertise required), users can instantly enjoy virtually seamless sat/sub sound, and from a system that doesn't even look like it has a powered woofer in the first place.

Endearingly, the three optional Bird system satellites are named—from the smallest to the largest—Little Birds, Birds, or Super Birds, while the one-size-fits-all amp/DAC/woofer module is called the Power Bird. For this review we'll sample Focal's entry-level Bird system (\$995), comprising a pair of Little Birds with stands, a Power Bird, and a wireless iTransmitter dongle for use with Apple devices.

To be perfectly frank, some guests who saw the stylish but diminutive system initially felt that the \$995 price seemed a little steep, judging by first visual impressions. But once they'd actually heard the system their reactions changed in an instant from skepticism to wonder. "Oh, *now* I get it," said one visitor whose voice was full of admiration, with undertones of disbelief. So compelling is the Bird rig that I've even had one high-end audiophile colleague (whose home system probably costs more than a hundred times what the Bird system does) hear the system once and then return for a second taste, muttering, "I just can't get the sound of this thing out of my mind." In this review, we'll explore some of the reasons why the Bird system evokes such strong, favorable reactions.