PRO AUDIO REVIEW
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Studio

Focus Audio FS-68
Closefield Loudspeaker

BY RICHARD KING

In the search for the "perfect bookshelf loudspeaker" (an oxymoron in itself!), I have come across many models that have been very satisfactory for pop listening, but entirely inappropriate for classical program. Musical content with strings come back sounding lean, glassy or too bright, and classical vocals are sometimes so much in your face that they seem too loud at any listening level!

Conversely, I have become attached to certain speakers that work very well for classical music and jazz, but yet when I play any pop music, the monitors sound too slow in the bass and the mids tend to be recessed.

Fast Facts

- **Applications:** *Studio, post production*
- **Features:** *Two-way; 5.5-inch Nomex/Kevlar Hexacone woofer; 1 1/8-inch soft dome tweeter; optional furniture-grade finishes*
- **Price:** *$2,150 per pair*
- **Contact:** *Focus Audio at 905-415-8773, www.focusaudio.com.*

I do a great deal of recording and mixing for multichannel, and for SACD in particular, so I have been looking around for a set of five matched monitors to place in my living room for accurate playback. Having full-range monitors in the front left and right, and smaller speakers in the center and the rear has been widely accepted by consumers for watching movies or sporting events. This configuration, however, does not do justice to music mixes with substantial full-range audio coming from the surround channels, especially high-resolution program material.

In addition, I do not believe that the subwoofer should be responsible for reproducing the low end of the surround channels, or the front channels for that matter. Even with a set of five small-sized monitors I set the bass management so that only the actual LFE channel gets routed to the sub, and not a mix of low-frequency information from the other channels. Since full-size rear speakers would pretty much block the use of my front door, I had to investigate the bookshelf option. Is there truly a closefield out there that is optimized for all types of music program? Well, I think the Focus Audio FS-68 deserves a listen.

FEATURES

The Focus Audio FS-68 ($2,150 per pair) comprises a 5 1/2-inch driver and a

soft dome tweeter in a 13 inches (H) by 7 inches (W) by 1 inch (D) cabinet, weighing in at 20 pounds. Frequency response is listed as 45 Hz - 22 kHz, ±3 dB, and sensitivity is rated at 85 dB at 1 watt/1 meter. Impedance is 8 ohms, recommended power is 20 - 200 watts. The custom-designed crossover sits at 2.7 kHz. The particular set I have been auditioning has a Piano Walnut finish, but it is also available in Burr Oak and black.

The tweeter is a 1 1/8-inch ferrofluid soft dome design with nonresonant chamber damping made by Scanspeak of

Denmark. Unlike the FS-688, the FS-68 has an offset tweeter, mirror-imaged on each pair. This feature comes in handy for placing the speaker on its side on the meter bridge of a mixing desk - less high-frequency diffraction off the edges of the console surface. I actually listened with the cabinets sitting upright, both in the studio and at home. This has to be one of the smoothest tweeters out there; it produces accurate top end on orchestral recordings without sounding aggressive – film scores, symphonic pieces, and large ensemble jazz recordings with strings. At the same time, it plays back pop high-end with great clarity and resolution.

The low/mid component is a Nomex/Kevlar Hexacone driver with polymer voicing coating. It is a custom design, manufactured for Focus Audio by Eton (Germany). The cabinet has a rear port and really goes down to 45 Hz. There is impressive bass response from such a small enclosure – the speakers sound much larger than a bookshelf set. I compared them to my old unported closefield speakers (which shall remain nameless) and it was no contest! The FS 68s sound very full – at first I was running without a subwoofer, and I was really enjoying it. I do not think a sub is needed for stereo playback, but to properly check out 5.1 music mixes, including test pressings of my own SACD mixes and of course for home theater use, adding a subwoofer was definitely in order.

The crossover design is also proprietary. According to Kam Leung at Focus Audio, it uses "high purity annealed copper coils and selected polypropylene/polystyrene capacitors," i.e. very high-end stuff. At any rate, the crossover frequency yields no audible dip in level or phase anomaly. The mids and upper mids are very pure, resulting in an extremely stable image.

The speakers can be biwired thanks to the Cardas binding posts, although I did not bother. The internal wiring is Litz wire, also by Cardas. The driver specs are matched to within 1/4 dB in a pair, and serial numbers of pairs sport the same number with either an A or B suffix.

In Use

The manufacturer was thoughtful enough to include the appropriate stands with the loaner set of monitors – Foundation Classic IIs, which were placed directly onto a hardwood floor. The speakers are adhered to the stands using Blue Tack, as recommended by the stand company. Amplifiers used during auditioning were Chord SPA 1232 DA, Bryston 3B, and a Sony ES Series multichannel receiver. The monitors performed very well on all three amps. It is refreshing to come across a speaker that isn't too fussy about power requirements. Subjectively, the Chord amp was the best to my ears. The Bryston was an honest, accurate and pleasing sound – generally quite workable. The Chord, however, was exceptional. Greater resolution, slightly more high-frequency extension (12 kHz and up) and more core to the sound were the net results of switching amps. I also listened in surround using two Chord 1232 amps for the front and back pairs, and one Chord 1424 mono amp for the center speaker. This combination was outstanding for both LCR and front-to-back imaging. I also added a Genelec 1092 subwoofer for full 5.1 playback – that was fun! I tried my Sony amp at home and I was very surprised – at 100 watts per five channels, it actually sounded all right – lots of sparkle and definition at both loud and soft listening levels (I expected much lower fidelity after the Chord lineup at the studio). Obviously a loudspeaker of this caliber deserves an amplifier of the same quality, but it is nice to know the FS-68s do not require a huge amount of power.

Summary

These are great little loudspeakers. I had heard an older version of them four or five years ago, and put them in the back of my mind as a good all-round small monitor, until I recently rediscovered them. They have an even response, large sweet spot and exceptional imaging – the location of the speaker itself really disappears when you close your eyes. This is one monitor that can really do everything. I feel I can trust them for very critical listening, and they are quite satisfying for casual listening as well, and a great treat on movie night.

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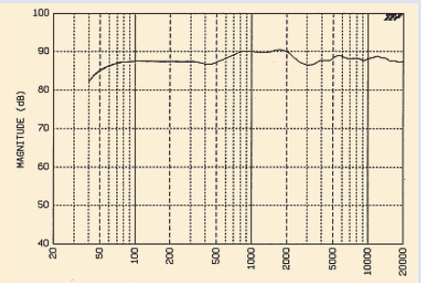
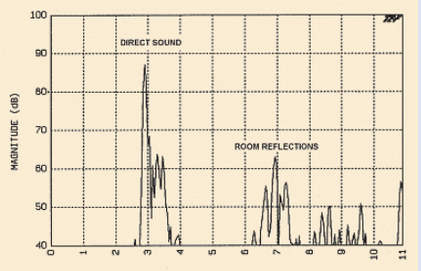
On the Bench:
FOCUS AUDIO FS-68

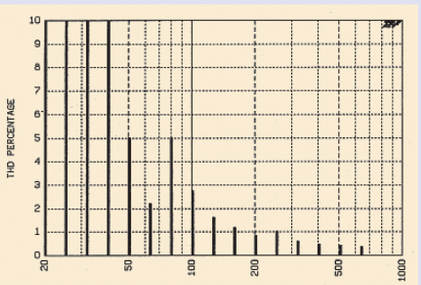
Figure 1 shows the free-field frequency response of the Focus Audio FS-68, measured with the microphone midway between the woofer and tweeter, 1 meter away, and 1/3-octave smoothed. The response is very wide range for such a small speaker: ±3 dB from 45 Hz to 20 kHz. That deep low-frequency response is aided by a well-damped port resonance centered around 70 Hz.



Not shown is the frequency response at 30 degrees off-axis. It matches the on-axis response within 2 dB up to 10 kHz, which is excellent performance.



In **Figure 2** is the Energy Time Curve, which correlates with the transient response. The time scale is 11 msec. We see an extremely sharp direct-sound spike with delayed vibrations about 25 dB down.



Finally, **Figure 3** shows the Total Harmonic Distortion vs. frequency at 90 dB SPL, 1 meter. It is very good for such a small speaker: below audibility from 100 Hz up. THD reaches 5% at 50 Hz and 80 Hz. If the FS68 were used with a subwoofer, that distortion could be reduced by high-pass filtering the signal driving the FS68. During the THD test, the rear-port tube buzzed slightly, which may have influenced the measurement.

— Bruce Bartlett