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FOCUS AUDIO FS688 Bookshelf Loudspeakers
(Net price: US\$ 2,600/ pair)

As I composed the feature article "The 10 best ever sounding bookshelf loudspeakers," FOCUS AUDIO's flagship bookshelf loudspeakers, FS 688, was not yet been put on sale in Hong Kong. Although I did look much to its performance, I never expected that it would bring any breakthrough in the sounding effect. However, after a recent trial listening I made for it, I firmly concluded that had I heard the sounding of FS 688, the listing of the 10 best (in sounding) ever small loudspeakers should have been revised (FS688 being the third in original listing). FS 688 is the best loudspeaker, to date, that glamorously reproduces the mid-ranged sounds, capturing my attention as soon as it sounded and would make you stay with it. FS 688 is not the only the best product, in terms of sounding, that FOCUS has ever manufactured, it is also the only bookshelf loudspeaker, in the entire Hi-Fi history, that, by using dynamic drivers, in producing the best musical taste.

It is impossible to understand how FOCUS FS 688 has achieved such a high performance of sounding effect until one realizes the manufacturer's high reputation in tuning and the acclaimed sales records set by FS 68, its precedent model.

Making Toronto, Canada, its base in the early nineties, the owner of and the designers at FOCUS, with their expertise and experience in the Hi-Fi industry, are well informed of the market trends and the needs of Hi-Fi fans. Since its establishment, FOCUS has designated itself to be the rival competitor to the most expensive and the highest class of loudspeakers on the market, which includes, of course, such brand names as B & W, Proac and Wilson Audio. Bearing in mind a dual-target, that is, to produce loudspeakers of the best quality at an affordable price, the manufacturer was fully aware of how easier it is said than done to think of achieving the highest sounding effect at reasonable costs. The most time-consuming stage in the production, according to the manufacturer, was the final sound fine-tuning procedure. The greatest challenge in this final stage was how to strike a balance for such aspects as tonal balance, musicality, transient, dynamics and sensitivity. It was not uncommon to hear lots of arguing among the executives, or to see them working night and day fine-tuning the tonal balance and the effects. The greatest repay for the hard work FOCUS had done on tuning was the very good acceptance of its products on the market. The signature series, with three sizes, FS 88, FS 78 and FS 68, with the performance of their sounding effect highly commended by Hi-Fi critics, sold well beyond the expectation of the manufacturer. Due to the comparatively small area of living in such cities as Hong Kong, both FS 78 and FS 68, since their availability in the mid-nineties, had become two of the most popular loudspeakers sought after on the market. Given such a highly competitive loudspeaker market as the one in Hong Kong, the success FOCUS had secured witnessed to the extraordinary repay rate the manufacturer in the industry of the sound to be determined by the price.

Between FS 78 and FS 68, it was FS 68 that was most frequently talked about, because, being a small-sized loudspeaker, the charming and magnificent sounds it produces has won itself a legendary status. Matched with a Foundation stand, as FS 68 is turned on, the sounds made by strings impress your ears as if the notes are imprinted on your mind in such a way that you could hardly forget them. I still recall, as a critic then, in my comments, I said that FS 68 was a tremendous success, but to the manufacturer and the designers, to produce a loudspeaker of a better performance in future would be a peak unconquerable.

Reality proved that it was almost an unattainable goal to design an improved model of FS 68. It took FOCUS three years to design FS 688, and the manufacturer emphasizes that FS 688 is definitely not

the improved model of FS 68. As a matter of fact, FS 688 is installed with new tweeter and woofer and a new crossover. It is, in short, an entirely new loudspeaker designed by FOCUS with experience in designing accumulated over ten years. Whether FS 688 sounds better than FS 68 does, the designers say, is to be evaluated and reported by well-experienced critic such as I.

Years ago in the former studio of this magazine, I recall, there had been almost a whole year during which I used FS 68 in examining small loudspeakers. I am so familiar with the sounding characteristics of FS 68 that I thought I would be able to tell the difference between FS 68 and FS 688 by listening to just a few CDs played on it. Test results showed that, apart from having a higher quality of production than that of FS 68, FS 688 opened up another world as soon as it sounded. In addition to have been equipped with a Revelator tweeter unit of Scan-Speak (which, on the market, is usually used with loudspeakers that are worth of \$10,000 plus per pair), the high gloss piano finish gives the exotic veneered loudspeaker cabinet an elegant and unassailable look. That is to say, in the production of FS 688, the manufacturer has approved unprecedentedly higher costs. I employed HERRON VTSP 1/HIT AUDIO Super 12 bulb-based amplifier combination to drive FS 688. Before that, the set did an excellent job in driving loudspeakers of different types. What I had never expected was that, as FS 688 started to sound, the sounding effect it made was ideally simple and forcefully gave me the impression of a surprising beauty. Like all loudspeakers produced in the FOCUS tradition, FS 688 produces high frequency with elegance and magnificence. At the same time, it allows the mid range to remain solid and powerful, expressing a tremendous force as the sounds intensify to their full scale. If mixed human voices and instrumental sounds coming out of FS 68, though surely transparent and beautiful, might occasionally sounds a bit weak and thin, you can expect something absolutely different with FS 688. Musical sounds seem to be carrying a grand and bold spirit as they come out of FS 688, engaging listeners to feel as if they were seeing sunrise on the mountaintop, reaching as far as their eyes can take them. If it were to be compared to the sounds produced by antique tube-based amplifier, I would say it would be the sounds from a Marantz 9. FS 688 attracts listeners by giving them musical sounds filled with rich emotions. Even when you listen to the voices of the DJs of radio stations, you hear them speak right into your ears. This characteristic is perhaps best likened to the sounds that come out of a horn loudspeaker. Hi-Fi fans (among whom I am one) who fell in love with the horn loudspeaker because of its sensibility to mid-range frequencies, thus enabling the loudspeaker to best respond to the colorful variations of vocal and musical sounds. You can expect the same effect with the FS 688 loudspeakers. As you listen to music of any kind with an FS 688, you will find yourself so engaged in the sound you hear that you just can't stop. That was the first time of me ever hearing from a dynamic driver loudspeaker with the lovely sound effect so close to that of the horn loudspeaker. It is no secret, though, that fans of horn loudspeakers are forced to accept the coloration made by the horn unit (for instance, it cannot be expected to truly reproduce violin sounds). On the contrary, FS 688 expresses both the timbre and dynamics of violin sounds vividly.

The sound of FS 688 was so fascinating that at first I suspected that was a natural effect of the best combination of all necessary components (e.g. using TARA LABS The One and SILVER RIBBON as code cables, AUDIOQUEST CV-6 as loudspeaker cables). Later I changed the pre- and power amplifiers, first using a LINN Klimax Kontrol crystal-tube pre-amplifier and an ANTIQUE SOUND LAB Hurricane vacuum-tube power amplifier (commended by HP of The Absolute Sound as the best existing tube-based amplifier). Then, the connecting cables were changed. With all the changes made, the sounding effect remained the same, producing magnificent sounds that every corner, making hearers addict to the way of expression.

From a consumer's perspective, I have two points to make regarding how FS 688 is to be matched with other pieces of sounding equipment:

1. Flexibility regarding the power of the power amplifier – On the whole, FS 688 is comparatively easy to drive. When matched with a 12W × 2 Super 12, the sound of the speakers fill the 500-square-foot studio satisfactorily. If it is expected to reproduce the scale of chorus like that of Carmina Burena, which was made up of hundreds of singers, then the more powerful the power amplifier, the better. When power-driven by an ANTIQUE SOUND LAB Hurricane, with each sound channel at 200 W (i.e. eight KT-88), the dynamic effects expressed by FS 688 is like breaking a way through a rocky mountain with a forceful demonstration of bass. It is fair to say that the effects can be compared to those produced by the renowned WILSON WATT/Puppy.
2. Flexibility regarding the costs of Hi-Fi components Everybody knows that higher costs get them better equipment. After trying it with different amplifiers and cables, however, I concluded that, with its built-in excellent sounding effects, it is not necessary to match FS 688 with expensive components to produce the desired ideal sounding effects. Drive it with costly and famous vacuum tube pre- and power amplifiers, you will be assured of the ideal sounding effects. However, if your policy is to spend the least and enjoy the best, then either a Super 12 or a Naim combo is certainly good enough to bring home excellent sound and the kind of musical feeling for which you are looking.

While the present Hi-Fi market is still in its low tide, perhaps people may think that FS 688 has been put on the market at the wrong time. Nevertheless, as soon as SARS is lifted, and when Hi-Fi fans start again looking for good equipment, the demand for FS 688 will easily supercede its supply. FS 688, certainly, will become a classic bookshelf loudspeaker by its own right.