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Focal XS 2.1 Multimedia Sound System

by [Vern Seward](#) on February 27th, 2009 at 9:05 AM

As I've gotten older I've notice many things about myself, but, as relative to this article, two things stand out:

1. Over the years I have amassed a fairly sizable collection of [music](#). I have well over 300 CDs, 200 vinyl albums, and music I've purchased from the iTunes Store and other sites around the Web.

2. My ears don't work as well as they use to.

I love music and would rather spend my time doing something, anything, while listening to Jazz, Rock, R&B, Classical, or even a bit of Country, than wasting my time staring at another mindless comedy or drama on TV.

Until recently I had pretty much written off much of my music because I could no longer hear the subtitles and nuances that make a piece of music great unless I plugged myself into a pair of high quality earphones or headsets. I have several headsets and I enjoy using them when the mood strikes. The problem with them is that you lose that open-air quality you get at a live [concert](#) or when you use a set of good quality speakers.

Back in the day I had a set of huge Cerwin Vegas that did a nice job of pumping out the bass. It also did a nice job in killing a few cells in my inner ear. I can't blame Cerwin Vega, of course, I'm the one who cranked the volume up so loud my neighbor's ears bled. I was a kid. It happens.

I then moved on to Boston Acoustics. At the time I couldn't afford the studio standard Boston Acoustics, so I wound up with a set of A150s that offered a reasonably flat response across the entire sound spectrum at a wallet-friendly price.

I throughly enjoyed the A150s and had them for many years and finally sold them (for nearly what I paid for them) several years back after buying a set of Bose.

I still have the Bose and I enjoy them, especially when I crank up a movie with good sound through them. (Some part of me is still a kid. Unfortunately, that part is not my ears.)

When I bought my Intel iMac I started looking around for a set of speakers to use with it instead of the pitiful built-in speakers Apple incudes. I was seriously considering a set of Bose Companion 5 Speakers. I had even gone so far as to walk into a Bose Store with checkbook in my back pocket. I had heard the Companion 5 [System](#) several times and was impressed, but I know vendors bring out new systems all the time, and I was heading to Macworld Expo, so I decided to wait.

I'm glad I did.

Nearly everywhere I turned at Macworld there was someone hawking speakers. Some were designed well while others were..., well...

Bose was there as well as other familiar speaker makers. On the day before the show ended I decided to take another swing through the expo and look for vendors I hadn't seen during my previous sweeps. That's when I came upon the Focal booth.

They had a small sound chamber set up with an iMac inside that was connected to their new sound system. When I sat down at the iMac and started going through the music selection in iTunes I couldn't help but smile.

Broadly. The music, while unfamiliar, was so rich, so clear, and so full of body that it easily filled the little display tent and I felt immersed in sound.

What I was listening to was AAC3 files playing on Focal's new [XS 2.1 Multimedia Sound System](#). That's a mouth full, but what it means is that I'd been listening to a new set of computer speakers -- two desktop speakers and a subwoofer -- from a company called Focal, but these were no ordinary computer speakers.



Outside the sound booth I met Gérard Chrétien, Managing Director of Focal JM Lab. Monsieur Chrétien is a cordial Frenchman with passion for Jazz who explained to me the finer points the XS system's design. There was a second system outside the sound tent and Monsieur Chrétien cranked it up. Even with all of the background noise I could hear how tight the XS' bass was, how clean the midrange, and how clear the highs were without being bright. And this is with my aging ears!

Well, I talked Monsieur Chrétien into sending me a system for review. He obliged and I am listening to the system now.

I play my music flat, I don't mess with equalizers or fiddle with bass and treble controls, I figure that by doing so I'd screw up the real sound, what the artist intended the music to sound like. I've noticed that lately, because of the changes in my hearing, I've had to crank up the volume to hear details I know are there, but are now too subtle and hidden by poor reproduction for me to detect using normal volumes.

According to Focal's sales brochure the XS was designed to produce natural sounds with no processor enhancements like those other speaker makers use. So, in theory at least, using flat response speakers should get you as close as possible to what the music really sounded like when it was recorded. In reality how speakers sound will be a matter of taste, but regardless of how you like your music, starting from a flat baseline, a standard that does not color or alter the original sound, is best, and building studio standard speakers is Focal's main line of business.

For me this flat across the spectrum reproduction of sound lets me hear

those details I've been missing while letting me use considerably lower volumes, much to the unstated joy of my wife and neighbors.

Bobby McFerrin's *Invocation* on his *Beyond Words* album is playing at the moment. I've listened to this album countless times, or at least I thought I had listened. Now I'm hearing details I hadn't noticed before or had forgotten about. It's like hearing the album for the first time. And the volume isn't shaking the walls.

Oh, there's plenty of sound, and that's the thing of it: speakers that produce a nice flat response don't need to be turned up in order to get full-bodied sound. And that was just playing standard MP3.

In fact, I re-ripped the CD, this time using the AAC encoder and 256kbps, just to see if I could hear the difference between it and the 64 kbps MP3 encoded version.

Yes, I can hear the difference. The XS System makes me want to re-rip all my music.

If you want to rattle the walls the XS will gladly give up ear piercing highs and gut-thumping lows. I'm amazed at the dynamic range this system seems to have. I have turned up the volume as loud as I can stand it and the bass is still tight and highs are still crisp. Nothing is overshadowed that isn't suppose to be. I've probably deadened a few more hairs in my inner ear, but I think it was worth it.

The exterior design of the XS components compliments the Mac Pro or Aluminum iMac nicely. Black enclosures and brushed steel pedestals and accents give the XS a classy understated look that works anywhere your Mac or PC happens to be. The weighty subwoofer can be easily hidden or prominently displayed. I think you'll won't want to hide it.



Setup of the XS System was as simple as it gets: plug in the left and right desktop speaker to the subwoofer, connect the right desktop speaker base to a USB port on your computer, and plug in the power. There ya go!

You can fiddle with the Bass Level control on the back of the subwoofer if you must tweak something, but I left it pretty much alone.

On your Mac remember to go to the Sound section in System Preferences and select the XS System as your sound Output.

I'm now playing *Full Moon* by The Black Ghosts, it's an Alternative Rock (whatever that means) tune full of nice guitar work and rich, full bass and

drums with a voice track that will remind you of a Gregorian Chant. Again I can't help but be impressed with the sound. I've listened to this piece many times with headsets and know that the bass track isn't sharply defined, which is fine of course, but what I've heard with the headsets I hear with complete fidelity with the XS system. Nothing added, colored, or removed. What you have is what you get, and I like that.

Other niceties include a remote with a magnetic back so you can stick it on one of the speaker pedestals, doing so make the remote easy to find.

The right speaker base is an iPhone/iPod dock, too. There's a "Sync" button in the back of the base, press it and put your device in the dock and you can charge and sync it. Take it out the sync mode and the XS system will just charge your device. What's even cooler is that you can also play music directly from your iPhone/iPod while docked (and not in sync mode). Cooler still is that you have full play control of your iPhone or iPod using the remote.

In fact, your Mac or PC isn't even needed. Set the XS System up as stand-alone sound system, add your iPhone and you have a system that will shame all other shelf system available today.

There's an 'Aux In' jack in the back of the right base so you can hook up your TV or receiver, and since the XS remote uses infrared signals for control you can control the XS system with your programmable universal remote.

I believe there are two reasons to buy speakers for your computer. The first reason is that you just want more sound than what the simple built-in speakers or those that came with your computer can provide. In this case you may not care too much about the specs, just so long as the sound they produce is good enough, you're happy.

The Focal XS Speaker System is likely not for you.

The second reason is that you actually listen to music produced from your computer and you would like it to sound as good as it possibly can. It matters that the highs are not artificially bright or the bass is not consistently muddy. And while we're at it, it matters that what you sit next to your computers looks at least as good as your computer.

It was for you that the Focal XS Speaker System was created.

I'm now listening to Mike Oldfield's *Serpent's Dream*, an all too short flamenco-esque guitar piece with a driving beat and a tight, insistent bass. I had to stop writing to play it again. It sounded that good.

There's only one downside to the XS Speakers, and it's really only a nit. When you set the XS system for iPhone/iPod syncing the system can no longer play music from your computer and you revert to you sad computer speakers. I'm not sure if there's anything Focal can do about this slightly annoying action. It may be a limitation of using USB. Truth be told, I've only run into this particular nuisance twice since I've been playing with the XS system and the first time I wasn't really paying attention to the music.

If you remind yourself not to sync your iPhone though the Focal XS system while listening to something important then you likely won't have much of an issue.

The upside is that when the syncing is complete and you switch back to the normal listening mode the XS system takes over. You don't have to go into System Preferences and reset the sound preference. That's the way it's suppose to work and I'm glad Focal paid attention to that particular detail.

Some may balk at the US\$600 list price, but I believe this is a classic example of getting exactly what you've paid for. There are plenty of other speaker systems that cost a lot less and sound very good, but it is my opinion that the Focal XS is the best computer speaker system that I've heard to date. The design, fit and finish is top notch and the feature set, while light, is well thought out and, most importantly, works.

I've just downloaded *Above the Bones*, an iTunes Store Discovery Download that you really should grab if you like Reggae. What a great song, but I now wonder if I would have thought so if I first listened to it with anything but the

XS system.

I rarely give a device, software, or system I've reviewed my highest rating, but The Focal XS 2.1 Multimedia Sound System deserves it. If I were you I'd *GET IT NOW!

Review Item	<i><u>Focal XS 2.1 Multimedia Sound System</u></i>
Manufacturer	Focal
List Price Street Price	US\$599 at the Apple Store
Minimum Requirements	A computer, iPod, or iPhone

* Note: My rating system goes like this;

- Get it Now!** - Highest rating and an absolute must-have
- Highly recommend** - Minor flaws, but a great product
- Recommend** - Flawed, but still a solid product
- So-so** - Problem product that may find a niche market
- Avoid** - Why did they bother making it? A money waster.

Vern Seward is a writer who currently lives in Orlando, FL. He's been a Mac fan since Atari Computers folded, but has worked with computers of nearly every type for 20 years.