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Focal Electra 1008 Be loudspeakers

By Alan Sircom

Focal's small Electra range (on the hi-fi side, just two floorstanders and a bookshelf) often fails to get the recognition it deserves. It's almost like middle child syndrome; the top Utopia range gets all the credit, the entry-level Chorus series gets the big sales figures. Electra gets left out in the cold. On the basis of the Electra 1008 Be standmounts, that middle child is actually a secret over-achiever.

It's a rear-ported two-way standmounter (Focal makes a dedicated stand too). The 27mm inverted dome tweeter is an all-Focal, all-Beryllium design, and exactly the same product seen in the company's Utopia range. Unlike most tweeters, this extends down to a crossover point of 2.2kHz (Focal uses what it calls Infinite Acoustic Loading to get past resonance issues at lower frequencies). This gives the 165mm 'W composite' mid-bass cone driver less of a job to do in the midrange. This is almost universally considered a good thing (it's partly why midrange units exist), but typically impossible to achieve when coupled to a tweeter that runs out of puff at 3kHz or more. By giving more of the midrange over to the tweeter, the heavier mid-bass cone doesn't slow down the speed of the midrange.

These two drivers sit in a very well constructed and well-finished cabinet. The wooden side-cheeks bolt on to the sides of a very thick tapered cabinet, and from the front you can see mostly the brushed metal curved plate for the tweeter and the piano gloss of the front baffle. It's not a good idea to measure quality by weight and knuckle-rapping tests, but if you do the comparisons between this and a typically thin-walled BBC like cabinet, all you get is tired muscles and sore knuckles here. A single set of high-quality speaker terminals and the bung-able rear port complete the package.

It's notionally not a difficult speaker to drive, with a rated 89dB sensitivity and a nominal eight ohm impedance (3.9 ohm minimum). That may place it outside SET territory, but means no difficulties with 25W valve or low-power Class A designs. 'Easy' does not mean 'undemanding' though; this is about quality, not quantity and the Electra 1008 Be demands an intelligent approach to system design, and rewards care in assembly and install. It also goes through an odd run-in; out



of the box it sounds bad, quickly goes through an all-too-brief good sounding period (like the 'walking ghost' phase of radiation poisoning), then goes through a difficult 'teenage' before becoming the complete, rounded and grounded individual it was destined to become after a couple of months.

There's a hurdle to get across with Focal in the UK. "It's bright" is the knee-jerk reaction to the brand; no matter how the system sounds in the real world, "it's bright" is the default position if there is a pair of Focals on the end of the system. This was robustly demonstrated by our Manchester Sound & Vision room, which featured these loudspeakers on the end of a Wadia CD player, Esoteric pre/power and a lot of Chord Sarum cables. The system had its problems (the small L-shaped room with one wall of glass and the others of cardboard make for a sound that drones like a set of bagpipes below about 150Hz) but brightness wasn't one of them. But people walked in, saw the Focal name and started talking about the brightness of the system. ▶

“This gives the Electra 1008 Be an economy of sound; a rare, enticing stillness at rest that disappears the moment it receives a musical signal.”

This isn't xenophobia, just that many UK listeners are used to hearing either the more 'laid-back' sound of soft-domes or the more 'zingy' sound of metal-domes when it comes to high-frequencies. Tweeters that don't behave in the same manner (diamond, ceramic, beryllium) tend to get pigeonholed into one or other sound. It's a natural happenstance of the maturity of the UK market. But it doesn't necessarily reflect the reality of the situation.

So, sorry but no, this isn't a bright loudspeaker. It's an honest, revealing loudspeaker and if the rest of the system has brightness about it, this will sound bright. If it's dull, it will sound dull. Similarly, if you put on a magnificent recording followed by a highly compressed one, you'll hear the differences easily. Not as much as you will if you raise your game, because the Utopia Diablo lets even more through, but that also places greater demands on the source, the electronics and the room.

The 1008 Be is not a characterless speaker, and unlike many loudspeakers, this one does have its focal point (pun sort of intended) trained on the tweeter. There's a sense of dynamic contrast and shade that is common to the Focal sound, and that comes out in a remarkable, almost uncanny ability to cope with real-world envelopes of notes (the attack, decay, sustain and release of a note), it may sound sharp next to loudspeakers that have a more laid-back approach to the shape of musical notes. This gives the Electra 1008 Be an economy of sound; a rare, enticing stillness at rest that disappears the moment it receives a musical signal. This applies universally; whether it's the baleful Willy Vlautin of Richmond Fontaine banging on about stalking and murder, James Taylor singing happy songs about puppies, Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers blowing changes or the almost ethereal DG/Amadeus Quintet version of Schubert's 'Trout', the 1008 Be presents the sound with a directness that never tips over into urgency, and a wide rugby ball of a soundstage.

Limits on the 1008 Be are rare. The mechanical limit of it being a ported two-way loudspeaker means it's never going to plumb the depths and those after 'phat' bass sounds will keep on searching. For a cabinet this size, however, the bass is surprisingly deep and mostly well-controlled, with few artificial

boosts along the way. There are a couple of points where the speaker trades stark neutrality for a touch of thickening, but this seems to act more to reinforce the sense of image solidity than making the speaker seem bigger than it is. It's a fine line, and one that is successfully towed here, as I suspect if the 1008 Be simply rolled off without that added bloom, it wouldn't sound 'neutral', but 'insubstantial'. And, in fairness, given the only options seem to be a bigger speaker in a bigger room, a flat and bass light sound or a mostly flat sound that appears more solid than most, I think Focal made the right choice.

One of the big parts of this review falls out of the hook-up that occurred not long after I first received the loudspeakers. Now that Focal is now 'best buddies' with Naim Audio, how do the products work together? The word on the street is the Utopia range and Naim electronics are not the happiest of bed-fellows, but the Electra series is a fine match. I have a Naim Supernait on loan for this eventuality and the Anglo-French coupling is a fine one. It's not going to be for everyone – the clarity of that tweeter coupled with the character of the Supernait is never going to find favour with those who like their music mellow, but those who find a lot of audio insipid sounding will find the immediacy of the Focal and Naim combo highly attractive. OK, so a more universal tonal balance occurs with different partnerships (Focal and softer sounding electronics, Naim and soft-dome tweeters), but the marriage of Salisbury and St Etienne is not the exercise in running fingernails down a





TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Focal Electra 1008 Be

Type: Two-way bass-reflex bookshelf loudspeaker

Drive units: 27mm pure Beryllium IAL inverted dome tweeter

165mm 'W' composite mid/bass driver

Frequency Response ($\pm 3\text{dB}$): 46Hz-40kHz

Low frequency point: 41Hz

Sensitivity (2.83V/1m): 89dB

Impedance (nominal/minimum): 8

Ohms/3.9 Ohms

Crossover frequency: 2.2kHz

Recommended Amplifier Power: 25-150W

Finishes: Basalt, Champagne,

Mahogany, White or Black lacquer

Dimensions (HxWxD): 39x27x35cm (excl. stands)

Weight: 15kg (excl. stands)

Price: £2,899 per pair

Stands £599 (lacquered aluminium);

£859 (metallic slate grey) per pair

Manufactured by: Focal & Co

URL: www.focal.com/en

Tel: 0845 660 2860 (UK only)

chalkboard that some would have you think. That being said, Focal and older Naim equipment is really not a good match, because the Naim sound has softened somewhat over the decades and the 'chrome bumper' Naim presentation is going to screech through the 1008 Be.

In many ways, the 1008 Be is the Focal speaker in the best position for the future of audio in Europe. It's high-end enough to be an incredibly open window on the sound, yet not so open that it makes near impossible demands on the music

and the signal chain. It's small enough to slot comfortably into the postage-stamp sized spaces we laughably call 'rooms', yet not so small it sounds underpowered in more realistic listening spaces. And sonically it presents a very 'now' sound, vivid and insightful. It's the Utopia Diablo for those of us lacking the provision to use them as they should be used – you get 80% of the insight for 20% of the pain of install, system compatibility and so on. If that sounds like a compromise, then it's a compromise many will be happy to make. +