

20
TOP PRODUCTS
OF THE YEAR

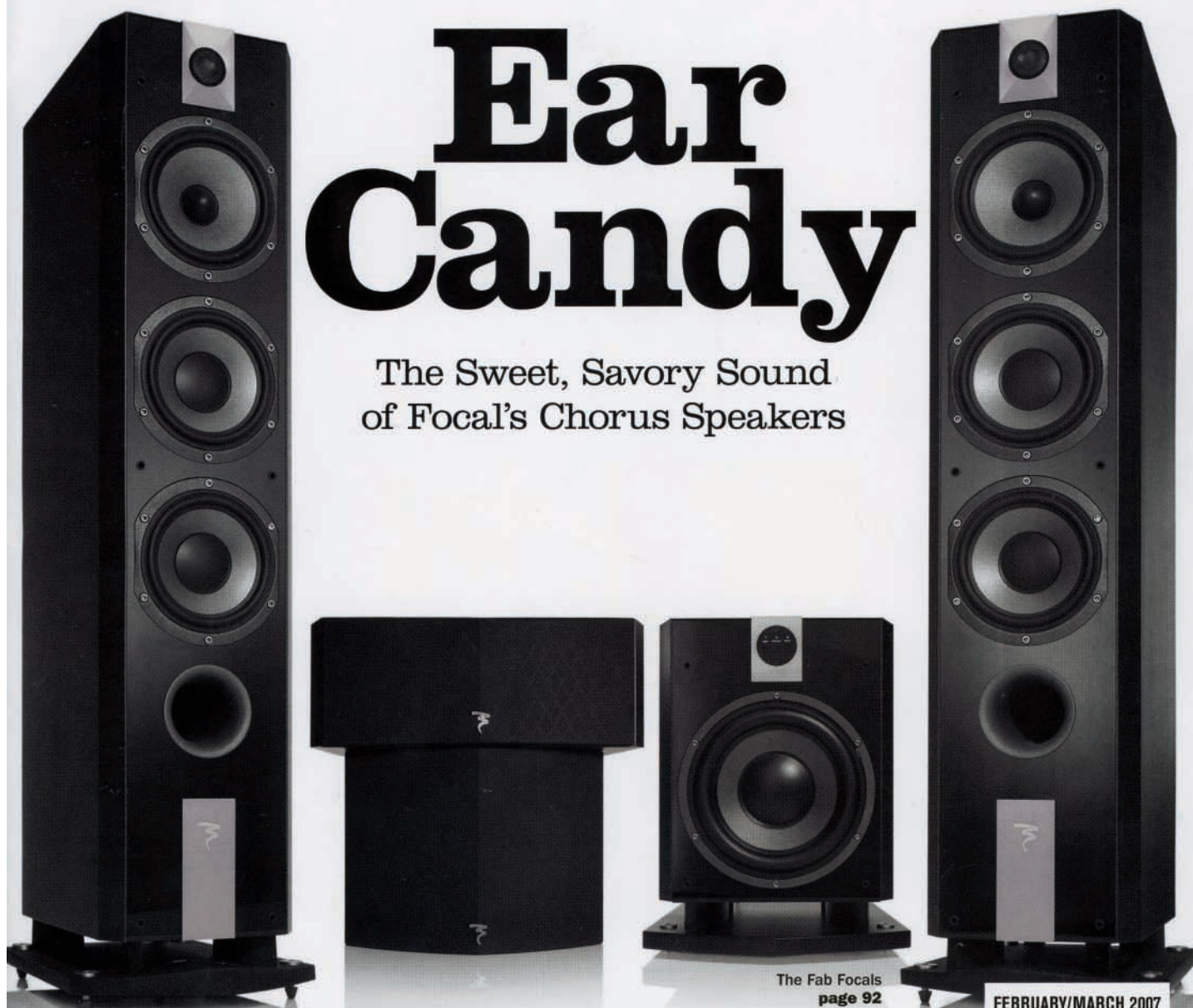
EDITORS' CHOICE AWARDS ISSUE

SOUND & VISION

THE CONSUMER ELECTRONICS AUTHORITY

Ear Candy

The Sweet, Savory Sound
of Focal's Chorus Speakers



The Fab Focals
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Focal

Chorus Home Theater Speakers

Ah, *la belle France! Les vins! Les fromages! La cuisine! Les...* high-end loudspeakers?

Well, yeah, actually. In addition to wine, cheese, and food, France grows some rather delectable sounds, in no small part thanks to Focal (and sister-firm JMLabs), a fast-growing concern headquartered in Saint-Étienne, not too far from Lyon. Focal's founder cut his teeth at Audax, a longtime French driver-maker, and indeed, Focal too produces drivers as well as finished loudspeakers. So it's no surprise that the firm injects much of its own transducer technologies throughout its designs.

This Chorus system highlights a new line from quite a broad Focal family, which includes the Utopia lineup of Mercedes-priced models (and not small Mercedeses, either). The more modestly priced Choruses were conceived with home theater in mind as much as music playback, and incorporate key Focal technologies such as a magnesium-aluminum tweeter employing an inverted dome, a geometry Focal lists as "exclusive to Focal" (though Win Burhoe deployed many thousands of non-metal

inverted-dome tweeters in EPI speakers in the mid-1970s). The unusually handsome Chorus cabinets eschew parallel internal surfaces, and use thicker wood-composite than is usual. Our samples up front were clothed in a gorgeous tiger-grained "ebony" vinyl of a very high standard; I like real wood, too, but given my housekeeping skills, I'm probably better off this way.

SETUP

Focal's Chorus 826V towers and SW800V sub include very nice cast-metal bases with adjustable spikes (caps included for the hardwood-floor set). All five speakers have good-grade multi-way metal inputs, so hookup was easy. The SW800V includes the usual sub level and crossover controls and a full set of both line- and speaker-level input and output terminals, but since I used my pre/pro's crossover as usual, I simply connected the SW800V's "LFE" input, bypassing its internal crossover. Focal's manuals urge break-in of their speakers, so I played the full suite over 3 nights and a morning, using a CD of mixed music and pink noise on repeat, at about 10 dB

below reference level. To activate all five units, I used my preamp's all-channels stereo mode. (My dog is now used to the speaker-break-in routine, but he still doesn't like it much.)

I always begin by listening to the main pair in full-range stereo, with no subwoofer. Focal's 826Vs intrigued me with an obviously highly transparent yet warm sound — even a bit too warm, with a slightly over-full thing going on in the upper bass range. It took some experimenting with placement to get a handle on this. As it turned out, in my room, the 826Vs needed to be moved closer to the front wall rather than farther out as I had first tried, perhaps a consequence of their second, hidden, down-firing port. And they needed to be raked forward considerably using the bases' adjustable metal spike/feet — the midrange sweet spot is actually well above the midrange itself. Toe-in proved quite important, too.

MUSIC PERFORMANCE

Thus re-situated, the Choruses settled into a still-rich but highly listenable balance with terrifically open, detailed vocal regions. Voices of virtually all sorts were seductively present, dead-on accurate without a hint of goosed treble or hyped upper-mids. It took top-shelf recordings to show this off to advantage; depressingly, that generally means "audiophile" rather

The Short Form

Snapshot

Warm, inviting sound with both high-end sonics and legit home-theater chops.

Plus

- ⚡ Gorgeous, detailed vocals.
- ⚡ Superb center-channel match, and above-average surrounds.
- ⚡ Handsome, dramatic appearance.

Minus

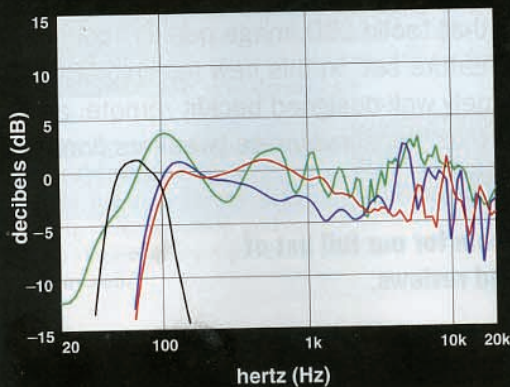
- ⚡ Unexceptional subwoofer extension.
- ⚡ Main towers may sound a bit full in some rooms.

Price \$4,880 (AS TESTED)

PHOTO BY TONY CORBOZZA

Test Bench

Full lab results at soundandvisionmag.com/focal



L/R 53 Hz to 20 kHz ± 4.7 dB
Center 86 Hz to 20 kHz ± 5.7 dB
Surround 94 Hz to 20.0 kHz ± 3.8 dB
Subwoofer 44 Hz to 108 Hz ± 2.1 dB

The 826V towers showed a nearly 4 dB peak from 75 to 150 Hz and a 3 dB floor-bounce notch at 275 Hz. Response above this was ragged, with a 2 dB peak at 600 Hz and a 4.5 dB dip at 2.6 kHz. The CC800V center shares a similar midrange depression and considerable lobing at listening angles wider than 15 degrees. The SW800V sub showed limited bass extension, hitting 11.2 dB max at 62 Hz but just 89 dB at its 32 Hz lower bass limit. — Tom Nousaine

than “commercial” productions. Cueing up a sampler of Chesky Records vocal tracks revealed layers of nuance on every different voice — layers you just never get from mainstream pop discs, or very rarely at best. Certain “chesty” baritone male voices — Livingston Taylor’s, for one — still retained a hint of extra warmth or fullness, but this was never displeasing, while the Focals’ dynamic detail and midrange-treble clarity were consistently impressive.

Surround music helped the Focal system shine its brightest in my setup. A DVD-Audio of the Dvorak “New World” *Symphony No. 9* (“Wagon Wheels,” as jaded orchestra players call it amongst themselves, possibly even affectionately) sounded wholly convincing. The Teldec disc’s impressive dynamic range came through unimpeded on the piece’s many climaxes, and the Focals’ recreation of the recording space — Amsterdam’s Concertgebouw, where I’ve attended several times — was impressive. Balance, depth, detail, transient dynamics, it was all there; great stuff!

MOVIE PERFORMANCE

Sometimes even high-end speakers imprint a bit of their own character onto film soundtracks; not a good thing. Movie sound depends upon the speakers truly to disappear even more than music does, and the Focal suite did this nicely. The 826Vs’ very accurate middle octaves conveyed the detail and nuance of soundtracks excellently. For example, in the dining scenes

from *Master and Commander*, the system delivered all the subtleties of ship noises, wind, water, and weather, simultaneous with clear and natural dialogue front and center, and quite believable party-chatter from around the table.

Speaking of which (ouch!), the CC800V center-channel proved highly intelligible and defined, and it made one of the closest matches in tonal character to the main left/right speakers (as compared with paired-mono from them) that I’ve heard. Whether or not Focal deliberately voiced the CC800V for this, the resulting timbral consistency is impressive; I found off-axis balance consistency above average as well.

The SR800V surrounds were also closely matched in tone to the main pair, and performed very well at their assigned function. These are bipoles, which helps broaden their spread of sound a bit and so slightly diminishes the ear’s tendency to localize them. Whatever the tech underpinnings, the full suite worked particularly well at ambience recreation. There’s a tough scene in *Clear and Present Danger* in which distant helicopters quietly circle the sound field. Any tonal inconsistency or heavy directionality within the system shows itself as “jumpy” panning, but the Focals were smooth as glass.

I was a bit less impressed by the SW800V subwoofer, even though it proved a fairly able medium-size woofer. My everyday sub, a sealed single 12-inch that’s actually a bit smaller than the Focal (but much

more expensive), sounded audibly deeper and cleaner, as well as less peaky over the 40-80 Hz range. Nevertheless, for its kilobuck price the SW800V is a competent woofer, and it includes convenient Boost, Night Mode, and Subsonic (filter) EQ modes. And while it fell short of “reference” performance at the lowest frequencies (my everyday sub was audibly slammer on things like cannon shots in *Master and Commander*), it had plenty of depth and power to convey cinematic thrills. And it could do so up to quite high levels, nearly matching my sub in peak level if not in near-infrasonic depth. Nonetheless, the Chorus towers could clearly justify investing in something with more bottom-octave oomph, and a bit better definition. (Focal itself makes a couple of larger — albeit substantially more expensive — subs.)

BOTTOM LINE

This is a hard-to-sum-up system. The Chorus 826V towers simultaneously sound warm and inviting, yet remarkably uncolored — a paradox, I know. The wholly excellent center channel and fine surrounds are supported by a good, not great, sub. In short, this system (indeed, any system we recommend) should be heard. Cue up a topflight vocal recording, or a well-produced orchestral or big-band SACD/DVD-A, and you may well fall in love. Let us know where and when, and **5&V** will bring the wine and cheese. **5&V**

Key Features

826V

:: (\$2,295/pair) 1-in inverted-dome tweeter; 6½-in cone midrange; (2) 6½-in cone woofers; 41 in high; 57 lb

CC 800V

:: (\$595) 1-in inverted-dome tweeter; (2) 6½-in cone midbass; 19½ in wide; 24 lb

SR 800V

:: (\$995/pair) (2) 1-in inverted-dome tweeters; (2) 6½-in cone midbass; 11½ in high; 12¼ lb

SW 800V

:: (\$995) 11-in driver; 350-watt RMS amplifier; 18 x 12¾ x 16¾ in; 41¾ lb

:: Finish: ebony or Moka woodgrain (CC 800V & SR 800V: matte-black)

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