

Focal

Maestro Utopia III

LOUDSPEAKER

JOHN ATKINSON

DESCRIPTION Three-and-a-half-way, reflex-loaded, floorstanding loudspeaker. Drive-units: 1.1" (27mm) inverted beryllium-dome tweeter, 6.5" (165mm) W-cone midrange, 11" (270mm) W-cone woofer, 11" (270mm) W-cone subwoofer with Damping Control System.

Crossover frequencies: 90Hz, 220Hz, 2.2kHz. Frequency response: 25Hz–40kHz, ± 3 dB. Impedance: 4 ohms nominal, 3 ohms minimum. Sensitivity: 93dB/2.83V/m. Recommended amplifier power: 80–600W. **DIMENSIONS** 57.9" (1470mm) H by 17.9" (455mm) W by 30.3" (770mm) D. Weight: 255.7 lbs (116kg).

FINISHES Gloss Black, Red, Gray.

SERIAL NUMBERS OF UNITS

REVIEWED 10A000051 & 52.

PRICE \$49,995/pair. Approximate number of dealers: not disclosed.

MANUFACTURER Focal, BP

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Focal Maestro Utopia III loudspeaker

Considering that the crates they're shipped in are each as large as a Manhattan studio apartment, once they'd been set up in my listening room, Focal's Maestro Utopia III speakers weren't as visually overpowering as I'd anticipated. The elegant dark-gloss front baffles, the gloss-gray side panels, and the fact that the speaker's three subenclosures are vertically arrayed so that the top, midrange section is angled down, significantly reduced their apparent size.

FOCAL MAESTRO UTOPIA III

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Following a series of minimonitor reviews in 2009, I had decided to live for a while with floorstanders aimed at the state of the art. Not that I'm unappreciative of what small speakers can achieve for a relatively modest price, but my experience with the superb Revel Ultima Salon2 (\$22,000/pair, see www.stereophile.com/floorloudspeakers/608revel) had whetted my appetite for what could be achieved when the designer wasn't quite so concerned with counting pennies for parts. The first model I auditioned was Aerial Acoustics' 20T V2 (\$32,000/pair), which I enthusiastically reviewed in the November 2009 *Stereophile* (see www.stereophile.com/floorloudspeakers/aerial_acoustics_20t_v2_loudspeaker). The Aerials were replaced by the subject of this review, the Maestro Utopias (\$49,995/pair), from French manufacturer Focal—and which, God willin' and the creek don't rise, will be replaced in turn by a pair of horn-loaded Acapella Violoncello IIs from Germany (\$80,500/pair).

Focal Maestro Utopia III

Although a large speaker, at a hair under 5' tall and weighing 256 lbs, the Maestro is actually the third model from the top of Focal's Utopia III line. Pride of place goes to the awe-inspiring four-way, five-driver, five-enclosure, 80"-tall, 573-lb Grande Utopia III EM (\$180,000/pair), which powers its 16" woofer with a field-coil-energized electromagnet. The smaller, three-way, four-enclosure Stella Utopia III EM also uses an electromagnetic woofer; by contrast, the Maestro Utopia has two conventional, permanent-magnet-energized woofers, though each is differently loaded, to result in a "three-and-a-half-way" design.

Like all the models in the Utopia III line, the Maestro's high frequencies are handled by a 1.1" (27mm) inverted-dome tweeter, its diaphragm formed from beryllium foil. This element offers an almost ideal combination of low mass—its density is 40% that of titanium—and very high stiffness, allowing a tweeter made from it to operate in pure piston mode



The "accordion pleats" aim the subenclosures at the listener.

MEASUREMENTS

Measuring the behavior of a speaker as large and heavy as the Focal Maestro Utopia III is problematic. Ultimately, I had to perform the acoustic measurements with the speaker in my listening room. Even though I maneuvered one of the Maestros as far as I could from the sidewalls and fired it along one of the room's diagonals, in order to push back room reflections as far as possible in time after the arrival of the speaker's direct sound at the microphone, the results don't have as much resolution in the midrange as I would have liked, or as I routinely achieve with smaller speakers, with which I can optimize the test setup. As usual, I used DRA Labs' MLSSA system and a calibrated DPA 4006 microphone for the farfield responses, and an Earthworks QTC-40 for the nearfield and spatially averaged room responses.

I examined the Maestro Utopia's electrical impedance and phase with both an Audio Precision System One, which uses swept spot tones, and MLSSA, which uses an MLS signal and FFT analysis. I used two different systems and measured both speakers because the Focal's impedance was idiosyncratic in the upper-bass region, and I wanted to be sure that I was characterizing it correctly. Fig.1 shows the impedance and electrical phase with the speaker's three tone-control jumpers in their boost ("3") and cut ("1") positions. Position "3" gave the lowest impedance in the mid-high treble, and the highest impedance in the low-treble and bass regions, but the impedance wasn't significantly affected by the jumpers in the region of special interest, between 60 and 300Hz. The magnitude lies below 4 ohms in this region, with a plunge to just 1.7 ohms at 111Hz rather than the specified minimum of 3 ohms.

As taxing as this will be for an amplifier, there are combinations of 3.75 ohms and -37° phase angle and 2.3 ohms and $+40^\circ$ at 62Hz and 126Hz, respectively, which will also demand very high currents from the amplifier. As all music has considerable energy in this region, the Focal's owner will have to use an amplifier that can genuinely deliver high powers into 2 ohms if the speaker is to be allowed to sing as it should. Even then, as I found with the otherwise superb Simaudio W-7 amplifier, the high phase angle at infrasonic frequencies may well cause the amplifier to go into protection with a wideband pulse as it encounters what appears to be a short circuit on its output.

Higher in frequency in fig.1, the impedance remains above 5.7 ohms above 600Hz, with a modest phase angle.

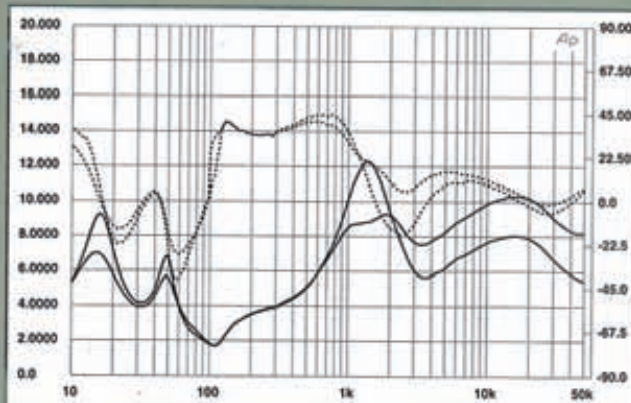


Fig.1 Focal Maestro Utopia III, electrical impedance (solid) and phase (dashed) with jumpers set to "3" (upper traces below 100Hz and between 1 and 2kHz; lower traces above 2kHz) and with jumpers set to "1" (2 ohms/vertical div.).

to a frequency well above the audioband. However, it is difficult to work, and the dust is poisonous;¹ how Focal forms this material into tweeter diaphragms is proprietary. But the material is only half the story. The Utopia III tweeter features Focal's Infinite Acoustic Loading (IAL) technology, whereby the rear of the diaphragm is left open and loaded by a tuned cavity. This allows the drive-unit's resonant frequency to be reduced to 580Hz, two octaves below its passband.

Both the Maestro's 6.5" midrange unit and its two 11" woofers have cones made from a material Focal calls W. This is a sandwich of aircraft-grade foam and glass fiber, the latter impregnated with a bonding agent. The result, Focal claims, is a cone that is very light and very stiff, but with a high degree of self-damping. Again, this should endow the cones with excellent piston behavior within their

passbands, and because Focal makes its own drive-units, it can tailor the physical properties of each W cone for its eventual use as a midrange unit, woofer, or a combination of the two, using a laser to cut each cone to the optimal shape. The woofers have hefty half-roll rubber surrounds and large-diameter, inverted, black dustcaps; the midrange unit

40mm-diameter coil. The lower woofer also uses a "double-ferrite" magnet. The midrange drive-unit has a circular array of small magnets rather than a single large one. Focal calls this array the Power Flower, from its resemblance to the petals of a flower, and claims it reduces nonlinearities in the magnetic drive and minimizes flux leakage.

BOTH THE MAESTRO'S 6.5" MIDRANGE UNIT AND ITS TWO 11" WOOFERS HAVE CONES MADE FROM A MATERIAL FOCAL CALLS W. THIS IS A **SANDWICH OF AIRCRAFT-GRADE FOAM AND GLASS FIBER.**

doesn't have a dustcap, but its magnet pole-piece is capped with an inverted black molding resembling the profile of the tweeter. Externally, the two woofers look identical, but the lower one uses a 50mm voice-coil, the upper one a

As you can see from the photographs, the Maestro Utopia's enclosure is complex, comprising three subenclosures joined by angled inserts. This gives the system, when viewed from the side, a faint resemblance to an accordion. While

¹ Once the beryllium is formed into a tweeter diaphragm, there is no danger. Focal's manual does include a section on how to seal and return the speaker if the tweeter is damaged in any way.

This makes the Maestro Utopia III a distinctly schizophrenic load for the partnering amplifier: very difficult for any amp to drive in the upper bass, but very amplifier-friendly in the upper midrange and treble. It is a good thing, therefore, that the Focal is very sensitive, playing very loud with only a few watts of power. My estimate of its voltage sensitivity on its tweeter axis was 92.6dB(B)/2.83V/m, which is within experimental error of the specified 93dB.

The traces in fig.1 are from slight discontinuities that would suggest the presence of cabinet resonances of some kind. Listening to the walls of the midrange and woofer enclosures with a stethoscope while I played the half-step-spaced toneburst track from *Editor's Choice* (CD, Stereophile STPH016-2), I heard no undue emphasis

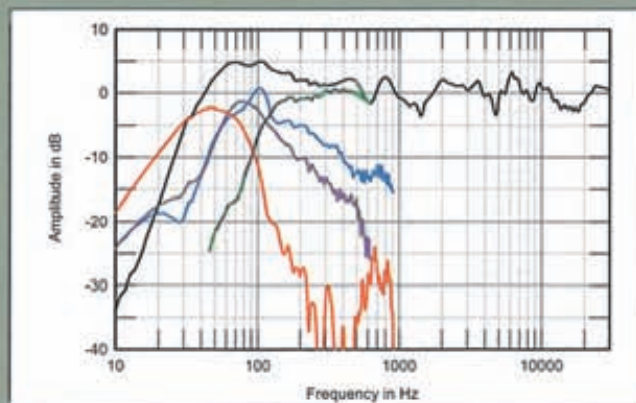


Fig.2 Focal Maestro Utopia III, anechoic response on tweeter axis at 50° with jumpers set to "3," averaged across 30° horizontal window and corrected for microphone response, with complex sum of nearfield responses plotted below 300Hz (black) and with nearfield responses of midrange unit (green), upper woofer (blue), lower woofer (purple), and port (red).

in the midrange, other than a slight liveliness from both the midrange and woofer enclosures at around 275Hz.

The rather complicated set of traces to the left of fig.2 shows the outputs of the three lower-frequency drive-units and the port, measured in the nearfield and scaled in the ratio of their radiating diameters. The midrange unit (green trace) crosses over to the upper woofer (blue) at around 150Hz, the latter rolling off with a relatively shallow slope. The lower woofer (purple) peaks a little lower in frequency than the upper, with a much steeper low-pass roll-off. Peculiarly, though the large, downfiring port loads the lower woofer's subenclosure, it is the upper woofer that has a better-defined minimum-motion notch in its response, at 28Hz, which is a little lower in frequency than predicted by the speaker's impedance graph. The port's output (red) peaks in the midbass and rolls off rapidly above that region.

The black trace below 300Hz in fig.2 shows the complex sum of the individual nearfield outputs. The broad boost in the upper bass will be partly due to the nearfield measurement technique, which assumes that the radiators are housed on the face of an infinite plane; in true anechoic conditions the Maestro Utopia's low frequencies will extend down to the port tuning frequency, where it will be down by 6dB. Higher in frequency in fig.2, the Maestro's balance on the tweeter axis is basically flat, though with small peaks balanced by small dips and extending at full level out to the 30kHz limit of the graph. This measurement was taken with all the midrange and treble jumpers in the "3" position. Changing the treble jumper to "2" shelves down the speaker's output above 3kHz by 1dB; the "1" position drops that region by another dB. The midrange jumper also gives a 1-2dB reduction in level, but covering just the octave between 2 and 4kHz.

the central tweeter cabinet fires straight ahead, the accordion pleats aim the top, midrange enclosure down toward the listener. The baffle of the subenclosure housing the two woofers is tilted back a little to complement the midrange enclosure's downward tilt. The massively constructed woofer enclosure is built up of sheets of MDF up to 2" thick; viewed from above, the side panels of all three subenclosures gracefully curve and taper toward the rear of the speaker.

The differences between the two woofers are made clear by the Maestro's internal construction (see p.86). The upper woofer is loaded by a trapezoidal sealed compartment, though this does have a pressure-relief system in the form of two arrays of small holes drilled through the partition between it and the larger compartment that loads the lower woofer. This vents to the outside world through a large, downfiring port at the front of the enclosure's bottom panel. An integral plinth raises this panel off the ground and extends behind the body of the speaker to

carry the single pair of binding posts and the three sets of jumpers that permit adjustment of the Maestro's balance. Casters on the underside of the plinth make it relatively easy to move the big Focal around; inserts elsewhere in the plinth allow four heavy-duty spikes to be fitted once the optimal positions have been found in the room.

The lower woofer hands over to the upper at 90Hz, which in turn hands over to the midrange unit at 220Hz. The midrange/tweeter crossover is at 2.2kHz, but no details are provided for the crossover topology, other than that it uses what Focal terms Optimum Phase Crossover Plus (OPC+). This includes the three sets of jumpers mentioned above, one each for the subbass, midrange, and tweeter. Each set offers three choices of position, labeled "1," "2," and "3," to allow the speaker's balance to be optimized for specific room acoustics. The middle "2" jumper positions are for nominal flat response; "1" reduces the low bass by 1dB and the treble by

1.5dB; "3" increases the bass by 1dB and the treble by 1.5dB.

Maestro: the music, please

Setup was relatively straightforward for such a bulky, heavy speaker, thanks to the casters and the fact that the intelligently designed crates include their own loading ramps. Ian McArthur of Focal's North American distributor, Audio Plus Services, helped me maneuver the Maestro Utopia IIIs into my listening room. Using a CD of music with which he was familiar, MacArthur moved each speaker an inch or so at a time from its initial placement, until the tonal balance was what he felt was representative of the speaker. He then fine-tuned the jumpers. Having set up many speakers in this room, I was surprised by how tolerant of setup the Maestro Utopia was. With some high-performance speakers, the difference between superb and merely okay sound can involve very small changes in position and toe-in. By contrast, even when we had first placed the speakers where we

measurements, continued

The Maestro Utopia is too heavy to be placed on my Outline speaker turntable, so I could practically measure its lateral dispersion only across the same $\pm 15^\circ$ window I used to generate the black trace in fig.2. I haven't shown the resultant graph, but the Maestro's balance doesn't change to a significant extent across that horizontal angle, this correlating with the superbly stable stereo imaging. The speaker was similarly uncritical in the vertical plane (fig.3), which is just as well, given that its tweeter is 45" from the floor.

The red trace in fig.4 shows the Maestro Utopia's spatially averaged response in my listening room. I produce this curve by averaging twenty $\frac{1}{6}$ -octave-smoothed responses taken for each speaker individually in a vertical rectangular grid measuring 36" by 18" and centered on the positions of my ears in my listening chair. I used an Earthworks omni microphone and a Metric Halo ULN-2 FireWire audio interface,

in conjunction with SMUGSoftware's Fuzzmeasure 2.0 running on my Apple laptop. Other than some lumpiness in the lower midrange due to residual room effects, the Focal's in-room balance is very smooth. There is a slight excess of energy evident in the mid-treble, though the upper octave is suppressed by the increased absorptivity of the room's furnishings in this region. Reflecting the implications of the overall nearfield response in fig.2, the upper bass is a little exaggerated in level before shelving down below the room resonant mode in the 50Hz region. The speaker is still putting out useful energy below 30Hz, however.

For reference, the blue trace in fig.4 shows the in-room response, taken under identical circumstances, of the Aerial 20T V2, which I reviewed in November 2009. The wide, top-octave lateral dispersion of the American speaker's ribbon tweeter results in more top-octave energy. There is a little

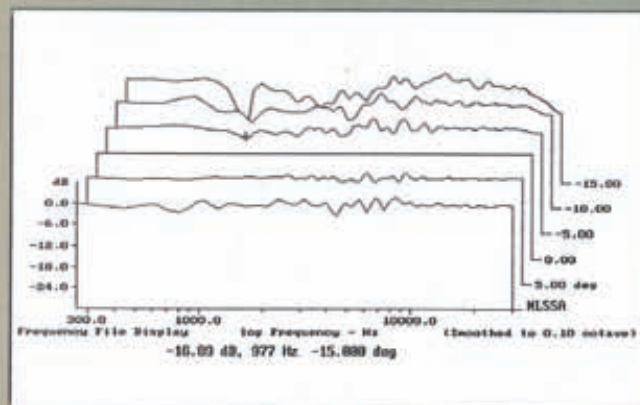


Fig.3 Focal Maestro Utopia III, vertical response family at 50°, normalized to response on tweeter axis, from back to front: differences in response 15–5° above axis, reference response, differences in response 5–10° below axis.

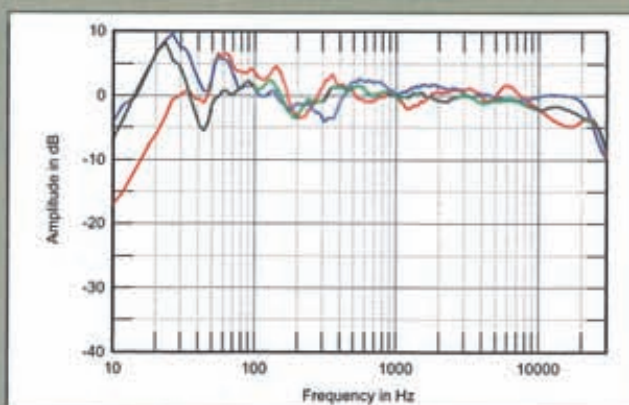


Fig.4 Focal Maestro Utopia III, spatially averaged, $\frac{1}{6}$ -octave response in JA's listening room (red); of Aerial Acoustics 20T V2 (blue); and of Revel Ultima Salon2 (green).



merely *thought* they might work best, the Maestros sounded excellent. The fine-tuning was just that: *fine* tuning.

A circular, black grille is supplied for each driver; the one for the tweeter is magnetically attached. MacArthur felt

Electra 1007 Be bookshelf speaker, which I reviewed in June 2006 (see www.stereophile.com/standloudspeakers/606focal), I expected a lengthy break-in period, but the Maestro's balance changed very little after the first day's use. I had found the

WHEREAS SOME SPEAKERS ARE TAILORED TO HAVE A TONAL IMBALANCE THAT RESULTS IN A POLITE SOUND, THE MAESTRO UTOPIA III'S DECORUM WAS **DUE TO THE ABSENCE OF THINGS THAT SPEAKERS USUALLY DO WRONG.**

the speakers sounded best with grilles removed. Having declared himself satisfied with the placement of the speakers and the jumper settings, he then fitted the carpet-piercing spikes, packed up his tools, and drove back to the airport, leaving me to live with the Maestro Utopia IIIs. After my experience with the Focal

1007 Be to sound brilliant; by contrast, the Maestro Utopia was, if anything, a little on the mellow side, even polite. Not that it sounded uninvolved, but instead of thrusting the music forward at me, it was more as if it were inviting me to hear *into* the music.

It took me a while to appreciate that,

less upper-bass energy apparent, though the Aerial's port pumps out more energy below 40Hz than that of the more overdamped Focal. The green trace shows the spatially averaged response of the Revel Ultima Salon2. This speaker is as smooth as the Aerial, but with a little less upper-midrange energy evident. The Revel's top octave falls between the Aerial's and the Focal's and is, I believe, about right, given the French speaker's mellow balance and the Aerial's always-exciting highs. In the bass, the Revel's three woofers are more successful than the two woofers of each of the other speakers at producing an even upper-bass balance, but the low-bass room mode is excited almost as much as it is with the Aerial.

In the time domain, the Maestro Utopia's step response on the tweeter axis (fig.5) indicates that the tweeter and midrange unit are connected in inverted acoustic polarity, with the decay of the tweeter step smoothly blending

into the midrange unit's step. Similarly, the decay of the midrange step smoothly merges into the start of the woofers' positive-going step, which suggests optimal crossover design. The cumulative spectral-decay plot on the tweeter axis (fig.6) is affected by the presence of early reflections, hence doesn't look as clean as I expected—or, for that matter, heard. That small peak in the mid-treble is associated with some delayed energy, though the region covered by the tweeter is clean.

Measuring a loudspeaker as large and heavy as the Maestro is never as straightforward as one might wish, due to the difficulty of getting the speaker well away from room boundaries, especially the floor. But within the inevitable limitations of the measurement procedure, the Focal Maestro Utopia III's performance suggests superb speaker engineering.

—John Atkinson

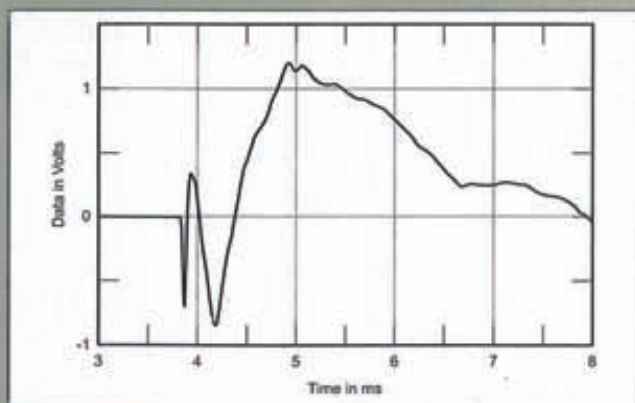


Fig.5 Focal Maestro Utopia III, step response on tweeter axis at 50° (5ms time window, 30kHz bandwidth).

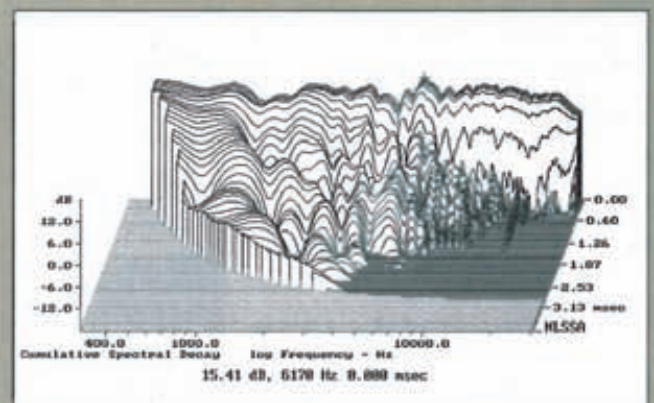


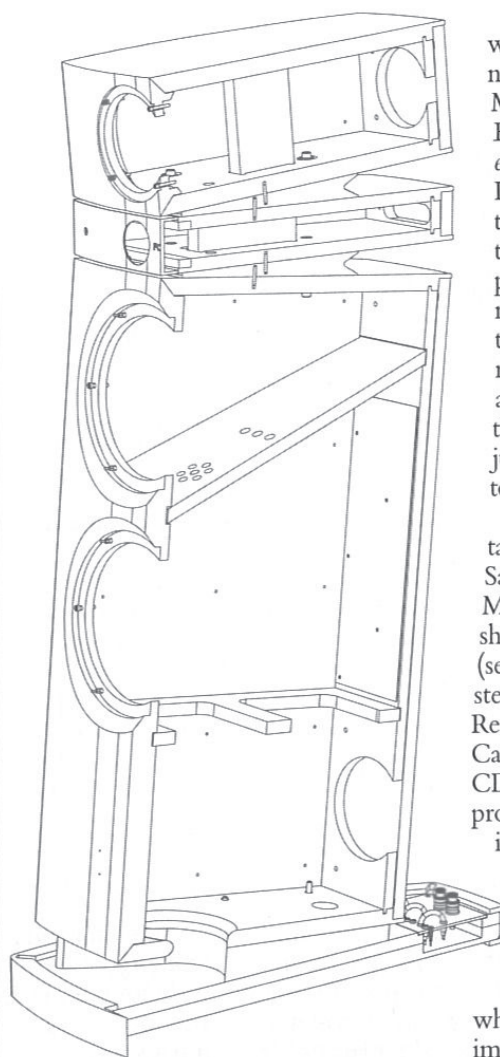
Fig.6 Focal Maestro Utopia III, cumulative spectral-decay plot on tweeter axis at 50° (0.15ms risetime).

whereas some speakers are tailored to have a tonal imbalance that results in a polite sound, the Maestro Utopia III's decorum was due to the absence of things that speakers usually do wrong. The big Focal didn't lack energy in any specific frequency region; instead, it lacked cone breakup modes in woofers and midranges, resonances in cabinets, and distortions of all kinds. The speaker sounded smooth, yet without smearing or covering up recorded detail. The subtle touch of extra reverberation I had added with a Lexicon unit to the sound of Jerome Harris's direct-injected bass guitar in "Hand by Hand," from his Quintet's *Rendezvous* (CD, Stereophile STPH013-2), was as clear as I had hoped it would be, and a little more obvious than I might have wished.

I had wondered about the Maestro Utopias' imaging, given the fact that the tweeter is set within a wide baffle, though this does have a slightly convex curve. I shouldn't have been concerned. The dual-mono pink-noise track from *Editor's Choice* (CD, Stereophile STPH016-2) was reproduced as it should be: as a very narrow spot of sound midway between the speakers, without any splashing to the sides at any frequencies. The instruments on *Rendezvous* were stably placed in space precisely where I had mixed them to be, with excellent image depth where appropriate.

Ian MacArthur had left the Maestros' tweeter jumpers in their neutral, "2" positions. Long-term, I preferred the balance with them set to "3," which took away most of the mellow top-octave quality. But, my goodness, this is one smooth tweeter, rivaled perhaps only by the Revel's beryllium dome. (I haven't heard the B&W diamond tweeter under familiar circumstances.) The Focal tweeter loved the sounds of cymbals, maximally differentiating among the various instruments used by drummer Billy Drummond on *Rendezvous*. For example, too often with less-aristocratic tweeters, the ride cymbal Drummond softly brushes throughout the first time through the verse on "The Mooche" sounds more like white noise. The Focal's inverted beryllium dome preserved the cymbal's changing texture, yet without pushing that character forward at me.

At the other end of the spectrum, a consistent factor in my auditioning was how well articulated bass guitars sounded. Jerome Harris's solo in "Hand by Hand," from *Rendezvous*, was reproduced by the Focals with no undue



The Maestro's internal construction features separate subenclosures for the woofers.

emphasis or lack of some of any of the notes played—other than that intended by the performer, of course. In-room low-frequency extension, judged using the warble tones on *Editor's Choice*, was good to 25Hz, though the 20Hz band

was inaudible. The lowest notes on my new reference for pipe-organ sound, Melanie Barney with the Buzz Brass Ensemble performing Holst's *Planets* (CD, Fidelio FACD028), which I was given at SSI, didn't quite have the magnificence that they had with the Aerial 20T V2s, but nevertheless provided a satisfying foundation to the music. The Focal's woofers seemed tuned for clarity and articulation rather than for delivering the ultimate amount of low-frequency energy into the room. I ended up with the bass jumpers in their "3" positions, to add a touch more midbass energy.

A CD that has been in heavy rotation since I returned from the 2010 Salon Son et Image at the end of March is an EP from the Montreal show's featured artist, the band Give (see www.giveband.ca and http://blog.stereophile.com/ssi2010/oh_caroline). Recorded at Studio Reference in St. Caliste, Quebec, the four songs on this CD, titled SSI, epitomize what can be produced with a modern rock recording

without having to resort to massive amounts of make-it-loud compression or in-your-face equalization. The bass player uses a five-string instrument on the final song, "Mouths," and while every note was reproduced with impressive clarity and good weight, this recording did reveal that there was a slight touch of extra warmth in the Maestro's upper bass. This made the bass guitar sound just a bit larger than life. Not that—speaking as a bass guitarist—there's anything wrong with that.

This character did seem somewhat amplifier-dependent. It was more noticeable with the Simaudio Moon

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

DIGITAL SOURCES Ayre C-5xe^{MP} universal player; Simaudio Moon Evolution 750D CD player; dCS Puccini SACD player & USB-input D/A converter with Apple Mac mini for media storage.

PREAMPLIFIER Simaudio Moon Evolution P-8.

POWER AMPLIFIERS Classé CTM-600 monoblocks, Simaudio Moon Evolution W-7.

LOUDSPEAKERS Aerial Acoustics 20T V2.

CABLES Digital: Kimber Illuminations Orchid AES/EBU, Stereovox CV2 electrical S/PDIF, Belkin USB. Interconnect (balanced): AudioQuest Wild, Ayre Signature. Speaker: AudioQuest Wild. AC: PS Audio Lab, manufacturers' own.

ACCESSORIES Target TT-5 equipment racks; Ayre Myrtle Blocks; ASC Tube Traps, RPG Abffusor panels; Shunyata Research Dark Field cable elevators; PS Audio Power Plant 300 at 90Hz (preamp, CD players other than Ayre), Audio Power Industries 116 Mk.II & PE-1, APC S-15 AC line conditioners (not power amps). AC power comes from two dedicated 20A circuits, each just 6' from the breaker box.

—John Atkinson

Evolution W-7 that I've long used as a reference power amplifier than it was with the Classé CTM-600 monoblocks that arrived halfway through my time with the Focals (review to appear in the fall). More important, with the otherwise excellent Simaudio amp, the speakers didn't offer the unrestricted dynamics I'd expected. The highly sensitive Maestro Utopia III wouldn't, at least in theory, need a high-powered amplifier to play loud. Yet the 150Wpc Simaudio was clearly being asked for more than it could deliver.

I was reminded by the passage in Tony Bramwell's autobiography, *Magical Mystery Tours: My Life with the Beatles* (Robson Books, 2005), about his experience as a record promoter working on Jennifer Warnes' tribute to Leonard Cohen, *Famous Blue Raincoat*, that it had been too long since I had listened to that superbly crafted album (CD, Private Music PVT2092). With the W-7 driving the Focals, I turned up the wick on the opener, "First We Take Manhattan." Hmm. Yes, Warnes' singing sounded as coherent, as focused, and as artful as I knew it should; Roscoe Beck's bass guitar was beautifully articulate and solidly reproduced; and the stereo stage was wide, deep, and stable—but the sound didn't want to *give* as much as I was expecting. It was just too damnably restrained. Similarly with classical music, where orchestral climaxes just didn't climax as much I wished or had expected them to. I want—no, I *need* the glorious encore of the theme of Thor's swinging hammer at the closing of Sibelius's Symphony 5, in the performance by Vladimir Ashkenazy and the Philharmonia Orchestra (CD, Decca 410-016-2), to raise me to my feet in joy; but that just wasn't happening with the Moon amplifier driving the Focals the way it had done with the same amp driving the Revel Salon2s.

The last thing you'd expect would be English reserve from a French loudspeaker, but that was what I was getting with the Simaudio. Changing from AudioQuest's Kilimanjaro speaker cables, which I've used for many years, to AudioQuest's new Wild didn't resolve the issue (though it did add to the Maestro's already-excellent presentation of midrange detail). It wasn't until the 600W Classé amplifiers took up residence in the system that I felt the Maestro Utopias were really giving me the dynamics

they had promised all along.

Which allowed me to concentrate on and appreciate what the Focals excelled at: the midrange. With rock recordings that are typically hot in the midband—Joni Mitchell's otherwise excellent *Shadows and Light* (HDCD, Asylum 704-2), for example—I set the Maestro's midrange jumpers to "1" to take away

her reading of Joni Mitchell's "A Case of You," from *Come Dream With Me* (CD, Warlock 4219), the small inflections of pitch in her voice unobscured by loudspeaker anomalies or overlaid with colorations. The same was true for Give's Caroline St. Louis: her small vocal decorations and grace notes, her tasteful use of vibrato to point a phrase,

IT WASN'T UNTIL THE 600W CLASSÉ AMPLIFIERS TOOK UP RESIDENCE IN THE SYSTEM THAT I FELT THE MAESTRO UTOPIAS WERE REALLY GIVING ME THE DYNAMICS THEY HAD PROMISED ALL ALONG.

some of the bite. But voices on well-recorded albums soared and sang. A secret pleasure of mine is the American Songbook stylings of Jane Monheit. The Maestros reproduced without flaw

were superbly well differentiated.

Male voices were treated with the same equanimity. I finished my formal auditioning of the Maestro Utopia IIIs with May's "Recording of the Month," Johnny Cash's *American VI: Ain't No Grave* (CD, Lost Highways/American Recordings B0013954-02). The life lived and the damage done are evident in every note this great American singer sings on this album, and the pitch differentiation offered by the Maestro Utopia, all too often smeared and homogenized by lesser speakers, was presented in full measure. *This* is high fidelity.

Utopia

There are loudspeakers that thrust their virtues forward at you. By contrast, the Focal Maestro Utopia III *invites* the listener into what it has to offer. Its balance is a little warm in the upper bass in absolute terms, and a touch mellow in the top octave, but the Maestro Utopia is otherwise an intensely musical-sounding loudspeaker, with smooth, uncolored mids, tight, controlled lows, stable, well-defined soundstaging, and superb dynamic-range capability. However, it demands to be used with amplifiers unfazed by its wicked load impedance in the upper bass. The Classé monoblocks proved a superb match, and I imagine the Musical Fidelity Titan that resides in Michael Fremer's man cave would also work a treat with these speakers.

With that caveat, and with an acknowledgment to the fact that this is a very expensive loudspeaker, I give the beautifully finished and engineered Focal Maestro Utopia III my highest recommendation.

