

Apple's HomePod Mini review: Attractive price, more useful than Google speakers

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Apple is late to the consumer priced smart speaker market, but it finally joined Amazon and Google with the \$99 HomePod Mini.

Here's what you need to know: The Mini is way smaller in size than both the new Amazon Echo fourth generation [speaker](#) and Google Nest Audio. And while it doesn't sound as great for [music](#) as either of them, (it is way smaller, after all) in our unscientific home ears test, it probably doesn't matter. This is a really useful speaker for anyone living in the Apple ecosystem and it makes the Siri personal assistant way more competitive with Amazon's Alexa and the Google Assistant.

The HomePod Mini sounds fantastic as a TV speaker. More on that in a minute.

One big selling point: you don't have to worry about Apple's speakers spying on you, as Apple has a different privacy policy than Google and Amazon. The company is not in the business of selling you personalized ads, so it's less likely to be recording you and storing the audio on its servers—something Google and Amazon both do.

Apple first entered the smart speaker market in 2018 with the original HomePod, first priced at \$349, but dogged by complaints that the speaker did little more than just play music. It was dwarfed by sales of Amazon's Echo, the No. 1 best-selling smart speaker, and what was originally called the Google Home (now Nest Audio.)

If you live in an Apple eco-universe, as so many of us do, you'll really appreciate some of the Mini features.

- With the HomePod Mini, you can dictate texts to send to contacts. Alexa and Google can't do that. (None can read back your latest email or let you dictate new ones, which seems like such an obvious feature to add.)

- If you lose your iPhone, not an uncommon problem, the HomePod will send a tone to the phone that won't stop until you find it.
- You can ditch the TV soundbar, buy two HomePod Minis and connect them to your TV, via the Apple TV (\$149 or \$179) streaming box. Amazon can do that with Echo speakers, granted that you have a Fire TV streaming stick (\$25-\$50) or the \$119 Fire TV Cube device for hands-free TV navigation. With Google it's possible, but not as a stereo pair, just basic speakers.

Apple's advantage is that through Apple TV, you get access to a wider array of streaming services than with Amazon, which hasn't offered HBO Max since it debuted in May, or NBC's Peacock, which opened for business in July. (Amazon shifted gears Monday, and said it would start offering Max on Tuesday.)

Because TV sound is so tinny in nature, having the extra audio by the side of the bed to listen, instead of having the sound come from the other side of the room from the soundbar or TV speaker is a really nice home theater like addition, and is just a no brainer. I listened to snakes hiss in the old "Raiders of the Lost Ark" movie that frankly I wouldn't have heard if I wasn't going through the speakers.

Some caveats to know: Remember that many of the Mini music features touted on Apple's website will require a \$9.99 monthly subscription to Apple Music. Asking Siri to play a Drake playlist or great songs from the 90s won't get you very far unless you do subscribe.

Beyond Apple Music, the Mini plays music from Pandora, iHeartRadio and TuneIn radio. Missing: Spotify, the world's most popular music streamer, YouTube Music, Amazon Music and many others.

The HomePod Mini is expected to be one of the big sellers for the

holiday, ("Would you like a Mini with that new iPhone?") based on its size, economical price and with over 1 billion people using Apple mobile devices, who wouldn't want a speaker to listen to music and podcasts seamlessly? You can be playing "Talking Tech" from your phone in the car, get home, pause it, and ask Siri to resume on the HomePod.

Which one to buy, Pod, Echo or Nest? It really depends on which ecosystem you feel comfortable in. The Nest is the best sounding of the three to these ears, but as good as that is, do you want a Google device in your home listening to and recording your conversations? (Google, as does Amazon, says it only does this when it hears the "Hey Google" or "Alexa" wake word, but any conversation that casually mentions Google or Alexa can be recorded, stored and mined.)

If you don't subscribe to Apple Music, are you going to be comfortable with a smart speaker that's optimized for that service? Are you willing to switch from Spotify?

Are you in an Amazon home, with Amazon Fire TV streaming, perhaps a Fire TV edition television, where everything is all about Alexa? In that case, you'd probably want the new Echo, if you felt the need to upgrade.

The Amazon and Google 2020 editions sport improved audio, while HomePod Mini's best improvements are smarts. If you do buy any of these brands, some friendly words of advice: not that long ago, in far away audio galaxy, people bought speakers in pairs, left and right, for great stereo sound. Don't skimp on just buying one of these babies. It takes two to tango after all.

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