

## Hardware Review



Focal Aria 948

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loudspeaker

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I have been using Focal loudspeakers in my own system for the last 15 years. During that time different cone materials from Focal have all made their mark; first impregnated paper with a polyglass coating, later yellow Kevlar was in use and finally the W-cone in the Electra and Utopia series showed up. The W-cone is made from a sandwich of foam and glass fibre with either a single or double skin. Focal has been searching for a material with better properties than Kevlar or polyglass that is cost efficient and able to be produced by machine. What they found was a natural fibre with lower weight than glass fibre since the material is hollow, it has the same elongation as carbon is self-damping and readily available in the northwest of France. The magic word is flax. Non-woven bundles of flax are sealed between single layers of glass fibre, only 0.04 mm thick. They use more flax for a woofer and less for a midrange speaker, you can read the whole story on the Focal website in a 10 page white paper I you want to learn more. These new cones have been employed in a follow up series to the Chorus 800 V called Aria 900.

The range consists of a monitor called Aria 906 and three floor standing speakers: Aria 926, 936 and 948. There's also a centre speaker, CC900. Since the distributor ruined my back by bringing the big, fat Aria 948, I will describe this speaker in detail. Each one weighs 35 kilos and measures 115cm high, so they are impressive to look at and

room filling. The MDF cabinet is 2.5 cm thick (1 inch) and tapered towards the back. On the baffle there's a very large bas reflex port under the two flax cone woofers, a flax cone midrange and an aluminium/magnesium alloy tweeter. The tweeter suspension is made with Poron, just like Focal's Utopia tweeters, but without the beryllium. A second reflex port is located in the bottom of the enclosure, hence the aluminium plinth. The cabinet is available in high gloss black or, even cheaper, in a walnut motif, in both cases the front and back are leather clad and the top plate is made out of glass. Spikes are included and screw into the plinth, they are adjustable from above for convenience. Wiring is done with a simple two-way terminal as is the Focal way. Although the Aria 948 is very big it still looks stylish with the flax cones and screw covering rings around the units. A magnetically attached grille cloth is supplied if you want to hide the drivers.



### **A journey through sound**

Listening to the Aria 948 is a journey back in time. My first Focals in 1995 had a very open and, you might say,

over exposed midrange. Bass seemed of less importance and the tweeter was a rather harsh sounding inverted dome type made out of Kevlar. Later, when the Electra series and the Utopia range became available, the midrange was less obvious, bass output increased and the tweeter got smoother. This was a pity because I like the open and expressive midrange of so many French loudspeakers. The Aria 948 is a nice synthesis between the old polyglass cones and the W-cone, it puts the emphasis on the midrange where human voice and so many instruments deliver their energy. The system I used for most of this review is not in the same price league as the speaker, consisting as it does of a NAD M50/M52 digital audio player, Esoteric D/A converter and Audia Flight amplifiers. So I also listened with a far cheaper Peachtree Nova.pre DAC/preamp and PT220 class-D power amplifier. I kept the NAD as the primary source and I only changed some interconnects for less expensive ones. Both systems had to work in a 100 square foot room at a listening distance of eight feet. Focal states that the Aria 948 is optimised for rooms measuring from 320 square foot (30m<sup>2</sup>) and from a recommended listening distance of 12 feet (3.5m), but if I wanted to sit that far from the baffle I would have been on the balcony. The speakers were positioned more than 6 feet apart, 3 feet from the side walls and just over a foot from the back wall.

It's hard to describe the music I played through the Aria 948 speakers because I played as much as time permitted, I really enjoyed this speaker's open character. But I will mention a few titles, on the CD *Metamorphosis, The Hours* Lavinia Meijer plays music by Philip Glass on her harp. It's hypnotizing and very well recorded on the Channel Classic label. The lower notes give me all the resonance that the bass strings bring to the instrument while the shorter strings are clear and eager. There is a distance between the listener and the soundstage so the Focal never sounds in your face, which works out fine. Meanwhile the wall behind the speaker disappears when the image is deep enough. This is partly due to the amplifier, my Audias were better in that respect than the Peachtree. From this solo recording I moved to *Flute Concertos* by Mozart with Sharon Bezaly, again a welcome distance is kept between the loudspeaker and the listener, but it's still close enough to stay involved. Like sitting in the fifth row in a concert hall. The Aria 948 avoids highlighting a specific group of instruments around Ms Bezaly, bass and cello are just as important as the violins or the flute. This points to a very even frequency response without nasty dips and peaks, so the speaker sounds smooth but at the same time inspiring, with lots of dynamic range. The high 92.5 dB efficiency of the Aria 948 helps to resolve dynamics, at the same time the system is not under damped. Bass is as tight as it should be, again less so with a Peachtree PT220, but we have to take into consideration that the Peachtree combination is a tenth the price of the Esoteric/Audia Flight. It's also possible that the class D amp doesn't like the 2.5 Ohm impedance minimum of the 948. However, the Focal shows true harmony and extended listening will never be a problem. This is a system for a music lover who has plenty of time to enjoy it.



### **Breath taken**

I believe that Laura Marling is a big favourite in the UK (especially at the ear. Ed.), and playing her album *I Speak Because I Can* it's easy to imagine how she sits in the studio with a guitar on her lap. The guitar sounds very natural and the rough edges of her voice are very clear, the flax midrange unit is extremely good with human voice. As soon as the band comes in and backing vocals join Laura on track three the Aria follows the jump in sound pressure without any strain. Her voice, which is warm and sometimes tender, could be placed a little higher in the soundstage but we can't have it all. Another fine lady, Vienna Teng, plays her piano on *Warm Strangers* with verve, the opening track *Feather Moon* sounds intimate as long as she is the only player. When more musicians join in it gets bombastic and dark, but not in the sense of dark sounding, it's more that bass notes go deep and are easy going, this is very capable in the low registers. To prove this I put on Stanley Clarke's *Spanish Phases for Strings & Bass*, a very old recording that we used to use long ago to destroy loudspeakers we did not like. He hits his bass guitar with the speed and power of a lightweight boxer. But the Aria 948 was returned to the distributor alive and kicking, no harm done, except to my ears.

For a contrast I put on some nice jazz played by the Tsuyoshi Yamamoto Trio on the album *Midnight Sugar*. The very clear piano tones from microphones almost on the strings, are undistorted although they try to take the

breath away from the amplifier. The cymbals are in the background with easy to recognize brushes and the bass is full of energy without putting pressure on my ears. The music is full of energy, as full as it would be in the front row of a jazz club. I promised to stop but couldn't help putting on Fourplay. Oh boy, that sounded good too. Hit that bass drum, shake that tambourine, play the guitar. This is the proof that you need a big speaker to produce a big sound without effort. Full marks to Focal for the flax cone.



### **If I were a rich man**

If I were a CEO at one of the larger loudspeaker companies like Bowers & Wilkins, KEF, Dynaudio or Sonus faber these new Focal's would give me a headache. The sound quality offered for the price is excellent. Visitors often thought that the price was for just one speaker not the pair. Partly because of the size and looks, but mainly for sound quality reasons. I have no idea what influence the flax cone has on its own, but Focal makes very good use of the material in these enclosures. Bass goes deep, deep enough to even satisfy movie lovers, the high

frequencies are detailed and smoother than I would have expected coming from a Focal inverted dome and the midrange is brilliant at this price. The stereo image is fine and given the correct amplifier the stage is wide and deep, never does the music stick to the boxes. This is in my opinion quite a remarkable loudspeaker and if this is the path Focal follows in the coming years I will be interested in hearing the results. Yes, the Aria 948 is big, but who cares if you can close your eyes and enjoy the music? The beast has escaped from the French flax fields and crossed the channel.

**SPECIFICATIONS:**

Type Three-way bass-reflex floorstanding loudspeaker

Speaker drivers Two 8 1/4" (21cm) Flax bass 6 1/2" (16.5cm) Flax midrange 1" (25mm) Al/Mg TNF inverted dome tweeter

Frequency response (+/- 3dB) 37Hz - 28kHz

Low frequency point - 6dB 31Hz

Sensitivity (2.83V / 1m) 92.5dB

Nominal impedance 8 Ohms

Minimum impedance 2.5 Ohms

Recommended amplifier power 50 - 350W

Crossover frequency 280Hz / 2600Hz

Dimensions (H x W x D) 45 1/4 x 14 5/8 x 16 9/16" (1150x371x420mm)

**PRICE:**

Aria 948 Walnut £2600

Aria 948 Black High Gloss £3100

**MANUFACTURER DETAILS:**

Focal-JMLab

[www.focal.com](http://www.focal.com)