



ELECTRIC DREAMS

FOCAL ELECTRA BE 1038

Much attention on Focal's flagship Utopia series by the media that it is easy to overlook the fact that Focal makes a fine line of loudspeakers that are priced and sized to accommodate smaller budgets and domains below that of the Utopia. Using many of the Utopia's technology such as the state of the art Beryllium tweeters and proprietary Focal signature sandwich membrane design for midrange and woofers. A simpler cabinet design brings down the cost of manufacture significantly.

The Electra series comprise a complete eco-system not only for 2-channel music playback and home cinema but also in-wall and in-ceiling custom solutions.

Standing at the apex of the range is the Electra 1038 Be – standing at 50" tall, the 1038 Be comes in an elegant enclosure. The 1038 Be looks exquisite in its two tone finish - choice of three finishes are available - champaign, mahogany or basalt side panels over the gloss black enclosure. The curved front baffle suggests a very solid foundation for the drive units to anchor themselves on. The 1038 Be indeed does make use of a 50mm thick slab of MDF, carved out for the drive units to eliminate any possibility of diffraction of the sound waves. The sides of the enclosure are tapered towards the back thereby eliminating the parallel sidewalls to break up whatever standing waves generated within the enclosure. Quite a change from the typical speaker enclosure. I am sure this makes the Electra's enclosure well nigh impossible to fabricate from the traditional V-cut and fold mass manufacturing technique. The speaker's finishing is exquisite – I am told it has an 11-layer lacquer finish.

The Electra 1038 Be is a 3-way loudspeaker – a 27mm beryllium 'inverted' dome tweeter, a 6.5 inch midrange and three 7 inch woofers. The use of three 7-inch woofers offer the equivalent of a 13-inch woofer with faster response and superior impact from the use of lighter membranes compared with a larger and heavier woofer. The midrange and woofers all use the famed Focal 'W' composite cone which offers an ideal balance between lightness, rigidity and self-damping. The 27mm beryllium tweeter has been re-engineered from the 25mm unit used in the Utopia II, offers lower Fs (Focal claims a low of 2 kHz crossover range) to enable a better integration with the 6.5-inch midrange.

The bass reflex Electra 1038 Be has a slot port on the front lower half of the cabinet. The slot port allows better airflow with minimal noise compared to a round port. The crossover design is said to optimize phase response of the multiple drivers. With the multiple drive unit configuration of the 1038 Be, mid to large sized rooms would be ideal to allow enough distance between the speaker and the listener for the drive units to integrate properly. If your room is on the smaller side, the smaller floorstand Electra 1028 or even the bookshelf Electra 1008 Be may be better options. The 1038 Be is rated at 93 dB sensitivity, power handling of 40 – 400 watts with a nominal 8 ohm load (min 3.3 ohm). The low frequency cutoff -6 dB is at 26 Hz and weighs in a hefty 51 Kg a pair.

Focal speakers are best driven with mid to high powered amplifiers, anything from 100 watts rms onwards would be fine though that would be generalizing since many fine amplifiers today have good current delivery capability even with low wattage ratings. As always err on the side of more power, there is never too much! The Electra runs on a single wire configuration. Focal feels biwiring does not offer any sonic benefits; if you have to buy two pairs of speaker cables, wouldn't it makes more sense to buy a superior pair of speaker cables instead of two lesser pairs?

First impressions

The 1038 Be burst forth with a lively and energetic performance. If the likes of BBC derived monitors (the so called Brit sound) bores you to sleep, the Focal is likely to induce a night of frenzied dance. The foot tapping characteristic of the well-loved Focal sound is all too apparent in the 1038 Be, all this without a sense of brashness or roughness in the sound.

Tonality

Classical music aficionados would embrace the 1038 Be for its sweet, airy and extended high frequency performance. The Beryllium tweeter is in its element here, the lightness and speed of the membrane together with the inverted dome design allows for a very wide and controlled dispersion. The transparency of the high frequencies is nothing short of astounding – one of extreme delicacy and poise, at the same time precise and dynamically well controlled. Metal dome tweeters have been accused of being 'splashy', I think we cannot assume all metal dome tweeters are like that, only poorly designed or poorly implemented metal dome tweeters will behave as such. Focal's optimum phase crossover place great emphasis on harmonizing the phase response, this is most apparent during the transition stage of the tweeter and midrange. This must have made a big difference to the performance of the beryllium tweeter with the composite W midrange unit. As the midrange is crossover to the three woofers at a low of 230 Hz, it is relieved of having to bear the load of bass frequencies allowing the midrange unit to handle higher power and play louder with less distortion.

The use of three bass units offers a vigorous low frequency performance second only to

the even more massive Utopia series. The use of two or more smaller bass drivers instead of one larger drive unit is more difficult to implement – the use of more than one driver operating in the same frequency range tends to create problems like lobing. To cut a long story short, Focal's implementation of triple bass units in the 1038 Be is an unqualified success – I hear non of the anomalies associated with using multiple drive units operating in the same frequency range.

Top marks for a neutral tonality of the 1038 Be.

Soundstaging

Soundstaging can be further broken down into three elements – the sense of depth (layering), scale (proportionality) and dimensionality. With all these three elements working in unison, it completes the illusion of a performance in front of you. Isn't that what this we are after?

Many elements work to prevent this from happening – for a loudspeaker, phase response is one of the culprit that destroys this illusion. With the use of multiple drive units in a loudspeaker, each with a different phase and impulse response characteristic literally tears apart any semblance of the illusion of a good soundstaging performance. Focal claims their optimal phase crossover seems to hold up well, the 1038 Be conveys a convincing soundstage with a very good sense of depth. Recordings with simple mike placements are most convincingly conveyed.

The mid priced Electra 1038 Be offers a good measure of the flagship Utopia – the Beryllium tweeter, composite 'W' cone midrange and woofers and a really nice enclosure. Lacking the more extensive crossover, complex drive unit configuration and cabinet design of the Utopia place less demands on the electronics; you probably could get away with a good integrated amplifier or use your existing amplifier and just upgrade the speakers. The Electra series is one formidable line of speakers you should shortlist when the time has come for a loudspeaker upgrade.

