

- **Pros**

Excellent audio performance. Unique—and now classic—design. Powerful, with strong subwoofer. Improved cable quality.

- **Cons** No remote control. Bass volume control is on subwoofer itself. Semi-hardwired cables—if cables fail, system needs to be repaired or replaced.

- **Bottom Line**

The Harman Kardon SoundSticks III is mainly a cosmetic upgrade of previous models, and a subtle one at that, but this 2.1-channel PC speaker set remains our Editors' Choice.



In an age that virtually requires tech manufacturers to produce brand new products on a yearly basis, often sacrificing good products for new products, the Harman Kardon SoundSticks III is a refreshingly minor update. After all, why mess with a design that has been entered into New York MoMA's permanent collection? Perhaps you'd improve the sound, but the [SoundSticks II](#) already offer superb sound. Currently, the SoundSticks III list for \$169.95, but this price will likely eventually drop down into even more affordable territory as the earlier SoundSticks models did. The SoundSticks III are not flawless—a remote control would be nice—but from their looks to the powerful subwoofer to clever design decisions like upward-angling, adjustable speakers, this 2.1-channel system remains our Editors' Choice PC [speakers](#).

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Design

By now, you have perhaps seen the iconic, modern design of the SoundSticks on a coworker's desk or

at a friend's house. The transparent plastic contour showcases each satellite's four mid-range drivers, and the transparency continues to the subwoofer, which looks like a



jellyfish or alien spacecraft. (The haunting subwoofer's otherworldly appearance is only enhanced by an internal pale light that glows when the system is in use.) Harman Kardon's SoundSticks III look nearly identical to previous SoundSticks; the biggest difference is a new color for the rubberized bases on each satellite speaker—they're black now instead of iridescent gray-blue—and a white sub light instead of blue.

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The included hardwired cables, which connect the two 10-by-2-inch circular speakers to each other

and to the 10.2-by-9.2-inch subwoofer, are much hardier and better looking this time around—a shiny, braided cable is snaked through a transparent casing. Sadly, these cables are still half-hardwired (they cannot be fully disconnected from the system), which means that if the cables go bad, there's no swapping them out and you'll need to get the unit repaired or replaced.

Another design choice, which annoys me much more, is that the subwoofer's bass volume is controlled on the subwoofer itself—why not find a place for this on the satellites, so you don't have to climb under your desk to adjust the balance between treble and bass? Also, why not include a simple remote for controlling volume and maybe even playback? These are gripes, for sure, but they do little to change my overall opinion of the SoundSticks III, which is probably one of the most graceful—and affordable—designs in the history of consumer electronics. And oh yeah: it sounds excellent, too.

Audio Performance

There's nothing really new here to discuss—I'm pretty certain we are looking at the same drivers (four in each satellite) and same subwoofer that we saw in the previous model. If you are unfamiliar, however, the SoundSticks series offers more than just looks. Like most quality 2.1 speaker systems, the sub comes equipped with a volume knob to boost or dial back the bass response, and like most subs, it performs most naturally with the volume set just at, or a little below, the halfway point. While the placement of the knob annoys me, the argument can easily be made that this is a setting you adjust once or twice and then probably never again, so it's a tolerable annoyance. At this setting, not even the Knife's "Silent Shout" (a bass-heavy song that often humbles modest subwoofers) distorts at maximum volume. Boost the sub to max, and yes, distortion artifacts appear, but this is not really the way music should be listened to—the low end, when at maximum volume, is far too intense to offer a balanced mix. Perhaps some listeners will like a heavier subwoofer setting for movies, but whether you're listening to classical, acoustic, rock, rap, or jazz, the SoundSticks III, with the sub set at reasonable levels, offers a splendidly crisp audio experience with generous, well-defined low-end.

Thanks to its stellar audio performance, the SoundSticks III retains the Editors' Choice for sub-\$200 PC speakers we once bestowed upon the SoundSticks II. The good looks are simply an added bonus. If you seek audio performance and style on a grander scale—at least monetarily—check out [B&W's MM-1](#) computer speakers (\$499.95, 4 stars). That system lacks a sub, but still packs plenty of low-end power. If looks are less of a priority and sound is your primary focus, the far-more-expensive [Focal XS](#) (\$599, 4 stars) is one of the best 2.1 PC speaker systems available. In the realm of the affordable, however, it's hard to go wrong with Harman Kardon's classic.

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