

Category Winner: Loudspeakers \$3,000 to \$5,000

FOCAL JMLAB PROFILE 918

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Okay, so when it comes to style, the French have plenty of it. Even popping out to pick up some fresh bread from the local Patisserie, your average Parisian lady looks like she's about to head down a catwalk, not down the shops. France is a nation that prides itself on its cuisine, wine and fine looking ladies, but can a loudspeaker be equally as stylish?

Aesthetically at least, these new floorstanders from Focal-JMLab cut a fine figure. The 918s are one of five in

the Profile 900 Series, which comprises the 908 standmounters, 918 and 928 floorstanders, CC 908 centre channel and SW 908 active subwoofer. At the launch of this new range, Focal-JMLab said that it has sought to introduce a truly innovative mid-market loudspeaker system to replace its current Electra models.

The 918s are a 2½-way bass reflex design, all of which is done in-house by Focal's engineers. They are a completely different speaker to the ones the Profile

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900 Series are replacing, with numerous significant technological changes and improvements - not just a face-lift. The Profile 900’s lines have definitely been softened and Focal says that it faced a new challenge with this series, because it was the first time style was the guiding factor in its design.

If anyone can do it, the French can. Confronting their latest project, Focal’s engineers took a ‘soft tech’ angle approach, where the end result had to blend multiple technologies intrusively in a loudspeaker that ‘perfectly accomplished its acoustical duties.’ If you’ve ever tried designing or building your own loudspeakers, then you’ll appreciate that this is no mean feat. Many designers are happy to just make the technology work, but doing it with style is another matter altogether.

So far then, top marks for style, but what about technique? Well, the Profile 900 Series comes with a virtual white paper on what’s gone into their design, so I’ll mention only the major aspects of these loudspeaker’s composition.

Many speaker manufacturers come up with their own cabinets and crossovers, then simply whack a couple of ‘off the shelf’ drivers in to finish things off. Not so Focal. Drivers have long been a component that the company continues to develop and experiment with, such as its pure Beryllium tweeter found in the top-ranging Utopia Be designs. The tweeter used in the Profile 900s is an inverted dome design made of a composite of aluminium and magnesium. The inverted dome is one of Focal’s trademarks and is used throughout its domestic as well as its in-car and professional audio loudspeakers. This particular tweeter is rated up to 30kHz making it compatible with high resolution formats such as Super Audio CD and DVD-Audio.

The other drivers in the 918s comprise two 165mm sandwich cone units - one a bass driver; the other handling mid/bass. Directly beneath the

twin drivers, the cabinet is vented by a large, tuned bass reflex port. The actual cabinet construction has also received plenty of design attention, with smooth, tapered curves that are there for plenty of reasons other than the fact that they look good. It’s rigid, plus the elliptical shape and varying height means unwanted internal resonance are avoided. Also, these speakers are quite a rarity in that they have been designed to be used with the grilles left on. It’s usually the other way around and most sound better with the cloth grille removed, but in this case it works with the tweeter’s response and resulting stereo imagery.

Another much pondered component is the crossover and rather interestingly, the 918s are not biwireable. As some loudspeaker designers pertain (Dynaudio, for one) biwiring doesn’t help if you have a decent crossover network. To this end, Focal developed its Optimum Phase Crossover (OPC) and because it manufactures its own drive units, it is able to control both low and high pass filtering very accurately with its OPC design. As Focal quite rightly points out ‘it’s unrealistic to think that a mechanical defect can be corrected electrically’ - meaning it’s no good compensating for a problem with the driver by tweaking something in the crossover network.

So, has all this attention to detail and no doubt hours and hours of R&D paid off? It was a bit hard to tell initially as I hooked up the 918s to a system comprising a Shanling CD-T300 valve CD player and ME 25/550 II amplification, as initially they didn’t sound like five grand’s worth of loudspeaker straight out of the box. I take note of how a speaker initially sounds, but it’s by no means consistent with what they sound like once given a run-in. I left them hooked up and playing for a week before properly taking note. Conversely, they look like a five grand loudspeaker straightaway and

the quality of fit and finish is flawless. It's worth mentioning at this point, the three finishes are available, called Classic (pictured), Signature and Style which are different real wood veneers.

After plenty of time to run-in, the 918s submit a very judged presentation. Those inverted tweeters provide a supremely smooth treble, but it has enough bite and sparkle to do justice to hard-hit cymbals or high frequency electronic sounds such as The Chemical Brother's *Push The Button* CD. This skilfully trod tightrope walk extends down to the midband and bass, where the former is particularly packed with detail and ambience. This means vocals are reproduced in an articulate and wholesome manner. Play Supergrass' *Road To Rouen* CD and lead singer Gaz Coombes' vocals come across with vivid naturalness - the midrange having everything you'd expect of a speaker of this price: detail, dynamics and expression.

A new CD in my collection is from Indian sitar guru Ravi Shankar. It's incredibly aesthetic music and even more joyous to listen to on a pair of loudspeakers such as these. It's deeply spiritual and ancient music, something which is heightened by these Focals which take you right to the instruments and music's core. The various indigenous instruments including the sitar, double violin, tabla and ghatam all sound wonderfully natural, and the recording is so atmospheric that the soundstaging ability of the 918s puts you right in the musical picture.

A completely different musical picture is painted changing to some heavyish rock, courtesy of The Stone Temple Pilots. By far their best offering, *Core* is a powerful, big sounding CD and it sounds best on loudspeakers that don't mind letting their hair down. These Focals do, to a certain extent, but I've heard this CD sound dirtier (as it should) and subsequently more enjoyable. The precision, accuracy and control the 918s excel at, backfires a bit with this sort of music. The bass too,

although nicely extended and rounded, doesn't get you into party mood with rock and dance numbers. It lacks the sort of depth that when you've a dance anthem cranked to antisocial levels, really gets the party going. They're refined, but a bit boring with music such as this.

Far better suited to more refined music, I'm not at all surprised that the numerous qualities of these loudspeakers, doesn't necessarily make them complete all-rounders. If you're not a rocker or raver, then it doesn't matter. With well recorded material, both simple and complex mixes, these Focals sound utterly seductive.

Switching to the higher production values of David Sylvian's *Gone To Earth*, the Profile 918s reward still more, drawing out the passion and intensity of his vocals on *Riverman* in a luxuriant, deep soundstage. It's much the same story with classical works too, such as Handel's *Messiah* - a powerhouse listen that can effortlessly raise hairs with each dynamic swing.

I enjoyed my time with these French works of art immensely. So much so that I had no hesitancy in awarded them highly at the conclusion of the publication is the original review in *Audio & Video Lifestyle*. Even then it was obvious that the Profile 918s were going to be strong contenders in this year's Best Buy Awards. Now with the publication of the award winners it is of little surprise that they take the honours in their category. They are not going to be everyone's cup of tea or drop of vin, nor are they within financial reach of us all, but if you're after a meticulously designed, executed and above all, stylish loudspeaker then, *le voilà*.

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Ancillary Equipment: Shanling CD-T300 CD player, ME Sound 25/550II pre/power amplifiers, Dared VP-845 integrated valve amplifier, Wasatch Cable Works interconnects, Nordost Flatline Silver loudspeaker cables, Concorde equipment support, SAP Relaxa 1 isolation platform, Black Box mains conditioner

Distributor:

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Specifications:

Product Type

Floorstanding loudspeakers

Enclosure

2½-way, three, driver, front ported

Driver Complement

2 x 165mm bass/mid driver
1 x 25mm inverted dome tweeter

Recommended Amplifier Power

175 watts RMS (maximum)

Frequency Response

40Hz-30.5kHz

Sensitivity

90dB

Impedance

8 ohms nominal
3.2 ohms at 110Hz (minimum)

Crossover Point

180Hz and 2.5kHz

Cable Connection

Standard

Dimensions

990 x 230 x 350mm

Weight

19.5kg (each)

Price

\$4,999 per pair

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Reviewer:

Nic Tatham

All specifications and recommended retail prices were supplied by the distributor at the time of original review, and may now be subject to change