

RAIDERS OF THE LOST DETAIL

High end means the revelation of details that have not even been missed up to that point. With the Focal Utopia this is achieved playfully easy.

The tempo in which Focal has tackled the development of a whole new series of high-quality headphones is astonishing. Even more amazing is, however, the fact that the quality of the headphones has consistently met highest standards.

Assault on the throne

After weeks of dealing with the Focal Clear and having had lots of fun with it, I was driven by curiosity and skepticism about what was going to happen when I enjoyed music with the 4000 Euro expensive “Utopia”.

To put it bluntly: whoever expects a trip out of the valley of darkness into sunlit mountain peaks is led by false assumptions. After all, already the Elear, available for about 1000 Euro, is a head-loudspeaker that evokes lots of pleasure with all kinds of music, while having the right dose of temperament and restraint, very

natural timbres, an eruptive dynamism and pretty much everything else that makes it a sensation even beyond its price class. So what else could have possibly been on the “room for improvement”-list? We don’t know, but the sound progress is as unspectacular as it is undeniable, and what one associates with the name “Utopia” for loudspeakers is now also entirely true for headphones.

For days on end it was difficult to contact me on my phone, as I was searching for clues, wanted to find out which qualities of the Utopia enabled its user to go on musical research trips for several hours every day and to discover artists that one hasn’t ever recognized before. Want some examples? Here you go: Nicole Scherzinger, known to me only as the front woman of the Pussycat Dolls, which was



to me a meaningless and cast troupe of optically attractive ladies, turned out to be an excellent and sensitively interpreting singer in the duet with violinist David Garrett on “Serenity” as well as in the duet with Andrea Bocelli on her version of “Don’t cry for me Argentina”. The lady even survived an excursion to the “Phantom of the Opera”.

Not just Beryllium

No less surprising and hardly recognizable: Lady Gaga, who is currently traded as the “Queen of Pop”, who showed herself as a veritably swinging and vocally variable artist in a duet with old star Tony Bennett in “Cheek to Cheek”. The Utopia amazed me, as I can not remember ever having had such a wealth of detail presented in such an unagitated, almost inconspicuous way. It became perfectly audible that Mr. Bennett is far older than 30 now, while the accompanying Lady Gaga could prove that her voice is suitable for more than just simple pop music because of its volume, expressiveness and finest phrasing. The complicated part is then to not get lost in the details, not to unravel the sound image in its components, but to keep an eye on the whole musical happening. To depict voices full and voluminous, but not bloated, to let the high frequency range burst with subtleties and details, while still conveying warmth – no biting and hissing, but voices as if they were facing you. There were no magneto- or electrostatic transducers missing, it just worked!

What was even more fascinating was how clearly outlined and focused the imaginary sound stage was. Some competitors may seem more spacious, but at

the same time also more diffuse and not as precise in their depiction of space and proportions. Here, the Utopia shows itself to be an absolute master. I have never encountered this degree of tonal and spatial unity before with any other headphones. Keith Jarrett, Gary Peacock, Jack DeJohnette with “Autumn Leaves” – an experience that brought me closer to playback via first-class loudspeakers than I would have thought possible. No matter what music was played, or at what volume, the Utopia seemed to cope effortlessly with any challenge. Bass, whether electric bass or double bass, a drum set or deep piano and organ sounds, was full-bodied and at the same time of highest precision that one must at least speak of “extraordinary” here.

But how?

Now, at the latest, it is time to ask how the development team, which entered new technological territory for the French company with its headphone series, avoided the numerous obstacles on the way to a great, benchmark headphone and ultimately clearly put the smaller models in their place. What has remained is the idea of relating the space in which a loudspeaker is playing to the microcosm that the membranes of a headphone have to work in. It is hardly surprising that the company set about adapting the superior membrane material beryllium for use in this personal loudspeaker – the stiffness of the material combined with its low mass was the perfect basis for further experiments. One disadvantage is, however, the effort involved in the production of this chassis exceeding almost all current

standards and thus going far beyond the usual budget. This is also the main reason for the immense price difference to the Clear and Elear, the “smaller” models of the series.

The weight of almost half a kilogram is very well distributed: the pressure on head and ear is comfortably balanced, the soft ear cushions lined with memory foam and the softly padded earpiece ensure relaxation even during longer listening sessions. The workmanship of all mechanical parts is excellent and designed to last – French carmakers should probably take some inspiration from this. Are you still looking for the icing on the cake? We’ve got it: in contrast to many competitors, the Utopia also cuts a fine figure on affordable headphone amplifiers such as an Audioquest Dragonfly. However, it gains noticeably in fascination if you operate it with high-quality headphone amps, preferably ones which are capable of emotional brilliance, such as an Exposure XM HP or our very universally applicable reference for headphone amplifiers, the Mal-Valve Headamp Three. What happens then is extraordinary and spectacularly unspectacular because it comes across completely natural.

Michael Lang



▲ Permanently perfect contact thanks to a snap-in plug and gold-plated contacts.



▲ Finest ingredients: Lamb leather, carbon, metal and a beryllium chassis.

FOCAL UTOPIA

around 4000 €
 Warranty: 2 years
 Contact: Focal
www.focal.com

Open headphones of the absolute top class. The Utopia has established itself in the league of the best headphones in the world. The idea of developing a headphone as a loudspeaker for a tiny room paid off thanks to the beryllium chassis. Neutral, but not emotionless, the Utopia reveals details in the music that can otherwise only be found in the highest quality magneto- or electrostats. The nearly 500 gram of weight are very well distributed, wherefore long wearing is easily possible. Also works well with inexpensive amps. Four meter high-quality cable with 6.3 mm jack included.

STEREO - TEST

SOUND QUALITY **100%**

PRICE/PERFORMANCE

★ ★ ☆ ☆ ☆
GOOD