

## Product Review...

### Focus Audio

### Signature FS-888 Loudspeakers

August 2003



The first time I encountered a Focus Audio loudspeaker was back in 1997, when I was working at *Stereophile's* HQ, in Santa Fe. John Atkinson walked into my office one morning (my office was the room outside *his* office, so this was not unusual) and announced, "You know those loudspeakers we edited *Rhapsody* on? Well, the company just informed me they've improved 'em."

"Oh, really?" I'd had these conversations with John before. I knew that the least display of interest would result in more work for me.

"Yep. I need you to write a follow-up on 'em."

See what I mean?

"And I need the copy by Tuesday."

My chagrin at being caught in John's assigning-editor net was soon tempered by my delight at the speaker's performance. The FS-88 looked great and sounded even better. It had oodles of bass, tons of detail, and a musical presentation that had me spinning CDs and records deep into the night. It turned out to be one of the most enjoyable assignments Mr. Atkinson ever threw my way.

Fast-forward five years. Doug Schneider called me one afternoon from *SoundStage!* HQ, deep in the great white north. "Wes, there's a speaker I really think you ought to hear."

My slacker instincts, well-honed by additional years of work avoidance, immediately kicked in. "Oh, really?"

You can guess the rest. Shortly thereafter, the Focus Audio Signature FS-888s were delivered to my house.

It took a while to rotate the 888s into my system (I really *am* a slow learner), but once I had—*Bam! Pow! Right in the kisser!*

### Give us grace to persevere

Since my initial experience with Focus Audio's products, the

company has maintained a low profile—in North America, at least. When the market over here went all wonky in the late '90s, the company concentrated on its distribution channels in Asia, where it did extremely well. Now the Canadian company is ready for another serious foray into the daunting North American market.



The FS-88 was a floorstanding three-way speaker with a side-firing 11" woofer à la NHT's 3.3. The top-of-the-line Signature FS-888 is a completely new design—a two-way floorstander with a 1.125" Scan-Speak Revelator soft-dome tweeter mated to two front-firing 7" Nomex-Kevlar midrange-woofers.

But before any of that makes an impact, you notice the cabinet. It's scrumptious! Tall and thin (46"H x 9"W x 14"D), it's available in two flavors: lustrous black lacquer or a richly burled, almost blindingly glossy, lacquered tiger maple (which is how my demo pair were clad). The cabinet is made of 1" MDF—the baffle is 2" MDF—and is rigidly braced and meticulously damped. The baffle's edges are beveled to reduce its profile (presumably to improve dispersion). The cabinet's flared, rear-firing port is *huge*—3" in diameter and 4" deep. The inset terminal panel sports two pairs of oxygen-free, tellurium-copper five-way binding posts from Cardas. Threaded spikes of hardened steel are supplied, as are mounting plates designed to give the speakers larger "feet."

The crossover is a minimal second-order design augmented by a Zobel impedance-matching network. All filter parts are of extremely high quality, and components are hardwired point-to-point with Cardas Litz wire and silver solder. The FS-888's sensitivity is specified as 90dB/W/m. Thanks to the Zobel filter, the speaker is a flat 4-ohm load.

The FS-888 is as gorgeously outfitted as any speaker I've auditioned, and its component parts have exalted pedigrees—precisely what you'd expect from a model that retails for \$6750/pair.

### The means of grace, and for the hope of glory

The Signature FS-888 did not prove to be a difficult load to drive, but its 90dB sensitivity does not recommend it for use with low-output amplifiers. Focus recommends using between 50W and 500W—I'd say 50W would be adequate in small rooms at reasonable volumes, but these days watts are cheap, as Jim Thiel is wont to observe. Neither the 150W Ayre V-5x nor the 300W Musical Fidelity Tri-Vista integrated had any problems controlling the 888s. Other components used in the audition included McCormack's MAP-1, MF's Tri-Vista SACD player, Ayre's CX-7 CD player, and Shunyata Research's Aries interconnects and Lyra speaker cables.

I did have to experiment quite a bit to determine the best positions for the 888, however. I ended up with them about 42" from the front wall—not too different from the placement of quite a few other speakers I've auditioned in my room—but getting the speaker/sidewall interface to click proved a bit trickier. To some extent, this was a result of my listening room's asymmetry, but the Focuses also seemed to require a bit more distance from the side boundary (or, failing that, mild toe-in) than most of the speakers I've auditioned recently.

I also found that I needed to sit a little farther back from the 888s than I normally do—or else employ a small degree of toe-in. A *small* amount, mind you, only a few degrees; no more than 12 degrees off straight-ahead, tops.

All this means is that you should persevere in getting that ratio of bass extension to precise imaging to click into sharp focus. The FS-888 didn't have the spectacular 22Hz bottom end that so impressed me in the FS-88 (that 11" woofer *really* moved air), but, on the plus side, the new Focus probably won't boom in most rooms. That said, it's worth the effort involved to get the best out of the speaker's 30Hz pedal point. When you do, you'll be rewarded with tight, tuneful bass that sounds impressively deep.

### The face of a Venus, the brains of a Minerva, the grace of Terpsichore

After all those hems and haws about the bass, it might surprise you that its bass was one of the attributes of the Signature FS-888 that I found myself enjoying most. No, the speaker didn't dig as deep as, say, the Dynaudio Evidence Temptation, but it had almost precisely the same low-end character as the Wilson Audio Sophia: tight, punchy, dynamic, and driving. And, as I did with the Sophia, I found myself seeking out discs with propulsive bass lines—Carla Bley's

*Looking for America* [WATT/31], for example, which struts along motored by Steve Swallow's high-fret fireworks. The 888 captured Swallow's unique blend of silky smoothness and kick-in-the-pants punch with U-R-there precision.

That's not a simple task—Swallow is a phenomenally clean player who hits every note spot on, clean, and on pitch. The slightest bit of muddiness or bloom added to his sound shatters the illusion that he's there, or maybe that *you're* there, or there's *here*, or—oh heck, you know what I mean.

The bottom end blended seamlessly into the 888's nothing-added, nothing-missing midrange. There's not much to say about the middle band, other than that the speaker "disappeared" entirely. First-rate string-laden discs, such as Telarc's extraordinary *Rainbow Body* [SACD-60596], possessed a purity and airiness that took my breath away time and time again.

The ability of the FS-888s to place the Atlanta Symphony in a wide, deep, richly layered soundstage was beyond criticism. If you're into 3D sound, the Focuses need to leap to the top of your must-audition list.

Then there was the speaker's top end. Wow! Focus has clearly been honing its chops, because the highs were sweet, completely balanced, and full of detail without sounding the slightest bit forward. Overtones seemed to pop off the strings on Kaki King's explosive acoustic guitar outing, *Everybody Loves You* [Velour VEL-0302]. Her playing style combines plucking, tapping, hammering-on, and a whole flurry of things flamenco guitarists probably have words for and I don't. But Ms. King's style depends on the *zing* inherent in her percussive approach to the strings, and the FS-888 captured that aliveness impressively.

The Focus Audio Signature FS-888 is a *very* impressive loudspeaker.

### When many beauties grace a poem, I shall not take offence at a few faults

Considering that I had to move a pair of Wilson Audio Sophias onto the landing of my staircase in order to make room for the Focus Audio Signature FS-888s in my listening room, the Sophias seemed the logical choice for comparison. At \$11,700/pair, the Sophias cost nearly three-quarters again as much as the 888s—in a reasonable world, they *ought* to be better.

Using Bley's *Looking for America* to compare the two speakers, I found them pretty close. Both captured Swallow's finger-pop and sassy strut. Both captured the big band's rich overtones and brassy blat. Both pairs were nearly holographic in their soundstaging and imaging. But the Sophia captured the dynamic play of music from instant to instant with more detail and variation than did the FS-888. This is the quality called "pace," and few speakers capture it down to the last microdetail, as the Sophia does. The FS-888 came close—*really* close. Close enough that the conclusion in my review of the Sophia—"name a loudspeaker that comes close to the same performance that's cheaper"—now has an answer: the Focus Audio FS-888.

### **The light of love, the purity of grace**

The Focus Audio Signature FS-888 is an outstanding loudspeaker. Great looks, great sound, and—at least in high-

end audio terms—great value. It ain't cheap and it ain't perfect, but it exists on that elevated plain of diminishing returns from which the ascent to the next level is possible only with a hefty price increase. I could happily live with 'em and never feel deprived. In fact, I'd feel blessed.

It's almost enough to make me look forward to the next time one of my editors gets that commissioning gleam in his eye and sings out, "Oh We-es, there's this speaker I want you to listen to . . ."

If it involves anything from Focus Audio, I know exactly how to respond.

*"Bring it on!"*

...Wes Phillips  
wes@onhifi.com

**Focus Audio Signature FS-888 Loudspeakers**

Price:

**\$6750 USD per pair.**

Warranty:

**Five years parts and labor.**

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