

Start ME UP



Focal Bird Compact Audio System

The Bird Is the Word

Chris Martens

Just about a year ago, at CEDIA 2010, I heard a pre-production sample of one the most unusual and appealing compact audio systems I've ever encountered: the Bird system from the French loudspeaker manufacturer Focal. Several things about the system are striking, including its appearance, configuration, price, and, above all, performance. What makes the Bird so pleasingly unorthodox? On paper, the Bird system could be described as a self-powered, 2.1-channel sat/subwoofer-type system with multiple analog and digital inputs, plus a wireless input (based on proven Klear technologies), which seems straightforward enough. But while fundamentally accurate, this description doesn't entirely capture the true flavor of the Bird package, for reasons I'll explain.

When you first encounter the Bird rig, you see two small, fashionably styled satellite speakers (which look like smaller versions of the satellites from Focal's elegant Dome Series home-theater system), plus what appears to be a slim, matching integrated amplifier. But the neat trick is that those three pieces are all that you see, and all there is to see. Where's the subwoofer? We'll come to that key point in a moment, but now let me give you a hint: It's hidden in plain sight. Before I give you more information on its configuration, let me offer a few comments on the system's sound.

Judging purely by outward appearances you might reasonably expect this compact three-piece rig to sound, well, small, but that isn't the case. On the contrary, it sounds big—*really* big—as in the kind of “bigness” that implies rich, room-filling, nearly full-range, spacious, focused, and three-dimensional sound. In short, these tiny components produce the sort of sound typically associated with systems based on moderately sized *floorstanding* speakers. To hear the Bird system is to experience a certain amount of audiophile-grade shock and awe. The mind reels a bit,

sensing—correctly, as it happens—that there must be some sort of technical magic (or sonic legerdemain) at work to make this kind of performance possible. How does Focal pull this off?

The answer involves the fact the Bird system's integrated amp/DAC module is also something more: namely, a slim-line, self-powered woofer, complete with a user-configurable, built-in electronic crossover geared specifically for use with Bird Series satellite speakers. Thus, what at first appears to be a cooling vent on the face of the amp turns out to be a cleverly disguised ducted port, while the bottom panel of the amp provides a mounting panel for a downward-firing 6-inch woofer whose usable response extends all the way down to 42Hz (the -3dB point), or even a bit lower than that. While perhaps not qualifying as a true *subwoofer* (because there's not a lot of bottom-octave output), this ingenious little one-piece amp/DAC/woofer module gives the Bird system much deeper and more solid bass output than any small monitor-type speaker you are likely to encounter, while managing not look like a woofer at all.

Apart from providing sheer bass output, the Bird woofer integrates with the system's satellite speakers in a sophisticated fashion, which to my way of thinking is where the real sonic magic lies. As mentioned above, a built-in electronic crossover handles all woofer-to-satellite integration tasks, providing precise settings (which are adjusted via a row of rear panel-mounted DIP switches) that precisely match the low-frequency characteristics of any of three available sizes of Bird satellites. The result is a system where, with the flip of a few switches (zero set-up expertise required), users can instantly enjoy virtually seamless sat/sub sound from a system that doesn't even look like it has a powered woofer in the first place.

Endearingly, the three optional Bird system satellites are named—from the smallest to the largest—Little Birds, Birds,

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or Super Birds, while the one-size-fits-all amp/DAC/woofer module is called the Power Bird. For this review we'll sample Focal's entry-level Bird system (\$995), comprising a pair of Little Birds with stands, a Power Bird, and a wireless iTransmitter dongle for use with Apple devices.

To be perfectly frank, some guests who saw the stylish but diminutive system initially felt that the \$995 price seemed a little steep, judging by first visual impressions. But once they'd actually heard the system their reactions changed in an instant from skepticism to wonder. "Oh, *now* I get it," said one visitor whose voice was full of admiration, with undertones of disbelief. So compelling is the Bird rig that I've even had one high-end audiophile colleague (whose home system probably costs more than a hundred times what the Bird system does) hear the system once and then return for a second taste, muttering, "I just can't get the sound of this thing out of my mind." In this review, we'll explore some of the reasons why the Bird system evokes such strong, favorable reactions.

The Birds

The Little Bird satellite speaker feature a 4-inch Polyflex mid/bass driver and a small (diameter not specified) aluminum dome tweeter, both housed in a rounded, almost dome-shaped molded thermoplastic enclosure. The Little Bird provides a sealed, not ducted, enclosure. Claimed low-frequency response extends down to a respectable 89Hz.

Just for the record, the larger Bird satellite, should you choose to go that route, is essentially a larger version of the Little Bird, but with a 5-inch Polyflex mid/bass driver. The Super Bird is somewhat differently configured, however, with a significantly larger elliptical enclosure that features a 5-inch mid/bass driver, a centrally positioned tweeter, plus a 5-inch passive radiator for deeper bass extension and better power handling.

Bird satellites ship with two sets of stands—one a tulip-shaped pedestal stand and the other a stand featuring three splayed feet and a slender stalk on which the speaker enclosure is mounted (the latter looks for all the world like the feet of a bird—hence the Bird name). Either way, the stands allow the speakers to be tilted up and down or swiveled from left to right, and then locked in position, and both stands can be used for tabletop or wall-mount applications. Optional floor stands are also available.

The Power Bird Module

The slim Power Bird module incorporates a 6-inch paper cone woofer in a ducted port enclosure, with low-frequency extension to between 35–42Hz. Rear-panel controls allow users to set the absolute polarity of the sub (with 0 or 180 degree settings) and to adjust subwoofer output levels. The Power Bird includes a built-in three-channel amplifier that delivers 80W for the woofer and 35Wpc to drive the Bird satellites.

The Power Bird provides three stereo analog inputs (two via sets of RCA jacks, one via a 3.5mm mini-jack), a digital audio input (which provides both coaxial and TosLink jacks, where one or the other can be chosen for the digital input). Completing the picture is a wireless input based on 2.4GHz Kleer technology.

The Bird system ships with a Kleer iTransmitter for use with Apple devices; a Kleer-USB dongle will be an extra-cost option. An optional tabletop iDock transmitter will also be offered.

One small caveat: In practice, Focal's Kleer-technology wireless

SPECS & PRICING

Little Bird 2-Way Satellite Speaker

Driver complement: 4" Polyflex mid/bass driver, small-diameter aluminum dome tweeter

Frequency response: 89Hz–25kHz

Impedance: 8 ohms

Sensitivity: 87dB/2.83V/1m

Accessories: Two sets of speaker stands suitable for tabletop or wall-mount applications (one set features flared "Tulip" pedestals while the other set features splayed tripod-type feet that look like stylized interpretations of birds' feet), wrench for adjusting speakers and for locking them in place, wall-mount bracket for the Power Bird, and rear-panel mesh grille for the Power Bird
Dimensions: 4.69" x 8" x 5" (speakers mounted on Tulip stands)
Weight: 1.65 lbs.

Power Bird Integrated Amplifier/DAC/Powered Woofer Module

Power output: 80Wpc (to drive woofer), 2 x 35Wpc (to drive satellite speakers)

Inputs: Three sets stereo analog (two inputs via RCA jacks, one via 3.5mm mini-jack), one digital-audio input (via user's choice of coaxial or optical jacks, both provided), one wireless input (based on 2.4GHz Kleer technologies)

Driver complement: 6" paper cone woofer in ducted-port enclosure.

Woofer section controls: Absolute polarity switch (0 or 180° settings), woofer output level control, woofer-to-satellite crossover setting controls (the Power Bird provides a built-in electronic

crossover network that can be configured, via a small group of DIP-switches, to perfectly match Focal's Little Bird, Bird, or Super Bird satellite speakers)

Bass extension: Nominally 42Hz -3dB (but depends on electronic crossover settings)

Accessories: Speaker cables, user's choice of wireless Focal/Kleer iTransmitter dongle (for use with Apple iDevices) or Focal/Kleer-USB dongle. Note: early production Bird systems will automatically ship with the iTransmitter dongle as a default

Dimensions: 17" x 4.12" x 13.75"
Weight: 15 lbs.

Focal/Kleer iTransmitter Wireless Dongle

Range: About 10m indoors
Rated current in operation: 8.15mA

Frequency response: 20Hz–20kHz
Distortion: < 0.1% (20Hz–20kHz)

Signal-to-noise ratio: Typically 86dB

Sampling frequency: Maximum, 44.1kHz

Warranty: Set by regional distributors

AUDIO PLUS SERVICES (U.S. DISTRIBUTOR)

(800) 663-9352
audioplusservices.com
Price: \$995

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modules are very easy to use, but the small set-up guide that comes with them leaves much to be desired (it is unnecessarily confusing). Fortunately, the expert product support team at Audio Plus Services (Focal's U.S. distributor) can help get users sorted out almost immediately, should problems arise.

By design the Power Bird can either be placed flat on a table or shelf or stood upright—typically with the flat bottom of its chassis against a wall surface with its control panel facing upward. Alternatively, the Power Bird can be hung directly on a wall. To support these options, the Power Bird comes with a beefy wall-mount bracket, a mesh grille that partially covers over its rear panel, and a special decal that flips its control markings and product logo upside down so they can still be read properly when the unit is placed flat side toward a wall. An elegant remote control provides on/off, input selection, volume control, and—for some Apple devices—menu and playback controls.

Sonic Character

The Focal Bird system strikes me as an absolutely brilliant exercise in the fine and subtle art of compromise, so that the net effect of the sound you hear is far greater than the sum of its parts.

As with any good audio system, the heart of the Bird's sound lives in the midrange, which exudes appropriate natural richness and warmth, plus a very good measure of transient speed and resolution. Highs, in turn, are reasonably well extended, though perhaps just slightly rolled off, and exceedingly smooth—qualities that turn out to be essential to the system's overall performance.

Bass, as I've suggested above, is surprisingly deep and tuneful, and beautifully integrated with the Little Bird satellites.

Where many small satellites manage to sound shrill (owing to aggressive tweeters that seem prone to transient overshoot) or to sound thin, compressed, and lifeless (owing to midrange drivers that sound overly coarse and unrefined, or that lack appropriate dynamic range and/or low-end extension), the Bird satellites consistently sound engaging, full-bodied, and vibrant. What is more, they never, ever draw attention to themselves in distracting ways—not even when you listen to them at close range (as would be the case in, say, desktop-audio applications, though the system is perfectly capable of filling small-to-mid-sized rooms with sound).

Perhaps as a result of their inherent smoothness and refinement, the Bird satellites exhibit imaging characteristics that are very fine, indeed, with a just-right amount of specificity and focus, so that the little system produces wide, deep, precise soundstages that belie its size. While the Bird satellites may not be, in an absolute sense, the most revealing or resolving speakers you have ever heard, they offer very high levels of what I would term “usable resolution.” In practice this means that the system provides almost all of the information necessary to render musical timbres and textures faithfully, yet without pushing the performance envelope so hard that there is a risk of the system becoming edgy or analytical (qualities that can be particularly annoying in systems designed for small room and/or desktop use).

Perhaps the real *pièce de résistance* here involves the unexpectedly excellent integration that the Power Bird achieves with the

Bird satellites. As anyone who has spent much time with sat/subwoofer-type home theater systems can tell you, proper subwoofer integration is hard to attain and rarely approaches the theoretical ideal under the best of circumstances. But in sharp contrast to most competing sat/subwoofer rigs I've heard, the Bird system achieves excellent integration in an instant and painless way—all with the flick of a few DIP switches on the Power Bird's rear panel. The manual provides simple pictorial guidance to show which settings to use for the Little Bird, Bird, or Super Bird satellites, so it's easy to get things right.

The key to the Bird's magic is that the upper range of the Power Bird woofer matches near-perfectly the lower range of the Bird satellite in transient speed and resolving power, so that the sonic seamlines between the two for the most part melt away. What is more, the sub judiciously avoids overreaching its own performance envelope, eschewing big, billowy, overblown bass for overall low-end quality. While the Power Bird trades away bottom-octave extension (which would probably be out of reach for such a small woofer in any event), it delivers in exchange quite impressive levels of transient speed and pitch definition. This is a very wise design choice on Focal's part because it gives the system sufficient depth and weight to sound full-bodied, while also providing enough finesse to impart a sonic sophistication that far exceeds most listeners' expectation given the Bird rig's modest price and diminutive size.

Dynamics are better than you might ever expect for a system of this size or type, though it pays to respect the inherent output limits of the compact powered woofer. On many types of music,

and for many listeners, the system will play as loudly as desired in small-to-mid-sized rooms, but if you push the system hard with music that is rich in low bass content you will eventually hear subtle signs of distress from the Power Bird module. These are your cue to turn volume levels down to more manageable levels.

Bottom Line

Consider this system if you like the idea of a small, sleek, unobtrusive three-piece system that is easy to set up, affordable, and that represents an astonishingly capable and refined "everything-in-one-box" introduction to legitimate high-end audio. Trust us on this point: You could easily spend lots more, yet wind up with less sonic sophistication and musical satisfaction than the Bird/Power Bird provides. Unlike most systems, this one also offers the option of highly effective wireless Apple iDevice or USB connectivity. Just keep in mind that while the Bird system does many things well, it can't and doesn't defy the laws of physics. If you like to play demanding large-scale music at high volume levels you would be better off with speakers that are considerably larger. (Note, however, that the versions of the system based on the larger Bird—or especially Super Bird—satellites will play much louder than the entry-level version reviewed here.)

To sum up, if you've ever wanted a flexible, affordable, and sophisticated taste of high-end audio where everything you need comes in one neat shipping carton, this is the system for you. Whether you use it on your desk or to fill a room with sound, you won't be disappointed. **tas**