



This reference headphone for the studio is a first from the company that so far has offered headphones for on-the-go listening only.

Focal Spirit Professional Headphones

A company known for monitors takes on the studio headphone world

Focal has been making high-end audio gear for many years, from mid-priced to higher-than-high-end equipment for the discerning hi-fi buff. About a year ago this reviewer stood in a studio in Montreal, being dwarfed by a pair of Focal Utopia III towers; you have to see them to believe them (www.focal.com/en/10-utopia-iii). And hope that one day you will also get to hear them, in a well-treated room and powered by the appropriate preamps and power amps—I will not soon forget that aural epiphany! Now if you have to ask “How much?” then they are not for you. You can get a nice house in the suburbs for that kind of money, so don't hold your breath.

Other Focal product lines cater to the home-cinema and car-audio markets, rounded out by multimedia and wireless technology products and custom and public address systems.

But as our readers know, Focal has a strong history of monitors for the recording studio as well, from the beryllium-tweeter Solo 6 Be and Twin 6 Be to the CMS line—

three models of two-way cabinets with 4", 5" and 6.5" woofers plus a matching sub—and the SM line—two kinds of cabs, a two-way with 6.5" woofer and a three-way with two 6.5" woofers plus a matching sub, and the SM9, a hybrid two-way/three-way combination in a box.

Now comes a headphone designed for sound engineers and musicians, a product that promises to benefit from the years of Focal design experience. Time to open the box and check out the Spirit Professional.

Presentation

A black box slides out of a white glossy wrap with a product photo in front and all specs on the back—sure to draw the attention of any potential buyer in a retail location. The box is foam-lined with a cutout for the headphone, and the following accessories are included: Two detachable cords, a screw-on converter piece (from mini 3.5mm to 1/4" plug), a product booklet, and a cloth baggie. One of the cords is

coiled, the other is straight and has an in-line remote control that—to quote the booklet and the website—“enables you to use your headphones in hands-free mode with your telephone or other devices equipped with remote-control functions compatible with this remote control”. Not being in possession of such a device, I can't report on usage—if you have such a device then I trust you'll know how this works.

The headphone is a closed-back circum-aural design, not as wide a circle as some I've seen—the inner diameter of the cushion measures just under two inches. Padding is extensive and comfortable, also on the top inside of the headband. There is plenty of scope for extending the band on either side. The tension is rather rigid.

Specs

At 32 Ohms these phones yield plenty of sound without the amp needing to be at 11. Sensitivity is listed at 102 dB SPL / 1 mW @ 1 kHz—surely more than your audiologist sanctions if you want to preserve your hearing. Frequency response

is stated as 5 Hz–22 kHz, with no curve given, so the optimists are on the winning team. Total Harmonic Distortion (THD) is given as <0.3 % / 1 kHz / 100 dB SPL.

Specs in headphones are notoriously hard to measure, so the ears will have to have it. Which brings us to our listening tests...

Sound

This is what matters more than any specs on paper, and the news is good. I'm not sure if my review unit had been “burned in” (it came in a pristine, previously unopened box), but the sound didn't change by much from my initial quick listen to the next session, after a day of banishing them into a closet with continuous music being pumped into them. With that much time gone by, I couldn't tell one way or another, so maybe they don't need this initializing procedure after all?

The latest BBC Music Magazine had just arrived, and the cover CD was Verdi's *Requiem* (BBC Symphony Orchestra)—



perfect for evaluating a new pair of headphones! Big orchestra, big choir (three choirs combined for the occasion!), four vocal soloists giving it their all—it kept me busy for hours.

Right away I marveled at the definition I heard in the low end. Verdi isn't known for holding back when it comes to the use of timpani and the big "grande caisse" bass drum, and in the excitement of this live recording the players didn't hold back, either. But to these headphones' credit there was no wiping out of the string basses or the low brass when the mallets came down.

On the subtle side of things, the hushed quasi-whispers of the choir and the bassoon-accompanied solo passages by the vocalists were revealed in great detail, breathing sounds and other nuances came through with an exquisite realism. At first I was worried about having to turn down the passages when the soprano really projects, but after switching to the room speakers it became clear that the mix favors her voice a bit too much (for my ears anyway), so I couldn't blame the headphones.

Pianos are good guinea piglets for headphone evaluation—the tonal range of a perfect concert grand is vast, and the dynamic range can be a challenge. I took two very different recordings—an archival 1982 London, UK recording by Vladimir Horowitz (his first appearance in Europe after a hiatus of 31 years) in front of an enthusiastic audience, and a new recording of Iiro Rantala's piano concerto, the composer at the piano with the Tapiola Sinfonietta from Finland.

The piano played by 78-year old Horowitz (his own Steinway that was flown to England for the occasion) was captured in a much different sonority than the new Finnish work. I first played both recordings on my Bowers & Wilkins speakers, then on my JBLs, before I put on the Focal headphones to find out how well they would highlight those differences. They left no doubt as to the nuances of sounds, in fact they revealed some details that I hadn't noticed in the room—typical for good headphones that "whisper" into your ears what might get lost in an ambient room.

After all is said and done

A random sampling of other music styles, additional to those mentioned above, confirmed to me that these headphones will play back accurately all the nuances of your sources, with a balanced tonality, excellent imaging, and—I presume for most people's heads—with considerable comfort. The build quality inspires confidence, and the detachable cord can be replaced if need be. All around, a top-quality product! 🍷

Price: \$349.95

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