

The Clear choice

Can't afford Focal's Utopia headphones? Now there's an alternative. Martin Pipe tries the Clear for size.

When I heard the Utopia, from French audio specialist Focal, I was stunned by the incredible standard of reproduction they delivered. Unsurprisingly, the Utopia won Hi-Fi World's 'best headphones' award last year – but they cost £3,500.

But there's a garçon nouveau dans la gamme - the Clear. Pitched between the 'entry level' Elear (£900) and the Utopia, the Clear sells for £1,500. It is a circumaural open-back design; at 450g, it's almost as heavy. The Clear's patented M-shaped domes are fabricated from an aluminium/magnesium material with physical properties that get close to those of the more esoteric rare-earth metal.

The voice-coils are wound from copper. Each has a 55 Ohm impedance, making them compatible with most equipment. Hold these 'phones up to the light, and you can see Focal's high-tech transducers suspended in the cups – which rest gently on your ears, thanks to removable 20mm memory-foam cushions covered with a perforated microfibre fabric. The clickstop-adjustable headband that covers the solid aluminium yoke is fashioned from a mixture of microfibre and soft leather.

They're comfortable to wear for long periods, look fantastic and are beautifully-made. In short, they exude quality – as one has every right to expect, given that not-insignificant price-tag. In the Clear box you get a 3m balanced cable terminated in a 4-pin XLR plug, a 3m unbalanced interconnect with 6.3mm plug and – for portable practicality – a 1.2m

lead that sports a 3.5mm plug. All plug into the base of each cup, courtesy of a 3.5mm mono plug. A 6.3mm adaptor is provided for the shorter lead, and your luxury purchase is rounded off with an elegant carrying-case.

PERFORMANCE

And the sound? Simply breathtaking. I partnered these objects of desire with my trusty FiiO X3 personal as well as Prism Callia and Chord Hugo TT DACs digitally-driven by a Cambridge CXN fed with hi-res and CD-derived material. The Clear eked out every last ounce of music from all three of their unbalanced headphone amplifiers – yes, even those of the modest X3. The Clear's lack of audible colouration contributes to an overall impression of neutrality. No exaggerated bass or treble tizz here – just a deep, articulate low-end, a naturally-communicative midband and an open, detailed top.

It's amazing what the Clear can do for music. Spinning Heaven 17's Let's All Make A Bomb (Penthouse and Pavement, FLAC CD rip), the textures of each contribution to the electronic rhythms were definable with an ease that simply eludes lesser headphones.

With another electronic classic from the '80s, Depeche Mode's Photographic (Speak and Spell, 24/96 FLAC), it was easy to follow a lower-pitched counter melody that tends to be lost in the mix.

Switching to supremely-talented Irish singer/songwriter Eleanor McEvoy's latest release – an

exceptionally well-recorded contemporary rendering of Thomas Moore's music and poetry (CD FLAC rip) – I found the same successful balance between musicality and analytics.

In McEvoy's version of 'Though Humble The Banquet', the brass was endowed with a living presence – while her centre-stage vocal crackled with intimacy.

They're revealing – I could pick out the hum at the end of the B52s' Throw That Beat In The Garbage Can – but this somehow doesn't impair enjoyment of the music, which becomes dangerously-addictive!

With orchestral material (a FLAC stream-capture of the National Youth Orchestra of Great Britain, playing Stravinsky's Rite of Spring during last year's Proms season) I was treated to a lucid and three-dimensional soundscape in which no tonal texture or dynamic twist was spared.

Yes, these 'phones are – like the Utopia – reference-class. The Clear boasts practically all of the more expensive model's staggering performance, but with valuable accessories that increase its versatility. If you can afford to spend £1,500 on a pair of headphones, you won't be disappointed.



FOCAL CLEAR
£1,500



OUTSTANDING - amongst the best

VERDICT

The Clear is well-built, looks good and produces a sound that is to all intents and purposes beyond criticism. A world-class headphone.

FOR

- supplied with three different cables
- accurate, transparent
- incredibly musical

AGAINST

- heavy

Focal
www.focal.com