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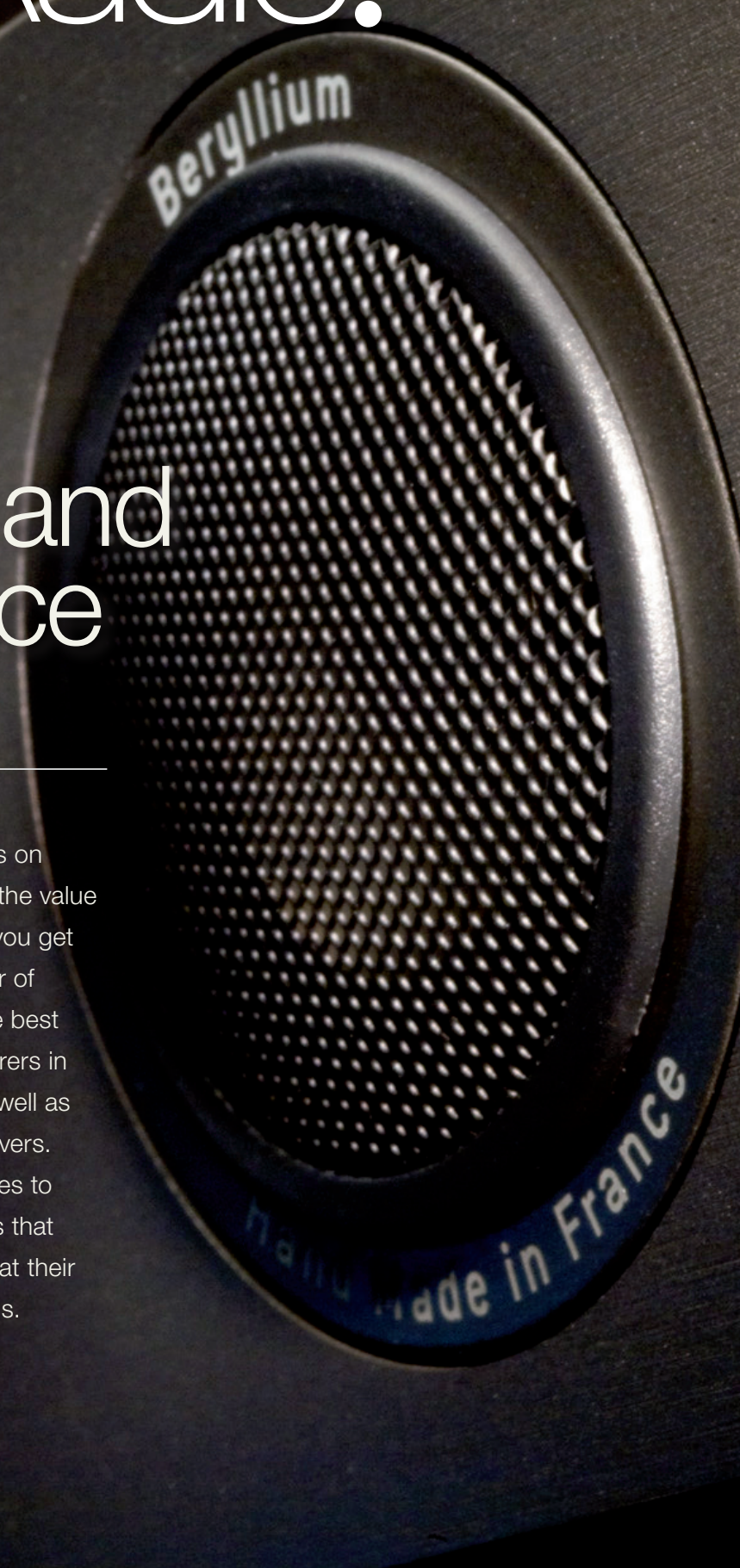
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High Style and Performance

The Focal Diablo

By Jeff Dorgay

Lately, there have been a number of posts on various internet forums that question the value of products in the high end. Just what do you get when you spend a five-figure sum for a pair of speakers? In the case of Focal, you get the best from one of the largest speaker manufacturers in the world in terms of speaker systems, as well as one of the largest manufacturers of raw drivers. This makes a huge difference when it comes to research and development. Manufacturers that do not have this level of technical diversity at their disposal can only investigate so many paths.



If you were sitting in one of the demos wondering how great it would be to put a pair of Grande Utopias in the shrink machine, the Diablo is for you.



A quick download of the PDF at Focal website shows the amount of effort that went into the Grande Utopia series:

<http://www.focal-fr.com/catalogue-docs/EN/32/files/1913.pdf>

Taking into consideration that Focal builds the raw drivers, both for OEM use by other manufacturers as well as a complete line of drivers for the autosound world, they have a large database of experience from which to draw on. Not only are they continuously trying to design better speaker systems, they are working to build better drivers as well.

The result of this diversity is what gives us the current Utopia III series. If you've been to a HiFi show in the past year just about anywhere in the world, chances are you've at least seen or perhaps heard the pinnacle of Focal's efforts: the Grande Utopia. An extremely large speaker, (with a fairly large pricetag to match, at \$180,000 per pair) the Grande Utopia is not for everyone's room or budget. As cool as they looked at last year's CEDIA show, my attention immediately turned to the model reviewed here, the Diablo, which is priced at \$11,995 per pair for the speakers, plus \$1,995 for the matching stands.

If you were sitting in one of the demos wondering how great it would be to put a pair of Grande Utopias in the shrink machine, the Diablo is for you. It uses a 6.5-inch woofer that looks identical to the mid-range driver in the Grande Utopia, but has different characteristics for woofer duty in the Diablo. The 1-inch tweeter is the same in all three Utopia III models.

The Diablos are a work of art visually, so you won't have to barter or resort to trickery with whomever you share your living space with to install a pair in your listening room. A quick peek at the cabinet reveals the same attention to detail as the Grande Utopia. The test pair came in a gorgeous black metallic finish, with a brushed aluminum band where the tweeter resides. *(continued)*

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While these speakers were in my living-room system breaking in, the vote was unanimous from everyone who visited; there was nothing but praise for the aesthetics of these speakers. Wife acceptance was off the chart.

Setup and Initial Listening

Like most speakers, the Diablos are somewhat stiff right out of the box. At first, the beryllium tweeter sounds forward and harsh. Between 100 and 200 hours later, as the woofer breaks in rather nicely, the tonal balance shifts, making the tweeter sound even more forward. The folks at Focal warned me that these speakers take a LONG time to sound their best, and other Utopia owners concur, so don't give up here. The best is yet to come.



Around 400 hours, the magic starts to happen in earnest, and by 500 hours, when the tweeter fully breaks in, you are treated to a completely different musical experience. To save yourself the aggravation and the urge to get rid of these speakers prematurely, I highly suggest that you just play them in a spare room or your garage for two weeks with blankets over them at moderate volume. Unless you are terribly curious to observe the break-in process, find a good house project (which will probably make your housemate happy) and forget about the HiFi soufflé that is cooking in the other room. Then just enjoy the speakers when ready!

The Diablos spent the first 400 hours in my living-room system with the Bel Canto e500 monoblocks and a Bel Canto DAC3. Because the Diablos offer such a high degree of resolution, a class-D amplifier would not be my first choice. The presentation was just too flat and one-dimensional. Be prepared to find any weaknesses in the rest of your system exposed by the Diablos. The better your source components and cables, the more music the Diablos will offer up.

Out in the main listening space, with more amplification and cable choices available, I did not find these speakers terribly cable sensitive and had good luck with a wide range of amplification as well. I found the Diablos equally at home with solid state or tube amplifiers. If you like a more up-front, extremely accurate presentation, you might veer towards your favorite solid-state gear. Those wishing a richer presentation will love the Diablos with tubes.

One of the most pleasurable combinations I assembled featured the 60th anniversary McIntosh gear reviewed in this issue. The Mac equipment provided a nice balance of warmth and detail, while my reference Burmester gear offered up more authority and dynamic contrast. I could live happily with either flavor.

All of the serious listening was done in our 16-by-24 foot main room. On both the long and short walls of my room, I found the optimum placement and balance between bass response and three-dimensional imaging was with the speakers about five feet apart (center of tweeters, front of cabinet) and the front face somewhere between four and five feet from the back wall. Moving them closer to the back wall will offer more bass reinforcement, but at a slight loss of front to back depth.

My listening position was exactly eight feet from the tweeters. In my living room, which is very reflective, I preferred the speakers with no spikes on the stands, just some 1-inch thick squares of high-density rubber as feet. *(continued)*

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In the studio with a thick concrete floor, the spikes offered the best bass performance. Either way, be sure to bolt the speakers to the stands with the hardware included or bass definition will suffer and the upper bass response will get cloudy. For those of you that like to tinker with everything, forget about someone else's stands – bolting the Diablos to their dedicated stands is the only way to go. I tried my favorite Sound Anchors stands that are full of lead shot (even heavier than the Focal stands) with every combination of sticky stuff, cones and spikes to no avail. Besides, the factory stands look so cool ...

While you are at it, double check the tightness of the woofer. All of the vibration from shipping will usually require tightening the bolts about a quarter turn. I suggest tightening the bolts in a star pattern, just as you would the cylinder head on an engine to keep the torque evenly distributed. The truly obsessive ones in the audience who have a torque wrench calibrated in inch-pounds could tighten them all to exactly the same spec.

The Diablos did a great job on both the long and short walls, but as with every other speaker I've tried so far, getting them away from the side walls, even in a treated room, made for a more spacious sound-field. However, this was one of the few speakers that offered up more depth when on the short wall of my studio, with precious little sacrifice in image width.

I am guessing that this speaker would be right at home in a room of about 10-by-12 feet to about 14-by-18 feet, without making you feel as if a subwoofer was necessary.

Close to Defying the Laws of Physics

If you really want to surprise your friends with the Diablos, escort them into your listening room and play one of your favorite records that has ample low-frequency information. I guarantee they will be quite surprised when they open their eyes and find that there is no subwoofer to be found in the room, and they will probably be surprised to find all that sound coming from such a small speaker.

Reviewers often get accused of falling prey to their own set of built-in prejudices when listening to new components. Guilty as charged.

I have three great sets of speakers to listen to as references, but I still love the big, walk-through presentation of a panel speaker. Is that soundstage a bit exaggerated? You bet, but that's what I like.

With that in mind, I was blown away by how big the Diablos sounded in all three dimensions. This is the first small speaker I've heard with tonal characteristics that I enjoy, but which sounds like a big speaker. *(continued)*

Most impressive was the amount of height in the presentation, along with width and depth. When connected to great electronics, the Diablos not only disappeared in the room, the soundstage extended way beyond the border of the speakers, just like my MartinLogan CLX's or the full-range Verity Sarastro II's. Listening to "Arms of a Thief" on the new Iron and Wine album, I could hear percussion effects and backup vocals spinning all around my listening chair.

There is one aspect in which the Diablos absolutely destroy my favorite panels: dispersion. While there is an obvious sweet spot, this is a speaker that everyone on the couch can enjoy. Whether you are sitting front and center or on the floor off to the side, you still get a big slice of the stereo image. These are no slouch in the speed department either. I guarantee that the Diablos are speakers that will help you to rediscover your music collection. You will be amazed at how many small details in your favorite recordings that were faint or undecipherable now reveal themselves.

Barely Any Limitations

The Diablos have only two minor limitations, neither of which troubles me. They will not play as loud as a big pair of floorstanders because a 6.5-inch woofer can move only so much air. When using the Burmester 911mk.3, I could bang the woofer cones against their stops before the amplifier ran out of clean power, but I was listening to Motorhead at a fairly ridiculous level. Most listeners will not push the Diablos this far, and I was amazed at how hard these little speakers would rock when I turned the volume down slightly. This isn't a small speaker that will only play chamber music and female vocals.

Extremely low pipe organ or synth bass will be diminished somewhat for the same reason, but I was amazed at how much output there still was in the 40hz range. But it does fall off dramatically after that. Factoring in some room gain in a small space (where these will most likely be used anyway) should shore this up slightly, so proceed with caution before you mate these with a subwoofer.

I can't think of a small, high-performance speaker that I've enjoyed anywhere near as much as the Utopia Diablo. Other than that last bit of deep bass, they do it all. If the rest of your system is up to the task, this is the perfect speaker for someone who wants six-figure speaker sound in a smaller form factor. This is as close to perfection as you are going to get in a box this small. *(continued)*

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Second Opinion – A Micro Utopia Be Owner Responds

As an owner of the previous generation bookshelf speaker in the Utopia line, the Micro Utopia Be, I was anxious to get my hands on the new version, the Diablo Utopia. On the surface, the speakers seem similar: the Diablo is marginally heavier by 5.5 pounds, marginally taller and deeper, and spec wise, goes 5Hz deeper at the -3db point (45 Hz vs. 50 Hz). Efficiency remains the same at 89dB. Although the woofers are the same diameter, the Diablo features a newer version of the Power Flower (TM) and a larger Beryllium (1-inch vs. ¾-inch) tweeter. The larger tweeter coupled with the Helmholtz resonator back enclosure makes for a lower crossover point and smoother bass driver to tweeter transition.

Physically, the new model seems better finished, although all the finishes are now all painted instead of having wood options. The matching stands come assembled and are fillable with your choice of dampening material. Packing is superb on both the stands and the speakers themselves.

So much for numbers. Even though the Diablo costs considerably more than the Micro Utopia Be (\$7,500 vs. \$12,000), it is in a different league entirely. After proper running in, the newer model gives the impression of a much wider, deeper and higher sound stage. There is also a sense of greater loudness for a given level, but I suspect that this new model is easier to drive than the old and that accounts for this impression. I also suspect that the lower crossover point pays dividends here because of superior off-axis performance.

While the Micro Utopia Be is a superbly balanced speaker, the Diablo handily outdoes it in the transparency department, giving you the ability to hear far deeper into the musical event without being put off by an overly detailed presentation. I especially enjoy live jazz recordings, and the Diablos pick up all of the fine textures from both the performers and the audience, presenting them as a whole event.

The new 1-inch Beryllium tweeter is a superstar with no discernable ringing or distortion, and it extends way out without ever calling attention to itself. To me, this is one of the hardest things to get right on a speaker, the fine line between musicality and detail. The Diablos' HF region is simply sweet and musical. On the Micro Utopia Be, the lower treble will occasionally sound strained when pushed.

Vocal quality is uncanny on the Diablos. On well-recorded LP's and discs, the dimension and nuance of the voice is presented without drama, bloat or harshness. It's just a person standing there singing for you. The better blend between woofer and tweeter on the new speaker gives the vocals more life than on the older model.

Proper low-frequency balance in my room took a bit of tinkering with placement, but once properly situated, the Diablos' greater bass reach made itself perfectly clear. I would describe the bass qualities of the Micro Utopia Be as punchy, but I'd attribute that quality to a slight bump in the response. Not so with the Diablo. The Diablo has more authority and more linearity. They will also punch when pushed.

It's always great to hear an audio product that gets it just right. There was never an off-putting moment the whole time I had the Diablos in the system. I thoroughly enjoyed the Micro Utopia Be, but I suspect that shortly there will be a pair of Diablos in their place. They say that the devil is in the details. In this case the details are devilishly good. – **Hood McTiernan**

The Focal Utopia Diablo
MSRP: \$11,995 (speakers only),
stands \$1,995

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Phono Preamplifier Nagra VPS/VFS, Naim Superline w/Supercap

Analog Sources Rega P9/RB1000 with Lyra Skala, Spiral Groove SG-2/ TriPlanar with Lyra Skala, TW Acoustic Raven TWO/SME iV.Vi with Dynavector XV-1s

Digital Sources Naim CD555/PS555, Sooloos Music Server w/Neko Audio D100, Wadia 781i SE

Interconnect Shunyata Stratos, Furutech Ref III

Speaker Cable Shunyata Antares

Power Running Springs Jaco and Dmitri line conditioners, RSA Mongoose power cords, Shunyata Hydra 2 line conditioner and Shunyata Anaconda VX power cords

Accessories Burmester racks, Shunyata Dark Field Cable Elevators, Furutech DeMag, Clearaudio Simple Matrix record cleaners

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