Getting the silent treatment from your TV? You don’t have to take it anymore

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Today's flat-panel TV sets have bright, detailed pictures. They look great even when not operating, as a result of thin profiles and disappearing bezels. And, they connect so easily to the Internet, Skype, and BluRay players that they easily serve as the entertainment hub for today's media-savvy consumers. But, sadly, unless you've hooked it up to an external sound system (a sound bar at the very least), you're probably listening to awful audio. That's the norm for today's inexpensive flat-panel TVs -- even the largest of the bunch. As a long-time audio engineer and sometime audiophile, it amazes me that consumers put up with this. What’s more, they don’t have to!

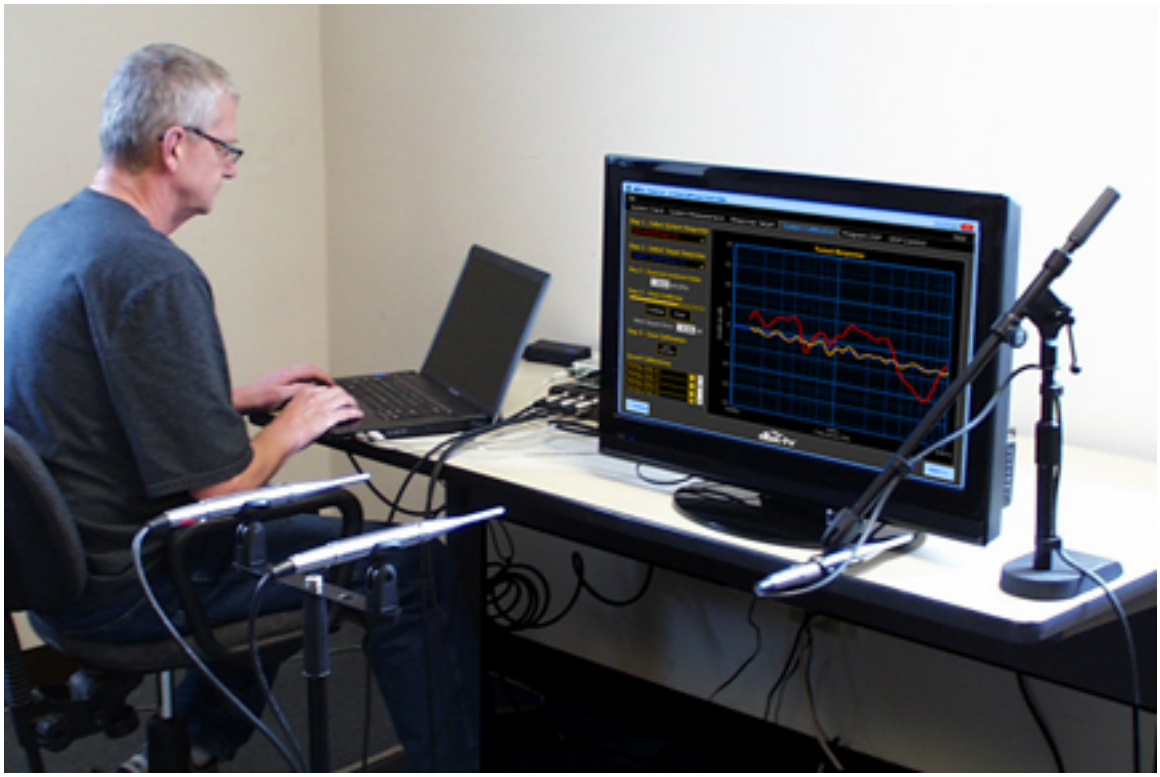
Of course, sound is, and has always been, an integral part of entertainment. Take, for example, "The Artist" -- the "silent" film chosen as this year's Best Picture winner at the Academy Awards. With no audible dialogue (well, there are two words spoken – you'll have to watch the movie to learn which ones), the music for The Artist takes on a whole new

dimension, conveying every word, emotion, nuance and direction of the story. Ludovic Bource's lush sound track, which also won the Oscar for Music (Original Score), becomes part of the story itself and is essential to the film and the overall viewing experience. Yes, even in a "silent" film, sound is critically important.

So, what's going on with audio in TV sets? Set makers primarily seem to focus on the picture and the "style" of the set. After all, it's a piece of (modern) furniture that graces our homes, so no wonder there's a rush to be a sleeker, thinner, stylish picture window into another world. But, these physical attributes make it much more difficult to include speakers big enough to deliver anything but the most rudimentary of audio performance. Speakers are tiny (<2" is the norm!), and either down-or rear-firing. They're often mounted in free air rather than in a baffle of any sort. The power amps are universally low-power switching IC types. As a result, the sound lacks real bass, is severely limited in loudness, and produces a fuzzy, narrow image…nothing at all like "home theatre" in any aspect other than the picture.

Of course, it's also tough to compare the sound of differing TV sets in your local chain store’s "wall of TVs". The sound is usually turned off on all but one or two of the sets, and it’s difficult to find educated salespeople that can answer audio questions specifically. So, most consumers judge sets on price, size, style, and picture quality. They don't know how bad the new set sounds until they get it home, but by that point it’s too late.

What's a consumer to do? Until recently, the way to solve this problem was to add external speakers and a separate sound system. But, that's expensive and cumbersome. Fortunately, advances in DSP audio technology can now enable manufacturers to affordably and quickly calibrate any TV to deliver the best possible sonic experience from its own built-in speakers. While no amount of DSP will repeal the laws of physics, clever processing can make a surprising improvement in the sound of small built-in speakers, making them sound like much larger, better-placed ones that can keep up with the picture.



For example, At CES 2012, dbx-tv debuted Total Cal, an audio measurement and calibration tool that custom-optimizes TV sound regardless of speaker size or price point. Total Cal, used in the lab, pairs with dbx-tv’s Total Sonics audio software suite running in the TV set. Together this technology enables TV manufacturers to quickly and easily coax richer bass, crisper highs, and immersive 3D sound from all the sets in their product line. Total Cal automatically tunes Total Sonics' parameters to achieve the best possible sound for each specific TV model. And, it does this in mere minutes with a minimum of user interaction.

It's time for consumers to speak up! Let manufacturers know that they need to provide exceptional TV sound as well as pictures so that consumers can enjoy the high-performance TV-listening experience they want and deserve.

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