



Focal-JMLab Electra 1037 Be Loudspeaker

by Roy Gregory

Perceived value is a peculiar thing. When Focal launched their "cheaper than Utopia but a lot of the same technology and performance" 1000 Be series, the diminutive 1007 Be stand-mount, at £3K by the time you'd lifted it to listening height, was always going to look expensive, a fact rammed home unceremoniously by its bigger brother, the 1027 Be. With an identical footprint the floorstander managed to add twice the number of drivers and three times the cabinet volume for an extra thousand pounds. Mind you, that didn't stop us choosing to review the 1007 Be, something of a no-brainer given our protracted love affair with the various Micro Utopias – and really liking what we heard. Being naturally cynical it was easy to wonder whether the 1027 might not be rather more show than go? Would it do enough extra in terms of bandwidth to overcome the inherent advantages and appealing clarity of the smaller two-way? It was a close call, with preferences tending to fall with individual listener's musical demands rather than any inherent superiority on the part of one speaker or the other.

But, perceived value is a peculiar thing. Now we have the 1037 Be, the 27's even bigger and more strapping brother. On the face of it you get an extra four inches of cabinet height and another bass driver to justify a substantial £2.4K jack in price, yet stand the two speakers next to each other, each with their cost prominently displayed and the 1037 still looks the better value: go figure. And that's before you listen to them...

In practice, there's far more to the 1037 Be than meets the rapid glance.

The 25mm pure beryllium tweeter and W-sandwich midrange unit are shared with the rest of the range (which naturally includes the necessary models for 5.1 channels or more). It's the bass drivers where things get hinky. These are all-new 180mm units in place of the 27's 165mm ones. In turn, they demand a cabinet that's both a couple of inches wider and deeper, proportions hidden by the greater height. The end result is a far more substantial looking speaker, although one that shows modest advantages over the 1027 on paper at least. Those looks are not deceptive, each 37 adding nearly 20kg to the 27's 33kg mass. Yet, in return it only delivers an extra 5Hz of extension while dropping the minimum impedance to 3.3 Ohms. Once again, you need to look a little closer: compare the -6dB point for the two designs and you see that the bottom end on the 37 is subtly fuller with a quicker roll-off. The crossover point is lower too, 230Hz as opposed to the 350Hz of the 27. And then there's the efficiency; up 2dB, which may not

sound like much until you factor in that extra low-frequency extension. So that's where all that extra swept area and internal volume have gone! Suddenly you look at the 1037 Be with new respect. This is one potentially potent package.

The bold styling of the Focals will either appeal to you or it won't – but at least it's not anonymously insipid. With "yellow" and "red" wood options to offset the grey and brushed aluminium baffles they should coexist happily in a broad range of environments. The speakers are single-wired and the base extensions allow for spiking as well as providing a controlled egress for the massive downward firing port. The grilles are neat but definitely best discarded for listening.

Of course, the real beauty of the 1037 Bes lies in their versatility. 93dB efficiency means that even relatively modest valve amps should have no problem driving them (as we found out in the system reviewed in Issue 50). A decent lump of metal at the output will deal with that low-ish impedance but the ►



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▶ bandwidth and low-frequency energy generated by this speaker will always place the emphasis on the extra grip of a push-pull output stage. Of course, there's also the option of a quick and agile solid-state design, or with 400W of power handling on offer you could go for broke. Whichever route you take you quickly discover that these Focals demand quality first – and that quality better be delivered in a musically coherent fashion.

Why the emphasis on coherence? Great speakers are all about balance: a balance of virtues; tonal balance; balancing one end against the other. This last is the one that really concerns us here – and it's partly about the design itself, partly about how you use it. Focal's 25mm IAL inverted dome beryllium tweeter may be a step down from the one used in the Utopia series but it delivers clean, extended and above all quick high-frequencies which would be the envy of many a flagship model. What makes the 1037 so special is that it's the most affordable speaker in the range where the bottom end can keep up, for quality and quantity. But "can" and "does" are two different things, and therein lies the rub.

As noted, the bass response is full but not especially deep, given the size of the speaker's cabinet. This is all about quality mid-bass, the crucial range that gives instruments so much of their solidity, music so much of its scale, impact and authority. The 1037s do mid-bass beautifully, projecting it with texture, punch and energy from those three drivers and their humungous port. But you need it to be working with the room and in time with the rest of the range or it all gets messy real quick. That means careful positioning and an amp that gets a grip on the bottom end – a question of nature as much as sheer power. Believe me, if this bass arrives low or a little late you're going to know about it, both because of the

bass weight itself and the contrast with the clarity and precision of the top-end.

I used the 1037s with amps as varied as the Ayre MXRs, the TEAD Linear Bs and a Naim 282/Hi-Cap/250 combination – the latter because of excited feedback from Naim dealers who've experienced this speaker and which, having lived with the combination, I can fully understand. Having said that, as impressive as each amplifier proved I know from past experience what an astonishing job the little Pure Sound A35 can do and I suspect the Sugden integrateds or a Super Nait might prove equally interesting – but more of that later.

Why was the Naim/Focal combination that little bit special? I suspect it's to do with the way the bottom-end of both products is voiced, the Naims always excelling in the area of mid-bass drive and punch, a voicing which accounts for their sense of



pace and timing – and which dovetails with the 1037's demands perfectly. Of course, whilst on the one hand the 250's grip was welcome, it's also an amp that likes to work a bit, and in the context of this Focal's relatively mild impedance demands (in Naim terms) and high efficiency, it was barely breaking sweat. It would be interesting

to investigate the swings and roundabouts of the lower powered alternatives in the range.

Once you've got them going (which means placed relative to side and rear walls with considerable care, absolutely vertical and toed-in just so*) you'll be rewarded with music of scale and unforced clarity. Such is the solidity of the performers, the focus and separation within the sound-field and the fluidity of the timing and pace of the music that the performance simply steps away from the system; you're listening to the players, not the system that's playing them. Too good to be true? Beer budget hi-fi heaven? No to the former but definitely a touch of the latter – but before you choke on the \$6.4K asking price let me explain. Firstly – what these speakers don't do: they don't set up a palpable acoustic space with real dimensionality and boundaries. Even driven by the MXRs, they simply don't have the low frequency extension for that. Nor do they change the scale of their presentation to match recordings the way that a full-range system does. So, the Art Pepper Quintet is spread across the same width as the Basie big band, it's the individuals who vary in size. Does that matter? Depends on your priorities, and how much value you place on this speaker's considerable strengths. ▶

* This is one place where I take issue with Focal; the spikes provided are beautifully polished but way too short and there's no option for polished surfaces. I stood the 1037s on an octet of finite element CeraPac feet, threaded into their M8 females. These interfaced perfectly with (as well as protecting) my wooden floor, as well as making minute positional changes and getting the speakers vertical an absolute doddle. Oh, and they looked pretty cool too...

► The upside is all about musical presence and vitality. The solidity of voices and instruments is partly down to the focus and separation, the resolution of dynamic nuance, but it's also a function of the natural tonality and lack of edge. The 1037s manage to sound sweet, even warm, without being clogged or sluggish. Instead, they're dynamic and immediate, changing pace and jumping rhythmic hurdles without stuttering or breaking stride. There's drive and impact aplenty, and sure-footed bass lines to underpin the music. Whether it's the convoluted fluidity of Norman Watt-Roy or the grumbling bowed bass melodies of Gorecki's *Third Symphony*, notes are pitch definite enough to effortlessly follow their lines. There's also enough air and texture to float bass notes, keeping them live and unravelling overlapping layers.

The expressive, agile low-frequency foundation lends presence and immediacy to the mids, concentrating your attention on the music, pushing the system itself into the background. Whether it's the fragility of Nanci Griffiths or the more robust charms of Patti Smith, this speaker allows you to really appreciate the character, humour and humanity in a singer, the message in their song. The treble? It's almost an afterthought, which is praise indeed. Just like the various diamond tweeters, there's so little edge or fizz that it's completely unobtrusive. But where some have found the step-change to diamond hard to make, there's no apparent dullness or lack of energy here. Instead, it simply sounds so right you no longer bother to notice it.


Roll these things together, get them working in concert and you've got a phenomenal balance of musical virtues. Properly positioned, the 1037s make performances big, bold and engaging, without over-powering

them or lacking the subtlety for a string quartet. It's more about delivering the musicians' full expressive and emotional range, and allowing the music as much impact as it demands (but only when it demands). It's almost as if, somewhere in the design process, somebody wound the fun control round towards its end-stop.



This speaker delivers an awful lot of exactly what makes music important, in a package that (with the appropriate care) will work in the vast majority of rooms without visually dominating them. This may not be Focal's best speaker, but it's their best value design by a mile.

Which brings us back to that whole value thing. I can just see the outrage writ large on the faces of those who feel that any suggestion that a \$6.4K product can be described

as a bargain. But consider this: you can't listen to a speaker, you can only listen to a system – and the system required to get great results out of the 1037 is astonishingly affordable. The various integrated amps I've mentioned barely break the \$1K barrier. Add to that the fact that the speakers are single wired, and a seriously good system (a better system than most of us can dream of) can be had for \$8K plus a source component. I never thought you could get this much music for that kind of money. Believe me, the results are astonishing. 

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	3-way bass reflex
Driver Complement:	1x 25mm IAL inverted beryllium dome tweeter 1x 165mm W sandwich midrange 1x 180mm W sandwich woofers
Bandwidth:	13Hz - 40kHz ±3dB -6dB @ 20Hz
Efficiency:	93dB
Impedance:	8 Ohms nominal 3.3 Ohms minimum
Crossover Points:	230Hz and 2kHz
Dimensions (WxHxD):	264 x 1110 x 350mm
Weight:	51kg ea.
Finishes:	Black baffles with Classic (red) or Signature (blonde) stained wood sides
Price:	6638\$

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