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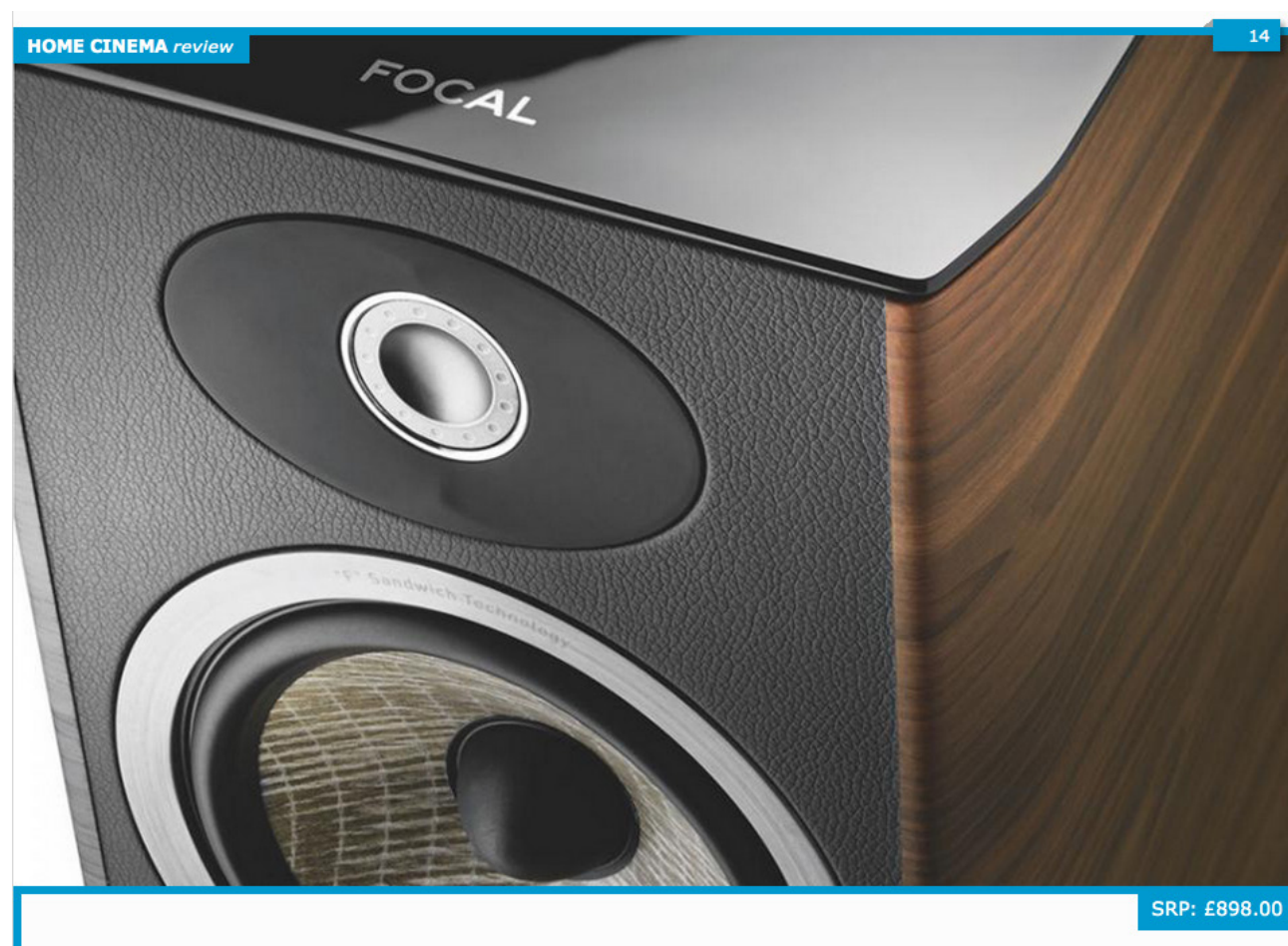
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Focal Aria 906 Loudspeaker Review

Focal's latest offering keeps the brand attributes but adds a little something else...

by **Ed Selley** Dec 1, 2013





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Introduction

As audio reviewing is to a great extent subjective, there is a curious subset of products that pass through my clutches that are technically impressive and frequently extremely capable but for one reason or another don't always fire my imagination. I broadly categorise them as easy to admire but rather harder to love. Put simply, they don't invoke the joy that some other products do. Joy is of course hopelessly subjective, it has no unit of measurement (pints?) but some products have it in spades. This is not linked to technical sophistication either. I own a pair of Audio Note AN-K speakers which are at least twenty years old and are less complex in design terms than some of the sandwiches I make. When you listen to them, you are acutely aware of just what they do wrong but give them some vocals and you simply won't care. They induce joy in spades. Equally, the vastly more sophisticated Naim ND5XS I use, still has a huge joy factor to the way it makes music.

One brand that has featured in this category before is Focal. Be under no illusions that I regard Focal as one of the most innovative, bold and respected speaker brands on the planet. They have consistently pushed the limits of what can be done with driver materials and cabinet design and the Utopia range can stake a legitimate claim to being one of the finest speaker ranges on sale today. Despite this, I don't covert them in the way I do some other speakers. They are awesomely capable but the joy quotient is less immediately obvious. That isn't to say that Focal can't do joy - the Spirit Classic headphone I reviewed recently is talented but also sounds fun too.

The Aria 906 you see here, is the newest offering from Focal and rather less expensive than the Utopias. It keeps all of the Focal design points - and indeed offers some new ones too. More importantly than that, I've been sent the Aria with the promise that this is a speaker that has a sense of fun to it as well as the technical excellence and sheer competence that Focal are renowned for. Tis the season to be jolly - is it the one to be joyful too?

Design



The Aria 906 is the smallest member of an all new range of speakers that are designed to bridge the gap between the line level Chorus range and the rather more exotic and sophisticated Electra and Utopia ranges. This is no small undertaking as the technology that goes into the flagship models is considerable but expensive and difficult to reproduce at lower price points. In terms of the shape of the 906, this is obvious enough. The cabinet is much more reminiscent of the Chorus range than the Electra's, let alone the 'slashed back' of the Utopia line.

Having tested the visually very similar Chorus 807 earlier this year, the differences in the flesh are subtle but apparent on closer inspection. The Aria is heavier and the cabinet feels more inert than its little brother. Internally, the 906 makes use of non-parallel surfaces and different thicknesses of high density board to create the least resonant and most inert enclosure possible. The drivers are kept in separate chambers which are again separated by a non-parallel divider. The result is a substantial and impressive cabinet.



It is the drivers that are able to make greater use of the technology Focal uses in their more expensive models. As they produce all of their drivers in house - something covered in my visit to the Focal factory last year - and this gives them greater leeway than many other companies in terms of being able to experiment and 'cross pollenate' technology. The more expensive models use a glass fibre laminate called "W" Sandwich that combines varying thicknesses of glass fibre depending on the role the driver will be required to undertake. This is more effective than the single piece moulded drivers of the Chorus range but ferociously expensive. The Aria makes use of a derivative of this technology that Focal calls "F" Sandwich (which rather wonderfully is embossed on the driver surrounds and I'm sure will cause much head scratching from visitors who aren't intimately familiar with Focal's grasp of composites). "F" Sandwich takes the principle of "W" Sandwich but reduces the cost of the materials used in this case by making use of flax for one of the layers. Using flax allows Focal to mechanise the construction process and employ the drivers at a lower cost. It also - whether by accident or design - makes for a very attractive driver that gives a bit of colour to what would otherwise be a very dark pair of speakers.

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The tweeter also benefits from experience gained further up the pecking order. Focal famously uses beryllium for the tweeters in their Electra and Utopia ranges while the Chorus lines have an aluminium design. Beryllium is a bit of a write off for trickle down - it costs a fortune and trying to use it as an alloy in conjunction with another metal is difficult and rather defeats the object as many of the properties are lost. The Aria uses a tweeter that has a similar form to the beryllium one but is instead made out of an aluminium and magnesium alloy. Interestingly Focal experimented with titanium some years ago and rejected it for resonance reasons. This is the first time I'm aware of that they have deviated from using aluminium or beryllium.



Setup

I used the Focals with a Naim ND5 XS streamer and matching XP5 XS power supply as my digital source and a Michell Gyrodec with Avid Pellar phono stage as the analogue one. For amplifiers I tried both a Naim SUPERNAIT 2 integrated amp and- for something completely different- an Audio Analogue Verdi Cento integrated amp from Italy which is different a presentation to the Naim as I have to hand. Material used included lossless and high res FLAC via NAS drive to the Naim streamer and internet radio services also via the ND5 XS. I also used a fair amount of vinyl as most of my recent purchases have been in this format.

Sound Quality



Before I cover the nuts and bolts of what the Aria sounds like, a word on positioning. Focal speakers are voiced in a very specific way and rather than apply heavy correction to the crossover, the idea is that the speaker should be moved in the room (and in the case of the Utopia, the drivers moved relative to one another) to achieve the correct performance. This means that while it might be front ported and indeed less fussy than some of the other Focal models I have spent time with, the 906 still won't take kindly to being plonked into a rough position and left. If you cannot have the Focal's about two metres apart and at least ten centimetres from the rear wall with a further two metres from the speakers to you, they probably aren't going to deliver. Sorry but that is a quirk of the voicing process. There are plenty of other options available to you however.

If you can humour the 906 and place them to their liking, all the things that Focal is good at can be found here. The 906 is capable of resolving detail that other speakers simply cannot find and manages to do this without losing sight of the performance as a whole. Indeed, the other area they excel in is the creation of a soundstage that extends perceptibly beyond the speakers and has quite extraordinary space and depth to it. Even connected to the SUPERNAIT 2 - a world away from Naim amps of old but still not an amp I associate with truly holographic presentation, the Focal delivers a performance you can all but walk around in.



Provided that they have a few hours on the clock, they are capable of exceptional tonality too. Give the Aria something like *Consequence of Sounds* by Regina Spektor - a track that is simply Spektor singing into a single microphone while playing a tiny supporting track on the piano - the result is quite extraordinarily real. Any flaws in the presentation will be shown up like an iceberg in the Mediterranean because there is so little to the track. The Focal is absolutely assured in the way it layers vocals in front the piano and gives them an unambiguous reality. In fact, even by the high standards that Focal normally goes about vocal reproduction, the Aria is a seriously impressive speaker.

It is also possessed of some Focal trademarks that can be less desirable though. The 906 is a very revealing loudspeaker and it generally avoids sounding harsh while it does so but it will make it abundantly clear if a recording has some quality issues. The 24/96kHz recording of Mark Knopfler's *Privateering* is absolutely sumptuous but something like the magnificent but flawed *War Stories* by UNKLE is left showing the limits to its dynamic range and slightly hot mixing. You can legitimately argue that this is the price of accuracy but the Focal is more merciless than a number of other speakers in this regard. Switching to the softer Audio Analogue amp does alleviate this slightly but also shaves off some of the fine detail that the Naim is able to find. As is often the case with revealing products, the 906 is less concerned about compression as it is the original recording. A 320kbps MP3 of a decent recording like The Hidden Orchestra's *Archipelago* is happier than the 24/96kHz version of Nirvana's *Nevermind*.



...the 906 encourages you to listen to 'just one more track'

Otherwise, my criticisms are fairly slight. For a fairly big speaker, the bass is deep but not exceptionally powerful and there is a sense that this slight softness is down to their being a little dip in output at the point where the very lowest part of the midrange meets the upper bass. It isn't severe and could be room interaction but on a few occasions there is a sense that there could be fractionally more output at this point. This is hardly uncommon in standmounts though and the Focal is far from the worst offender.

The 906 also manages to distract from this because it does have a joy factor that I've not really experienced with a Focal speaker before. Beyond the accuracy and control, there is a sense of life and excitement to the performance that makes the 906 a very easy speaker to listen to long term. Exactly what has changed is hard to put a finger on because the 906 hasn't obviously lost any of the qualities that make it a Focal but it seems happier to let the music happen (recording quality permitting) and get out of the way. With the White Lies' latest effort *Big TV* played on vinyl, the Focal pounds along and lets the performance speak for itself rather than providing a slightly clinical analysis. More than any other product from St Etienne I've listened to, the 906 encourages you to listen to 'just one more track' even though, it's 1 in the morning / you'll be late for work / you're going to miss your favourite TV show - delete as appropriate. It isn't simply a function of up-tempo material either. The slower musings of BB King in *One Kind Favour* are just as gripping and the Focal manages to be equally capable across all the genres I threw at it.

Conclusion



OUT OF 10

Pros

- Detailed, expansive and enjoyable performance
- Beautifully built
- Handsome design

Cons

- Demanding in terms of placement
- Won't flatter poor recordings
- Doesn't have prodigious bass

Focal Aria 906 Loudspeaker Review

The Aria 906 breaks new ground for me in terms of Focal's offerings. The elements that have always been Focal strong points are still here. It offers superb tonality, a wonderful soundstage and it is built like a Swiss watch - although in some regards it is more sophisticated. Equally, some of the Focal peculiarities are still here too. It won't flatter poor recordings and it is the very antithesis of plonk and play. What moves the 906 from worthy to genuinely covetable is the new found sense of excitement and joy it seems to have across a huge range of material. Unlike on previous occasions, I don't simply admire the 906, I genuinely love it and for this reason, Focal's latest speaker comes highly recommended. I can't wait to see what a multichannel set can do...





I own this 0

I want this 0

I had this 0

The Rundown



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