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MAGICO SPODS

Who would have thought that a set of feet could have such a dramatic effect upon the sound of a high class loudspeaker? Martin Colloms carries out the analysis

CHORD ELECTRONICS MOJO + POLY

Mojo is well established, but its partner Poly is brand new – or maybe it was launched before it was really ready? Harry Harrison investigates

DSD DOWNLOADS

Keith Howard examines what turns out to be a very complex issue, through both measurement and listening

FOCAL SCALA UTOPIA EVO

A true competitor for B&W's 800 D3, the Scala costs a bit more, but that's arguably justified by its performance, as Paul Messenger discovers

ATC SCM50SL

This large ATC stand-mount has been around long enough to be considered a classic. It may not be the height of fashion, but Martin Colloms rates its performance highly.

PASS LABS XP-12 + XA30.8

Kevin Fiske was so impressed by this brand's integrated amplifier, he couldn't resist trying a separate pre-/power – and ended up buying the combo!

MUSIC & MORE



REVIEWED THIS ISSUE

Proac Response D Two, Linn Klimax DS+Katalyst, QED XT25, Rotel RA-1572, NAD C388, Pass Labs XP-12, Pass Labs XA30.8, Chord Electronics Mojo, Chord Electronics Poly, ATC SCM50SL, Magico SPODs, Spondor A4, Focal Scala Utopia Evo

Focal Scala Utopia Evo

PAUL MESSENGER SPENDS QUALITY TIME WITH FOCAL'S LATEST EVO VERSION OF THE SCALA UTOPIA

Focal has long been France's leading speaker brand, and in some respects it can be considered a rival to British brands like B&W and KEF. However, main man Jacques Mahul was still learning his craft, developing drive units for SonAudax in Western France during the 1970s. He returned to St. Etienne in the East to take over the engineering operation that his father had founded, but not until the end of that decade.

Mahul first established Focal/JMLab in 1979, so his British rivals had a start of 15-20 years, but a number of bright ideas regarding drive unit design led to rapid growth, and the brand is probably now second only to B&W in terms of global hi-fi sales. Focal merged with Naim Audio in 2011, forming the Vervent Audio Group (VVAG) and allowing Mahul to retire. Gerard Chretien (MD of Focal during its significant growth and the main man behind its Utopia ranges) sadly passed away recently (see Obituaries). VVAG covers the whole higher end home entertainment sector.

The lack of real wood veneers might be radical, but it's also rather refreshing. Our review samples came finished in a dark metallic blue paintwork, which my wife (who directs household aesthetics) considered a very interesting and attractive alternative to wood. Metallic blue is just one of five alternatives, which include British Racing Green alongside the relatively neutral trio of Black, White and Grey.

This £27,999 *Scala Utopia Evo* (to give its full name) is arguably 'just right' for our decent size listening room. It strongly reminds me of a *Mezzo Utopia* that I originally reviewed way back (nearly twenty years ago) in 1998. That was the first generation of Focal's *Utopia* ranges, but it was an obvious clue as to why its *Alto Utopia* successor worked so well. However, the enormous *Grande Utopia* proved a disappointment in my room, as it delivered excessive bass output that tended to swamp the midband. What had worked rather well in a very large room in St Etienne, was rather too much in my (decent size) lounge. I've come to refer to this phenomenon as a 'Goldilocks syndrome', inasmuch as it seems to be important to match the bass driver size/alignment to the room in which it will be used.

It's interesting to speculate how the prices have changed through the years, as the *Mezzo Utopia* cost £7,250 in 1998/9, while the *Alto Utopia* (now with an inverted beryllium dome tweeter) had gone up to £11,000 by late 2003. Today, in 2017, the *Scala Utopia Evo* costs £27,999, a price that's at least double the rates of inflation over that period.

Although there are currently five different models in the Utopia III line (including *Maestro* and *Scala*), only the *Maestro* and *Scala* currently have *Evo* versions available (thus far). The two main innovations for these two *Evo* models over their predecessors



PAUL MESSENGER

include an NIC (Neutral Inductance Circuit) and a TMD (Tuned Mass Damper). The purpose of the NIC is to tackle the three factors that Focal claims detrimentally modulate the magnetic field. These include the motion of the voice coil (Lenz's law); the audio current; and the frequency. The solution takes the form of a Faraday ring. The TMD consists of a couple of ridged rings that are moulded into the surround to form subtle counterweights that help damp secondary resonances.

Crossover components have been upgraded too, as a result of extensive listening tests. And bi-amping is now possible, as the network now separates the bass driver from the mid/treble.

The *Scala Utopia Evo* is a three-way speaker with three different enclosures, set in such a way that the wavefront is concave and the diaphragms of all three drivers become roughly equidistant from the listener. The largest low frequency section uses Focal's well established 270mm (c11-inch) driver with the latest version of the W-sandwich cone. (A 'W-sandwich' separates two glass fibre cones with a structural (rigid) foam core.) The enclosure is port-loaded to around 33Hz, through a large slot at the floor level front.

The midrange driver is fitted into a smaller (though still quite generously dimensioned) sealed enclosure, mounted above the tweeter and pointing slightly downward. It's a 165mm unit with a laser-cut W-sandwich cone, and is driven by a multi-magnet 'power flower'.

Between the bass and midrange drivers and enclosures is a much slimmer one that houses an inverted beryllium dome tweeter. Beryllium is somewhat controversial, because of its potentially poisonous nature. Protected by a strong grille, it offers benefits in terms of extended bandwidth (to c40kHz).

Sensitivity measured 89dB, which is a decent enough figure, albeit rather short of the claimed 92dB. Focal is being honest about the amplifier loading, indicating a 3.2ohms minimum which is certainly depressingly low (especially as it's in the 80-100Hz power range), though no worse than many other 3-way designs. However, the far-field in-room averaged response is beautifully even above 65Hz, holding within an impressive ± 3.5 dB until 14kHz.

Sound Quality

The normally supplied bi-wire links were missing from our review samples, so I drafted in my Vertex AQ links, which might have modestly benefitted the *Scalas*. We spiked the speakers and then placed them on Townshend platforms to decouple them from the suspended wooden floor. I then hooked them up to my regular system, which consists of Naim *Statement S1* pre-amp and *NAP500* amplification fed from

Rega *Naiad* vinyl and *Valve Isis* CD player sources via *NAC A5* speaker cable.

I spent some weeks listening to the *Scalas*, and wasn't particularly happy when they had to be returned (a few days before we went to press). My initial reaction was indeed positive, as the *Scalas* sounded very clean and well balanced, with a notably wide dynamic range. Image precision and focus is also first class, and a lack of some bass 'bloom' was a noticeable advantage that I immediately detected when changing from the B&W *800 D3* to the Focal *Scala Utopia Evo*.

The £28,000 *Scala* does cost around £5,500 more than the £22,500 *800 D3*, but close enough to make some comparisons worthwhile. It would have been very difficult to compare the two models stereophonically, in part because the steel Townshend plates made more than one speaker per platform quite impossible. I therefore carried out the comparison using monophony, with some mono discs that were available. One of my all time favourites, *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* might be distinctively midrange-oriented, but there was no question that *Blowin' in the Wind* sounded better through the voice band on the Focals than the B&Ws. And the voice band is also unquestionably the most important element in any music reproduction.

That same observation was true for the other mono discs I played, such as the eponymous *Buddy Holly* and *Ella Fitzgerald Sings the Cole Porter Songbook*, both of which comfortably demonstrated that the Focal has the advantage through the voice band – maybe the extra magnetism provided by the 'power flower' is really doing its stuff. However, when I put *Leftfield* onto the turntable, it clearly showed that the B&W had an advantage at the bass end of things, where it demonstrated both greater damping and superior extension, despite the Focal's very clean delivery.

Both are unquestionably very fine loudspeakers, and while I think that the *Scala Utopia Evo* has the advantage, that is because of the much greater importance that one must attach to the midrange over the bass. At the end of the day, I'm not sure that that the difference between these two very fine loudspeakers is really worth £5,500 – maybe the choice comes down to one's musical preferences.

Conclusions

The Focal *Scala Utopia Evo* is a great speaker, no question, and consequently well deserves an Audio Excellence rating. Indeed I've grown very fond of so much that the review pair can deliver, and I'm missing it now that it has gone away. But it also does seem rather costly – such is 'hi-end' audio today...



Manufacturer's Specification

Type	3-way bass-reflex floorstanding loudspeaker
Drive units	270mm 'W-sandwich' woofer Power Flower magnets, 165mm 'W-sandwich' midrange, with TMD suspension and NIC motor 27mm 'IAL2' pure Beryllium inverted dome
Frequency response (± 3 dB)	27Hz – 40kHz
Low frequency point (-6dB)	24Hz
Sensitivity (2.83V/1m)	92dB (89dB measured)
Nominal impedance	8 Ω
Minimum impedance	3.2 Ω
Crossover frequencies	220 Hz / 2400 Hz
Recommended amplifier power	40 – 500W
Size (HxWxD)	1247x393x670mm
Weight	85kg
Price	£27,999