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The Focal Electra 1028Be Loudspeaker

by Steve Dickinson

Shortly after completing the review of the Focal 1027S floorstanders for issue 59, a pair of the (£1,000 more expensive) 1027Be model arrived. These sat very happily indeed in my system, for many months. Their revealing nature made them ideal reviewer’s tools, their lucidity, transparency and sheer musicality made them a joy to have at the noisy end of my system. A review was never forthcoming, but they informed my view on virtually everything else that passed through my hands from then-on.

Now they have gone, replaced by the Electra 1028Be. Visually, virtually identical to the speaker it replaces, this is nevertheless quite a different beast. The changes are comparatively subtle but, in musical terms, very significant. The beryllium tweeter is replaced by a variant with a slightly larger diaphragm, similar to that found in the current Utopia models, but the key difference is in the porting of the bass units.

Let’s back-track a bit, as there’s no point discussing what’s changed if one is not at least somewhat conversant with what went before. In the 1027 models, the –S variant had a single, rear-firing port and the –Be version a single, downward-firing port which vented, rather in the manner of a flutulent penguin, between its feet. The analogy refers to the configuration, not the sound, by the way. The 1028Be has both ports, but the downward-firing port is now modified by a horizontal web which extends between the feet, about a centimetre from the floor. According to Focal, the new porting arrangement is not to augment the bass, but to control it. The ports are not tuned primarily for output, but to improve the loudspeaker’s impedance in the lower bass and therefore present an easier load for amplifiers.

It works.

The outgoing 1027 models have a wonderfully even and coherent sound, each driver integrating particularly well with the others, but in the lowest couple of octaves the 1027Be could still get a bit headstrong, unless your amp was very powerful or particularly grippy. To be fair, particularly in the later versions of the 1027Be with precision-cut bass driver cones, this only ever manifested itself on particularly bass-heavy material, where the results could get a tad fruity or slightly boomy on occasion, but the overall levels of musical communication still...
remained well-above the norm for the price. In the new model, these matters have largely been consigned to the past. If I had to sum up the performance of the Focal 1028Be’s in one phrase, I would suggest that they behave more like a small two-way standmounter with added bandwidth.

That presents, to my mind, something of an ideal compromise. You get the fleet-footedness, vitality and pinpoint imaging of a well-designed small loudspeaker, with the scale and authority of a full-range design. If you are already familiar with the sound of the 1027Be, first impressions on hearing the 1028Be are likely to include the notion that the bass is lighter. Dismiss that thought quickly from your mind. The bass on the 1028Be reaches just as low and digs just as deep as that of the earlier model, as any moderately extended listen makes abundantly clear. There is, however, somewhat less of it, in much the same way that Baby Bears’ porridge had less heat than Daddy Bear’s. Accepting Focal’s explanation, the reduction in bass weight, if not depth, is largely down to the easier amplifier load.

This also manifests itself as faster and more tuneful bass, with better textures and timbral subtlety. Plucked double-bass, for example, Reynaud Garcia Fons on ‘Béribasse’ from Arcofitz (Enja Records: ENJ-9478 2) is not only agile and tuneful, but one is acutely aware of the stunning clarity of the instrument and the way it is played, all of which brings me back to the analogy of a two-way floorstander with added cofones.

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Bass performance alone, of course, does not a fine loudspeaker make. I have commented before on the phase-coherent approach adopted by Focal in their crossovers. If you have heard any good single-driver speaker design, for example pretty much anything by Eclipse, one thing which can hardly fail to strike home is the immediacy, solidity and stability of the sonic picture. Any compromises, in bandwidth for example, are quickly forgotten and forgiven, because the musical message is in the coherence of the signal: the timing, the almost total lack of smear, overhang or delay within the sound. These are artefacts of the reproduction process we scarcely notice, until they are taken away. And the one ace a single-driver design has up its sleeve is the lack of a crossover. One is not to assume that the audible effects of a crossover will mostly be in a lack of integration between drivers and, to a large extent, that is probably true. But integration isn’t simply a matter of rolling-off one driver smoothly as the next kicks in; as Focal understand only too well, it is vital to preserve the phase relationships in the signal as far as possible across the entire frequency spectrum. This is a relatively controversial topic from a psychoacoustic standpoint; we may not perceive phase directly (making this very difficult to test under laboratory conditions, which makes some dismiss the topic out of hand), but the ear-brain system seems to be remarkably sensitive to it and if the phase relationships in a musical signal are not treated with care, the brain refuses to be fooled.

Taking all these factors into account, the increase in bass control and the almost uncanny integration between drivers, the result is a loudspeaker with such immediate and compelling appeal that lesser designs can simply sound broken in comparison. I could bang on about the effortless high frequencies from the beryllium tweeter, the open, lucid and intimate midrange and, well, I’ve already wittered on about the bass quality quite enough. There is also the astonishingly vivid and stable imaging and soundstaging. The fact is that all the above simply contributes to making the Focal 1028Be the most musically communicative, engaging and involving loudspeaker I’ve heard at the price.

I’ve played a lot of jazz, during the work-up to this review. Quite a lot of rock, too; some pop and some more leftfield stuff, such as One Second, by Yello (Virtigo 06624 98307/56) and, on reflection, probably rather less orchestral and choral music than might normally be the case. This is not because the Focals are not well-suited to ‘classical’
music. Quite the reverse. It is just that they are better at jazz and other rhythmic, dynamic music than most speakers in this price range so that, all of a sudden, this stuff sounds so much more vital than it did before and it is hard to tear yourself away when you’re having such a good time. Listening to some large-scale orchestral material, however, and the Focals reveal a level of discrimination and subtlety that quickly banishes any thoughts that these might be simply a good jazz-lovers’ loudspeaker. Actually, I think the notion that loudspeakers may be permitted to have a bias towards jazz, rock or classical is invidious, if it is good with one type of programme, but not with another, that is a weakness, not a strength.

I played some Tchaikovsky; Symphony no.6 and was immediately struck by the way the system portrayed the pathos and yearning in the first movement. Here was an electric atmosphere, conjured from less, rather than more, and a tension which held me in thrall. So much so that the bomb Mr T. throws into the mix about ten minutes in (sorry if I’ve spoiled the surprise) was all the more powerful and dramatic in consequence. This ability to turn on a sixpence, to go from barely a whisper to a full-blooded assault without breaking step is not only down to the loudspeaker, of course, but even the best amplifier will struggle if the speakers it is driving are at all wayward. Similarly, the lack of overhang when going abruptly from fortissimo to pianissimo (the man does like his cheap thrills, doesn’t he?) is a feat many speakers can’t manage with any sort of panache but the 1028Be’s are astonishingly accomplished. Their sheer manoeuvreability means you can forget about the system’s capabilities and just enjoy the music. The Naxos recording I used is nothing special, (nor is it by any means substandard) but I have never enjoyed Tchaikovsky’s 6th Symphony more through my system, and that’s not just because of the blood and guts bits, but because the contrasts and contradictions worked into the piece have never been better resolved.

This exposes one of the most interesting aspects of modern hi-fi life. Focal designs like this one seem to polarise opinion in the audiophile community. Some love them, some don’t. And the further up the catalogue you go, the more the opinion diverges, it seems. However, this must be tempered by the ‘I heard them at a show’ effect. A great many of those on the ‘nay’ side of the Focal debate are those who have experienced them at shows or in very short demonstrations. If you attempt to seek the opinions of those who have spent a little longer in front of a pair of good Focal designs like the 1028Be, the balance shifts toward the ‘yay’ side. A lot of this comes down to the tweeter design; an initial reaction to it is often to think it fierce and bright, especially on percussion instruments like gongs and cymbals. I suspect this is something of an audiophile conceit, because these instruments are fierce and bright in the flesh. It’s that epiphany – that the real instruments often don’t sound as ‘nice’ as many audiophile loudspeakers can make them – that can lead you on a path that ultimately ends with a pair of Focal loudspeakers.

Another interesting aside is that most Focalites started out with the same reservations as those who sit from room to room at a hi-fi show. The only difference being that somewhere along their audiophile journey, they spent a few hours in front of a pair of good Focals, then presumably listened to some live music and a switch flicked over in their audiophile perceptions. I’ve been reliably informed that those who listen to Focal speakers without the preconceptions built up from years of listening to audiophile loudspeakers seldom dismiss them as quickly as those steeped in audio folklore. Whether this comes down to a keen set of ears in the newcomer, or a keener set of prejudices in the long-standing audiophile, remains unclear.

If you want your music to be well-mannered and polite, look elsewhere. Sure, the Focals can do it, but it feels like warming a kid to be on its best behaviour: pointless and slightly cruel, and the ebullience is never far from the surface even so. Compared to many other loudspeakers, the Focal 1028Be is refreshingly confident, open and honest. It stands out like a speedboat at a yachting convention and if the rest of your system is in any way nervous, nerdy or shy, it’ll come in on that characteristic and let you know in no uncertain terms. Some people might be uncomfortable with that. Me? I just wish more hi-fi was like this.