

Small Wonder...



Focal XS 2.1 multi Media Speaker System

By Roy Gregory

Spend any time in the bar at a hi-fi show and sooner or later, the conversation (either the one you are having, or the one next door) will turn to the vexed question of attracting new blood to what is in danger of becoming a dying industry. As levels in the beer and whisky glasses drop the full spectrum of devils incarnate and bêtes noirs will put in their expected appearance. Everything from the internet to MP3, X Factor to Simon Cowell, the iPod to the Xbox will be wheeled out and ritually slaughtered while the assembled sages slip slowly under the table. After all, it's not in the spirit of pub philosophy to look too close to home.

There are undoubtedly many things wrong with the hi-fi industry, a number only exceeded by the range of possible solutions, a situation that only encourages the pointing of fingers in any direction as long as it's out of the particular tent you happen to be sitting in. But amidst the fog of blame and recrimination one fact stands like a beacon: make the right product and you'll sell them in droves.

Exhibit one – the Tivoli radio.

Exhibit two – the B&W Zeppelin.

And here's a sobering reality for you – the value of B&W's sales on the Zeppelin exceed their total sales on the 800 series speakers; yep – all of them put together.

Now, before you get all bent out of shape pointing out that neither the Zeppelin nor the Tivoli should be considered hi-fi, it's their lesson I'm interested in, not their performance. What they demonstrate is that, as an industry, rather than trying to sell people the products we make, we should concentrate on making products that they might actually want to buy. Which brings us to the Focal XS 2.1 speaker system...

Open the single, beautifully presented box that the XS arrives in and inside you'll find a pair of tiny but suitably stylish (for which read techy) table-top speakers, complete with integral stands, together with a neat and extremely compact sub-woofer. Nothing particularly startling so far; in fact, you might think it depressingly reminiscent of all those "five in a box", sub-hi-fi surround systems that flooded the

market a few years back. Undoubtedly pretty to look at they were rather less pretty to listen too and yes, you could be forgiven for thinking that the XS 2.1 is nothing more than a sub-standard 5.1 set up shorn of three speakers; forgivable maybe, but still a major mistake.

What sets the XS apart are its connectivity and its performance. Look a little closer at the base of the “master” satellite and you’ll see, as well as volume controls and an on/off button, the familiar slot of an iPod dock. Round the back there’s a micro USB input and a socket that accepts a 3.5mm stereo jack. Apart from a switch to select between the USB input and iPod dock, that’s all you get – and that’s really the point. This isn’t a hi-fi system with a token iPod or USB input “to include the kids”. The XS 2.1 starts from the assumption that it only needs to deal with two kinds of source: an iPod or a computer (whether that’s a lap-top, a desk-top some kind of Playstation). And before you get all hot and bothered again just pause to remind yourself that when it comes to hi-fi, source quality is king – and that an iPod is just a portable hard-drive/server, and that as we are all (slowly) starting to acknowledge, file types matter, and that horror of all horrors, if you save music files in the right format and play them back with the appropriate care (that would be the same level of care that we lavish on CD and vinyl replay) they sound pretty darned good!

So what the XS 2.1 actually represents is a serious dollop of Focal’s undoubted acoustic expertise, shoe-horned into a package that will work with tomorrow’s source components, in a size and at a price to match. And make no mistake about this – the XS is easily capable of real hi-fi performance. Yes, you can get silly about it and start playing hi-res downloads from Pure Music software, but what is really impressive about this little system is that you don’t need to go to those lengths. Plain WAV files replayed via iTunes sound great, the speakers’ lively, dynamic character bringing welcome life and energy to the music. The sub is easy to position and adjust for decent integration and pretty soon, you simply forget about it – which is exactly how it should be. But the real kicker is that even the much maligned MP3 sounds so much better than you



“JLS will always sound like JLS, but the critical thing is the XS makes them sound way, way better than the headphones on an iPod.”

think it’s going to; engaging and interesting, musical with a real sense of depth and weight. Of course, the XS can’t make a silk purse out of a sow’s ear and JLS will always sound like JLS, but the critical thing is that the XS makes them sound way, way better than the headphones on an iPod, or the sort of computer speakers that go for £80 at PC World. And when I say “Way better” you’d better believe it. It’s exactly the sort of jaw-dropping difference we all want to demonstrate to “the next generation of customers” – with the major difference that it works with their music, played from the sources they use and it comes in a package that isn’t just available, it’s one they might actually consider buying! But then you don’t need to take my word for it...

▶ TESSA'S VIEW

I am currently in my first year at university, living in halls of residence. I grew up in a family that takes its hi-fi very seriously, forever being told off for venturing too close to those enticing holes in the speakers. I have had to sit through many a listening session, trying to hear the difference between these speakers and those speakers, this black box or that one, but I still can't say I understand the first thing about hi-fi systems! The problem now is that I never appreciated how good the hi-fi system was at home until I arrived at university and decided to listen to some music on my favorite new toy, a shiny new laptop. Even I could conclude that the sound quality was atrocious. Half of the music and all of the depth and weight that I should be hearing seemed to be missing: Clearly something needed to be done!

I own an iPod and thought about buying an iPod dock, however I would not be able to use this to deliver sound whilst watching films. I also didn't need the system to be portable. Ideally I needed something that could double up as an iPod dock and speakers for my laptop. I live in a cupboard-sized room so anything I bought would have to be small. I would also be using them constantly, as being a student I spend more time listening to music and watching films than actually studying. Having more or less decided on a trip to PC World for a set of extension speakers, I casually mentioned my listening needs in earshot of "the grown-ups". If only I'd known how easy it was to get their attention! The intense (and intensely boring) discussion of carbon-fibre bicycle frames just stopped and suddenly I was the subject of silent and equally intense scrutiny. After much debate, judgment was passed; apparently, what I needed was a set of Focal XS loudspeakers. Very cool and very French – at least, that's what it said on the internet. They cost more than I wanted to spend but seemed like a good long-term investment (especially as the recommendation was coming from the principal source of funds and with three more years of college, I'll need all the Christmas hand-outs going). And if I'm going over budget I want something that will be reliable and last more than a few terms.

I soon discovered that the speakers are just as stylish and neat as they look on the web, and take up very little space – which is just as well! The subwoofer is larger but still fits easily under a desk. The angled speakers line up perfectly with your ears when sitting at a desk. They also sound amazing. Better than I would have thought possible for something so small! The remote control is magnetic and can be stuck to the speakers so it doesn't get lost. To play music from an iPod you just have to plug it into the dock on the base of the right hand speaker. While plugged in your iPod charges itself, and with the flick of a switch you can sync your iPod with the iTunes library on your laptop. A push button on the back of the control/dock base switches between the iPod and the computer input. The system is very easy to use and the integration between iPod dock and laptop/hi-fi system is seamless. My only complaint is that the buttons that control the volume (also on the base of the right-hand speaker) need to be pushed quite hard. They could be easier and a bit more precise to use.

Most people in my flat of 20 believe that the louder the bass and bigger the speakers, the better the sound is going to be. Everyone was very surprised at how brilliant the Focals actually are. A few people have even asked if they can get some too. The only downside is that I now have to put up with people in my room watching films all the time, as I have the best sound!

I could dissect the performance of the XS speakers; I could subject them to the sort of back-handed critique that snooty hi-fi magazines usually bestow on the latest budget pretender that tries to teach us a thing or two. But that would be to miss the point (the same point we've been missing for a decade or more). The target audience clearly gets it, and somewhat to my surprise, so do I. As I write this, Neil Young's *Prairie Wind* is playing through the XS, stored in the iTunes library of my iMac. The easy, loping rhythm of 'The Painter' is effortlessly infectious, Young's nasal vocal unmistakable and just as affecting as usual. Change pace to the empty hopelessness, the plaintive, layered vocals and fractured phrasing of 'No Wonder' and you are left in no doubt that Young has still got it. Nor would this most critical of artists be displeased with what I'm hearing; there's no missing the message here. To paraphrase the good doctor, "It's hi-fi Jim – just not as you know it!" +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

System Type: Active 2.1 channel sub/sat system, with Burr-Brown USB DAC
Amplification: 2x30W (spkr), 70W (sub)
Dimensions (HxWxD): 32x9x15cm (spkr)
 26x23x37cm (sub)
Weight: 9.4kg
Price: £380
Manufactured by: Focal
URL: www.focal-uk.com
Tel: +44 (0)1420 476767

