

Focus Audio MT1 / MC1 / FS-68 Home-Theater Speaker System

March 2002

By: Roger Kanno
roger@hometheatersound.com



Left to Right: MC1 / FS-68

Focus Audio made quite a name for itself a few years back with the highly regarded model FS-88 loudspeaker. A relatively large three-way floorstander, the FS-88 went through several iterations as the flagship of the company's Signature Series speakers. Listener's reported a smooth-sounding, full-range loudspeaker with build-quality to die for. The Signature Series also included the smaller FS-78, and the FS-68 bookshelf speaker reviewed here.

Both the FS-78 and FS-88 are now discontinued, leaving the FS-68 as the only current member of that esteemed series. But Focus Audio is now producing a *new* lineup. The floorstanding MT1 and MC1 center-channel speakers, which are both part of their new Multichannel Series, are aimed squarely at high-resolution surround sound. The trio of the MT1, MC1, and FS-68 were chosen for *Home Theater & Sound* to review, primarily because Focus Audio designer Kam Leung thought them to be exceptionally matched as a system. I pressed a Paradigm PW-2200 into service to handle the LFE channel, and away we went.

Description

The Focus Audio speakers are finished in a *very* attractive piano-black finish. The cabinets feature 2"-thick front baffles and 1"-thick side walls, which results in quite inert construction. The cabinets do appear to be *very* well braced, as they are exceptionally sturdy. The MT1 and MC1 each use two 5.5" Nomex/Kevlar bass/midrange units sourced from Germany and a 1.125" soft-dome tweeter from Denmark. According to Kam Leung of Focus Audio, two smaller drivers allow for higher power handling than one larger unit—a necessity for home-theater applications.

The drive units are all matched to within +/- .25dB. Crossover components utilize polypropylene and polystyrene capacitors with "ultra-purity" copper coils, and are tested to be within a 1% tolerance. Silver solder is used throughout each loudspeaker for all internal connections.

The MT1 is a diminutive floorstander with a small footprint. The MC1 is similar in appearance and dimensions to the MT1, except that the tweeter is situated between the two bass/midrange drivers. It is designed to be oriented on its side, on top of, or beneath a monitor. Manufacturer-rated sensitivity is 89dB with a nominal impedance of 4 ohms for both the MT1 and MC1, while Focus Audio states frequency response that extends down to 40Hz for the MT1 and 45Hz for the MC1. Both the MT1 and MC1 feature Cardas high-purity-copper binding posts.

The FS-68s supplied as surrounds are small bookshelf speakers that seemed even sturdier and more solidly constructed than the Multichannel Series, which is quite an accomplishment, given the extremely high build quality all the speakers possess. They use a similar 5.5" bass/midrange driver, but the Scan-Speak tweeter is slightly smaller at exactly 1" and it is offset from the center of the speaker cabinet. The FS-68 has a rated sensitivity of 86dB and a nominal impedance of 8 ohms. Like the MT1, its frequency response extends down to 45Hz.

The Focus Audio speakers assembled here are not the most expensive speakers on the market, but they are still *very* expensive by most standards. Suggested retail pricing for the system as you see it here is \$7695 USD, and that does not include a subwoofer.

The sound

I used the Focus Audio speakers to replace those in my reference home-theater system, which meant I listened to both multichannel and two-channel sources. Although I enjoyed this system immensely, after listening to it for some time, I found that I could not easily describe its sound. It was not until after I began comparisons with other speakers, using different source components, that I realized that the Focus speakers have *very little* sonic signature of their own and that what I had been hearing was a transparent sound that was very revealing of the other components in the system.

The sound I was able to obtain from the Focus Audio system was accurate and clean. Although the lowest octave was a bit lean, the bass that was reproduced was tight and responsive. The Focus speakers reproduced instruments and vocals with great clarity and managed to maintain a smooth, natural ease in their presentation. The Eagles' *Hell Freezes Over* on DVD has a wonderfully recorded DTS surround presentation that is impressive even on modest speaker systems, but the Focus Audio system added yet another dimension to it. The soundstage was deep and the well-recorded guitars exhibited a sparkling quality. Glenn Frey and Don Henley's vocals were especially smooth and natural sounding. The Focus speakers presented a relaxed, coherent 360° soundstage.

And talk about coherent! Panning from left to right and front to back was nearly seamless. The many motorcycle, automobile, and helicopter fly-bys in chapter 14, "Race Against Time" from *Mission: Impossible 2* were executed flawlessly—the sound moved effortlessly among the five speakers. It never became harsh or bright, even at the high playback levels required for a realistic home-theater experience. And while the speakers could be made to distort—like with the massive amounts of bass present on "Lady Marmalade" from the *Moulin Rouge* soundtrack [Interscope 0694930352]—they were able to produce *extreme* SPLs before that happened.

With such a relaxed, natural presentation, it was easy to take the Focus Audio speaker system for granted. Until, when I was watching *Runaway Bride* on DVD, it happened! It was then that I realized that these speakers were doing something *very* right. Although "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For" by U2 is not a particularly well-recorded song, it sounded wonderful during the opening credits of this film. The guitar bounced back and forth between the front speakers, the shaker imaged very precisely, and Bono's raspy vocals were spot on. Not only that, the system sounded good at very low levels, something many systems fail at.

Other songs such as Hall and Oates' "Maneater" and "You Can't Hurry Love" have rarely sounded better on a home-theater system, in my experience. The Focus Audio speakers comprised an accomplished *system* that made

few compromises when it came to music reproduction. Putting the lie to the U2 song, I *had* found what I was looking for!

As is required of an excellent home theater, the Focus Audio speakers could play loud and provide an extremely visceral experience. Scenes such as *The Haunting's* chapter 22, "It's All About Family," were startlingly frightening and gave me goose bumps when the whole room seemingly comes alive with sound. The FS-68s provided both excellent envelopment and a vivid sense of directionality.

Panning of sounds from all directions was exceptional with the low-frequency rumbling in chapter 10, "Creaking Pipes" seemingly moving all around the room and providing a well-defined sense of space. Earlier in the film, when Nell and Charlie discover the merry-go-round room, the music swirls all around and is extremely enveloping.

The MC1 center-channel speaker is a great match for the MT1s. As sounds pan across the front soundstage, the lateral integration is nearly seamless. Vocals, musical instruments, and sound effects are all well-placed among the three front speakers. All of the speakers in the system worked exceedingly well together, providing a soundfield that was nearly symmetrical in all directions.

Even at high sound-pressure levels, the Focus Audio system remained composed and smooth sounding. During the opening credits of *Gladiator*, the subtle music score and effects were open and holographic. When the horses rumbled across the screen at the beginning of the battle scene, the presentation never became harsh or compressed, despite the scene's wide dynamic range.

Musical fidelity

If the Focus Audio speakers did have any shortcomings, they were minor. Vocals could sound a *little* coarse in the midrange on Diana Krall's *All For You* [Justin Time JTR 8458-2]. And although the presentation would certainly not be described as upfront, the soundstage on recordings such as Ry Cooder's and V.M. Bhatt's *A Meeting By the River* [Water Lily Acoustics WLA-CS-29-CD] did not extend as far back behind the speakers as I have heard on this recording.



MT1

These are *minor* shortcomings and I noticed them primarily on two-channel recordings. When the Focus Audio system was used to play back movie soundtracks or multichannel recordings, the sound was impeccable. In fact, I thought that, in many instances, the limiting factor of the sound quality for home theater was the Paradigm PW-2200 subwoofer, which is not a reference-quality sub, though a very good one. In fact, when mated to the Sunfire Theater Grand II processor and Bel Canto eVo6 amplifier (review forthcoming), these speakers were able to serve as both a reference-level home-theater and two-channel music system.

Comparison

In many ways the Focus Audio system reminded me of the Mirage HDT system (\$7850, including subwoofer and external crossover). Both speaker systems have excellent dynamics and extract plenty of detail from recordings, while remaining transparent.

The Mirage HDTs were a little cleaner in the midrange, and in that respect, they could sometimes even better the performance of my reference Infinity Compositions P-FRs. The HDTs also had slightly more image specificity, especially when their midrange and treble EQ boost switches were activated. The HDTs could effortlessly float the vocals of Eva Cassidy and Holly Cole with a nearly ethereal quality. They lacked the solid bass of the larger floorstanding MT1s, however. The soundtrack for the movie *Moulin Rouge* [Interscope 0694930352], Madonna's *Ray Of Light* [Warner Bros. CDW 46847], and other bass-heavy pop recordings sounded rich and full in the bass with the MT1s, while the HDTs could sound a bit thin on their own and, in fact, required the use of a subwoofer to fully appreciate these recordings.

Nonetheless, all of these speakers, including the mains from both systems, are relatively small. This fact contributes to making them easy to place and suitable for use in rooms where space is at a premium. While the Omnipolar Mirage surrounds provided a spacious and enveloping rear soundfield, the Focus Audio FS-68s excelled at providing more directionality and a more punchy and realistic sound with better bass response. This was most noticeable on aggressively mixed DVD soundtracks such as *Saving Private Ryan* and *Star Wars Episode 1: The Phantom Menace*. Although they differed somewhat in their presentations, both of these systems provided me with some of the best home-theater sound that I have experienced in my home.

Conclusion

I truly enjoyed the sound of the Focus Audio home-theater speaker system. It was articulate and accurate without being fatiguing or harsh sounding, even at high volume levels. With a system price of \$7695, the Focus Audio speakers are quite expensive, especially when you consider that the price does not include a subwoofer. What you *do* get for that money though, is an excellent-sounding, *very* attractive speaker system. It is extremely well built, but still relatively compact, and will fit nicely into the confines and décor of almost any room. With its excellent home-theater performance and accomplished musical qualities, you have a system that deserves to be noticed.

Features:
 Piano-black finish
 Heavily braced MDF cabinets
 2"-thick front baffle & 1"-thick cabinet walls
 Scan-Speak soft-dome tweeters
 Eton Nomex/Kevlar woofers
 Crossovers use polypropylene and polystyrene capacitors
 Drivers matched to +/- 0.25dB tolerance
 Crossover components matched to within 1% tolerance
 Silver solder used on internal connections
 Cardas binding posts

Model:	MT1 speakers	MC1 center-channel speaker	FS-68 surround speakers
Price:	\$3695 USD per pair	\$1850 USD each	\$2150 USD per pair
Dimensions:	36"H x 7"W x 10"D	7"H x 24"W x 10"D	13"H x 7"W x 10"D
Weight:	42 pounds each	30 pounds	20 pounds each

System Price: \$7695 USD

Warranty: Five years parts and labor.

Focus Audio

43 Riviera Drive, Unit #10
 Markham, ON Canada
 L3R 5J6

Phone: (905) 415-8773
 Fax: (905) 415-0456
 E-mail: contact@focusaudio.ca

Website: www.focusaudio.ca

COMPANY INFO

Review System

Processor	Sunfire Theater Grand II
Amplifiers	Bel Canto eVo6, Krell KAV-300i
Sources	Pioneer DV-626D DVD player, Teac VRDS-T1 transport, MSB Link DAC III (with 24/96 Upsampling, Half Nelson, and P1000 power-supply upgrades)
Cables	Nordost, Sonic Horizon, Audio Magic, Analysis Plus, Tara Labs, ESP
Monitor	Toshiba CX32H60 direct-view monitor

Home Theater & Sound is part of the SoundStage! Network

Published by:

Schneider Publishing Inc.
 Box 20068, 390 Rideau Street,
 Ottawa, ON K1N 9N5
 Canada

**HomeTheater
 sound**

PART OF THE SoundStage! Network

www.hometheatersound.com