Focal Dimension | Soundbar | £890

A sonic blockbuster for the big screen

Soundbars are big business. In fact, they’re one of the most searched for products on Amazon.com. But where budget designs are 10-a-penny, high-end soundbars aren’t and some traditional Hi-Fi companies see these products as a way of entering the market without the Branson competition.

Brands who know a thing or two about loudspeakers, such as Bowers & Wilkins and Monitor Audio, have all had success in this field, and now it’s the turn of French subwoofer. The sub is designed to fit behind the soundbar, transforming it into something resembling a soundbase (see panel opposite).

The soundbar is praised at either end and uses five ultra-flat drivers and six channels of amplification (this includes one for an external subwoofer - the Dimension or other brands). Unlike some rivals that claim to bounce sound off your walls to create a surround-like experience, Focal says it uses a feature that’s sometimes overlooked on product like this.

You can feed audio from your TV’s couple of different ways, either through the Focal’s optical digital input or via the ARC (Audio Return Channel) enabled HDMI output (provided your TV has a compatible socket).

There’s also a single HDMI input for connecting an external Blu-ray player, soundbar console or set-top box. The Dimension can’t decode high-res soundtracks, but it can strip the core Dolby and DTS mixes from Blu-ray discs.

Woofers and dongles

A dedicated output means you can connect a third-party subwoofer - if you use it with the Dimension only, you’ll need to use the small spring-loaded terminals on the back panel and mix the supplied unbalanced cable between the two.

A lack of built-in Bluetooth isn’t the end of the world, but at least Focal includes an aptX-friendly Bluetooth dongle as part of the deal. It plugs into the rear 3.5mm input, but given the other cables in close proximity, things can get quite crowded. Flexible HDMI cables come in handy here.

Before you unleash the Dimension, you need to complete the
Play the Reboot of RoboCop on Blu-ray and as our heavily armoured hero goes through his final training exercise in the huge warehouse, cracks of gunfire sound precise and powerful

Expans of sound

Wearing to boost Focal’s surround bubble, the Dimension doesn’t really immerse you that way. Play Fast & Furious 6 and during the chase scenes as helicopters fly into frame, you’re aware of a slight back-to-front shift in sound but it doesn’t have the same impact as listening through dedicated surround channels but then again, it’s very hard for any soundbar to match a home/5.1 system.

What the Dimension does offer is a very solid, stable and impressive soundfield. The bass has no trouble filling large spaces, and that includes our biggest home cinema test room. You’re presented with a huge expanse of sound which Focal creates effortlessly and pads full of detail.

Precise realism

Play the Reboot of RoboCop on Blu-ray and, as our heavily armoured hero goes through his final training exercise in the huge warehouse, cracks of gunfire sound precise and powerful. It wouldn’t take much for these effects to sound hard and huffy but the Focal falls on the right side of the line. The Dimension also does a good job of recreating echo around voices and giving dialogue a great sense of expression.

Given the bar’s dimensions, bass weight isn’t an issue. Sure, you could get more from adding a subwoofer, but as RoboCop assaults OmniCorp HQ and battle ensues, explosions have enough force and lift to convincingly place them further. Done something less obvious, like RoboCop’s footsteps, have an airy, solid, rounded, robotic sound. As his mind is being forced feed an entire criminal database, the Focal does a great job of communicating the tension and drama as it all becomes too much for Murphy’s brain to cope with. This shows the Focal’s impressive dynamic range, and its musical flair too. Switch to music, play Metallica’s Nothing Else Matters over Bluetooth, and the Focal shows great fluidity and ease. It’s fun to listen to and never distracting, which can’t be said for most soundbars out there.

Jumping straight in at the deep end with a premium soundbar is a bold move, but Focal’s Dimension delivers the goods in spectacular style.

Rating

FOR: Striking design, detailed, exciting sound, impressive bass weight, great with music
AGAINST: Cramped input panel can make things fiddly; cheap remote
VERDICT: Dimension is a bold move for Focal but it’s paid off. A high-end, high-quality soundbar

Needs to beat

Monitor Audio ASB 2 £800

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Direct and powerful, this is the Focal’s nearest rival. It’s a very close call.