



Focal Dome 5.1 Surround Sound Speaker System Reviewed

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Focal is probably best known for their uber-high performance loudspeakers, most notably their award winning Utopia line. Statement level speakers such as the Utopias are typically beyond what most of us working-class enthusiasts can or are willing to invest in. The good news is that Focal performance can be had without raiding our 401Ks, thanks to their ultra-compact Dome system. The Focal Dome 5.1 speaker system (\$2,595) is designed to integrate into your decor while delivering true high-end performance. While there is certainly no shortage of sub/sat systems available, the goal Focal set was to redefine the expectation of quality in the category. That's a lofty goal considering how many billion dollar speaker companies find this market category to be their bread and butter.



The Dome 5.1 system is comprised of five aptly named Dome bookshelf speakers and a matching subwoofer. The small enclosures are constructed from a single casting of an aluminum alloy. They are then beautifully painted and polished to a high gloss. The build quality of the unit is exceptional, which is to say it's very Focal-like. My review system speakers were finished in black. They are also available in gloss red and white.

Each unit is then filled with a four-inch Polyglass mid-bass driver, a one-inch inverted aluminum/magnesium composite tweeter and a high-performance OPC crossover. The Dome is suspended by a thin post, which connects to a hefty base and can pivot vertically up to ninety degrees. This allows for nearly infinite installation flexibility as well as stunning good looks. The base stands on a thick rubber mat which is a welcome feature to those of us with glass tables. The speaker clings tightly to whatever surface it is placed on. Remove the mat and the speaker terminals are exposed under the base. Look closely at the rubber mat and you will notice that it also stores an Allen wrench for the speaker terminals, reminiscent of how a Rolls Royce Phantom hides an umbrella in the doorjamb. Those who like products designed to the Nth degree will quickly fall in love with the Dome system.

The single-piece cast aluminum alloy subwoofer enclosure continues the Dome theme: simply a slightly larger version of the bookshelf unit. The extremely rigid ported enclosure holds a 100 Watt BASH amplifier and a down firing eight-inch Polyflex woofer. The amplifier circuitry can be left on full-time or set to power up when it senses an input signal for additional environmental consciousness. The controls include 0/180 degree phase switch, a variable 50-200 Hz crossover as well as volume control. Focal has thoughtfully marked its recommended crossover point to blend seamlessly with the Dome bookshelf units. As with the bookshelf units, the subwoofer is beautifully constructed and weighs in at eighteen pounds, indicating a serious driver lurks inside.

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The Hookup

The Dome 5.1 system arrived in one large (double) box, which contained six additional boxes. All of the individual units were wrapped in thick plastic sleeves, and then secured in tight fitting Styrofoam shells to ensure safe delivery. Out of the box, what was most surprising was how substantial each Dome was. A speaker this small should not weigh this much, was my immediate thought.

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The design of the Dome is without question quite elegant. The simple lines and restrained accent of only a single ribbon of brushed aluminum give it a modern, striking look that is heads and shoulders above the more mainstream competition. The speaker grill is an integral part of the design and the speaker is even more interesting to look at when it's on, as it outlines the drivers behind. Remove the grill and you will find the enclosure face has also received much attention. For example, the tweeter sits slightly behind the plane of the mid-bass and the textured speaker face gently curves to it, improving dispersion.

After removing the rubber base I used the Focal-provided Allen wrench to loosen the gold plated terminals and connected my AudioQuest speaker wires. The terminals are not large enough to accept spade or banana terminals but a pin connector is a possibility. I used bare wire to connect all five of them to my Cambridge Audio Azur 650R A/V receiver. The subwoofer setup consisted of running my single AudioQuest sub cable to the LFE output of the 650R, plugged it into the wall and was off and running. The sub was placed in the front corner of the room. I used the 650R to configure the pass band of the Dome bookshelves and crossed them at their specified low-end response of 80 Hz. I then completed the calibration of the 650R for the speaker distances and levels.

Performance

I began my review with the Blu-ray blockbuster "Avatar" (20th Century Fox) via Cambridge Audio Azur 650BD universal player. Immediately, I was plunged into the alien world of Pandora. As stunning as this film is visually, it may be even more impressive from an audio perspective on Blu-ray. The surround effects so perfectly matched the CGI created environment that the mind quickly accepts fantasy as reality. The Focal Dome 5.1 system revealed even the most subtle spatial cues, which helps transform the audience members from spectators to characters. Whether it be a twig snapping over your shoulder as a creature approaches, or a Mountain Banshee flying across the soundstage, the Focal system never failed to bring it to life. The room-shaking power of the Dome subwoofer added another level of authenticity to the story. When rockets were fired into Hometree the room, the impacts were not only felt, but believable. Some sub-woofers are good at making booms but little else; not this one. The Dome sub delivered the pounding, but also maintained definition while doing it. The performance of the sub belies its size and is more than enough for all but the most extreme bass-heads.

Switching gears completely, I cued up an independent film I have been anticipating for some time: The award winning "The Stoning of Soraya M." (Mpower Pictures) which is based upon a true story. The film tells a horrifying tale of a woman living in Khomeini-era Iran who is no longer wanted by her husband. She is falsely convicted of adultery, thereby sealing her fate. Her punishment is death by stoning. The film's soundtrack carries the viewer along an emotional journey. From the soaring highs of Soraya playing with her young daughters to the deepest betrayal by her own father casting the first stone at her execution, the audio effects turn the intensity to maximum. The emotional connection of the soundtrack to the viewer was absolute through the Focal Dome system. The final scene is easily one of the most disturbing I have ever experienced. The sound of the cheering crowd willing Soraya's death is chilling. The impact of each stone on the face of the young wife is crystalline and unforgettable. The Focal Dome 5.1 system helped the viewer more closely experience Soraya's nightmarish life.

After being thoroughly impressed with the movie experience provided by the Focal system, it was time to hear if it could make music too.

Utilizing only the front two channels and the sub-woofer, I selected "Walk" from the 1992 album Vulgar Display of Power (Atco) by Pantera. If there was a weakness in the system, I hoped to find it with this bombastic track. The song thrashed through the Focals with all the rage and darkness that I expected and perhaps a bit more. The sledgehammer beat was felt throughout the house when I was playing it at all-out levels. Vocals, I dare not call that singing on this song, came through with all the power that Phil Anselmo could muster - and that's a lot. Each note of Dimebag's guitar solo was clearly separated from adjacent notes and pure in delivery. The Focals never missed a beat and made Pantera sound as good as I have heard them sound on speakers costing as much as five times more than this Focal system.

Next up was "All Summer Long" from Kid Rock's Rock n Roll Jesus album (Atlantic). What first struck me was how deep Kid's vocals floated into my living room and how far away the backing vocals seemed. The soundstage seemed to go on indefinitely. What the system created in size was matched by precision in placement. If I hadn't set the system up I would have thought that there was some digital trickery involved. The Focals can image with the best of them. Vocals were gravelly yet mellow, which is textbook K-R. Bass was deep, punchy and rhythmic. My feet were tapping from the opening notes.

The Downside

Consider this nitpicking, but I would prefer the subwoofer to play a bit deeper. I realize that designing a sub to blend with the four inch mid-bass is no easy task and it has to be quick to keep up. Considering

the woofer's size, it is truly an over-achiever in output, and the Focal engineers should be commended for working within some very difficult size parameters. Perhaps adding an auto-EQ feature to the sub would help but likely would add cost. Another out of the box idea would be to offer a custom finish option like Fender does with Stratocasters. This once again could easily double the cost of the speakers but you could justify that for a truly special installation.

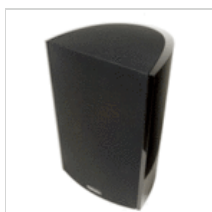
Conclusion

In my opinion the Focal Dome 5.1 system sets a new standard for micro speaker systems. It doesn't just sound great for a micro system, it sounds great compared to speakers that are larger and cost many times more. For the enthusiast who wants high-end performance but cherishes their floor space, the Focal system may be your dream come true. For home theater soundtracks - the Domes immerse the viewer in whatever they are watching with smooth, accurate and often powerful sound. In two-channel mode the Domes throw an amazing soundstage and sound as good with thrash metal as they do acoustic ballads. Wrap all of this performance in a package that looks like it should be on display in an art museum and you have the Focal Dome system. Needless to say I loved this speaker system. They are as much art as they are function and because of that, they lead their class. Don't buy a 5.1 sub-sat system without auditioning this Focal Dome system first.

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