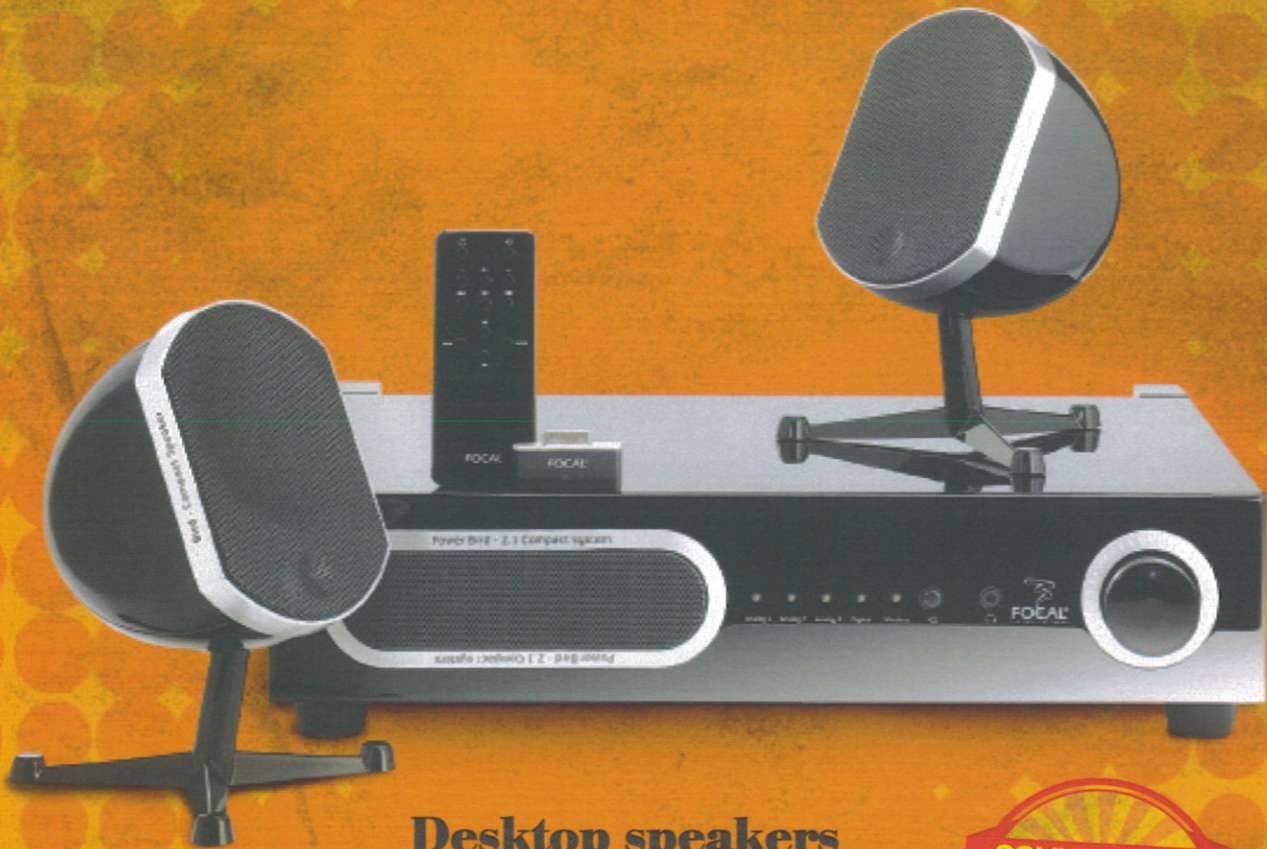


Test Reports

FOCAL

LITTLE BIRD 2.1 SPEAKER SYSTEM \$995

BY DANIEL KUMIN



**Desktop speakers
that earn their wings.**



FOCAL HAS FLIPPED ME the bird. The company is hardly the first to have done so (even just among audio manufacturers) and is unlikely to be the last. But none before has done so quite as elegantly or enjoyably.

Okay, I'm not talking about the *medial-digital* salute: I'm talking about the Focal Little Bird, the French maker's new . . . hmm, what shall we call it? Desktop audio system? Mini-monitor 2.1 array? iPod playback solution?

Focal's Little Bird is all of these and more. At bottom, the French firm's Bird models (there are three variants) consist of a pair of desk-stand or wall-mount micro-monitor speakers and a superbly elegant, 2-channel integrated amplifier that happens to have an active subwoofer built into it.

This sounds like a revolutionary, even bizarre approach — until you recall that about a zillion different "computer speaker" designs of the past 20 years follow the same functional pattern. But few have ever achieved Focal's visual and tactile class, or matched the Little Bird's sonic results.

SETUP

The smallest of the Focal flock, the aptly named Little Bird 2.1 speaker system consists of a left-right pair of roughly cantaloupe-size half-spheres (the Little Bird satellites) and a single slim, strikingly finished component, the Power Bird. This features just one control, a volume knob, plus a mysterious grille that dominates the front panel (it's the subwoofer vent) and a 6-inch speaker cone firing downward from the bottom panel. For their part, the Little Bird satellite speakers are a two-way sealed design using, of course, Focal's own drivers. (Background time: The company originated



VERDICT
A desktop system with audiophile cred, Focal's Little Bird 2.1 is pricey, but worth it.

DESIGN 10
●●●●●●●●●●

PERFORMANCE 9
●●●●●●●●●

VALUE 7
●●●●●●●●●

OVERALL 8.7
●●●●●●●●●

FOCAL LITTLE BIRD 2.1

as a manufacturer of high-quality transducers.)

Focal provides two styles of stands, either of which can serve as a tabletop/shelf-stand or wall-mount, as well as wall-mount hardware for the Power Bird. There's also a small remote that lets you control volume and step through the amp's inputs. (It also includes Menu and cursor keys, which are a bit puzzling, as the system has no display.)

Actual setup is pretty simple: Connect the satellites to the Power Bird using the plain "zip" cords provided, and plug it in. If iPod/Phone is your lifestyle, you're pretty much done: Focal includes a wireless transmitter that docks to any 30-pin iPort, and a USB transmitter for laptops and such is \$89. These use the CD-quality Klear wireless digital-RF link to beam your music to a receiver built into the Power Bird. Those of us who still remember the Wired Era will be comforted to find one digital and three analog stereo inputs around back, along with a Bass Level knob and a set of DIP switches to configure the Focal Power Bird, which is common to all three Bird systems, for the appropriate model.

PERFORMANCE

Focal's Bird Series raises a host of interesting questions, beginning with: Why can't all small speakers sound this good? Yes, the Little Bird system was a tad light in the "body" octave (between, say, 100 and 200 Hz), which gave its bright, airy presentation a very slightly "forward" tilt on voices and strings. But oh boy, what a presentation! The Focal setup's depth, detail, and stereo soundstage breadth and precision are breathtaking, and you'll notice it from the first upbeat of the first high-quality recording you play.

Mark Knopfler's solo albums exemplify state-of-

Key Features

+ Little Bird speaker

Sealed enclosure; 4-in cone woofer, 0.75-in aluminum-dome tweeter; 5.5 x 4.6 x 4.25 in (not including stands); 1.7 lb

+ Power Bird subwoofer/integrated amp

Vented enclosure; 6.5-in cone woofer; 80-watt subwoofer amp plus 2 x 35-watt satellite amp; digital and 3 analog stereo inputs; 4.1 x 13.75 x 17 in; 15 lb

focal.com

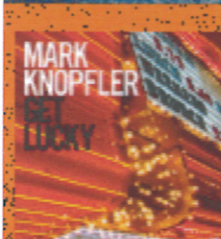


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FOCAL LITTLE BIRD 2.1

the-art studio-pop recording techniques, such that songs like "Remembrance Day" (from 2009's *Get Lucky*) sound great even when heard through an average-to-good audio system. With a high-end setup, though, you quickly begin calling out nuances — like the spatial depth to the "tock" of a snare-rim hit, or the rich tonal complexity of Knopfler's trademark guitar sound. And, of course, that inimitable beef-stew baritone voice. You just know that somebody spent hours or even days choosing and positioning the "overhead" drums mike and the main vocal mike, as well as moving an equally carefully selected guitar-cabinet mike a half-inch at a time to find the perfect sweet spot on the cone. The result is an almost surround-like sense of spatial richness. And my point is this: The Little Bird 2.1 thus qualifies as an honestly audiophile "B-chain," fully capable of the tonal and spatial shadings that mark the often blurry distinction between hi-fi's audiophile and mid-fi divisions.

Larger-scale works like a full symphony orchestra — or even full-bore rock — didn't fare quite as well, as the Little Bird's volume limit, though more than ample for a modest room, cramped big-impact dynamics a bit at higher volumes. So it was the more chamber-size works that let Focal's suite shine its brightest. John Adams's early *Shaker Loops* is among the American composer's most accessible and attractive works (imagine the illicit love child of *Appalachian Spring*-era Aaron Copland and U2's *The Edge*), and



LUCKY STRIKE The Focal Little Bird 2.1 displayed almost surround-like spatial richness on Mark Knopfler's "Remembrance Day," from *Get Lucky*.

the Little Bird system presented its ever-shifting-yet-static soundscapes with electrifying transparency. The alternately dense, almost overwhelmingly rich and detailed massed-string textures and the ghostly episodes of harmonics and sotto voce tremolos carried enormous tonal conviction and dynamic subtlety, yielding the kind of sucked-in immersion that high-end audio is all about.

More prosaically, the Little Bird 2.1 evidenced, as already mentioned, a slight dearth in the upper-bass regions that made most pop music sound a bit less weighty, and a very slight emphasis in the tip-top-mids. The combination doubtless contributed much to the system's extraordinary precision and spatial definition, however, and I did not find the resultant colorations the least bit worrisome. A reduction in the boom-and-thud octave is almost always welcome (even when it's a reduction from literal accuracy), and the minute touch of treble bite attending the system's slight upper-presence boost is a fair price for so sparkling a sonic signature.

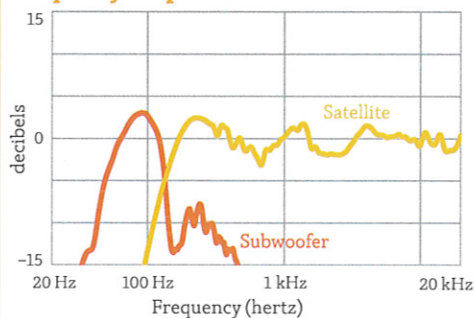
BOTTOM LINE

What can I say about a thousand dollar micro system that cannot be made to sound bad, whatever you throw at it? That it's worth it. I'm not even going to speculate on the market segments to whom the Focal Little Bird might appeal. (Yes, I am: well-heeled dorm-room denizens? Home-office workers of the *Architectural Digest* set? Microcosmic audiophile acolytes?) Whoever and wherever they are, folks who choose to pony up \$1,000 for a system that, at least in one sense, competes with the latest \$49.95 CyberAcoustics 2.1-channel trio will get what they pay for and then some. And included in the "some" is a side door to the fevered world of serious sound reproduction — one that just might infect some next-generation audiophiles. With audio Bird flu. **SV**

KNOPFLER, WARNER BROS.

Test Bench

Frequency Response



SATELLITE 143 Hz to 20 kHz ± 2.8 dB
SUBWOOFER 54 to 132 Hz ± 3 dB

Frequency-response measurements for the Little Bird satellite are fantastic; the speaker has essentially flat response on-axis and no major response anomalies even way out at 60° off-axis. Sensitivity is a little low but impedance is moderate, so the Little Bird should work fine with almost any amplifier if you buy it separately. The subwoofer section in the Power Bird unit delivered good low-bass (40-63 Hz) output for its size, averaging 104.7 dB. While it had measurable output of 86.2 dB at 31.5 Hz, there was insufficient ultra-low-bass (20-31.5 Hz) output to average. — Brent Butterworth

Full Test Bench data at soundandvisionmag.com/focal-little-bird-2.1

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