

# Focal Profile 918 Loudspeaker

## The real deal when it comes to high fidelity

Sue Kraft

**T**he upside of having two listening rooms at my disposal is, obviously, being able to audition equipment—especially loudspeakers—in more than one acoustic environment.

After all, the room is at least as important as any other component in the audio chain. The downside to multiple rooms is the chore of actually having to lug gear back and forth between said rooms. I've "walked" so many speakers up and down the hallway these past few months, my dog is starting to get jealous.

Fortunately, the sleek new Profile 918 (\$4000) from Focal weighs in at only 43 pounds, making it almost light enough to tuck under my arm and carry. But when it comes to loudspeakers, putting on a little extra weight can be a good thing, especially when you're trying to keep 'em securely anchored to the floor. More on that minor infraction later. For now, I'd rather dive right into the cream filling and tell you about the invigorating sparkle and liveliness, all-out dimensionality, precise imaging, piston-quick bass response, and ear-pleasing finesse of this 2.5-way floorstander. The 918 is one gorgeous-sounding speaker.

My initial listening session quickly confirmed this might not be the ideal transducer to pair with a tube amplifier—especially the OTL variety. No problem there. I'm finding there aren't a whole lot of speakers as enamored of OTL design as the ultra-efficient Coincident Total and Super Eclipse models are. So I shuffled a few solid-state amps around and, surprisingly, settled on the vintage Harman Kardon Citation 16 as the best choice.<sup>1</sup> The 150w Citation 16 lit a fire under the 918, illuminating all manner of inner detail, extending bandwidth at both frequency extremes, and expanding the soundstage every which way but forward and fatiguing.

We all have our listening biases; for me, I want to hear the music breathe with open, clear, and enthusiastic expression. Given the opportuni-

ty, the 918 will pass this test with flying colors—as it did with one of my listening favorites, Benny Carter's *In the Mood for Swing* [Musical Heritage Society]. Perhaps I'm living in the past, but I'll never tire of that disc. Due to the upbeat tempo and percussive intricacies of tracks such as "South Side Samba," a compressed and darkish sounding component just won't do this music justice. The 918 will have you in the mood for swinging from the rafters.

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Jennifer Warnes' *Famous Blue Raincoat* [Cypress] is another disc I'll never tire of spinning. Tracks like "Bird on a Wire" usually invoke flashbacks of my early days as a budding audiophile, when I first encountered the then-unfamiliar lingo about soundstage depth and three-dimensionality. The 918 would be a perfect demonstration for the newcomer as to what soundstage depth and three-dimensionality are all about, as well as seamless transitions and wholeness of images. Vocals were naturally smooth and solidly placed, while bass performance was quick and articulate, never calling attention to itself but blending succinctly with the pace of the music.

In the numerous listening sessions that followed, I was never once disappointed with the performance of the 918, though I did find the speaker to be more revealing of associated equipment than what I've experienced with other gear in the same price range. In my book, this can be a very good thing. A revealing speaker may need a bit more care



<sup>1</sup>For more on the Citation, see last issue's TAS Retrospective. —WG

with system matching, but the extra effort will be greatly rewarded—much more so than with a model that has a

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tendency to smooth everything over. Smoothing over may hide flaws, but in the process it will mask some of the delicious inner detail and nuance we all live

for. I'd also like to point out that system matching has little to do with price. So don't make the mistake of simply throw-

ing money at your stereo setup without doing a little research first. The more expensive component will not always be the best choice.

One of the better matches I uncovered via some experimentation was outfitting my system with a trio of active cables from Synergistic Research. (I made Ted from Synergistic promise that he wouldn't "cheat" by sending wires costing three times more than the speaker itself.) With two pair of Alpha Core interconnects (\$360 each for a one-meter

pair) and a single run of Signature 10 speaker cable (\$812.50 for a six-foot pair) in place, my ears did an auditory double take at the vast improvement in transient response as well as top-to-bottom image definition. The Synergistic cable also helped to tame the high frequencies a notch, which at times—depending on the recording—could get to be a little too unforgiving.

The 918 is a very different animal when compared to a speaker like the B&W 704. The 704, like every other B&W I've heard to date, has a presentation that is more upfront and personal, making you feel as if you're almost a part of the musical experience. The 918's soundstage, on the other hand, begins a few feet back from the front of the speaker. This perspective has greater depth, allowing the listener to hear fur-



### Technically Speaking

The Profile 918 is a 2.5-way system housed in a front-ported enclosure. Borrowing from technologies developed by Focal for the Utopia Beryllium, it utilizes the new 1" aluminum/magnesium alloy inverted-dome tweeter. Both the 6.5" mid/bass and bass drivers uses Focal's latest "W" composite cone technology, which employs two glass leafs affixed to both sides of a structural foam. Focal believes this patented "sandwich" best addresses the inherent issues of manufacturing a cone that is both light and stiff, with the least amount of unwanted resonance. For those who want to delve a little deeper into the technical details, Focal does offer more information online, as well as a white paper on request.


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ther into the music, but sacrificing the sense of immediacy of the B&W. Both presentations can be equally enjoyable, depending on listening preferences and associated equipment.

As I said earlier, my only nit-pick build-wise is that the speaker could use more heft, like perhaps some lead shot in the bottom. [*Maybe a hunting trip with Dick Cheney?*—JV] Even with the factory-supplied spikes, the 918's relatively light weight combined with its small footprint made for precarious traction on carpeted flooring. Rather than having to worry about another speaker being jettisoned into the fireplace by my furry listening companion, I decided to do away with the spikes altogether and place the speakers on Symposium Svelte shelves. This cured the 918 of its wobbly footing.

The Profile 918 is a speaker you won't easily tire of looking at—or listening to. It may take a little extra

equipment shuffling to realize its full potential, but your efforts will not go unrewarded. If you're the type who doesn't want to fuss with system matching, that's okay, too. You can still plunk the 918 in your rig, push play, and be perfectly happy. But for those who enjoy the journey almost as much as the ear-tingling pot of gold at the end, you'll be getting your money's worth and then some with this sleek French hottie. The Profile 918 is the real deal when it comes to high fidelity. 

#### DISTRIBUTOR INFORMATION

##### AUDIO PLUS SERVICES

P.O. Box 3047  
Plattsburgh, New York 12901  
(800) 663-9352  
[www.focal-jmlab.fr](http://www.focal-jmlab.fr)  
Price: \$4000

#### SPECIFICATIONS

Type: 2.5-way bass-reflex floorstander  
Driver complement: One 1" Al/Mg inverted-dome tweeter; one 6" "W" cone mid/bass; one 6.5" "W" cone woofer  
Frequency response: 40Hz–30.5kHz  
Sensitivity: 90dB  
Recommended power: 25–175 watts  
Impedance: 8 ohms  
Dimensions: 9" x 39" x 13.6"  
Weight: 43 lbs.

#### ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Meridian G08 and Marantz PMD-320 CD players; AVA Ultra DAC; Meridian G02 control unit; Sonic Euphoria passive controller; Audio by Van Alstine Ultra preamp; Meridian G57, Atma-Sphere Novacron OTL, and HK Citation 16 amps; Coincident Super Eclipse, Von Schweikert VR4jr, B&W 800D, and B&W 704 speakers; Coincident TRS, Paul Speltz anti-cable, and Harmonic Technology speaker cables; Harmonic Technology and Audio Magic interconnects; Cardas RCA to XLR adapters; Elrod, JPS power cords; Bright Star Audio and Symposium Svelte shelves; PS Audio Ultimate outlet; Echo Busters and ASC room treatment