

## EQUIPMENT REPORT

# Overachiever

Focal Chorus 705V Loudspeaker

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**W**ebster's *Dictionary* defines an overachiever as "one who achieves success over and above the standard or required level." That sums up what's expected from a superior small monitor speaker. Consumers desperately want a miniature box that delivers all the sound of a large box. Dr. Who fans would describe this as the audio equivalent of his Tardis space/time ship—small outside but huge inside. Too bad the laws of physics prevent this from naturally occurring. Petite box speakers, by their very nature, have difficulty producing high sound pressure levels and plumbing the depths of the bottom octave. That's just a fact. But nothing prevents diminutive monitor speakers from reproducing completely satisfying music because most sound worth hearing is in the midrange. And midrange is something small enclosure speakers can do just as well as big ones. The new Focal Chorus 705V proves this point.

If all things were economically fair and equal, the Chorus 705V, JM Lab's tiniest and least expensive speaker, would be damned to the realm of "good for the money," "trickle-down technology," or worst of all "close, but no Montecristo." But somehow despite its size and modest price the 705V can, within certain limitations, make music as involving as its larger and far more expensive siblings.

### Bop Around the Box

As you might expect from a company that makes its own drive units, the tweeter and midrange/woofer drivers in the 705V are something special. The tweeter uses Focal's proprietary magnesium/aluminum inverted dome mounted in a special integrated concave baffle for better dispersion. According to Focal this latest-generation design delivers "six-fold less distortion at its crossover point" than its previous model, the 705S. A 4¾" midrange/woofer cone composed of cellulose fiber coated with Polyglass microsphere material handles the 705V's lower frequencies. This fine layer of silica micro-balls enhances the cone's rigidity without adding appreciable weight or mass. Mounted in a one-piece cast chassis, the midrange driver employs a polypropylene surround and dustcap. The cabinet design is



bass-reflex, with a 1½"-diameter front-firing port.

Unlike most cost-conscious speakers the 705V is not just a rectangular box. Its front baffle has 1¼"-thick beveled sides; its 1" thick side panels are tapered so internal surfaces aren't parallel. This minimizes internal resonances. The wood laminate finish looks and feels like genuine wood yet the wrap-around grain pattern hints at a man-made material. Only your local termite will know for sure. The grille cover is angled not unlike a ship's prow and covers only the midrange/woofer. The tweeter has its own removable perforated cover. Removing the tweeter covers will require some sort of simple tool. I used a carefully inserted thumbtack. (Don't even think about trying this after your second or third cup of coffee.)

On the back of the 705V you'll find one pair of robust angled five-way binding posts. To use banana-plug connectors you'll have to remove the Euro-mandated plastic covers. But anyone with healthy fingernails can accomplish this in about 10 seconds; so much for protecting European tykes from themselves. The 705V rear panel also includes a slot for wall-mounting, if you wish to go sans speaker stands.

The overall fit and finish of the Chorus 705V is much better than I'm used to seeing from a speaker in this price range. If someone told me they were \$900 a pair rather than \$495, I wouldn't have been at all surprised. In fact when JM Lab's U.S. distributors, Audio Plus Services, told me the list price for the 705V speakers was \$495, my first question was, "Is that per speaker?" Every physical detail hints at a much higher price point.

### Listening Near, Middle, and Far Away

When I receive a pair of speakers for review I set them up in my desktop monitor system, burn them in for a couple of days, and then begin serious auditioning. I like to start out listening in the nearfield because it eliminates room interactions and lets me focus on the sound of the speaker itself. Although this is just the first step in my review process, I quickly discovered that nearfield listening presented an ideal environment for enjoying the Chorus 705V's strengths while avoiding its weaknesses.

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The first sonic characteristic I noticed about the Chorus 705 V speakers was that unlike most inexpensive speakers they added no additional grain or texture to the music. This made it much easier to listen into mixes and hear the micro-details that make music involving. For example, I received an advance copy of Chris Thile's new album *Punch*, which includes his 40-minute composition "The Blind Leaving the Blind." His quintet was recorded in a 4600-square-foot room with a 35-foot ceiling, using classical rather than pop music mic-placement. The Chorus speakers not only retained all the recording's textures, but they did an excellent job of preserving the micro-dynamic interplay among the acoustic instruments.

As you might expect from such small-footprint monitors, the Chorus 705Vs don't have a ton of bass, even though they have ports. Fortunately, their bass response trails off smoothly so coupling with a subwoofer was easy. In my desktop system I tried two subs with the 705Vs, the Earthquake Super Nova Mk IV-10 and the Axiom EP-400. Both integrated successfully with the 705Vs. Since this isn't a subwoofer review I won't go into great detail about the differences between the two subs, except to say that the Earthquake could go slightly lower, but the Axiom's DSP system allowed for a more linear in-room bass response. When I used my Meridian 561 multichannel controller's internal crossover the 705Vs were freed from having to reproduce anything below 80Hz, which gave them much greater dynamic range. But even when relieved of bass duties the 705Vs don't have the dynamic range of a big speaker, such as my Dunlavy Signature SC-VI's. Fortunately, the 705Vs' dynamic limitations are only obvious during dynamic peaks where they act like limiters—differences between *f*, *ff*, and *fff* disappear. Just as fortunately, at the other

end of the dynamic spectrum shadings in *p*, *pp*, and *ppp* remain well delineated.

The 705Vs image extremely well. But I would expect nothing less from a two-way monitor where the center of the tweeter and midrange/woofer are only 4 3/4" apart. Returning to the new Chris Thile recording, I could clearly place each instrument in three-dimensional space, and easily tell when players changed their positions slightly. Even on multi-tracked in-studio recordings, such as Abra Moore's *On The Way*, the 705Vs do an exemplary job of layering the various parts in successive planes. Abra's lead vocals hover front and center with a stable yet shimmering presence. The 705s' dimensional accuracy is enhanced by their fine transient capabilities. When I switched from a Meridian 561 controller to a professional Grace m902 reference headphone preamp, I could immediately hear the Grace's superior speed and rhythmic accuracy through the 705Vs. You usually don't hear that kind of transient resolving power from such an inexpensive speaker.

When I moved the 705Vs to the mid-sized room that usually hosts my Genesis 6.1 system, I began to hear their shortcomings. Sure, they still imaged superbly and handled micro-dynamics with aplomb. But as the SPLs inched up to room-filling levels they began to come undone. The first thing to go was dynamic contrast. As they got louder dynamic subtleties fell by the wayside. Above a certain volume level the 705s grow increasingly compressed and lifeless until they display signs of audible distress. In a mid- or far-field environment, movie soundtracks or full-scale orchestral music quickly overwhelm the 705Vs, even when they are coupled to a subwoofer. I used a pair of JL Audio Fathom f112 subs connected in stereo mode to a Lexicon MC-12 HD controller. While at moderate levels the f112 subwoofers integrated smoothly with the 705Vs, once the sound pressure levels increased to over 85dB the subwoofers decisively outperformed the 705Vs when it came to dynamics.

After a week or so of punishment in the room system I returned the 705Vs to my desktop. Both the speakers and my ears were relieved. These really are superb nearfield monitors! Compared to the other monitor speakers I regularly use the Chorus 705Vs have an especially neutral tonal balance. They aren't as dry or matter-of-fact as the Role Discovery speakers, and they aren't as warm or juicy as the Aerial Acoustic Model 5s. The 705Vs balance most closely parallels the ATC SCM7's, which rank among the least colored monitors in my collection. The ATCs do have additional top end air and substantially more dynamic headroom, but the Chorus 705Vs match them in resolving capabilities and imaging precision.

### Using the Right Tool for the Job

The smaller your listening environment the more you will enjoy the JM Lab Focal Chorus 705V speakers. They compare favorably with the best nearfield desktop monitors I've heard. But in anything larger than a small room their charms will fade. For such environments Focal makes larger monitors and floor-standing Chorus speakers that would be far better suited to a larger room's greater dynamic demands. But if you employ the 705Vs in the right listening environment, ideally coupled to a high-quality subwoofer, these diminutive monitors can deliver satisfying performance for a refreshingly miniscule price. **TAS**

## SPECS & PRICING

Drivers: 5" Polyglass mid/bass,  
1" inverted-dome tweeter

Frequency response: 65Hz-  
28kHz +/-3dB

Sensitivity: 89dB

Nominal impedance: 8 ohms

Recommended power  
amplifier: 25-100W

Dimensions: 12 3/8" x 7 9/16"  
x 9 3/4"

Weight: 12.5 lbs.

Price: \$495 per pair

### ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

#### Desktop System

EAD 8000 Pro CD/DVD  
player and transport, MacPro  
dual-core computer with  
iTunes 7.61, Trends USB Audio  
Dac UD-10, Monarchy Audio  
DIP, Meridian 518 digital  
re-processor and digital

mastering tool, Meridian 561  
pre/pro, Grace M902 reference  
headphone preamplifier, Bel  
Canto S-300 stereo amplifier,  
Goertz M12 Veracity speaker  
cables, Goertz TQ2 alpha-core  
interconnects.

### Room System

CEC TL-2 CD transport,  
Lexicon RT-20 Universal  
transport, Sony BPS-300 Blu  
Ray Player, Lexicon MC-12B  
HD pre/pro, Bel Canto M-1000  
power amplifiers, Genesis 6.1  
speakers, JL Labs Fathom F112  
subwoofers (2), Synergistic  
Research Designer's  
Reference interconnects and  
speaker cables.