

EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Focal Aria 926

by Ed Selley

Focal's Aria range sits between the Chorus 800 and Electra line-ups and faces the tricky challenge of replicating some of the technology of the former rather closer in price to the latter. The Electra and Utopia ranges make use of distinctive "W Sandwich" driver diaphragms, in which three-to-six layers of glass fibre composite are applied to both the front and back sides of foam cores. The Arias' simpler F Sandwich diaphragms use a three-layer (glass fibre/woven flax/glass fibre) composite structure that allows mechanised production, thereby reducing costs.

The 926 is the smallest of three floorstanders in Focal's Aria range and is joined by a single pair of standmounts and a centre speaker. The Aria 926 uses three 165mm F Sandwich drivers; the uppermost driver has 'F Sandwich' emblazoned in its surround, which ought to prove cheerfully baffling to the uninitiated. At the top is a 25mm aluminium/magnesium tweeter that follows same design practices as Focal's beryllium units, but at a more terrestrial price. The large cabinet is both front and base-ported, with a separate cast plinth providing the necessary clearance. This proved slightly fiddly to fit and level, but otherwise seemed entirely logical.

The twin ports point to substantial bass extension and Focal claims 45Hz at -3dB. At slightly over a meter tall, the 926 is a fairly large speaker and the very slight curve to the sides of the cabinet doesn't really alleviate this. The finish is excellent, though, and while the Aria range bears more than a passing resemblance to the Chorus ▶



EQUIPMENT REVIEW / FOCAL ARIA 926

► 800 series, the cabinets feel more substantial and inert. The flax drivers also add a welcome splash of colour to the speaker as a whole, although a full-length grille is supplied if you want to hide them away. The review samples arrived in the walnut finish, which is a wrap rather than a veneer. Regardless, it still looks more than domestically acceptable. A gloss black finish is available as a cost option.

Some traits of Focal's past remain in the 926. The speaker is fitted for single wiring only, although the pair of terminals feel reassuringly solid. The 926 is also not a 'plonk and play' speaker. Although the speaker vents no energy to the rear, it benefits from being some distance from a rear wall and will require a little experimentation in terms of positioning to show what it is capable of. I also found that with the feeble suspended floor of my listening room, placing the 926 on a pair of Aurealex isolation platforms made the difference between deep bass and dominating bass, but this is specific to the Aria in my room.

A little perseverance goes a long way. With the positioning sussed, a little toe-in added, and connected to a Naim SuperNAIT 2 and ND5 XS streamer and XP5 XS power supply, the 926 behaves in a way that is still recognisably Focal, but at the same time brings some new attributes to the way it makes music. These manifested themselves fairly early on when I selected the lossless rip of Public Service Broadcasting's *Inform-Educate-Entertain* and was greeted by something altogether more propulsive and engaging than heard from Focals of old.

Any devotees of the traditional Focal 'house sound' who are reading this review with alarm can rest assured that the traits the brand has always got right are still very much in attendance. The sense of space and soundstage that the 926 generates is phenomenal. The Cinematic Orchestra's *Manhatta* is a vast shimmering sea of musicians, and the Focal gives them the room that the recording so richly deserves.



This sonic foundation is then built upon with incredible detail and tonal accuracy. The string section is entirely cohesive, but still has the separation to allow you to discern individual instruments. This is still an accurate and revealing loudspeaker, but it has taken these attributes and brought a definite sense of fun to the package.

'Fun' is not a measurable construct (or at least, trying to so rather undermines the basic principle), but there is a quality to the 926 that makes them rewarding beyond the sense that what you are hearing is simply accurate and well proportioned. With any beat, be it the rapid delivery of Public Service Broadcasting or the more languid presentation of Terry Callier's 'What Color is Love?', the Focal engages and entertains. I found myself wanting to try other pieces with them, but instead kept listening when I should have been attending to other things. This isn't simply a case of speed or responsiveness, good though these are. There is cohesion and sheer presence that makes the 926 more than merely competent and instead moves into real emotional engagement.

The Focal also demonstrates that when it comes to bass response, there are few substitutes for cubic capacity. The claim of low bass extension is entirely believable in practice, but beyond extension the sheer punch and agility that the Focal possesses is at times utterly addictive. Care will need to be taken that you don't have too much of a good thing – as previously mentioned, ►

EQUIPMENT REVIEW / FOCAL ARIA 926

▶ placing the 926 too close to walls can lead to the low end becoming boomy. But, with some space around it, the Aria has the ability to produce bass that is felt as much as heard. It gives everything – be it the swell of an orchestra or the huge electronic blare of Scratch Massive – a tangibility that many speakers at the price can't match.

This almost universally positive assessment of the Focal Aria 926 comes with only a few minor caveats. The 926 is sufficiently revealing that poorly mastered material can be a little sharp at the top end in particular, but even there the 926 seems smoother and more forgiving than some of its predecessors. It is also important to remember that although the 926 is impressively sensitive as the specification suggests, it will show up any failings in amplification with a certain ruthlessness so although the partnering electronics need not be hugely potent, they do need to be capable. Interestingly, although it has been some years since the Naim/Focal merger, the 926 is one of the first speakers to break cover since then, and there is a definite improvement to the synergy that results from pairing them with Salisbury's finest.

Taken as a whole, the 926 is a speaker that keeps true to Focal's core values, but brings with it a sense of engagement and fun that I haven't really previously experienced from the brand. These are speakers that will take whatever you throw at them and present a big, detailed, and utterly engrossing soundstage. They are beautifully built and, even if not finished in the real wood veneers that some competing speakers offer, they shouldn't offend too many sensibilities. They require a little space and time spent positioning to give their best, but the speaker with the flaxen drivers is something that you need to add to your shortlist at the price. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Three-way bass-reflex floorstanding loudspeaker
Speaker drivers: Two 165mm) Flax bass, 165mm) Flax midrange, 25mm Al/Mg TNF inverted dome tweeter
Frequency response: (+/- 3dB) 45Hz - 28kHz
Low frequency point: - 6 dB 37Hz
Sensitivity: (2.83V / 1m) 91.5dB
Nominal impedance: 8 Ohms
Minimum impedance: 2.9 Ohms
Recommended amplifier power: 40 - 250W
Crossover frequencies: 290Hz / 2400Hz
Dimensions: (H x W x D) 1035x294x371mm
Weight: 25kg
Price per pair: £1,798 per pair
Manufactured by: Focal
URL: www.focal.com
Tel: 0845 660 2680 (UK only)

