

## EQUIPMENT REVIEW

# Focal Stella Utopia EM

*review by Roy Gregory, photography by Simon Marsh*



**T**he big problem facing any company that launches a flagship as impressive, imposing and expensive as Focal's Grande Utopia EM, is knowing how to follow it up. There is no avoiding the necessary\* step and the gap (in technology and cost) to the Grande EM would need bridging.

So what has Focal left out in the Stella? Most obviously, the mid-bass driver that sits on top of the flagship model. The resulting reduction in height, along with a proportional reduction in depth and width makes for a speaker that is considerably less bulky than the Grande. You also sacrifice a degree of adjustability, with only three settings on the power supply (as opposed to the Grande's six) but given that you are also sacrificing ultimate extension, they should prove more than adequate. Finally, the cranking mechanism that enables you to 'focus' the Grande, curving its cabinet like a giant spine, has also been eliminated. Focal suggests that, with the elimination of the top-mounted mid-bass driver, its time-alignment function becomes superfluous. The fixed curve of the Stella, combined with its lower height and reduced driver spacing makes it far less critical in this regard.

So finally, what does all that save/cost in monetary and musical terms? At £63,500 the Stella is not exactly inexpensive – but it still slices a whopping £49,250 (or 44%) off of the price of the Grandes! It still goes deep, it still goes loud and it still offers similar room-matching capabilities to its bigger brother. It still comes in fire engine red (and other colours, including the elegant white of the review pair) and it's still one of the most sculpturally stylish loudspeakers on the market. In fact, the rather more svelte dimensions of the Stella are less imposing, more flat out attractive than the bigger model. The Grande goes deeper than the Stella, but it does so (in part) thanks to that extra mid-bass driver, allowing the EM bass unit to operate across a lower but more limited bandwidth. The down-side is a more complex crossover, and while the numbers look good on paper, there's no escaping the fact that the full capabilities of the Grande are really only revealed once you are running several hundred seriously high-quality Watts into them – and that's never cheap. In contrast, the Stella is both slightly more efficient and (subjectively at

least) a significantly less demanding load, making it easier on your system and in turn, making your system easier on your pocket. The Stella isn't just cheaper to buy than the Grande, it's cheaper to run too.

I ran the Stella with a whole host of partnering amps, including a couple of high-quality but relatively modest integrateds, just to see what would happen. Even the Storm Audio V35's 70 solid-state Watts were more than capable of raising music from the Stellas. Sure, the Berning monos delivered greater texture, detail and transparency, the VTL 450s considerably more colour and authority, but the Stellas seem to shine a light on their partner's strengths – rather than exposing their weaknesses.

Set up is surprisingly straightforward for a speaker of this size and weight, and while I allowed them plenty of room to breathe, their adjustability will make them more tolerant of cramped accommodation than many speakers of this size and bandwidth. Do remove the grilles and do tighten the driver mounting bolts. Other than that it's just about getting the position and settings right, for which a little experienced help will be invaluable.

Confronted with the Stellas, it's almost inevitable that your first impulse will be along the lines of, "Well, let's see what the bass is like?" It's a big speaker and it should go low, especially given the EM driver. Well, it does – and in emphatic fashion. But what is more interesting is how the low frequency extension affects the musical presentation.

The Stella cannot match the scale and soundstage dimensionality of its bigger brother. In real terms, it's far from a slouch in this regard, but it doesn't possess the clear delineation of soundstage boundaries, the breadth and depth, the three-dimensionality of individual instruments that the Grande is capable of. Take the Petrenko Shostakovich 11th Symphony as an example. The Stellas' soundstage is big, with good width and depth. But compared to the Grande, it doesn't extend as far outside the speakers, and doesn't end in a definite boundary. The tims and snare drum in the opening aren't located precisely relative to the rear wall, the trumpet call isn't surrounded by its own cushion of air. What does this mean in musical terms? In absolute terms, it robs this most atmospheric of symphonic openings of that last ounce of tension and chill, the ability that the bigger speaker has to pull you, almost bodily into the recording. Less obviously, it also lacks the absolute fluidity of pace and tempo that the Grandes can deliver.

Take a listen to *This One's For Blanton* and you'll hear the same effects on a smaller, more intimate recording. Played on the Stella, the presentation lacks the explicit placement of bass and piano, both in depth and height, while the astonishing rhythmic elasticity that flows between Ellington and Ray Brown is curtailed in its sheer expressive range. Instead, the playing is tighter, more driven, more locked in. Now consider that in the Stella the EM driver, with its incredibly powerful and responsive motor, coupled to a peak to peak extension of 36mm, is responsible for the range all the way up to 220Hz. No wonder the Stella's low frequencies enjoy such attack and clarity of note to note separation. Ironically, the EM driver in the Stella might be smaller than the one in the Grande, but its influence is wider ranging and could actually be considered more important. These are essentially the differences that you'd expect between a genuinely full-range design and one that just goes deep, but the equation is far from being entirely on the debit side, especially once you place both designs in context.

The Stella is a far less demanding beast, especially of space and matching equipment. Its potential performance at the bottom end might not match the Grande, but I'd rather have all of the Stella than some of the Grande. Also, factor that more purposeful, directed presentation into proceedings and you quickly discover that, even if it lacks that last ounce of "you are there" frisson that comes with the Grande, it makes for an undeniably compelling physical performance. What extra bass does come out of the Grandes has more to do with space and the acoustic than the notes from the instruments. Just listen to the mounting, climactic waves that carry the second and fourth movements and you'll hear exactly what I mean. There's no shortage of orchestral weight and no diminution of the sheer musical power that Petranov conjures from the score and the Liverpool Philharmonic, which given the music in question, is no mean feat!



\*Necessary, because flagship models are expensive to produce, expensive to buy and remain for the vast majority, an unattainable dream. "Why bother then?" I hear you ask: because they serve as development platforms and attention grabbers, generating "trickle down" products and sales. So, for every pair of Nautilus 800Ds they sell, B&W will look to sell at least ten pairs of 802Ds. Likewise, in smaller numbers, the Wilson Audio X2 and Maxx 3 – or of course, the Focal Grande Utopia EM and the Stella...

► So, while there are very real differences between the bottom end of the Stella and its more expensive, older brother, for most of us, either practicality or taste will render them irrelevant. But, whilst bass presentation and power are key to the sound of this speaker, certainly in commercial terms, it's only half of the story. What really impresses me about the way they play the Shostakovich 11th is their ability to transit from shatteringly loud to the quietest, most fragile phrase without hangover, spatial or dynamic collapse. The score takes you from *fff* straight to *ppp* without hesitation, deviation or repetition, one musical phrase growing literally from the decay roots of the other. Live, it's a shatteringly emotive effect and the Stella is one of the very few speakers that has both the bandwidth and the unfettered dynamic range to pull it off convincingly. Where other systems make the transition more of a slope, less of a cliff, the Stellas give you Beachy Head, complete with the impact as you hit the bottom!

This ability to play genuinely loud, without placing such a strain on the amplifier that the orchestra congeals into a single, screeching mess, combined with the tactile microdynamic immediacy that holds the quietest passages together allows the Stellas to run the full musical gamut, from quiet to loud as well as quiet and loud. Their ability to hold separate the quieter instruments, maintaining their integrity in the face of much larger forces, is bettered only by the likes of the Grande and other speakers in that class. Just listen to the opening of 'Way Out Basie' (Farmers Market Barbeque) and you'll note the guitar, quietly strumming along with the rhythm section. Now ask yourself how clearly you can hear it under the brass tutti? With the Stellas it's a quietly confident and constant presence, locked in space behind the piano. Likewise, the impromptu backing vocals and noises off (dog barking, mechanicals) that accompany Townes Van Zandt on 'Waitin' Round To Die' are crystal clear parts of the whole, without distracting from it.

That impressive weight and power that gives the Shostakovich such musical and emotional authority underpins the fact that the Stellas' agility and detail isn't won at the expense of tonal colour and harmonic complexity. The conversational give and take of Mozart's Sinfonia Concertante K.364 is built on the contrasting voices of violin and viola. It's amazing how many speakers confuse or fail to separate the two instruments, yet the Focals keep that separation clear, even when the two are playing in unison. The viola's richer, woodier tone is unmistakable, as is the characteristic colour of the cor anglais, in the hauntingly fragile and evocative solo passage that graces the fourth movement of the Shostakovich. And when that mighty performance crashes to a close, the accusing tone of the bell's final toll rings on – and rings true.

Tracks that depend on their measured pace (Janis Ian's 'Some People's Lives', for instance) lose a little of the pathos, but make up for it in terms of intensity and purpose, while those tracks that demand drive and energy take on a whole new life and energy. Everything from Elvis Costello and Steve Earle concert tapes to the Cure's *Head On The Door* were let off the leash, to impressively compelling effect. Volumes were advanced and sessions extended, but the Stellas took it all in their stride.

Which invites the question, leaving aside sibling rivalry, just how do they compare to the likes of Avalon's Time and Nola's Baby Grand?

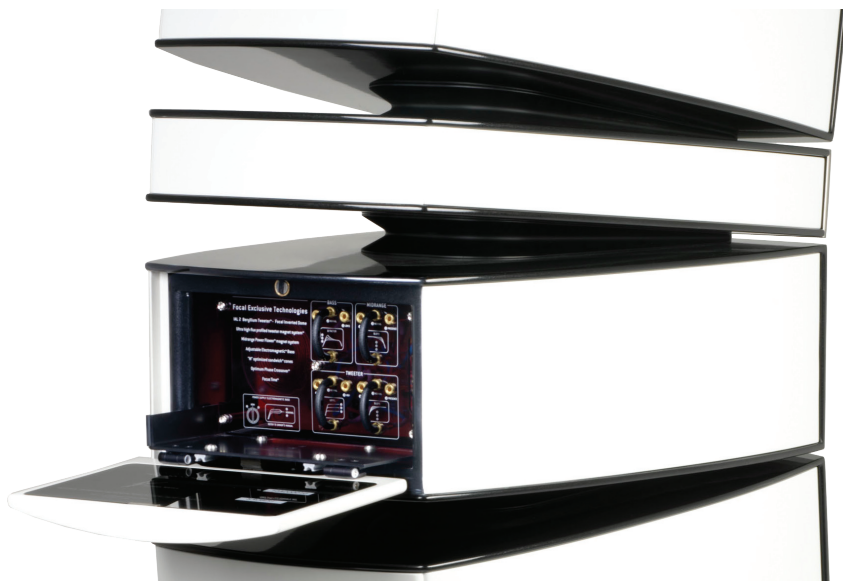
Of those two, the Time is both the better balanced and the more serious competition. Capable of matching the fit, finish and engineering/technology

content of the Stella, it offers a distinctly different musical presentation as well as a smaller and less dramatic physical one. Tonally, the accuracy and richness of its palette eclipses the otherwise impressive capabilities of the Stella in this regard, and it has a poise and easy precision that is both engaging and musically seductive. Where it loses out to the French speaker is in the demands it places on the partnering amplifier, and even when those are met, in its ability to track the dynamic demands of the performance. The Stella can simply jump further – and faster.

But each time the Avalon shades the Stella in one regard, the Focal responds in another. Both are truly exceptional speakers, offering a level of performance I wouldn't have thought possible not so long ago. Which of these speakers you'd prefer is going to be a largely personal choice. Let's take the top-end as an example. Would you opt for the purity and incredibly natural tonality of the Avalon's diamond tweeter, or the immediacy, energy and speed of the Focal's beryllium? Both are exceptional, both integrate beautifully with the rest of the design they grace – but the benefits are quite distinct, and in the case of the Focal, which is after all the speaker under review, they lean towards excitement and drama. If you like your music live, then look no further.

Which brings us to the area in which the Stellas truly excel. Just like the Time, they are able to project musical energy evenly across the entire range, from their deepest bass to beyond audibility at the high end. It makes them seamless in presentation, allowing them to step back behind the performance, allowing the music to speak for itself. Impressive enough, except that the Stella takes this to a new level, exceeding in my estimation, even the ability of the Grande in this regards. Maybe it's the smaller bass unit, maybe it's the slightly higher efficiency and I'm sure it has a lot to do with giving the driving amp an easier job, but when the music (and amp) says "jump", the Stella simply says, "How High?" ►





► The effect (and benefit) is so obvious, so unusual, that they're apparent whatever you play. Try Beausoleil's 'Zydeco Gris Gris' (I know, but you'll find it on the excellent Big Easy OST); it has exactly the kind of tub-thumping bass that becomes a one-note thud on most speakers. On the Stellas, the notes don't just have pitch and shape – which is remarkable enough – but they actually project too, pushing the track along, rather than dragging it back. Meanwhile, the rattles and brushwork at the other extreme are just as clean and purposeful, insistent without ever being intrusive. It is just apparent on more poised and controlled material too, bringing new illumination to Julia Fischer's precision and technical virtuosity, further revealing how that technique is harnessed to the musical whole, while the astonishing control of Zinka Milanov, even past her best, is clear to hear.

If power, weight and impact are high on the list of Stella attributes, it's voices that really bring this speaker's strengths together. Familiar voices are instantly recognisable, so Eleanor McEvoy's accent and contralto pitching, the particular slant they give her sardonic social snapshots, carry you straight back to her live delivery. It's an effect that's reinforced by the sheer presence and lifelike scale that the Stella invests in its images. This is no pint-sized facsimile of the real event. The speaker's height and its ability to project energy creates solid, substantial images that both convince and reveal the degree to which most speakers scale down the musical event – both in physical and dynamic terms. This is about big, bold musical presence; if it's on the disc then the Stellas will project it into your room. It makes great live recordings (like Elvis Costello *Live At The El Mocambo*) an almost visceral experience – just like they were. When the Attractions pile into a gloriously over the top 'Pump It Up' it sets the whole room jumping – just like it was! Costello's laconic, almost deadpan delivery provides the perfect foil to the tight, frenetically driven energy of tracks like 'Mystery Dance' and 'You Belong To Me'. When the music gets out of control it's because the band takes it there, rather than because the speakers lose their grip on proceedings.

Indeed, beside the discussion of what the Stellas don't do there's the parallel issue of just how they do do what they do do; the mark they leave on the musical performance. It's perhaps most easily understood as an underlying attitude, the speakers giving the performance a forward facing stance. In the same way that, by the highest possible standards, they rob the acoustic of a little space, they almost seem to pull in the temporal verges too, leaving the

players a little less latitude. But that's the price you pay for their ability to react so fast and so emphatically to the dynamic demands of the signal they receive, and for many a listener it will be a trade-off they are more than happy to make, a trade-off that's less intrusive, less musically emasculating than those chosen by other speaker designs.

And that's the key to the Stella; what you get (in musical terms) for what you pay (in cost and system terms). For of all the serious contenders in this price bracket, the Focal offering not only provides a unique blend of virtues – and "me too" really isn't an option at this point in the market – that potential is by far the easiest to realize in practice. Adjustable and drivable, not only is the Stella more amenable than most of the competition to less than perfect rooms, the bill for the driving amps is likely to be lower too. When it comes to scaling down the Grande Utopias, Focal have got their mix spot on: Practicality and commonsense infecting a genuinely high-end product? Whatever next... +

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Type:** Floorstanding three-way, reflex loaded loudspeaker system

**Driver Complement:** 1x 27mm inverted Beryllium dome HF, 2x 165mm W sandwich MF, 1x 330mm W sandwich, electro-magnetic LF

**Connections:** Bi-wire inputs for signal IEC power connection for bass unit

**Bandwidth:** 22Hz – 40kHz  $\pm 3$ dB

**Sensitivity:** 94dB

**Nominal Impedance:** 8 Ohms

**Minimum Impedance:** 2.8 Ohms

**Crossover Frequencies:** 220Hz and 2200Hz

**Dimensions (WxHxD):** 553 x 1558 x 830mm

**Weight:** 165kg ea.

**Price:** £63,500 per pair

**Manufactured by:** Focal

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

**Distributed by:** Focal UK

**Tel:** +44(0) 845 660 2680