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Product Review

Focus Audio Signature FS-788 Loudspeakers

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Review Summary

Sound

"A rich and grand character that imbues instruments like piano and drums with a large, lifelike, and realistic sound"; "a tad warm, [but] they don't sound fat, woolly or bloated"; "down low, the '788s are weighty and quick," although there is "a little bit of upper-bass boost," while the "extreme top end is exceptionally extended and sweet."

Features

Rear-ported two-way floorstanding speaker "in drop-dead-gorgeous real-wood veneer"; uses Scan-Speak and Eton drivers crossed over "at about 2kHz"; "Focus Audio specs the FS-788's -3dB point as 35Hz, indicating fairly generous bass output."

Use

"The FS-788s have the bass output to fill a reasonably large room, but they are not the most sensitive speakers in the world, so it will take a bit of power to get them sounding their best." Doug found that the binding posts were "recessed too far, giving me a bit of grief getting even rather pliable spade-lug-terminated speaker cables like Nordost Valkyrja connected."

Value

"The FS-788s are considerably more expensive than the FS-688s, but they represent a clear step up in a number of ways."

Anyone who reads my reviews knows that I evaluate *many* stand-mounted two-way monitors—speakers that I believe can offer tremendous value *provided that* a buyer is willing to give up deep bass. Small speakers can't go deep, but they can do everything else, sometimes shockingly well, and all at a fraction of the price of much larger designs that are more expensive to build. A great example is Focus Audio's FS-688 (originally \$2600 USD per pair, now \$2990). They are beautifully made and exquisitely styled, use high-quality parts, and are able sonically to take on contenders costing quite a bit more—just not in terms of bass.

But I'm not oblivious to the fact that some people *do* want a reasonably deep bottom end and they might well want a speaker that doesn't require stands, either. That is precisely what Focus Audio's next step up from the FS-688, the FS-788, offers. Priced at \$5100 per pair, the FS-788 is a floorstanding two-way design that's built with the same attention to detail as the FS-688, but it can deliver bass of which the FS-688 can only dream. As I found out, the '788 is everything the '688 is—and then some.

Description

Standing 40" tall, 9" wide, and 11" deep and weighing 55 pounds, each FS-788 is a tall column that seems solidly built. The cabinet is constructed from MDF, and like all of Focus Audio's Signature-series speakers, the '788s come in drop-dead-gorgeous real-wood veneer.

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The review sample came in piano burr oak, a finish that will make the speakers stand out in any listening room. Other finishes include piano walnut and piano black, both darker finishes that may help the speaker blend more discreetly into a room's décor.

One thing I didn't notice with the FS-688 but did with the FS-788—most likely because there's a lot more veneer on the FS-788 to look at—is how well each pair's veneer is matched. Dart back and forth between each speaker and you'll see surprisingly similar wood markings. Focus mentions in their literature about how they match the components to close tolerances—this obviously includes the veneer as well.

As with the FS-688, the FS-788 uses the Scan-Speak Revelator tweeter—reportedly one of the more expensive tweeters available. And also as with the FS-688, the FS-788 uses an Eton woofer with Nomex and Kevlar cone materials, and is ported on the rear. The '788's woofer is 7" in diameter, though, while the '688's is just 5 1/2".

Focus Audio says that the crossover transitions between the tweeter and woofer at about 2kHz—a relatively low figure intended to take advantage of the bandwidth capabilities of the tweeter and make a smooth transition in terms of dispersion from driver to driver. In their product literature, Focus *focuses* on the quality of the crossover parts and, as with the drivers, close tolerances are maintained for each speaker—something I can believe based on my experience with the FS-688s. When we had those speakers in for measurement, we took the opportunity to measure *both* speakers to determine if there were any performance differences. While I can't say that FS-688 has tighter speaker-to-speaker tolerances than *any* speaker we've measured, because we often only have one on hand due to logistics of getting speakers to the NRC's lab, I can say that of all the speaker pairs we've measured, the FS-688s ranked at the top in terms of matching.

Focus Audio states the '788's sensitivity as 86dB (1W/1m) and the impedance as 8 ohms. The company recommends amplifiers rated from 20 to 350Wpc.

Functionally and cosmetically, there's little to quibble about, but "little" doesn't mean "nothing." I do have a couple of small gripes. First, while I like the attractive way Focus Audio recessed the dual sets of high-quality Cardas binding posts on the back of the FS-788, I found them recessed too far, giving me a bit of grief getting even rather pliable spade-lug-terminated speaker cables like Nordost Valkyrja connected. Eventually, I did manage to work them in, but it was the result of a bit of pushing,

prying, and bending. My other gripe involves the grilles—the same thing I complained about with the FS-688. Given the FS-788's obvious attention to detail and stunning woodwork, I found it a tad disappointing to see a standard cloth-around-an-MDF-frame grille that's peg-attached to the speaker. To me, that's a typical grille on a not-so-typical speaker. Today many companies are doing quite novel things with magnets and other ways to more attractively attach the grille, and I would have liked to see something like that on Focus Audio's Signature-series speakers.

System and setup

Focus Audio specs the FS-788's -3dB point as 35Hz, indicating fairly generous bass output. Therefore, I wasn't scared to pull the speakers way out from the walls—I left about five feet of space behind them, and there was about two feet to each side wall. Toe-in was a slight 10 degrees—a figure not set in stone, and more dependent on room interaction and listening position than anything.

I powered the '788s with Zanden Audio's Model 600 integrated amplifier. This tube-based integrated is only rated at 30Wpc, but it was sufficient in my smallish room. However, if you have a fairly large room—say, 15' x 15' or greater—I'd recommend a more powerful amplifier. The FS-788s have the bass output to fill a reasonably large room, but they are not the most sensitive speakers in the world, so it will take a bit of power to get them sounding their best.

The rest of my system consisted of the Zanden Model 5000 Mk IV DAC, Theta Data Basic transport, Assemblage D2D-1 sample-rate converter, i2Digital X-60 digital cables, Nordost Valkyrja speaker cables, and Valkyrja interconnects from the DAC to the integrated amp. All the electronics were plugged into an ExactPower EP15A line conditioner.

Sound

There are few pop/rock CDs that are as well recorded as Greg Keelor's 1997 release *Gone* [Warner Canada 17513]. The first track, "When I See You," is a solemn, dark number that thunders into the room with an exceptionally deep-sounding drum recorded far back in the stage. The first time I listened to this track on the FS-788s, I knew that despite how much I liked the FS-688s, and even though there's a definite sonic family resemblance, the FS-788s have it over the FS-688s in almost every way. Where the '788s don't outright beat 'em, they at least meet 'em. In other words, everything that's special about the FS-688's is preserved—the exceptionally sweet top end; as I note in my FS-688 review, the "rich, present, and natural" way the speakers have with voices; and the wonderful soundstaging characteristics. However, the FS-788s give you much more bass along with a room-filling sound

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that the FS-688s can only hint at, plus even more presence and texture in the midrange.

The drum sound on "When I See You" was reproduced with far greater depth and cleanliness than I ever thought my room would allow. The placement in the stage—way, way back in a room that's seemingly quite large—was effortless to discern. On this track, Sarah McLachlan next moves in on piano. The FS-788s render that instrument with richness and vibrancy, and without a hint of overhang or glare—the FS-688s never sounded as big or grand as the '788s. Keelor's thickly textured voice comes next, placed the farthest forward and dead center in the stage. As with the piano, there's wonderful richness and vibrancy in his voice, and not a hint of chestiness or an overly resonant quality. The stage was laid out with uncanny specificity; overall, the amount of detail and the ability to see "into" the recording impressed me greatly.

But then a good number of things impressed me about the FS-788s. They have a rich and grand character that imbues instruments like piano and drums with a large, lifelike, and realistic sound. I also found the FS-788s a tad warm, not a bad thing, since at the same time they don't sound fat, woolly or bloated.

Bass isn't in the down-to-20Hz range, so you can't call this a true full-range speaker, but it's as deep and weighty as I'd expect speakers with 7" woofers to be. The FS-688s go just so low and then drop off rapidly, while the FS-788s roll off far more gradually, making the their cut-off point rather difficult to discern by ear because so many factors come into play when reproducing bass in a real room. I'm not exactly sure how low they go; in a bigger room they'll likely go even deeper than in my room. For me, the FS-788s go deep enough, and there's no way a listener is going to find them light-sounding. More important though is *how* the '788s deliver the bass—with power and control. Fat, sloppy bass drains life from most music, and a kick drum shouldn't sound like a thumped beach ball. Down low, the '788s are weighty and quick.

This "control" holds true straight up through the midrange. Keelor's closely miked voice can sound quite chesty on lesser speakers—that extra resonance I mentioned earlier that tends to overemphasize and blur voices—while the piano and drums can be overripe and become obscured in the mix. The FS-788s have a wonderful sense of urgency about them and can sound full and natural. They are never uncontrolled and congested, which surprised me. Some warmer speakers are also less detailed. Not so with the FS-788s—they're warm-sounding and highly detailed.

And the highs—wow! Just as with the FS-688s, the FS-788s' extreme top end is exceptionally extended and sweet. These are the only speakers I've reviewed that use Scan-Speak Revelator tweeters, and from what I can tell, this driver is quite spectacular. It extends to the stratosphere but never sounds dry, clinical, or etched.

Next I turned to another rather solemn, gravelly voiced singer—Bob Dylan and his "Man in the Long Black Coat" (*Oh Mercy* [Sony 90316]), a cut that provides a good midrange workout for any loudspeaker. Producer Daniel Lanois captures Dylan's nasally, raspy voice with a very present, sometimes-in-your-face sound. Some loudspeakers make this track sound too up-front and make what should be just raspiness into something quite nasty. The FS-788s, though, keep their composure, managing to sound highly detailed and never hard or edgy. If anything, there is velvety texture to their sound—along with a little bit of upper-bass boost that helps add some warmth. They're a touch laid-back in the upper mids—just a touch—and where the male vocals seem velvety, female voices, like Ani DiFranco's, sound silky and sweet. The FS-788 sounds as though it was voiced to be pleasant rather than offensive, very much like the FS-688.

On *Oh Mercy*, I again couldn't help notice how good the FS-788s are at laying out a soundstage—in fact, it's something you just can't miss. The width of the stage won't necessarily knock you out—things stay at the speakers or between, with no out-to-the-side phasey things going on—but the image specificity and the depth of stage will. This was a strength of the FS-688s, and it repeats itself to the letter with the FS-788s. On "Man in the Long Black Coat," Dylan kicks in on harmonica, and like the drums on Keelor's album, the instrument is placed way back in the stage with pinpoint precision. The depth of stage and the sense of space were a snap to discern. There's no closing your eyes and imagining the stage with the '788s—any recording that has a well-defined soundstage was reproduced with astounding precision.

Obviously, the FS-788s impressed me, but as much as there is to like about the FS-788s, *sigh*, I have to let you in on a secret: They're not quite perfect. But here's another secret: There isn't a speaker in the world that is.

First, as I said before, the '788 isn't a true full-range speaker—not that this revelation should surprise anyone. Full range, in the audiophile world, means bass to 20Hz. The FS-788s don't offer that, nor did I ever expect them to with a single 7" woofer. They have tight, controlled bass starting from an octave or so above that, and this impressed me enough. In fact, in my room the FS-788s' low end was just about perfect. But if you want even more bass, the company makes the dual-woofered FS-888.

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Second, the FS-788 isn't a pinnacle of absolute neutrality. Although, most certainly, the FS-788 is not wildly colored by any stretch of the imagination, I do hear a bit of a rise in the upper bass/lower mids—something that I believe contributes to the warmth and fullness that this speaker conveys. It's also a touch down in the upper mids, making it a bit laid-back, although certainly not rolled off in any way in the extreme highs. The FS-788s deviate slightly, but they sound darned good the way they're voiced.

Comparison

Speakers like the FS-788 have to satisfy two audiophile requirements: appearance and sound. Make no mistake about it, when you're paying thousands for speakers, part of what you pay for is the way the speaker looks. Of course, the speaker should also sound as good as it looks. The most recent competitor I've had in my listening room was Verity's Tamino X3—a gorgeous-looking and beautifully constructed close-to-full-range speaker that's priced at \$6000 per pair. It's a logical competitor to the FS-788.

Appearance-wise, these two speakers are quite different. The Tamino X3, with its truncated-pyramid enclosure, is more slender and far less visually obtrusive. It appears designed to blend with décor rather than stand out from it like the FS-788. Taste, obviously, will dictate which will be more suitable for you. I liked the look of the FS-788, but overall I preferred the unassuming and graceful appearance of the Tamino X3—they have visual elegance that few speakers can match. And despite the fit'n'finish quality of the FS-788, the Tamino X3 is even more polished.

When it came to sound, though, the FS-788s worked far better in my room. The Tamino X3s, with their rear-firing woofer, have serious weight down low—more so than the FS-788s—but they also sounded a bit fat and tended to overload my room. The Tamino X3s may have needed more space, whereas the '788s were ideal.

The midrange was more of an apples-to-oranges thing. The FS-788s are a touch laid-back, but the Tamino X3s seem more laid-back still. As well, the Tamino X3s were a touch dry in the mids, where, as I mentioned, the FS-788s have a velvety sound that's almost lush by comparison. I preferred the balance of the '788s, at least in my room. The Tamino X3s can cast an impressively large soundstage—perhaps even larger than the '788s', particularly when it comes to width—but the '788s were more exact with their image placement.

The top end, though, is where I found a clear winner. To my ears the FS-788's tweeter beats out the Tamino X3's

quite handily—I made the same observation in my Tamino X3 review when I compared them to the Focus Audio FS-688s (remember that the '688 and '788 share the same tweeter). The high frequencies from the FS-788s, as well as the '688s, sound cleaner, sweeter, and more detailed than those of the Tamino X3, which sounds drier and not quite as clear by comparison.

Conclusion

In the world of speakers I tend to frequent—minimonitors and inexpensive overachievers—\$5100 is a lot of money to spend. But I love this range of speakers because I find so many that justify their price more easily than higher-priced models. However, I can understand full well why someone would buy the FS-788s. In fact, the FS-788s are speakers I could easily live with—and I don't say that often.

The FS-788s are considerably more expensive than the FS-688s, but they represent a clear step up in a number of ways. In my room, the FS-788s delivered just the right amount of tight, well-controlled bass, possessed a deliciously vivid and textured midrange, and showed high-frequency airiness and sweetness that are among the very best I've heard. When it comes to soundstaging and imaging, the FS-788s, like the FS-688s, are what I judge others against—they're that good. And let's not forget that the '788s look quite stunning with their scrumptious real-wood veneer, which is important at this price point.

Yes, \$5100 is a lot of money to spend on any single piece of audio equipment—particularly for a two-way speaker—but if you want striking looks and great sound, the Focus Audio FS-788, to my eyes and ears, delivers.

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Company Info

Focus Audio Signature FS-788 Loudspeakers

Price: \$5100 USD per pair

Warranty: Five years parts and labor

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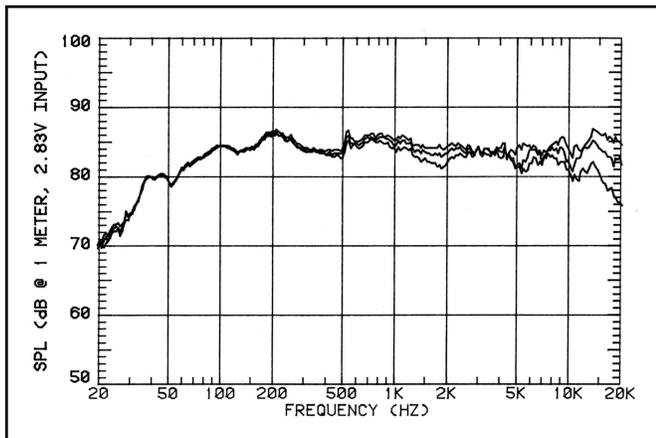
Loudspeaker Measurements

Measurements taken in an anechoic chamber at Canada's National Research Council.

Microphone measuring position: tweeter, no grille.

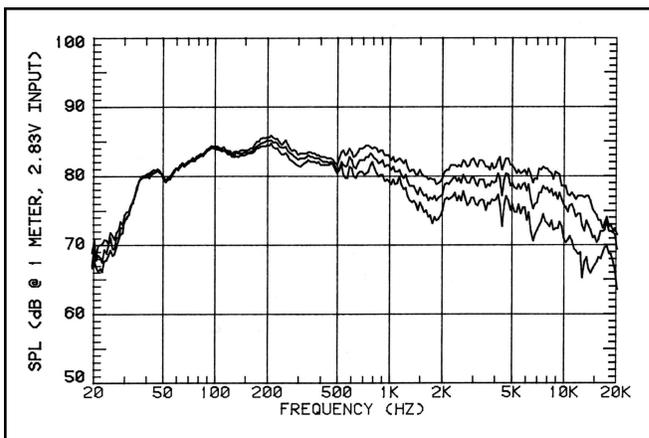
Sensitivity: 84.5dB (averaged 300Hz-3kHz, 2.83V/1m).

Frequency Response #1, 20Hz - 20kHz (measured @ 2m, plotted @ 1m)



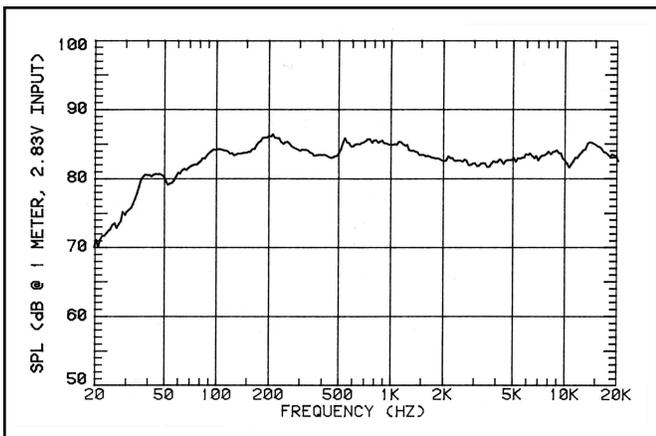
Top curve: on-axis response
Middle curve: 15 degrees off-axis response
Bottom curve: 30 degrees off-axis response

Frequency Response #2, 20Hz - 20kHz (measured @ 2m, plotted @ 1m)



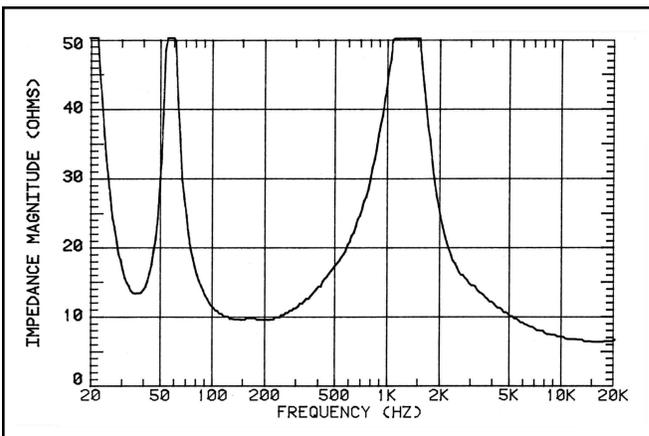
Top curve: 45 degrees off-axis response
Middle curve: 60 degrees off-axis response
Bottom curve: 75 degrees off-axis response

Listening Window (measured @ 2m, plotted @ 1m)



Response curve is an average of five measurements:
on-axis, 15 degrees left and right off-axis,
15 degrees up and down off-axis

Impedance Curve



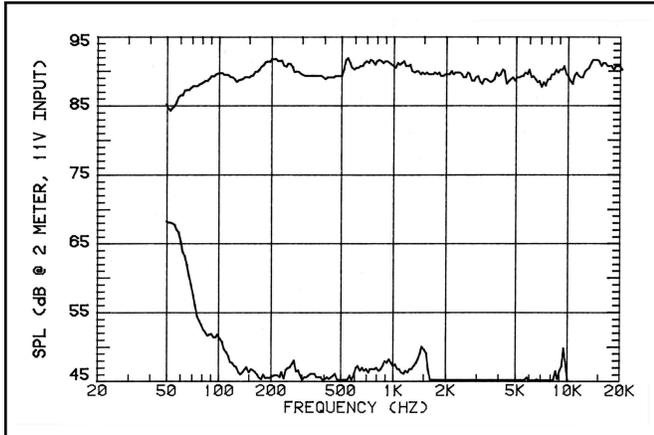
Vertical axis: impedance
Horizontal axis: frequency

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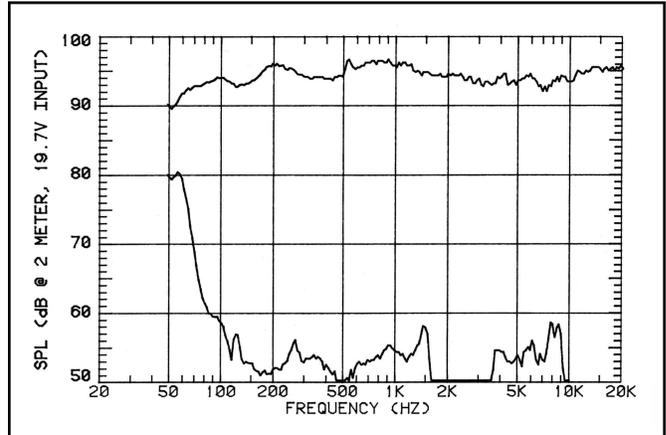
Loudspeaker Measurements (cont'd)

**THD+N @ 90dB, 50Hz=10kHz
(measured @ 2m)**



Top curve: frequency response @ 90dB SPL
Bottom curve: THD+N @ 90dB (50Hz-10Hz)

**THD+N @ 95dB, 50Hz=10kHz
(measured @ 2m)**



Top curve: frequency response @ 95dB SPL
Bottom curve: THD+N @ 95dB (50Hz-10Hz)