

# The Apple Home Theater

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[May 25th 2022](#)

*The potential for HomePods all over the place is real.*



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Not so long ago, Apple announced that the HomePod (the big one, not the mini), supports a ‘home theater’ mode with support for Dolby 5.1 and 7.1 Atmos when paired with the Apple TV. Also, not so long ago, they announced it would be discontinued 😓.

Even though I currently have a Dolby Atmos-enabled soundbar, this got me curious for these reasons:

First, and most importantly, I was tired of using multiple different remotes and constantly fiddling with settings, so I liked the idea of a more simplified integration with Apple TV.

I also had heard that the sound quality on the HomePods is excellent in general and wanted to see whether the Dolby Atmos was on par with my soundbar.

So, after about a year or so with it, I'd have to say that Apple has lived up to my expectations with the pair of HomePod speakers I bought near the end of their life. I wanted to take this time to share my thoughts on the HomePods and how they compare to my Atmos soundbar.

Even though HomePods 'OG' version is discontinued, but I can't help but to be left with the thought: "what if Apple devoted more of its speaker ecosystem to HomePods?" "What if you could add HomePod minis in other parts of your room to get true surround sound?" The potential for (1) amazing sound, (2) Apple's seamless integration of hardware and software with its services, and (3) much better color quality and rendition (at least from my Apple TV setup) compared to any other device (e.g. native 'Smart TV' apps, Chromecast, FireTV, Roku), makes me think Apple and Apple TV users would really benefit from this kind of 'Apple Home Theater' offering.

To support the argument for an Apple Home Theater from at least an audio perspective, here's a few of my notes on the HomePod speakers when compared to my Dolby Atmos Soundbar.

Currently you can use at most two HomePods for home theater mode with the Apple TV. So, to get the full experience so I decided to get two HomePods and try it out.

After setting up both HomePods via the directions on their site, I compared the sound output of both the HomePods and my Samsung Atmos-enabled HW-K850 soundbar. To be clear, this was not meant to be an exhaustive scientific test, but I wanted to test a few use cases right away:

- (Obviously) Cinema sounds
- Streaming Music
- Streaming YouTube

For the cinematic sounds, I chose 3 short approximately 2 minute clips:

- Mandalorian Season 2 Trailer (Disney+, Atmos)
- Mad Max Fury Road Intro (Apple Movies Purchase, Atmos)
- Harry Potter and the Order of Pheonix Segment (Apple Movies Purchase, starting at around 9m)

For the Mandalorian Season 2 trailer, there were a few things I noticed right away when comparing them a few times:

- Could hear more details of various sounds on HomePods
- The HomePods surround sound was on par if not better in comparison
- The Samsung soundbar could get louder and more powerful in general. The subwoofer helped with bass-heavy scenes though the HomePod's bass was surprisingly good.

For the Mad Max intro, I actually forgot how sound-heavy it was so it was a perfect example to test with. After comparing both of those for a few times, I'd say my experience was largely consistent with one additional note.

The Atmos effect was so pronounced on the HomePods for one sound that I had to play it back a few times to re-assure myself that it wasn't actually a noise coming from behind me from something real. I didn't get this same feeling from the Samsung soundbar.

Finally, for the Harry Potter and the Order of Pheonix segment, I chose a segment starting at approximately 9m. This segment contained some nice cinematic music combined with some nice surround sound effects and ended with a bass-heavy scene of 12 Grimmauld Place opening up. So even though this was a non-Atmos movie, I thought it would be a fun test because was very familiar with the scene and how it sounds on a variety of sound systems.

After comparing them a few times my thoughts were largely aligned with the other two tests with one addition: the cinematic music quite a bit clearer and brighter sounding which added to the positive experience.

Moving on to the streaming music and video, my wife chose a pop song, Ariana Grande's Moonlight, and I chose a classical piece: Mozart's 26th piano concerto as well as using YouTube to stream various old opera pieces and videos. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the HomePods did significantly better in this space as they were specifically designed for music from the start. I'd say easiest way for me to describe the difference between the soundbar and the HomePods was that the HomePods made it seem like the instruments and voices were actually in the room vs.

coming out of a speaker.

So to sum up, I was quite impressed with the HomePods in terms of sound quality. The soundbar and the HomePods both provided a very high quality experience with rich, distinct surround sound, though the soundbar excelled in power and bass adding to the cinematic effect and the HomePods excelled in terms of sound quality, clarity, and in some cases Atmos sound experience.

The impressive sound quality coupled with the fact that the HomePods:

- Integrates seamlessly with the Apple TV: I use just one remote now
- Take up less space than the soundbar
- It's so easy to hand off music via Airplay to the HomePods

makes me tempted to stick with this setup for the long haul. This decision does however come with one major drawback: you can't use the HomePods as audio for other devices you may have connected to your TV (e.g. a game console). In my case I don't have other devices, and I use Apple TV with their apps as my primary source of entertainment, but I could see this being an easy deal breaker if you use multiple inputs regularly.

If you're in the market for an Apple Home Theater, it doesn't really exist now, but the HomePods + AppleTV setup gets close and shows the potential it has.