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The Bowers & Wilkins Zeppelin Air: Our Review

BY: JEFF KOVACS | AUDIO, HOME THEATRE, JUST COOL, LIFESTYLE, MOBILE PHONES, MUSIC, REVIEWS, SOFTWARE & APPS, TABLETS, WHAT WE'RE EXCITED ABOUT | MAY 6, 2011 | 0 COMMENTS



When Beauty is Function...

For long time readers of the site, admitting that we're fans of Bowers & Wilkins will likely come as no surprise. Bowers & Wilkins (previously better known as 'B&W') has spent the

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better part of the last decade refining their product line and overall brand strategy – an aggressive approach we fully endorse that's based on a foundation of a balanced commitment to both great audio performance and innovative design. But, confession being good for the soul, it's also worth noting that fandom such as ours can be a fickle thing (just ask a certain Mr. Lucas). While we have consistently been impressed with Bowers & Wilkins products over the years, each success has, in turn, created an ever escalating aura of expectation... and there are few hurdles more difficult to overcome than high expectations. So, it was with this history of success and anticipation that we took delivery of the latest addition to the Bowers and Wilkins line, the *Zeppelin Air*. Join us as we take an in-depth look at this elegant speaker system.

A Closer Look

To begin, the *Bowers & Wilkins Zeppelin Air* is a new and improved version of their highly acclaimed *Zeppelin* iPod speaker system that incorporates a number of audio and design improvements along with the introduction of Apple's new "AirPlay" feature. If you haven't heard of Apple's Airplay before, trust us, you will—as it is likely to have a huge impact on how and where people listen to and use their enabled devices. For those not yet familiar, Apple's AirPlay will allow owners to stream music wirelessly from their iOS handheld devices (including the iPhone, iPod Touch, or iPad) or from a PC or Mac running iTunes directly, to enabled devices like the *Zeppelin Air* via a home network. Taken together, these improvements and new features push the *Zeppelin Air* a long way towards establishing itself as one of the first "must-have" products of the year.

Design

As we've come to expect with Bowers and Wilkins, the *Zeppelin Air's* build quality and stylish design impressed us right out of the box. At around 25 inches wide, the *Zeppelin Air* is virtually the same size as the original, and maintains the earlier unit's elegant oval shape. In a departure from the original *Zeppelin*, the new model opts for a tasteful polished black back and black cloth speaker covering rather than the older versions mirror-polished stainless steel back, improvements we believe that lend it an even more subtle, sophisticated and high-end look.

Carrying the high-end theme a step further, the *Zeppelin Air* features an updated version of Bowers & Wilkins floating chrome device dock (now compatible with virtually all of the most recent versions of the iPad, iPhone and iPod touch), complete with a subtle "Bowers & Wilkins" logo and a small color-shifting status light. Finally, the *Zeppelin Air* features a mirrored, high-contrast metal strip running down the center of the unit's front that includes the power and volume buttons. Finally, the *Zeppelin Air* comes with a stylish, small, black egg shaped remote (the same remote you'll find with both the *Zeppelin Mini* and *MM-1 computer speakers*) that allows simple power, volume, input and selection control of the *Zeppelin Air* from a surprisingly useful distance. While not strictly necessary in AirPlay mode, its small size and attractive design make it a worthwhile and helpful addition.

At this point, it's worth mentioning a change that will likely cause the audiophiles in our audience some concern. While the new *Zeppelin Air's* silhouette and footprint is virtually identical to the original, it is somewhat lighter, coming in at 13.5 pounds, versus the original *Zeppelin's* 16.5 pounds. While seemingly a very minor change, for some, this update might be



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viewed as a red flag, suggesting that the engineers at Bowers & Wilkins had sacrificed sound quality for profit. Have no worries... while its true that better audio / speaker components used to mean heavier components, Bowers & Wilkins promises they've managed to reduce the weight while simultaneously improving sound.

Though admittedly the result of a combination of complex and subtle changes, the majority of the improvement comes from the introduction of new speaker drivers, each of which now featuring a dedicated "audiophile" class D amplification unit. Where the original Zeppelin had three amps powering five drivers: a 5-inch bass driver, twin 1-inch tweeters, and two 3.5-inch midrange drivers, the *Zeppelin Air* leverages the tweeter design of the company's MM-1 PC speakers, and the two midrange drivers have been trimmed in size from 3.5 inches to 3 inches (saving weight while improving sound).

Taken together, Bowers & Wilkins claims the combination of more power to the improved drive units along with its 'Flowport' technology and advanced Digital Signal Processing has "dramatically improved the bass performance." It is also worth noting that they've upgraded the unit's digital to analog converters (DAC) with new 24bit – 96 KHz capability, which also appears to help on the performance front.

Connections

While the front of the unit received the lion's share of consideration, the Bowers & Wilkins designers' attention to detailed extended to the creation of a elegantly finished, sleek rear side a well, that not only houses integrated speaker ports, but also features an Ethernet port, a 3.5mm auxiliary stereo input jack, a USB 2.0 port for PC connectivity, and a composite video output for connection to your TV. Lastly, the *Zeppelin Air* boasts built-in Wi-Fi, so owners won't be limited to wired home networks.

Audio performance

While we were able to test the *Zeppelin Air* extensively over the course of several weeks, I have to say that my initial impressions held true throughout. As with the best compact speaker systems, the *Zeppelin Air* always sounded bigger than it was, delivering warm, rich, distortion free sound that easily filled even surprisingly large rooms.

At the same time, it is worth remembering that this is a single station speaker system, and careful listening did uncover some stereo imaging quality variation depending on distance. Under most conditions, true separation sounded best somewhere between 2.5 to 5 feet away from the speaker. Moving further away reduced stereo separation, but the speaker never sounded small; the *Zeppelin Air's* rich tone and healthy bass output easily outclass virtually every other similar iPod dock speakers we've tested. In fact, we had only one real audio issue (and a minor one at that) – noting slightly over-boosted bass as delivered via the units built-in subwoofer. While warm and largely distortion free, we did note some balance and definition issues in some formats. While the speaker doesn't feature separate bass and treble controls, it is easy to fine-tune the *Zeppelin Air's* sound via the EQ setting on your iPod / iPhone / iPad (we tended to prefer the "Bass Reducer" option, but your preferences may vary).

Having adjusted the EQ settings, we found that the *Zeppelin Air* audio performance surprisingly good across a wide range of musical genres. While it excels with acoustic music of all kinds (guitars sounding incredibly natural and 'present'), we were pleasantly surprised by its versatility... as it easily handled everything from U2 to The Clash, and Green Day to the Muses. All in all, the *Zeppelin Air* is an excellent iPod speaker – delivering great sound across the complete musical spectrum.

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Using AirPlay

While we would have frankly been shocked to find the *Zeppelin Air* anything else than excellent as a speaker system (did we mention what big fans we are of Bowers & Wilkins?), what really sets this newest version of the Zeppelin speaker system apart is the addition of the "AirPlay" capability... so lets take a look. To start, we suspect that as good as the systems sounds, the vast majority of buyers will be people interested in streaming music from an iPhone, iPad, or iPod Touch, adding a degree of "cool, flexibility and versatility" to the devices they already use and love. The good news for Bowers & Wilkins is that these people will almost certainly be very satisfied with the additional capabilities the Zeppelin Air adds to their technology mix.

Getting started is relatively easy. Step one (which we learned via trial and error) is to ensure the *Zeppelin Air* has the latest firmware version by connecting it via the included USB cable directly to your PC or Mac. Having updated your *Zeppelin Air*, next you'll have to add it to your home network (which, while not difficult, is not yet the simple process we'd wish it would be. That being said, it is likely just a matter of time before updates are offered simplifying the process even further). Connecting to a home network can be done by either connecting the *Zeppelin Air* directly to a PC or Mac via Ethernet, or by logging onto the *Air's* initial temporary Wi-Fi connection. Both ways worked well enough, simply open your



browser, enter "169.254.1.1" to be taken to the *Zeppelin Air* setup page, where you can log the *Zeppelin Air* into your wireless network.

Once selected, the *Zeppelin Air* remembers your Wi-Fi network / password information in its internal memory (translation – you can move or disconnect your *Zeppelin Air* any time and then powered it back up and it will find and login to your Wi-Fi network

seamlessly). Having gotten it up and running on the network, it's ready to connect with other any other AirPlay sources (including any iPhone, iPod Touch, iPad, or PC or Mac running iTunes) that are logged into the same home network.




While we were pleased with the overall performance of AirPlay, we did find that each option (either streaming from a multi-media device or via computer-based iTunes) resulted in a slightly different experience. When listening via a portable device we noticed a devices menu icon in the lower right corner of the screen which allowed us to select the Zeppelin Air from the menu, and launch the streaming. When using AirPlay to play music from a networked computer running iTunes you'll find you can download Apple's Remote app, and follow the onscreen instructions to link it to any networked computer – giving you access to the entire iTunes-based music library on your hard drive from the screen of the iPad, iPod Touch, or iPhone.

Audio performance from material sourced via AirPlay, once you get past the initial setup, was for the most part quite good (and significantly better than we've found streaming via Bluetooth). All in all, it's a really nice feature with huge potential that we believe will become more and more useful and popular (especially as new iPhone / iPod / iPad apps appear, expanding capabilities and extra features i.e. FM radio!) over time.


Wrapping it Up

To end as we began, our faith was rewarded. With the introduction of the *Zeppelin Air*, Bowers & Wilkins has once again reaffirmed our confidence... and maintained their streak

of developing elegant and stylish devices that perform as well as they look. While it isn't inexpensive, the new *Zeppelin Air* sounds better than the original (and virtually ALL of its competitors), and with the addition of Apples 'AirPlay,' does significantly more. If you're looking for a great sounding, stylish and feature rich speaker system to access your iTunes library (and soon, much more), there is nothing currently available that can compete with the Bowers & Wilkins *Zeppelin Air*.

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