



Home speakers

We take some of the best speakers on the market and put them through their paces

Small speaker docks are now so common and simple to get hold of that we've started to wonder how we listened to our music before. They provide a great way of listening to your music in your bedroom, but sometimes a little speaker system just doesn't provide enough power for your tunes or movie-watching setup. In these situations you start to wonder if there's something a little more powerful than a small dock on your table, and that's where these giant speakers come in.

We've taken three of the best sets we could find and pitted them against each other to find out which one can fill your room with the best sound

possible. Each has its own unique selling points, but we've tested them all on a level playing field to see which one can triumph with sound quality, room-filling noise, connectivity and more. As ever with all products, there's an element of personal opinion that makes some setups more appealing than others. We've been as fair as possible, so consider what you want from your speaker setup before you decide to buy. Now, onto the tests...

"Sometimes a little speaker system just doesn't provide enough power"

Parrot Zikmu Speakers £1,000/\$1,599.99

Key features

- Flat Panel NXT technology
- Built-in iPod dock, Wi-Fi and Bluetooth
- 360-degree sound

Learn more...

- www.parrot.com

Available from...

- <http://zikmu.parrot.com>

The standout design is the first thing you notice about the Zikmu speakers. It's more than a simply aesthetic decision, though – the casing is designed specifically to ensure that every aspect of sound is covered by the speaker. The bottom of each unit houses a large, down-firing woofer, along with a bass-reflex system, all contained within a metal structure to reduce distortion. The top of the speakers contain two flat-panel speakers using NXT technology, which, unlike most speaker systems, uses a honeycomb membrane structure vibrated by a series of exciters. The

placement of the top speakers also ensures a great spread to the sound coming out of the speakers.

The result of all this technology is a sound that is impressively clear; high and mid-levels were all reproduced superbly, with plenty of detail. The bass wasn't particularly lacking, but it certainly didn't blow us away.

The remote included with the speakers was hugely disappointing. The controls available were basic, and while the remote looked nice enough, it felt cheap and didn't include functions like EQ settings, or controls for any iPod/iPhone you may connect.

Talking of iPod connections, a slot on top of one of the speakers will hold most designs of iPod or iPhone and transfer sound digitally to ensure high-quality audio, while the other speaker's top houses touch-based controls that work surprisingly well. Here, you will see the buttons that let you connect to the speakers through Wi-Fi or Bluetooth via AirPlay. Bluetooth was straightforward to set up, but we didn't test it too heavily due to the poor quality of sound. Wi-Fi required a Mac to set up and was frustratingly complicated, but once it was done we could connect to it using our iPhone or Mac to edit equalizer settings or play music.

The only other problem we had with the speakers was a little distortion at high volume, but this wasn't as bad as other speakers in our tests thanks to the design of the speakers, and we hit some seriously high volumes before we noticed the issue. These speakers really do go loud.

Apart from the design, what really impressed us was the wireless connection between the speakers that meant we could put them as far apart as we wanted, allowing for an excellent stereo sound. The Aux-IN option under each speaker makes it simple to connect to your TV, and we have to say that we really love the design. While the audio clarity is great, we're not sure if they're worth the price. Still, in terms of design, connectivity and adaptability these speakers truly stand out from the crowd.



The top of the speakers house the controls and the dock, which is a great addition



Everything is hidden away underneath the cones, so wires won't be spoiling the look



Pros

- ✓ **Connectivity** – Along with the standard iPhone/iPod dock, you can connect via Wi-Fi and Bluetooth, as well as through an Aux-IN connection.
- ✓ **Design** – We love the design; they sit perfectly between beautiful and pretentious, with softly lit buttons and a stunning profile.
- ✓ **Sound quality** – The clarity of the sound from the Zikmus was fantastic, and with the wireless connection, placing them is easy.

Cons

- ✗ **Bass issues** – The bass was lacking, and while this is changeable when connected to Wi-Fi, it should be easier to do.
- ✗ **Wi-Fi setup** – Setting up Wi-Fi with the Zikmu speakers for the first time was awkward at best. Downloading updates and connecting took longer than we would like, and may confuse some.
- ✗ **Cost** – The Zikmus have a lot more functionality than the other two systems, and sound great, but they're the most costly by far. The remote feels cheap too.

Ferguson Hill FH009 £795/\$TBA

Key features

Two horn speakers and two bass speakers
Adjustable stands and wall mount
Remote with MP3 controls

Learn more...

www.fergusonhill.com

Available from...

www.fergusonhill.co.uk



The rear of the sub-woofer houses the cable connections

Ferguson Hill have become rather well known over the last few years as a company that can combine brilliant design with some of the best sound available, so we were naturally eager to give the FH009s a try. The design of the speakers themselves did not disappoint. The acrylic horns that the company are known for are all present and correct at the top of two aluminium stands which can be shortened by unscrewing half the rod, or removed completely to allow the speakers to be wall-mounted. The horns look fantastic and will undoubtedly be a talking point in your room, but thanks to the transparent design, won't be intrusive.

Sadly, the unit that's included in the package of the FH009s is quite a different story. Thanks to its size, the block is incredibly hard to ignore and will make it difficult to place if you don't have a lot of space in your room, which is a real shame. The large casing houses two bass speakers, and deals with all the connections as well as the display, with two wires that connect to the speakers through the metal stands they perch on. It's a shame that the spacing of the speakers is limited by the wires, but in this case the speakers would have to compromise the minimalist approach to add wireless receivers, so we can forgive it for that.

It's even easier to forgive the FH009 speakers their faults when you start using them. Thanks to the design of the horns, along with the power that emanates from the huge unit, you'll get a near-perfect mix of low, mid and high-levels. The clarity of the sound is astounding, and while the two are certainly close, we'd say that these even

trump the excellent Zikmu speakers thanks to the well-balanced levels. The bass that comes from the unit has plenty of punch, and it can be altered to your liking using the included remote, which is great. We really pumped the sound up, but couldn't manage to find any distortion, no matter how hard we pushed – it was very impressive.

The connections included are, sadly, pretty limited. There are two AUX-INS as well as a 3.5mm port to enable you to connect your iPod to the front of the device. There is also a USB port on the front, although we never used it and aren't too sure why it was included. In terms of connections, that's it. Like the Soundbar there is no HDMI, and with no wireless options for AirPlay you'll be forced to leave your iPod or iPhone sitting next to the main unit to hear your music. The remote is passable, with relatively responsive buttons, and while

it does feel better than the other two, it still can't match the quality of Apple's Remote, and simply doesn't match the Soundbar's number of functions.

However, what we cannot ignore here is the quality of the sound from the FH009s. With clear tones at every level, changeable bass and some of the best stereo sound we've ever heard, this is still a brilliant choice for true audiophiles.



The speaker stands are hollow, allowing you to hide wires and maintain looks



Pros

- ✓ **Sound quality** – The audio that comes out of the FH009s is hard to fault, with crisp high and mid levels alongside strong bass. Close your eyes and you could be listening to live music.
- ✓ **Things of Beauty** – The design on show here is simply beautiful.
- ✓ **Adaptability** – You can wall mount the cones, or alter their height, so you'll easily find the perfect place for the best listening experience.

Cons

- ✗ **Connections** – With only a few connections, it would have been nice to see AirPlay or a dock included in the huge unit
- ✗ **Price** – While they're cheaper than the Zikmu speakers, they're still pricey. You pay for quality, but not everyone will have the cash to spend on these.
- ✗ **Huge unit** – Considering the beauty of the horn speakers, it's a real shame that the main unit is so bulky. The sound they create is lovely, but surely a little space could've been saved.

Orbitsound T12 v3 Soundbar £299/\$399.99

Key features

- Spatial stereo technology
- iPod dock, 3.5mm Audio IN, Optical Out
- Remote control's iPod library

Learn more...

• www.orbitsound.com

Available from...

• www.orbitsound.com

This may be the cheapest of the three speakers we've tested here, but we were really interested in how much difference there would be between the more costly choices and this. The answer is that while there certainly is a difference, it is smaller than you might think.

The T12 features two distinct parts to its design – a Soundbar that includes an iPod dock and all the connections you'll need for the setup, and a large sub to deal with your lower-end sounds. The two connect using the nasty spring-clips that we thought had died out some time ago, and are therefore limited in placement.

Luckily, this isn't too much of a problem thanks to Orbitsound's patented spatial stereo technology, which creates a stereo effect from a single speaker. The system uses a side-firing speaker at each end of the Soundbar, which projects sounds from each output into the perfect place for you to hear it. We have to say that this

feature works absolutely brilliantly – it was very impressive.

The sub-woofer does a great job at providing some serious thump, too, although we found that in some cases turning it up higher than around 75 percent started to distort our tunes. It's also fair to say that the audio simply couldn't match the stunning clarity of the Zikmu and Ferguson Hill Speakers, but the T12s certainly didn't disappoint. The audio quality was slightly above what we would expect for speakers at this price, with a nice balance between high and low-levels.

The remote features both bass and treble controls, along with menu buttons that enable you to directly control your iPod or iPhone when docked without leaving your chair. This is an excellent option, and the remote itself works brilliantly, but sadly it feels

just as bad as that of the Zikmu thanks to cheap buttons and plastic casing.

In terms of design, the T12s may not be as revolutionary as the other two in this test, but they still manage to look extremely sexy. The glossy black finish looks great, and the metal grille on the front of the Soundbar is lovely. We would be very happy with these wonderful speakers in our lounge.

Sadly there are no options to connect the T12 wirelessly, but with Aux-IN, a 3.5mm audio jack and Optical Out connections we can forgive this thanks to the impressively diverse wired options. If you don't mind losing out on the immaculate clarity of the other speakers, want a beautiful single speaker stereo experience, and won't be turning the volume up too high, you should be pleasantly surprised by the T12's abilities and functionality.



The sub-woofer produces an amazing amount of bass thanks to this chamber



The rear of the Soundbar gives you access to the wide range of connections



Pros

- ✓ **Spatial stereo** – The Spatial stereo technology that Orbitsound have built into the speaker is astounding; you'll get the full effect no matter where you stand.
- ✓ **Remote control** – The remote included with the Soundbar may feel cheap, but its functions are absolutely brilliantly.
- ✓ **Price** – We worried that it would be unfair to include this speaker in our test, but for your cash you get a really nice sound balance.

Cons

- ✗ **Distortion** – While the sub-woofer allows for powerful bass, it becomes distorted at higher levels when over 75% volume.
- ✗ **Wireless-less** – While we can forgive the lack of AirPlay support in the Soundbar, we would have liked to see a wireless connection between the bar and the sub.
- ✗ **No HDMI** – This speaker is great for both iPod and TV audio, but it lacks a HDMI port, so you won't get HD sound out of the speaker if you hook it up to your TV. It's a shame considering what it can do.



"All three of these speakers offer amazing features and fantastic sound"

And the winner is...

Parrot Zikmu Speakers

Wireless functionality really impressed us with the Zikmu Speakers – both playing your music through AirPlay, and the way the two speakers communicate with each other was brilliant. The sound quality through the Wi-Fi connection was brilliant once the tricky software had been set up, which is a bonus when the other two speakers don't offer this option.

The sound of the Zikmus was also electric thanks to the technology implemented, and the way the speakers are constructed. The flat panels at the top which pump out the sound give fantastic coverage of the whole room when placed close to a wall, and while the bass was a little lacking, the stereo effect was excellent. We especially liked that the two speakers could be placed anywhere in a room.

Ultimately the only reason the Zikmus didn't win was the price, however, for what you pay you really do get a lot. They're by far the most fully-featured speakers on test, and if you have the cash and can deal with the frustrating wireless setup, they're still a wonderful option.



Ferguson Hill FH009s

Picking a winner was by far the toughest job we've had so far with these group tests; all three speaker sets have some fantastic features. In the end we think that the Ferguson Hill FH009s are the worthy winners thanks to the wonderful sound quality and design that they offer. The clarity of the sound was unmatched in our tests, and thanks to the separate main unit, the bass was much stronger than that of the Zikmus. While there are some features we'd like to see in the FH009s, such as an iPod dock or AirPlay connectivity, the lower price and punchier bass slightly push it past the more expensive offering.

The design is so important, and that's where these speakers really take the prize; the acrylic horns look stunning on their thin stands, and while the large unit is distracting, the adaptability of the speakers is fantastic. Thanks to the clarity of the sound, and the ability to alter the bass level, you can close your eyes and hear every note.

Ultimately, the real winner of this test is down to you. All three of these speakers offer amazing features and fantastic sound. If you've got the cash, the more expensive systems are simply brilliant.



Orbitsound T12 v3 Soundbar

If you're looking for great sound on a smaller budget, the Soundbar is the perfect choice. While the sound quality on offer can't quite match up to that of the other two speaker sets in the test, it certainly isn't bad. In fact, we were very impressed by the spatial stereo effect that Orbitsound has managed to create – it genuinely works, and you can stand almost anywhere in a room without losing the effect, which a truly outstanding achievement.

The balance is also surprisingly nice, thanks to the detailed control that you have over the levels of treble and bass. These are available through the remote, which impressed us with the direct iPod control, but did feel rather cheap.

Despite these small issues, we can't ignore the value the Orbitsound speakers represent; you get some impressive sound quality for your cash, and with features like spatial stereo, a wide range of connections and completely customisable EQ settings, this is still a great choice.

