

Dynaudio Focus 220 Loudspeaker

These Scandinavian speakers show why clarity is its own reward.

It bears repeating: Today, we can put together a high-performance, highly musical system for a fraction of what that cost a decade ago. And we have choices in each category to suit our musical tastes. The Dynaudio Focus 220 joins my list of fine reasonably priced loudspeakers.

This Danish company, which has been building speakers since the late 1970s, was long known in the U.S. as an OEM manufacturer of drivers that were low in distortion, extended in dynamic range, and high in power-handling capabilities. I once had speakers with Dynaudio drivers and they were wonderfully clean and clear. As I increased the quality of the system around them, they met every occasion with grace. Dynaudio's own loudspeakers always sold well in Europe, and in 1995 they appeared in the U.S.

The Focus 220 is a floor-standing model, simple and handsome. It matches in looks and undoubtedly in

experience, not only doesn't allow bi-wiring, but doesn't need it. This is also one in which spikes matter and grille cloths do not. Since I have dogs with dangerous tails, I ended up with the grilles on, since I heard no difference with and without. And though I don't have a carpet, the spikes increased the perception of soundstage air and light, and so remained in use.

As the owner's manual warns, the 220s need break in. Out of the box, you can hear the Dynaudio clarity, extension at both frequency extremes, and richness in the midrange. But I also heard a touch of graininess in the treble, described by one listener as "whishiness" on high percussion (which may be wishy by nature), high strings, and flute. This effect went away in about a week, and the overall frequency balance just gets better and better. I also heard a slight forwardness in the upper midrange, which lingered.

The bass is deep and clean. The

Out of the box, you can hear the Dynaudio clarity, extension at both frequency extremes, and richness in the midrange. But I also heard a touch of graininess in the treble, described by one listener as "whishiness" on high percussion (which may be wishy by nature), high strings, and flute. This effect went away in about a week, and the overall frequency balance just gets better and better.

sound quality the others in the Focus series, a home-theater package with satellites, center channel, and subwoofer. This could be a boon for those who want to expand into multichannel sound.

I had the 220s out of their boxes and hooked up in about 20 minutes. This is a design that, unusually, in my

overall sound of these speakers is powerful and smooth, exciting when music is, as calming as a deep clear voice when music calls for that. And goosebumpily thrilling when, again, the music is. All this depends a great deal on that clear, deep, beautiful bass.

And the 220 is "fast." I usually



avoid this word like the very devil—never until recently did I hear a comprehensible explanation of it in audio terms. But in a note sent to *The Absolute Sound* last month on TAS founder Harry Pearson's latest system, designer Carl Marchisotto wrote about an amplifier: It is "fast, but not just in the normal ways. ... The modulation of one instrument or voice by another, which is common in reproduced music, seems to have been eliminated, and this adds greatly to the feeling of experiencing 'live sound.'" This, indeed, describes what I sense as "fast." And the description is quite true for the Dynaudio. The "normal" way of system speed I translate as transient information so clean, clear, and crisp that it drives the music with sparkle. This too the Dynaudio accomplishes. And the crossovers are so smooth and the drivers so matched, you hear no seams in these sensitive spots, where seams appear if seams there be.

Focus 220 2.5-way
Floor-Standing Loudspeaker

STRENGTHS

Clarity, power, spectral balance, wonderful bass. Joins with others in the Focus series to make up a home-theater package.

WEAKNESSES

A slightly protruding upper midrange off-axis, and highs that can be bettered, but not by many in its price range.

All these characteristics I assayed with Saint-Saëns' *Carnival of the Animals*, the middle piece on a spectacular (old) recording from EMI that also includes Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf* (nearly flawless) and Britten's *Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra*. This *Carnival* is deliciously performed by the Philharmonia Orchestra under Efram Kurtz, with Hephzibah Menuhin and Abbey Simon on pianos. The flute/piccolo parts—a passage that starts out on flute and ends on piccolo as seamlessly as the Dynaudio's performance—are a good test for treble wishiness. There were, after break-in, no impurities.

Even two weeks in, though, I was still hearing that small forward thrust in the upper midrange, particularly when I was listening slightly louder than normal (for me). On Patricia Barber's *Live in Paris* [EMI], at jazz-club volumes, she was front and center and intimate, her silvery voice delivering sentiments wry and biting. This CD seemed to well recorded, but the band, which is excellent, was, oddly, at once loud and recessed. The voice dominated in ways not entirely normal.

Then I adjusted my listening height (down until tweeter was dead-on at ear level), and lo! the pesky forwardness vanished, and the stage locked in. The overall sound was clear as a mountain stream, tinkling and dancing and plunging into the depths, and Barber's musicians took on the living quality that she had possessed all along. I eased up in the seat—the soundstage constricted around her voice, which seemed to swell. Back down, again—perfection. Sweet-spot magic.

After playing with this phenomenon on many recordings, I have concluded that in my room, not only do the 220s need extra-careful positioning (here,

slightly toed in, about 30" from the rear wall—I did not use the supplied "bungs," didn't need them, as I also didn't need a subwoofer). But the listener requires the same care. I measured, as suggested in the manual, the same distance between the speakers as that from the inside edge of each speaker to the listener's chair—an equilateral triangle, for me, at 70.5 inches. (And don't forget the ears at tweeter level, which you may be able to achieve by adjusting the height of the front spikes). Off-axis, the effect on non-critical listening is not disturbing. But if you want to really hear and feel your music, you need to be seated properly.

And then, what a treat you're in for. This speaker, on good recordings, will melt you into their loveliness. Less than well recorded CDs are revealed for what they are, though. On the exquisitely performed *If You Love Me*, with mezzo Cecilia Bartoli [London], the audibly dull recording robs these love arias of that final drop of heaven.

To see how much these characteristics might owe to a synergy between speaker and amplifier, I replaced the Musical Fidelity kW500 integrated amplifier, a hybrid design, with the all-tube Prima Luna amplifier and pre-amp, which are a hair "softer" in sound. The differences were slight—yes, softer, but not too. Then I put in the MF X-150 integrated, less powerful than the kW500, and of a price more in keeping with the speaker. The quality of the sound was still gloriously clean and clear. The volume just needed to go up a bit—no surprise. So these speakers seem to get along nicely with a variety of good amplifiers.

The words that best describe the 220s for me are "powerful," "clear," and "exciting." Intimate groups come out into the extensive soundspace with air and light and force. Orchestras (a rarity, in my experience, for smallish systems) are satisfyingly spread out beyond, behind, and above—and dynamic. Featured instruments in good recordings sparkle. The organ at St. Mary's in San Francisco [Reference Recordings] rattled body and floor, yet the individual timbres remained precise. Chico Freeman's miraculous saxophone on *Saudades*

[Water Lily Acoustics] was in turn reedy, breathy, and sinuous—you feel as though you're eavesdropping on a jam session, an intense Brazilian body-jazz, a whirlwind tour of heart and mind. The fellows were having fun, so there is, o rara avis, not a *single* boring cut on this CD. And the playing—ah, this playing is surely some of the best in the world, and deliciously reproduced through the Dynaudios. This wonderful recording appeared in 1990 and vanished with hardly a ripple. If you're lucky, you might find a used copy online.

You will be lucky as well if you treat yourself to the Dynaudio Focus 220. At \$3000, it is a spectacular bargain. Alongside my reference, the Spendor S8e, also \$3000, it holds its own. These two splendid speakers are both clear and rich in midrange and mid-bass. The Dynaudio's treble, though extended and fine, is not as sweet and lovely as that of the Spendors. And the Spendors are more forgiving in placement. But the Dynaudios go further down in the bass.

So maybe you are triply lucky: You get to let your music make a difficult choice easier. The Dynaudio will have the edge over most of its competitors on hard rock and on the full spectrum of complex orchestral music.

SPECIFICATIONS

Focus 220 2.5-way floor-standing loudspeaker
Price: \$3000
Driver complement: (two mid/bass drivers; one tweeter)
Sensitivity: 87dB
Power handling: 250 watts
Impedance: 4 ohms
Dimensions: 8.1" x 38.6" x 11.6"
Weight: Approx. 42 lbs.

MANUFACTURER/DISTRIBUTOR INFORMATION

DYNAUDIO NORTH AMERICA
1144 Tower Lane, Bensenville, IL 60106
(630) 238-4200
www.dynaudioua.com

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Musical Fidelity kW500 and X-150 integrated amplifiers; Prima Luna Three pre-amp, Five amp; MF C5 CD player; Nordost Blue Heaven cables; Monster Cable HS3500 powerline conditioner.