



FOCAL NOVA UTOPIA BE

An alternative to the Grande Utopia for those who don't live in les maisons très spacieuses

PRICE £22,799 per stereo pair CONTACT Focal UK, PO Box 4267, Coventry CV4 0BS ☎ 0845 6602650 🌐 www.focal-uk.com

Focal has successfully and progressively built its position in recent years. From being the leading French brand of medium-to-high-end speakers – and it was not even that a few years earlier – it has become one of the major international players. Several factors have worked in the company's favour. Although some of its production is subcontracted elsewhere, the company has a spacious factory in Saint Etienne in the south-east of France, from where it controls everything including the in-house manufacture of its drivers and crossovers, final assembly, warehousing, and even some of its cabinet work.

“The Nova’s ability to conjure up the awe-inspiring power of a big orchestra can only be readily bettered by the real thing”

The design labs are based at the same site, and there the company has developed a powerful raft of technologies, which most famously includes the beryllium dome tweeter, which has a counterpart in the Bowers & Wilkins diamond tweeter project. Other important technologies include: the Focus Ring, rare earth magnet structure used in the same tweeter; Flower Power, the multiferrite magnet geometry from the larger units; W-cone, the composite multi-layer diaphragm also used in the larger drivers; Focus Time, which provides time alignment; and more besides. All of these make the models in the Utopia range, the primary range in which they're used, some of the most sophisticated in their class, with build quality to die for. You can argue about whether beryllium is better than diamond or vice versa, and the same with the other key technologies, but there are few other contenders in the frame.

The Nova Utopia Be is the penultimate Utopia series loudspeaker, down market from and smaller than the Grande Utopia. It includes all the Grande Utopia highlights in a speaker system that, while still massive by any normal standards, is only about half the price and much more manageable than the flagship. Manageable in this context means a system whose deadweight is 124kg – for each speaker – and that stands 134cm tall, 44cm wide and 62cm at its deepest point, near the base. This is considerably smaller and lighter than the Grande Utopia.

To flesh out the numbers, the Nova is nominally an eight-ohm design, with a relatively benign 3.6-ohm minimum impedance, and a frequency response within 3dB limits from 25Hz to 40kHz. 20Hz is achieved at -6dB, which, with room boundary reinforcement, is perfectly feasible.

The picture shows the basic arrangement of the enclosure, which is divided into four entirely separate sub-enclosures. These are strapped together with the wood veneered sections at the sides. There's one enclosure for the 33cm primary bass driver; one for each of the two 16.5cm midrange drivers, which take over above 250Hz; and one for the beryllium dome

tweeter. The tweeter takes the reins at 2.5kHz and continues through to 40kHz. A benefit of its design is that it not only handles a prodigious amount of power but its diaphragm is inherently stiff, quick and well damped.

All this, with a sensitivity of 91.5dB, means you don't strictly need an enormous power amplifier. However, given the system's power handling capabilities, you'll be missing out if you don't feed it properly.

Having once spent an extended spell with the Grande Utopia, the chance to do something similar with the Nova was particularly welcome. The flagship was always a thoroughly enjoyable and compelling listening experience, but it wasn't particularly easy to get along with. It rewarded meticulous set-up, and it definitely needed large spaces to work into: larger than we had available if the truth be known. In the real world, many people will not be able to achieve anything like what the Grande Utopia can deliver: the bass especially can overpower many rooms. And let's not forget its enormous visual footprint.

The Nova is much easier to get along with. Being smaller, bass extension is much closer to what many rooms are capable of supporting. In practice it will live happily, and its bass and midrange will breathe naturally, in rooms larger than, say, 4x5m – especially if the ceiling is reasonably tall. This is not just a matter of size: it seems the Nova has been deliberately designed for smaller rooms, perhaps because there is some room

compensation built into its low frequency response – though one cannot say for certain without examining its anechoic behaviour.

Regardless of whether this is the case, the Nova Utopia Be makes an electric listening experience. Of course, with an enclosure this big, the bass is tremendous in every respect. It is deep and powerful beyond the capabilities of normal loudspeakers, but more than this it has tunefulness and an ability to convey power and texture, which is all but in a class of its own. There are moments with large-scale orchestral material where the Nova's ability to conjure up the awe-inspiring power of a big orchestra in full flood can only be readily bettered by the real thing. Even the Grande Utopia struggled to do the same, because of the limitations of the listening room.

But the Nova's strengths apply throughout the entire audio band. The treble is clean, extended and finely detailed. The beryllium tweeter is among the best of its type, and there is no discontinuity or overt narrowing of directivity at the very top end of the audio band. Its behaviour is always smooth and progressive. Similarly, the midband completely avoids the charge of sounding too obviously 'French' – that is, too forward and explicit. In fact, the Nova Utopia Be is tonally neutral and correct. This is a world class high-end. ■

Alvin Gold



THE COLLECTION 2007 HI-FI CHOICE 63