DAC attack!
Blind test: Arcam, Burson, CEntrance, Jolida, Fidelity Audio and Rega DACs

Retro
Pink Triangle's Pink Linnk – the ultimate Linn Sondek mod?

Small wonders
NEAT iota ribbon speakers and Musical Fidelity M1 PWR amp

Pod power
Four premium iPod docks from Arcam, B&W Monitor Audio and NAD

Vinyl value
Is Thorens' TD 2015 the natural £2,000 turntable choice?

21 top products tested:
Focal, Naim, Swans, Usher, XTZ and more...

Ciao bella!
Unison Research’s stylish Simply Italy integrated amplifier

Carbon dating
We meet the enigmatic Wilson Benesch!
Focal points

It’s always interesting when a major speaker brand starts making headphones too. Malcolm Steward rates Focal’s Spirit One...

French hi-fi specialist Focal is best known for its behemoth Utopia loudspeakers, so it’s not a name that one normally associates with headphones. But two or more years ago, the company decided to bring its considerable loudspeaker voicing skills to a range of ‘phones designed for the mobile user. The first of these to appear is the Focal Spirit One you see before you.

I tested them with my iPhone and Apple lossless files on the move, and with my Naim UnitiQute and FLACs in the car, comparing them to other headphones aimed particularly at iPod/iPhone/iPod users. (The connecting lead includes an in-line remote control to allow wearers still to use their iPhone for calls while listening to music.)

The Spirit One is a lightweight closed back circumaural type, designed to be sonically accurate while keeping out the majority of external sounds. As the design is intended primarily for use on the move, Focal carried out extensive research to develop what it considers to be the ideal balance for security, sonic performance, and comfort when worn for extended periods.

Many headphones today seem voiced solely to impress upon initial listening, however their boosted bass and turbocharged treble soon become wearisome, so Focal used its experience with studio monitors to deliver a balance that better reflects what is heard in a recording studio. It is fair to say that the design has been successful in this respect.

Although the Spirit Ones were engineered for performance, they are not unattractive and are comfortable to wear, even for prolonged periods. They are light in weight – at 225g – and feature an articulated headband engineered from aircraft-grade aluminium for its lightness, durability, and resistance to atmospheric pollution, apparently. The design of the earpiece and headband encourages the pods containing the drive units to be pushed squarely against the ears of the wearer, delivering optimal sound while maintaining user comfort and minimising sound leakage.

Sound Quality

The sound of the Spirit Ones is refined, subtle, expressive, dynamic, detailed and rewardingly communicative. Their inspired voicing is best demonstrated by tracks featuring taxiing female vocals, where their control and polished tonality mean that multi-layering of a breathy female voice over percussion, for example, poses no obstacle. They are transparent and revealing, thoroughly content when handling a veritable welter of high-frequency information. These ‘phones never approach sounding brittle, brash, or unnaturally bright, so there is no ‘tizz’. The opposite end of the spectrum is equally informative yet controlled; the Spirit One handled the low-frequency wallop of Jaco Pastorius’ fretless 1960 Fender Jazz in an appropriately masterly fashion. This authority came as a result of the headphone’s ability to portray note shape accurately. Notes had precise and rapid attack and equally clear-cut release, so there was no possibility of any boom or wallowing.

All round it’s a very clever acoustic design. The music, although detailed, dynamic and having presence, never seemed uncomfortably close. It ‘kept its distance’ and did not approach closer than the pinna. It never felt as though it was being injected directly into your ear canal, which is an inherent and, as far as I’m concerned, annoying problem with bud and in-ear designs.

In terms of detail, the Spirit One excelled, even with mixes as relentless as This Is It from Staind’s album Illusions of Damnation. Even the power chording from the distortion-laden, down-tuned guitars could not make the band’s metal sound the slightest bit murky or muddy. Indeed, when, say, the bass and rhythm players were playing a similar progression on another track, there was never any confusion as to who was playing what; the instruments remained distinct and separate. The tonal quality and detailing of this metal mix also had the pristine clarity of a true audiophile recording, except, of course, that Aaron Lewis’ impassioned vocal was replete with genuine emotion and feeling.

The finest part of the Spirit One’s performance was the way it knitted all these elements and qualities together to imbue music with integrity, coherence and credibility. It presented a persuasive and exciting portrayal of music and one that fully engaged the listener.

Another vital consideration is that one can enjoy this optimal engagement without the discomfort of hot, sweaty ears. The Spirit One, therefore, receives a definite no-hesitation recommendation.

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