

The \$ensible Sound

FOCUS REVIEW

Helping Audiophiles and Music Lovers Spend Less and Get More out of Music.

from issue #54



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Long-time T\$S readers have probably figured out that I am a big-speaker kind of guy. Like the late Bert Whyte, I love my bass. I love the big bass, big image, the big sound, the big ease that big speakers provide.

Until very recently, the only speakers I have had in my system that I seriously considered as replacements for the JSEs were the Carver Amazings. They had the big bass, the big image, the big sound, the big ease, but amazingly, did not cost the big bucks. But as long-term reference speakers to replace the JSEs, the Amazings had a few strikes going against them; first, the latest versions proved unreliable; second, the sound of the Amazings, although wonderful for listening to music, was so different from any other speakers in terms of imaging that it would be hard to do meaningful comparisons of other speakers; third (and this is clearly a case of three strikes and you're out), the Amazings were discontinued.

The Snell C/Vs gave me a taste of what I was looking for, but simply did not have the bass extension and ease that I demand. Still, the sound of the Snells convinced me that it was really time to make a move in terms of speakers. From some of the research I had been doing and some of the conversations I had been having with people in the know, I knew it was time to tell Bill Dudleston of Legacy Audio that I was ready to audition the Focus speakers.

Why the Legacy Focus speakers? Let's start at the bottom. The Focus speakers have a bass complement of three 12" woofers per side. That begins to provide some serious air-moving capability. And the way Dudleston arranges his crossovers, it also carries over into some serious air-moving capability in the lower midrange. Moving up in frequency, we find that the main midrange chores are handled by, not one, but two 7" Kevlar drivers, while treble duties are handled by a 1.25" woven soft-dome tweeter and a 3.5" ribbon supertweeter. An added bonus of having all those drivers is the efficiency of the speakers, a remarkable 98

dB. Plus, all those drivers means plenty of power handling, and when you have plenty of efficiency and plenty of power handling at the same time, that means that you have a speaker system with remarkable dynamic range and remarkably low distortion.

As I said at the outset, I'm a big speaker kind of guy, and as you have no doubt guessed from the driver complement, these are big speakers: 56" H x 15.75" W x 13.5" D, weighing in at 165 pounds per channel. As TAN pointed out in his review of the Legacy



LEGACY AUDIO FOCUS

Convergence speakers, Legacy does beautiful woodwork, and my review pair came with a gorgeous rosewood finish and nice attention to little styling details that make these big attractive boxes look like they were carefully crafted by a fine furniture maker.

The tweeters, midrange cones, and two of the woofers are mounted on the front of the cabinet, while the third woofer and the twin ports are mounted on the rear. Toward the bottom rear of each cabinet are two pairs of heavy duty 5-way binding posts and a set of three switches that can be used to tailor the sound. The first switch is a low-frequency contour switch that can be used to reduce the upper-bass heaviness that can occur in a room with an 8-foot ceiling (sound familiar?), the second switch can be used to reduce the level of the upper midrange. The manual points out that this can be handy to reduce "chestiness" caused by floor

reflections, and I would have to guess that it might also be useful for those who listen to a lot of FM to cut down on the chestiness than many FM stations dial

into their sound. Finally, there is a switch to reduce high-frequency brightness, which may just be the thing for those Herbert von Karajan DG recordings that GDB so enjoys complaining about.

Bill Dudleston realizes that many potential Focus owners may have either replacement restrictions or personal tastes that might demand some tailoring of the speakers beyond the flexibility already built into them, so he mentions in the manual that the company is willing to work with potential purchasers to come up with solutions. For example, Legacy has designed a passive resonance trap circuit that can be installed in Focus speakers to help take the drone out of corner placement. They also offer an option that allows for switchable attenuation of the tweeter. These options are discussed in the owner's manual, which is simply the best speaker manual I have ever seen, period.

Another factor of speaker design of which Bill Dudleston is keenly aware is the interaction of room and speaker. As I briefly mentioned in my remarks about Legacy's flagship Whisper speaker in Issue #53's Ramblings, Dudleston has been working overtime to understand and attempt to overcome the sonic limitations of making a loudspeaker sound like music in a real room. In addition, Legacy has been working on a line of electronic components with the goal of incorporating circuitry that will offer the listener a chance to compensate electronically for room and recording

deficiencies. This is an ambitious undertaking that will progress over the years, but among the first fruits of Legacy's research into both electronics and room interactions is a new addition to the Focus speakers, a literal and figurative black box* that in its current configuration can be plugged into the system electronics to accomplish two things: provide a B6 bass alignment with a corner frequency of 16 Hz, and provide an electronic equivalent of the circuit invoked on the rear of the speaker to remove the "room boom" that can muddy up the bass.

Although some readers will no doubt swoon at the thought of ever polluting their systems with any kind of speaker equalizer, I have happily left the unit in my systems tape loop for my listening sessions. I can certainly hear no detrimental effects from the box, but I prefer the bass alignment with the box in the circuit,

and the "room boom" circuit seems to work exactly as Dudleston describes it. When I use the tape monitor button on the preamplifier to remove the box from the circuit, the only differ-

ences I can discern are on the bottom end, and they are differences that persuade me to leave the box in the circuit. Legacy has hinted that there may be more magic available in the box down the road, and if such developments occur, I hope to follow up on them in these pages.

Before I go on to describe the performance of these large boxes in my 14' by 22' by 8' listening room, let me briefly list the associate equipment used. The primary CD player was the Marantz CD-63, spelled at times by the Quad 67. The preamplifier was the venerable old Transcendence II by AVA, and the power amplifier was the AVA Omega II 440hc that BWV and I reviewed in Issue 51. I connected the amp to the speakers with a single 10' pair of Kimber 4VS cables.

As Martin DeWulf reported when he tested a previous incarnation of the Focus speakers in his **Bound for Sound** newsletter, the first thing you expect to be bowled over by is the bass, but as Marty attested, the first thing that caught my attention was the midrange. Never have I heard such clean, textured, layered, stunningly natural midrange in my system. A couple of days after the Focus speakers were set up in my listening room, my wife made the unsolicited comment that she was amazed by the "layers of sound" she was hearing from her Jeffery Oryema CD. She went on to say that she was used to having nice sound in our home, but that the new speakers really added to her enjoy-

"Never have I heard such clean, textured, layered, stunningly natural midrange in my system."

ment of music, and to have them look so nice was a good feature, too. Having heard the midrange of the Focus speakers, I could not go back to the JSEs or the Snell C/Vs. Even if the Focus speakers had only adequate bass, their midrange performance alone would make them seem worth the extra money.

By now you have probably guessed that it did not take me long to drag out some CDs with bass: WCH came over and brought with him his Mercury Living Presence CD of Paray conducting the Saint Saens Organ Symphony, and we had a lot of fun comparing that performance and recording with that led by Chung on DG. I then gave WCH a blast of "Dzogchen Punks" from Steve Tibbetts' The Fall of Us All. I'm quite confident that Steve Tibbetts himself has no real idea of how much bass he dialed into this cut, but the Focus woofers played it with remarkable pitch definition and control. What comes across as a dull roar of energy through the Snells C/Vs, for example, becomes clearly defined musical bass through the Focus woofers. The JSE 2s have remarkable bass, reigning as long-time bass champs in my home until the Legacies came along. Amazing bass, how deep the sound!

Interestingly, switching the black box out of the system made the Focus bass sound much like that of the Snell C/Vs, i.e., not quite in focus, a little boomy. You don't notice this on all music, but when you do notice it, it gets bothersome, especially after you have heard the sound of the system with the bottom end cleaned up.

As I indicated earlier, though, although the Legacy Focus speakers have truly remarkable bass capabilities, the bass never calls attention to itself. The really welcome thing about these speakers is that they do whatever chore you ask them to undertake, but they are not always pestering you about whether or not you have any bass to throw at them. It is a comfortable feeling to know that I can bring home just about any CD I can lay my hands on, throw it in my system, and know that the speakers are not going to overload, nor is the amplifier going to work up any kind of sweat. Charlie Haden plucking his string bass? No problem. Ernie Watts cutting loose on his saxophone? Let the man wail. This is what I meant when I mentioned the "big ease" of big speakers. It can really spoil you.

On the top end, the Focus speakers also do an excellent job. The tweeter and supertweeter do their job without calling attention to themselves, and I don't think you can ask for much more than that. More likely than not, their main contribution to the sound is manifest more in the clarity and beauty of the midrange performance than in the treble sound per se.

Once again, you just can't ask for much more than that.

I could go into more detail about the sound of the Focus speakers, but that would be to lose the forest for the trees. The most profound change that the Focus speakers have made is not in the **frequency** response of my system, but rather in the frequency that I find myself **responding** to the system. It has been a long time since I have found myself so excited by a piece of audio gear that I have spent hours digging old CDs out to give them a listen and then running off to the store to buy new CDs. And this is not just to enjoy the sound, but rather to enjoy the music. After a long period of taking music somewhat for granted, I am falling in love all over again with Sibelius and Coltrane and Arnold and Haden and Prokofiev and Jarrett and . . . I think you get the idea.

The only possible negative reaction I can see that some folks might have to these speakers is their price. Yes, (\$5,400) is one heck of a lot of money. But \$5,500 for a pair of B&W 801s is even more money, and I would take the Focus speakers all over the 801s. **You would have to spend \$15,000 on a pair of B&W 800s to get sound in the same league,** and I suspect that in most real-world listening rooms, the Focus system would fit in much better both aesthetically and sonically. Or, you could spend \$12,300 on a pair of Thiel CS5is, speakers with less than half the bass radiating area and less than a quarter of the midrange radiating area of the Focus speakers. Put on a Quartet West CD and see which pair of speakers can handle the plucked bass of Charlie Haden or the wailing saxophone of Ernie Watts with more realism. Or see which pair of speakers is easier for an amplifier to drive. No, (\$5,400) is not cheap. But for those who can afford such a sum, **a pair of Legacy Focus speakers is possibly the most speaker that can be had for the money,** and future upgrades to the Focus electronic control box may bring even better sound in the future to the Focus owner. To spend even more on a pair of speakers might not be very sensible.

