

Opera Callas Speakers Reviewed

By: HomeTheaterReview.com, February 14, 1994



Focal's bass/mid driver is a twin-voice-coiled 130mm unit. It uses a 'neoflex' cone and it's a tight, sharp performer working up to 1.9kHz in this instance; the Callas' crossover is a 4th order acoustic Linkwitz/Riley arrangement. The inverted dome tweeter measures 25mm across, and is fashioned from Kevlar. Overall frequency response is 45-20kHz, while one's amplifier has to deal with a nominal impedance of 6 ohms and a sensitivity of 86dB/1W/1m. Opera recommends amps delivering 20-150W; I found the Callas to be an avaricious little gold-digger able to suck up the better part of even a Krell MDA-300's output.

At the risk of reviving an odious, late-1970s craze -- system-matching by nationality -- I must confess that I preferred the Opera Callas with Italian electronics and cables. I conducted most of the listening sessions with GRAAF pre-amp and power and A.R.T. wires, fed by the Michell Gyrodeck with the SME IV arm and Transfiguration m-c cartridge into the Acurus phono amp, with the Krell MD10/Reference 64 CD player for digital duties. (I don't suppose that a CD player from Italy would have made much difference, but Dan D'Agostino did design the Krell. And Dan is most certainly of the Italian persuasion. Sheer coincidence, I'm sure.)

I know what you want me to say. You want me to save 11,000 for you and tell you that the Callas sounds a lot like a Wilson WATT. OK. 'The Callas sounds like a WATT with an Italian accent.' Which doesn't mean that it makes everyone sound 'a like'a thee'es. The difference between, say, a Wilson WATT and most Italian mini-monitors, of which I've now sampled most, is all in the presentation, reflecting the spirit of the designers. Dave Wilson is one of the most methodical, clear-thinking, composed individuals I've ever met; your basic Italian is so emotional and demonstrative that a Roman corpse has more life in it than a British game-show host. And given the Franassovici Dictum which states that the designer is inseparable from his product (and vice versa), a listener familiar with the Italian spirit can only surmise that the Opera Callas is a justifiable case of anthropomorphism. And I don't mean some broad named Callas.

Where the WATT is cool and detailed and Dave-like (and the LS3/5A, by contrast, smooth and restrained and peculiarly British), the Callas is vibrant, lively and dynamic. How much of this is due to the different grades of Focal inverted domes I cannot say because I was not about to remove and swap them to find out. Suffice to say, the Callas' top end is slightly coarser than that of the Wilson but also less sharp and potentially fatiguing. (Note that these remarks refer to the WATT III/Puppy II; the new WATT/Puppy V which Wilson launched in Miami is a radically different performer.)

Where it apes the WATT is in pin-sharp positioning and image solidity. Maybe this is what so many soundstage fetishists find so endearing about Focal tweeters. Whatever, the Callas is so good with positional and dimensional concerns that it's enough for some to make them overlook oddball behaviour at the frequency extremes, behaviour which imparts a specific nature of so strong a type that potential customers will know within seconds if it's yea or nay. In essence, the frequency extremes are tighter and faster than the midband, crisp bass and breathtaking treble on either side of a near-syrup midband. I suppose a positivist would call this a happy blend of tube midband and solid-state extremities, while a negativist would label it discontinuous. I found it not at all unpleasant, but I suppose that a similar situation in a massive full-range speaker flat to 30Hz would be unbearable.

Fast and extended treble devoid of screech or edge -- a dream, right? It's what you get most of the time in the WATT and occasionally with certain of the more refined metal domes and better ribbons. The Callas

offers this, too, but it has a potential for runaway hysterics. When moved to handle dynamics, which it does without complaint to levels beyond what's expected of a small monitor, the Callas registers arrival at the 'maximum headroom barrier' with a scratchy, transistor-on-the-edge form of clipping. Admittedly, this is life at the limits and something which only headbangers or those trying to fill massive rooms will experience. At the same time, the bottom end turns dry and lumpy -- none of the heart-stopping 'cracking' made by an LS3/5A but a warning nonetheless to back off a bit.

Analogies beg to be written, but I'll spare you the esoteric automotive references and thoughts of Italian exoticcars. The Callas is, simply, a speaker no BBC-bred individual might have conceived. It eschews laboratorial analysis for emotion, detail for spirit, transparency for warmth. It can rock with the best of them or it can bring tears to your eyes with a midband which positively caresses the human voice. Which makes the name far less preposterous than it seems at first.

But I'd have been happier if they called it the Lanza.