

Elite Elears

French audio experts Focal expands its range of headphones with the new over-ear Elear model. Jon Myles dons a pair.

Best known for their range of loudspeakers, Focal are a relatively new entrant into the headphone market - first starting off with the Spirit One model just five years ago.

Priced at £200 they proved a huge success and since then the company has invested much time, effort and resources into expanding the range.

Alongside the Spirit they now have the in-ear Sphears, the over-ear Listens – both primarily designed for being used while out and about – and now the more sophisticated Elears which aim to replicate the sound of the company's loudspeakers in a smaller package.

They sit one rung below the flagship Utopia 'phones and cost £799. Hand built in Focal's St Etienne headquarters, the Elears are an open-backed design featuring a 40mm aluminium/magnesium full-range driver – meaning there's no crossover involved. The headband is also formed from aluminium with a leather cushioning while the supplied balanced cable is a handy 9ft in length. There are standard 3.5mm terminations going into both earcups so if you fancy a cable upgrade it is easy to do.

The padding on the earcups themselves is a 20mm thick memory foam cushion – meaning the 'phone's drivers sit slightly further away from the ears than some other designs. They tip the scales at 450g but the construction of the headband and foam pads translate into a comfortable fit with that weight evenly spread over the head. During testing I clocked up one four-hour listening session without any fatigue setting in.

SOUND QUALITY

After a 48-hour break-in period I pressed the Elears into service via

Naim's DAC VI and HeadAmp's GS-X MKII headphone amplifier.

Focal claim a frequency response of 5Hz to 23kHz from their driver and the low-end response would seem to bear this out. With Massive Attack's 'Group 4' the complex bass lines were tight and never muddy or bloated. There's a real kick to the sound here plus good extension in the treble.

They are not quite as warm in the midband as my set of Oppo PM-2 planar magnetics (£699), but compensate for this with greater detail and a more up-front sound – but not one veered into harshness or an overly-brash presentation.

Also impressive was the sense of spaciousness evident. The relatively large foam cushions opened up the soundstage in a way that made the Elears an immersive experience. Playing Bruce Springsteen's 'Born To Run' the cinematic scale of the track came over wonderfully, Clarence

Clemons' epic saxophone solo simply soaring. Unlike some headphones which can compress this track the Focal's replayed it in full grandeur.

They were adept at revealing the differences between partnering equipment, highlighting the smooth, detailed nature of the GS-MXII compared to the Naim's punchier, more driving nature. On both, though, the Elears never failed to impress.

CONCLUSION

Focal have engineered a fine set of headphones with these Elears. Build quality is exemplary and more than justifies the £799 price with a comfort and fit few others can match. The sound possesses detail and drive with a punchy bass and clean treble. Match them with a good headphone amplifier and you'll be listening for hours.



HI-FI WORLD

FOCAL ELEAR £799



OUTSTANDING - amongst the best.

VERDICT

Great build quality and an engaging sound make the Focal Elear headphones amongst the best at their price. Highly recommended.

FOR

- firm bass
- clean treble
- detail
- comfort

AGAINST

- not the warmest sounding

Focal
www.focal.com