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ST Index (Real-time)
 2,750.94 ▼7.85

Fri, Nov 20, 2009, 09:30

Regional Indices

KLCI 1,275.64 -1.01

HSI

NIKKEI 9,460.21 -89.26

US Indices

Dow 10,332.44 -93.87

Nasdaq 2,156.82 -36.32

S&P 1,094.90 -14.90

Thursday Closing

Stock Report

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News

Breaking News

Print Edition Headlines

Commentary

Hock Lock Siew

Editorial & Opinion

Financial Markets

Stocks

Stock Picks

IPO Watch

FX/Money Markets

Funds/Unit Trusts

Derivatives

Commodities

Calendar

Tools

Specials

Biz IT

Property

Executive Money

Executive Lifestyle

BT Living

Supplements

Entrepreneur Of The Year
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Mon Tue Wed Thu Fri Sat Sun

Shopping

Published November 14, 2009

Gadgets

Aural definition

The sound quality of Apple's iPods and iPhones is perfectly acceptable for listening to music on the go through earphones, but there are many ways to improve your enjoyment when using them with speakers. Fortunately, many useful upgrades exist, regardless of how much or little you are willing to spend. By

Christopher Lim

Focal XS dock-speaker system

THE biggest problem with listening to music on computers is that the sound cards built into them usually aren't very good, and instantly become the weakest link in your system after you upgrade your speakers.



Focal XS dock-speaker system , \$899 speaker.

What isn't immediately apparent is that the Focal XS also has a built-in digital-to-analogue converter (DAC). This means that you get improved sound quality from your computer without having to pay for a separate DAC and clutter up your desk with yet another gadget box. You don't even need to install any software.

Just plug the system into either a Windows PC or a Mac, select the Focal XS as your sound card, and you are all set. As a speaker upgrade for your computer, the Focal XS sounds excellent. Compared with a similarly priced set-up of Razer Mako speakers (\$499) with an M-Audio Firewire Solo DAC (\$345), the Focal has better treble detail and a tighter sound, while the M-Audio-Razer combination is warmer and has a wider soundstage.

Insert an iPod or iPhone into the Focal XS dock and you can use a remote control to manipulate music playback. You can also synchronise your devices with your computer. An input jack allows you to use non-Apple music players with the system.

The Focal XS isn't cheap, but considering that it's a three-in-one proposition - speakers, DAC and dock - it's worth the asking price of \$899.

B&W Zeppelin mini dock-speaker system

If looks are as important to you as audio performance, Bowers & Wilkins (B&W) is one of the kings. Even though its local dealer The Experts Group isn't selling it yet, it's worth taking an early look at the new Zeppelin mini.

The dock-speaker system costs US\$399.95 in the US, and is a smaller version of the original B&W Zeppelin launched two years ago.

It's a pleasingly minimalist offset oval box with the dock perched on top. A pebble-like remote control finishes off a gorgeous piece of technological

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sculpture.

An unusually intelligent touch is the ability to rotate the docking cradle so that your iPod or iPhone can be used in landscape mode. The Zeppelin mini is extremely versatile, with the ability to connect to your computer with a cable, and even control Apple's iTunes software via the remote.

You can even stream music to the mini wirelessly through any broadband network. It probably won't be quite the same as having separate satellite speakers and a subwoofer, but if you want everything in one sleek box, the Zeppelin mini should please.

X-mini MAX II speaker system

OF course, not everyone has hundreds of dollars to spend on improving the sound of their computers. For the budget-conscious, Singaporean company XMI makes speakers that are unbeatable value for money.

The X-mini MAX II - retailing at \$74.90 - comes in an egg-sized device that separates into a pair of tiny stereo speakers, which are fed by simultaneous connections to a 3.5mm plug and a USB cable. You won't find better sound quality at this size and price, so it's the perfect travel companion for a laptop.

X-mini II capsule speakers

IF you want the sound quality of the MAX II without using a computer, and you also want compatibility with any device that can connect to a 3.5mm plug, then check out the battery-powered X-mini II (\$49.90).

Unlike the MAX II, it will work with most music players and mobile phones, including iPods and iPhones, and is cheaper than the stereo MAX II because it only has one speaker. You have the option of daisy chaining an indefinite number of X-mini IIs together to form a multi-speaker mobile sound system.

Naim n-Link iPod cable

OWNERS of Naim's excellent all-in-one NaimUniti sound system (\$5,303) have the option of adding high-quality iPod and iPhone support via the n-Link cable. \$259 might seem like a princely sum to pay for a cable, but it's made to top audiophile specifications to maximise sound quality, and also allows you to control iPods and iPhones from the NaimUniti in addition to displaying the current song being played. If you have a NaimUniti as well as an iPod or iPhone, the n-Link is a no-brainer.

Meridian i80P dock

IF you aren't lucky enough to own a NaimUniti but want an audiophile-grade dock for an iPhone or iPod, the Meridian i80P (\$577) is a major step up from most stand-alone docks. Like the n-Link, there's top-notch circuitry to improve the sound of iPods and iPhones, but instead of being just a cable, it's a robust circular dock stand. The i80P connects to amplifiers or speaker systems without any dependence on computers or auxiliary devices. If you are looking for a straightforward way to add iPod and iPhone compatibility to an existing hi-fi system, this is it.

Wadia 170i iPod dock

MERIDIAN'S i80P still doesn't represent the pinnacle of audiophile obsession for iPod and iPhone owners. That honour, without a doubt, belongs to the Wadia 170i (\$650).

It looks like a fairly ordinary dock, but it does something unique. All digital sound systems comprise two fundamental processes - digital and analogue. Everything on CDs and iPods is digital, but by the time it reaches your ears as sound, the digital information has been converted to analogue signals.

This conversion process is the job of a DAC, which every digital audio device contains. But the quality of DACs varies widely, and those built into small iPhones and iPods aren't very good.

The Wadia 170i extracts the digital information from your iPod or iPhone and allows you to feed it into a DAC of your choice, which can cost anything from hundreds to thousands of dollars. This is completely different from what the Naim n-Link and Meridian i80P do. Those two devices merely polish the analogue quality of your iPod or iPhone. The 170i, however, turns your portable Apple gadgets into audiophile sound sources on par with fancy CD players.

This sort of quality will cost you, of course. The 170i itself is only \$73 more than the Meridian i80P, but you have to factor in the additional cost of a separate DAC. The 170i is absolutely useless on its own. Obviously, only hardcore audiophiles need apply.

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