

FOCUS AUDIO FS688

It should probably come as no surprise that some small speakers have large price tags...or that expensive speakers can be small. The original Totem Model One made that clear for a lot of audiophiles, and since then upscale speakers have come in different shapes and sizes. This is one of the smallest ones, though not, as we shall see, one of the least capable.

You look at this small speaker, and you figure you could buy it for its look alone. The piano walnut finish must be seen to be appreciated. Fit and finish is meticulous. For example, note the flared vent at the rear of the enclosure, and run a finger nail over its edge, to find where the enclosure leaves off and the port tube begins. You won't. In the time we had the FS688 around our office, no one who saw it failed to exclaim on its sheer beauty. And you know what? When we told them it cost C\$4000 a pair, no one so much as raised an eyebrow.

But be assured that the money wasn't spent exclusively on veneer and lacquer.

Take the drivers. The Eton woofer isn't large, just 14 cm across, but it is an expensive one, with a stiff cone

made of two layers of Kevlar with a Nomex honeycomb between them. The Scanspeak Revelator tweeter is the same one used in the magnificent Living Voice Avatar OBX-R speakers reviewed in our last issue. The capacitors are expensive Multicaps. Internal wiring is silver Litz wire from Cardas, whose copper binding posts and jumpers are also used.

Keeping a small cabinet from ringing is easier than doing it with a large one — and that is but one of the advantages of going small — but it's still an effort, and on the evidence Focus Audio has gone to the trouble. Tapping various parts of the enclosure revealed no obvious weaknesses.

The sensitivity figure, 85 dB according to the manufacturer, is much lower than that of most speakers made today.

Surprisingly small, surprisingly beautiful, surprisingly desirable

This is not the speaker to choose to accompany a timid amplifier.

Our speakers were already well broken in (we picked them up at the end of the Montreal show), and we gave them only another 10 hours or so before bringing them into our Alpha room. We placed them on the superb Foundation stands you can see in the picture across. They look good that way...no surprise, since Foundation is a division of none other than Focus Audio.

As with the other speakers, we picked a stack of LPs for this review. We began with the *Olympic Fanfare* from Dave Wilson's old *Center Stage* album. Could this diminutive speaker handle the barrage of brass and tympani?

Yes in the case of the brass, at least. The horns were brash and dissonant, with great energy and power, but with plausible timbres. We had no difficulty listening through the louder instruments to hear everything that was going on. Albert and Gerard both used the word "refined," and Reine thought the speaker was made to order for this music.

Well...except perhaps for the very bottom of the frequency range. The Focus reproduced the impact of the tympani quite well, with a fast, energetic and well-controlled attack, but of course without the earth-shaking boom of larger speakers. The sound was by no means unbalanced, though Albert wondered allowed whether Focus made a subwoofer (the answer for the moment is no).

We could already anticipate that the Focus would do well with the intricate and subtle harp piece, *Vers une source dans le bois* (Reference Recordings RR-7). How could it have done otherwise? Gerard wrote but one word: "perfection."

The sentiment was unanimous. The cascades of notes from Susann McDonald's fingers (does she really have only 10?) was at once charming and dazzling. Some of those notes are the result of a mere touch, and their discreet sound is responsible for much of the magic in this astonishing piece.

Not all of the notes are that subtle, though. Some powerful arpeggios come to remind us that the classical harp's sound board can rival that of a grand

piano for sheer size. They are not only loud but deep. There were no comments about the low frequency behavior of these speakers. Perfection indeed!

But how well would the Focus do under stress at the other end of the spectrum. We know the Revelator tweeter well, since it is used on the Living Voice speaker which earned a glowing review in our last issue. It is a very good tweeter, as we noted, though it is sensitive to speaker placement, and it can sound uncomfortably sharp under some circumstances.

One likely circumstance is the introduction of Walton's *Façade* (RR-16), which includes in its rapid mix a piccolo that rises where few instruments dare to go. We *know* it shouldn't sound shrill, because we have (rarely) heard it play perfectly, but when we have it has rarely been from a dome tweeter.

This was no exception. The highest piccolo notes were rather too forward, and the piccolo was difficult to separate from the clarinet in the passage that followed. That was only a fleeting problem, fortunately, and we noted that the flute (which of course doesn't climb to quite the same nosebleed heights) suffered from no such problem. Nor did the other varied instruments, whose distinctive timbres were reproduced with...well, we used the word *refinement* once again. The clarinet and the bassoon were especially warm and rich, and the snare drum had a satisfying snap that was attention-getting without seeming forced or unnatural. The castanets seemed farther away but no less clear for that, thus helping to underline another of the speaker's characteristics: the depth goes from *over here* to *way back there*.

However the sound of individual instruments is not the whole story. Walton wrote intricate counterpoints for combinations of instruments, each having a different mood. We were delighted to find how well the combinations emerged from these speakers, and how evident each mood change was. This is pretty much how this recording should be reproduced.

Female voices are a challenge for speakers as well. We turned to a classic direct-cut album: *West of Oz* (on Sheffield), from which we selected the



ballad *Gossamer*. With barely a reservation, we judged that the Focus passed the test with full honors. Despite a slight but noticeable accentuation of sibilance, Amanda McBroom's voice was hauntingly present, warm, and expressive. "I like the way she moves up and down

between two octaves," said Gerard. "It makes me want to sing with her."

The accompanying instruments sounded superb as well. Indeed, from the first notes of Lincoln Mayorga's piano we knew we were in for a good time. We all noted the authoritative presence of the electric bass, and the delightful additions of the many percussive instruments. Needless to say, the rhythm worked too. Should we take that for granted? We know better.

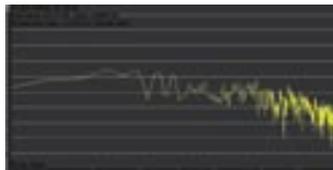
Having had a taste of this speaker's ability to project convincing depth, we were looking forward to *Jazz at the Pawnshop* (Proprius 7778-79), with its well-captured 3-D sound field. And we were right.

Where to begin? With the crowd sound, of course, since this is a live recording done in a pub, where sobriety is a goal that must be checked at the door. The Focus speakers projected a convincing approximation of surround sound. And then...the smooth, lyrical clarinet, the liquid vibraphone, the magnificent piano, the percussion. And the *transparency*. Even during a solo, you can feel the presence of the other musicians. For example, while the clarinet is playing, there is an accompanying passage on the snare drum. You can shift your attention to the snare and it seems to come to the foreground, as it would in real life.

The piece, *Limehouse Blues*, ends with enthusiastic applause, and even *that* sounded remarkable. Reine deplored that she was 27 years too late to go down to the Stampen pub and take in a set by these musicians.

The speaker did well with our *Secret of the Andes* disc, rendering the various percussion instruments with nicely heterogeneous timbres, with no characteristic cabinet resonance to blur their identities. Nor did anything mess up the stereo image, which was unusually precise. Overall tonal balance was excellent, with no hardness at the top, and surprising bottom end punch. The kick drum, for instance, came out way better than you would guess from looking at these diminutive speakers. Of course by now we were used to them sounding much bigger than they look.

Naturally, music must be more than the sum of its parts. What pleased us



at reference level (100 dB at 1 meter), shown above left. It's reasonably good, with a recognizable shape, though with risers that show signs of a minor phase error.

most about the Focus Signature was the way all the elements coalesced into a pleasing musical entity. "Flawless," said Reine.

You wouldn't expect a speaker this size to rock, but this one can. On *Dark Side of the Moon*, it showed no sign of running out of energy, despite our optimistic twists of the volume control. The space thrown up was huge, and the countless layers of music were peeled back so we could hear them all. The guitars were much clearer and more natural than with our reference speakers.

Of course the infrasonic "heartbeat" in the *Time* sequence didn't have quite the same impact, but even there we were favorably surprised. We exited the ses-

sion with broad smiles on our faces.

We ran the usual battery of tests, starting with a 100 Hz square wave,

SUMMING IT UP...

Brand/model: Focus Audio FS688

Price: C\$3999/US\$2600)

Dimensions: 33 x 18 x 25.5 cm

Impedance: 8 ohms

Sensitivity: 85 dB

Most liked: Transparent, sophisticated sound...and great looks

Least liked: May be too crisp in some rooms

Verdict: High price per kilo, low price per thrill

The frequency response (middle graph) is quite good, though with some anomalies in the upper midrange. Response in the lower regions is very good: a 30 Hz tone is shown in the graph at right. It isn't perfect, but it's much better than most other small speakers can handle. At our 100 dB reference level, however, things get worse between 40 Hz and 150 Hz, because air movement in the small rear port crepitates alarmingly. This is of course much less evident on music than on pure tones.

Focus Audio has put together a speaker that looks rich and gorgeous. The best we can tell you about it is that what you see is a foretaste of what you'll hear.



CROSSTALK

These Focus speakers deserve to be recommended. They brought me into a sonic universe that seduced me from the first. Through these speakers, the image is stunning, and the dynamic palette has the breadth you dream of.

I loved the lower midrange too. A possible lightness in the extreme bottom end is compensated by the sharp attacks and the energetic impact. The strings are rich harmonically. Human voices, save for a slightly "acid" tone at the very top, come through with a certain warmth that avoids the trap of "improving" on nature. The piano startled me from its first notes, and the pleasure continued undiminished throughout the piece. There's a multitude of detail in the timbres, in the percussive effects, in the other charming effects that are not without refinement, in the excellent reproduction of varying ambience, and even in applause, which took on a realism few speakers manage. In short, what we have here are good speakers.

And suppose they made you want to pull out recordings you hadn't listened to in a long time because their sound didn't please you. Trust them, and try it. You may, like me, overlook their minor flaws and let yourself

be won over completely.

—Reine Lessard

Remember when you were in school and some kid always had the right answer ready — as if he or she knew what the question was going to be? (If you *were* that kid, skip forward, you already know where I'm heading.)

Well, that kid grew up and ended up designing these speakers. They seem to *know* what music is going to play before it starts and, what is more amazing, what's really important for you to hear.

They definitely have solid bass, but they're not subwoofers, and I would match them with one from the start if they were to reside in a large space. That said, what I enjoyed most was discovering new sounds and nuances, complex yet transparent textures where I thought I knew what to expect. That surprise effect, repeated with every selection, is usually the sign that a very good component has been introduced into a system.

And when the midrange sounds so richly full and mellow and space opens up in such a way that you know you're *there*, it's usually

the sign of an exceptional component.

It's not easy but you can now thank that kid.

—Albert Simon

I've had too much experience with very small speakers to scoff just because a speaker is at once tiny and expensive. The fact is that big speakers are up against a bigger challenge than small ones. But I could have been tempted to suppose that, in the case of these pretty speakers, a lot of your hard-earned money was going to a cabinetmaker rather than to a designer.

But not all of it, and that's for sure. What does the Focus speaker do right that others don't? What we hear as "sophistication" is the product of the speaker's ability to reproduce extremely tiny signals without grossly coloring them. It means not only reproducing those sounds, but also not covering them up with the crude artifacts too many speakers produce. And I use the word "crude" advisedly.

It's amazing that this small, attractive speaker can play so loud. What's *really* amazing is how good it sounds when it's not.

—Gerard Rejskind