In April 2015, Recording was invited to a special product launch in Las Vegas at the prestigious Studio at the Palms. It was there that the folks at Audio Plus Services gave us a sneak preview of new products in its distributed lines: a new mic from Lauten Audio, new interface and processing hardware from SPL... and the new Trio6 Be speakers from Focal.

Focal is a French speaker company that makes some of the most popular pro studio monitors on the market today. The company’s lineup ranges from the affordable entry-level Alpha series (reviewed December 2014) to the SM6 series with its popular Twin6 Be (reviewed July 2008), to the flagship SM9.

The Trio6 Be is the new top end of the SM6 series, positioned between the Twin6 Be and the SM9. It’s an active 3-way monitor with an 8” subwoofer, a 5” woofer, and one of Focal’s famous 1” beryllium (Be) inverse dome tweeters.

Focal Trio6 Be Monitors
Power, accuracy, beauty, detail... and did we mention the power?

The insides: brand new, powerful, fast, and toxic

Both of the drivers are a brand new W composite sandwich cone design made specifically for these monitors. A dual glass fiber design, each cone is made up of two thin layers of woven glass fiber sandwiched together onto a structural foam core. According to Focal, this is a more homogeneous and flexible design than cones made from Glass Aramid or woven Kevlar.

Focal both pioneered and perfected the beryllium tweeter design. Incredibly light and rigid, beryllium is said to offer a faster, more linear transient response than titanium or aluminum designs. Its only real downside is that it’s poisonous if ingested, so no licking the tweeters... and no, you’re not supposed to touch them, either!

The Trio6 Be is a triamplified active design. There’s a 200 W Class G amp for the 8” driver, a 150 W Class G amp for the 5” driver, and a 100W Class AB amp on the tweeter. The Trio6 Be has a range of 35 Hz to 40 kHz with a 115 dB SPL. In Focus mode (see below), the range is 90 Hz to 20 kHz at 105 dB maximum SPL. Its crossover points are set at 250 Hz and 2500 Hz.

Like other models in the Focal line, the Trio6 Be offers a power saving mode known as Automatic Standby. The cabinets power on in standby, and return to it if no audio signal has passed through them in 15 minutes. Think of it as screen saver/sleep mode for your speakers; when in this mode, power consumption of each monitor is less than 0.5 Watts. When signal is detected, the Trio6 Be wakes back up with a gentle fade in and resumes work.

The outsides: cabinet, connections, and controls

Each cabinet is made from 22mm (0.86”) thick MDF finished in a textured gray. They measure 20”/2” x 12 1/4” inches and weigh 44 lbs. each. The 8” subwoofer is in its own chamber and isolated from the 5” cone and tweeter. Each section has its own front-firing bass ports: there is a large bass port below the 8” woofer, similar to the ones found on other Focal cabinets, and there are two small matched ports flanking the 5” driver. The latter are similar in size to those on the Alpha series monitors.

Input is handled around back by a single electronically-balanced 10 kilohm XLR input jack, complete with an input sensitivity switch with settings for –10 dBV or +4 dBu levels. Also on the back are three recessed, screw driver accessed tone shaping controls. Each one offers ±3 dB of attenuation or boost. There is a 35 to 250 Hz Low Shelf, a 4.5 to 40 kHz High Shelf, and a Low Mid bell filter set at 160 Hz with a Q factor of 1.

Also on the rear is a standard IEC power socket, as well as a pair of 1/4” jacks labeled Focus Input and Focus Output.

Sorry, no “Hocus Pocus” jokes

One of the Trio6’s main features is Focus mode, first introduced on the SM9. This mode effectively gives you two sets of monitors for the price of one.

BY PAUL VNUK JR.
Focal Trio6 Be Monitors

When Focus is engaged, the 8" subwoofer is muted and the Trio6 becomes a compact 2-way box with a more limited frequency response. This is great for checking mixes and hearing how they might sound on smaller consumer-style systems. I found it fantastic for really checking where the bass and kick sit in the mix, as well as zooming in on the mids.

This 2Way/Focus setting on the Trio6 Be is much fuller and more balanced than a single driver check box, and as such is not even remotely similar in sound or use to the many sealed single-driver speakers like Auratones, Avantone MixCubes and the like.

Focus mode is activated by plugging in any simple third-party single button foot switch into either speaker’s Focus Input and then Daisy chaining one speaker to the other. Output to Input, via an additional instrument cable. (Note that neither is included and there is no way to turn on Focus mode without them.) You can visually tell when Focus mode is activated due to a front-located LED, which sits below a power/clip LED.

Turn, turn, turn

Big Feature Number Two of the Trio6 Be is that it is specially designed to work properly in both vertical or horizontal use. Of course, for better or worse, engineers have been placing vertically-designed speakers horizontally for years, and companies like Focal have been placing horizontally-designed speakers vertically for years... but this choice can also depend on the room, but this choice can also depend on the room, as 3-way monitors often can....

KaBOOM!

The Trio6 Be can and will get loud! Thanks to their headroom, even without the clip protection it is quite difficult to feed these speakers a signal so loud that they will distort (or worse yet, fart out on the lows) like so many less expensive monitors.

One of my mix setups for over seven years has been a set of 2-way 8" KRK E8s monitors with the matching 12sHO subwoofer, so I am used to, and love, a solid bottom end. Surprisingly the Trio6 Be monitors held their own in every way—no sub needed or wanted, and the sound was more focused and direct than one often gets with a satellite/sub rig.

Unless you want to level buildings, I see no reason why you would need a sub with the Trio6 Be. It has low end for days—and that low end is usable low end. It is a full and gently focused low end. It is a full and gently focused bottom for days... and low end is usable low end. It is a full and gently focused bottom for days... and low end is usable low end. It is a full and gently focused bottom for days... and low end is usable low end.

High yet clear

The sound of these monitors is also of the inverse dome beryllium variety. They are clear and open, but the clip protection is quite difficult to feed these speakers a signal so loud that they will distort (or worse yet, fart out on the lows) like so many less expensive monitors.

Sound and use

Unlike many monitor reviews I have done, where I rarely get to hear them outside my own personal listening environment, it was great to get my first taste of the Trio6 Be with two pairs set up in both rooms at The Palms. The Focal crew gave us all a lot of time and freedom to audition songs ranging from the stellar soundtrack work of film composer Armand Amar all the way to AC/DC’s classic “Back In Black”, with various EDM, HipHop, Classical, and Jazz tracks thrown in as well. We also got to hear them in a simple vocal/acoustic guitar tracking session when demoing Lauten’s new Eden mics (review forthcoming) with producer Fab Dupont and singer/songwriter Will Knox.

The monitors easily held their own in these large, professionally treated spaces, with fantastic wide imaging, full and natural low end, and stupid amounts of headroom and volume. This makes sense, of course, as the Trio6 Be is a 3-way design with a pro-studio build, pedigree, and price tag. It was that volume and low-end fullness, however, that made me wonder how they would fare in smaller project rooms, home studios and such.

My mix room at Mass Garden Music measures 12.5' x 15.5’. It is fully trapped and treated, but it is still a converted office space and just a tad larger than many bedroom studios I have used. I set up the Trio6 Be, did 48 hours of continuous burn-in, and came back two days later. I found that these speakers would simply pack too much power for my room, as 3-way monitors often can....
even, and full. The mids are very smooth, being neither scooped sounding or too pushed forward. The one word I would not use is “punchy”; they don’t sound hyped or in your face. For all of their power and volume, they are well balanced and very pleasant to work on, even in my relatively small room.

As I’d done at the studio in Vegas, I spent quite a bit of time listening to music and mixes that I know well. I was pleased to hear that there is no style of music the Trio6 Be can’t handle, either when cranked or at moderate listening levels.

The mix

With all of this pleasant impressive sound, I was a tad worried how mixes would translate. Would I overmix the highs to maintain the studio brightness I was used to? Would I undermix the bass since these monitors were so sub-like? I jumped in and mixed a song I just finished tracking with multiple passes of classic rock guitars, vintage Slingerland 4-piece drums, miked bass cabinet, male vocals, and real Hammond B3. For “trial by fire” purposes, I did not do any mix checks or tweaks with my second and third sets of monitors, although I did use Focus mode often.

After a few hours of mix time, the final mix I heard in my studio sounded almost spot-on in my car, on my iPhone, on my wife’s Bose Bluetooth speaker, and more. I did overmix the vocals a bit, but that was an easy and quick fix. I am not saying that I don’t expect a bit of a readjustment and learning curve as I do more tracking and mixing on them, but for a quick mix right out of the gate, I was quite satisfied with the results.

What a Trio!

The more I mix on these monitors, the more I appreciate their versatility, their evenness of tone, and of course their bass output, which can “give good client” one minute and provide accurate clarity for mixing the next.

As expected, being at the top end of the SM6 line means the Trio6 Be monitors are not cheap. But real quality rarely is. If you are ready for a pair of uncompro-misingly high-end 3-way monitors that work great at any volume and translate beautifully, these are well worth taking out for a spin.

Price: $2795 each ($5590/pair)


The Editor gives special thanks to the staff at Audio Plus Services for making Paul Vnuk Jr. welcome at its product premiere event in Las Vegas.