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Speakers

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Focal XS

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RATINGS

EDITOR ●●●●○ VERY GOOD

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By Tim Gideon

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Focal, a French audio company that typically manufactures high-end monitors for recording studios and luxury car-audio systems, has also produced an exceptional, though very expensive, PC speaker system: the Focal XS. At \$599 (list), this set is clearly aimed at audiophiles who want high fidelity to extend to their PC audio. What's the difference between the XS and other, less-expensive systems? Balance and design. This system may not be drop-dead gorgeous, but its tweeters line up perfectly with your ears, and the subwoofer complements your music instead of overpowering it. There are a few minor flaws, including a flimsy-feeling controls and a limited remote control, but overall the XS, with its built-in iPod dock, is generally excellent.

Two silver-and-black satellite speakers, each measuring 12.6 by 3.6 by 5.9 inches (HWD) and weighing 2.2 pounds, feel sturdy and combine upward-angling drivers with built-in stands to aim sound directly at your ears. Each enclosure hides two drivers behind its grille: a 3-inch paper cone driver for mid-bass frequencies and a 0.75-inch mylar dome tweeter. A two-way driver system—something you won't often find in lower-end PC speakers—ensures the proper attention and balance is given to frequency ranges that are better served by different types of drivers and materials. The right speaker houses an iPod dock in the base of its metallic stand, and an array of plastic trays ensures that most dockable iPods will fit snugly. There's also a 3.5-mm aux input, a mini USB connector (a cable is included) to connect to your PC, and a Sync/Audio button that lets you sync your iPod with iTunes right from the speakers. Each satellite, with its thick woven audio cables, delivers 30 watts of power.

With a power rating of 70W, the 10.25-by-9.2-by-13.75-inch (HWD) subwoofer has the potential to destroy fragile items—but this is where high-end systems separate themselves from lower-tier setups. There's a bass volume knob on the subwoofer's rear panel, along with both speaker cable connections and the AC input. Even at nearly full volume, the bass is not overwhelming. At about halfway, the subwoofer does what few subs do well: It gracefully and smoothly reproduces the low-end frequencies from roughly 20 Hz to 150 Hz. Too often, subwoofers are associated with poor audio, mainly because they're cheaply constructed or set up improperly. A good sub doesn't create a booming sonic mess; it merely lets you hear bottom-end frequencies in the music that the satellites' smaller drivers cannot accurately reproduce. The subwoofer operates in a subtle manner, letting you hear the thud of a kick drum, the resonance of an upright bass, or the ominous low-end of analog synthesizers—all without gross exaggeration. From the deep, driving beats on The Knife's "Silent Shout" to Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, the XS is well suited to deliver any musical genre accurately.

The included remote offers only limited iPod navigation; you can't switch menus or do anything beyond pausing, playing, skipping forward and backward, or adjusting the volume. I expect more from the remote that comes with a \$600 system, but I suppose all the engineering went into the audio performance. The volume and power controls on the right speaker aren't great either; they're not much to look at and lack any sort of solid tactile response.

A nice feature: The Sync/Audio button on the right speaker's rear panel lets you transfer music from iTunes on your PC to your iPod. And the dock charges your player.

Setting up the system is as simple as connecting all the cables—until you get to plugging the USB cable into your PC. Whether you have a Mac or a

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PC, you'll need to make some changes to your computer's default sound settings so it knows to send audio to the speakers via USB. This is simple, and if you get stumped, the short process is detailed in the (translated-from-French-but-still-understandable) manual.

If your PC is your main audio source and you want (and can afford) high-end speakers to make it shine, the Focal XS certainly delivers. If your budget doesn't comply, the [Audioengine 2](#) sounds fantastic and only costs about \$200. Sure, the stereo pair lacks a subwoofer, but any sound snob would proudly connect it to his or her PC. If you crave a 2.1 system with power, both the \$400 [Razer Mako](#) (our Editors' Choice) and the \$250 [Creative GigaWorks T3](#) offer substantial low-end. Neither will give you the high fidelity-level audio balance you get with the XS, but you'll still get solid desktop sound.

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