

A certain je ne sais quoi

French hi-fi specialist Focal has hit a new price point with its latest release, **Ed Selley** checks out the new mid-range model

The ongoing boom in the sale of headphones has seen many brands make the move into the category.

Focal was one of the earliest, and its Spirit models (*HFC 391*) did so well it has launched three new options. The Listen competes in the same area as the Spirit, while the Utopia and Elear models push the range into more ambitious price levels.

The mid-range Elear takes much of the design philosophy of the flagship Utopia (£3,250) and brings it to a more attainable price point. It has a pair of 40mm drivers made from the aluminium/magnesium alloy that is also used in the construction of the tweeters for its Aria loudspeaker series. Each driver, viewed in cutaway is in the shape of an M, which Focal claims aids the soundwave formation and improves nearfield listening.

To ensure that the drivers are as responsive as possible, Focal uses nitrile butyl rubber (NBR) for the surround and a specially designed lightweight voice coil to lower the operating mass. The fine mesh, open-back enclosure design means that the Elear leaks a fair amount of noise to the outside world.

The enclosures themselves are mounted to a large aluminium yoke that forms the main structure of the Elear, and the headband is wrapped in leather-coated padding. The band and the enclosures enjoy sufficient freedom of movement to ensure that most head shapes and sizes are easily accommodated. While the Elear is comfortable to wear, it lacks the cossetting nature of the Oppo PM-2 (*HFC 402*) or Audio-Technica ATH-A2000Z (*HFC 412*), but build quality on the other hand is superb and of a very high quality, and the headphone feels very solid without being too heavy. A final mention needs to be made about the cable,

which at 4m long is extremely useful and should be sufficient for most home listening situations.

Sound quality

In the time I've spent with the Elear, it has seen use with all models in this month's headphone amp *Group Test* (see page 24), as well as with Naim's Supernait 2 and Chord's Hugo (*HFC 386*). Despite the variety of sources, the characteristics of the Focal make themselves consistently apparent. This is a usefully sensitive design that should not be beyond most headphone amps to drive to a good listening level.

There is also an immediacy to the Elear that suggests that Focal's efforts at reducing the driver mass have been very successful. The performance with the complex beats of Michael Kiwanuka's *One More Night* is effortlessly agile. Each beat is

DETAILS

PRODUCT

Focal Elear

ORIGIN

France

TYPE

Open-back, over-ear headphone

WEIGHT

450g

FEATURES

- 40mm aluminium/magnesium driver
- Quoted sensitivity: 104dB/mW
- Detachable 4m cable with 6.35mm jack

DISTRIBUTOR

Focal UK

TELEPHONE

08456 602680

WEBSITE

focal.com

beautifully defined and has plenty of impact to it. Kiwanuka's vocals have a wonderful sense of texture and detail to them and the Elear manages the neat trick of ensuring they take pride of place in the performance without ever becoming detached from it.

Where the Elear really excels is the sense of spaciousness it brings to music. The stripped-back simplicity of *Oliver James* by Fleet Foxes is replicated perfectly with the echo on Robin Pecknold's vocals at the end sounding stunningly vibrant and believable. Against these impressive qualities, the negatives are pleasingly limited. The Focal avoids ruthlessly showing up limitations in recordings and partnering equipment to a point, but sometimes this effortlessly detailed model can't help but expose the foibles in what you give it.

Crucially though, it knows how to have fun. Listening to the infectiously entertaining *Boy King* by Wild Beasts sees the Elear effortlessly find the swagger of the album and while it is undoubtedly delivering an accurate and precise take on the material, the speed and sheer sense of agility that accompanies it is enough to get you to stop analysing the music and start enjoying it. When you combine this with the sensible weight and reasonable comfort levels that the Elear offers, you have a headphone that makes long-term listening sessions easy to do and deeply satisfying while you do so.

Conclusion

Taken as a whole, the Elear has to be seen as a serious new contender at the price point. The design and construction suggests that huge amounts of care and attention have been lavished upon it and the result is a headphone that very effectively balances both accuracy and fun. If you are shopping for headphones at this price, your shortlist has just become a little longer ●



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

LIKE: Accurate and engaging sound; build; good comfort

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

DISLIKE: Can be unforgiving of poorer recorded material

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

WE SAY: A hugely accomplished home headphone that perfectly balances accuracy and fun

EASE OF DRIVE

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★