

ELAC Vela FS 408 stereo speakers

by Simon Lucas

For a company that's fast closing in on its 95th year in business, ELAC certainly took its sweet time to become a loudspeaker manufacturer. Taking more than two decades to transition from sonar technology to turntables for the consumer audio market (as ELAC did between its inception in 1926 and the debut of its PW1 record player in 1948) is one thing – hanging around until 1984 before starting to develop loudspeakers is quite another. Perhaps if we live long enough, we might get to listen to that pair of ELAC headphones the company's almost certainly planning to launch in the middle of the century.

In the meantime, though, these Vela FS 408 floorstanding loudspeakers are plenty to be getting on with.

It should probably come as no great surprise that the Vela FS 408 have taken their time getting here at all. After all, ELAC's well-regarded 400 series of loudspeakers was superseded by the Vela 400 series getting on for three years ago – and, as a range, it looked to be pretty comprehensive. But it turns out the stable door hadn't been properly shut, and subsequently Vela FS 408 has emerged. A little bit smaller than Vela FS 409, a little bit bigger than Vela FS 407 – and surely the final piece of the Vela 400 series. We need only wait another four or five years to be certain.

If you're at all familiar with the Vela 400 series, nothing about the way the Vela FS 408 looks is going to come as any great surprise. This is a cabinet of reasonably assertive dimensions – at a touch over 114cm tall, getting on for 28cm wide and over 33cm deep, you're realistically looking at a medium-sized listening room as a minimum requirement. Neither of the available finishes (high-gloss black or high-gloss white – the walnut option enjoyed by the rest of the Vela 400 series is nowhere to be found here) do anything to minimise the physical presence of the FS 408, either.

The convex baffle shape is a little bit of welcome relief as far as industrial design goes – and, of course, in conjunction with the angled, non-parallel cabinet sides it helps minimise reflections and standing waves. The Vela FS 408 lean back quite a way on their die-cast bottom plate, too – if a person adopted this attitude during conversation you'd read their body language as 'sceptical'.

The standard of finish is about where it should be for a loudspeaker at this sort of money. Certainly the high-gloss lacquer is flawlessly applied, and the anodised aluminium soft-touch top plate of the cabinet is quite tactile. The rather rakish angle the top plate mimics the angle of that die-cast bottom plate – when the speaker's on its hefty stand, if seen in profile it looks a little like it's standing on tip-toe.



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▶ ELAC has decided the distance between the horizontal base stand and the angled bottom plate is perfect for the stand to be used as a fixed boundary for the Vela FS 408’s downward-firing bass reflex port. One of the biggest visual advances of the Vela 400 series over the range it replaced is the apparent disappearance of a port-hole, and ELAC has been able to deploy the same oval, double-flanged port (at 250mm long and with an effective diameter of 80mm, it’s a big one, Missus) as is fitted to the larger Vela FS 409 without anyone being any the wiser.

So despite appearances, the Vela FS 408 is a two-and-a-half way ported design. The top of the baffle features the single most intriguing bit of technology on display here – ELAC’s long-ish serving and extremely well-regarded JET5 tweeter. This deploys a light, folded foil membrane (so tricky to achieve it’s mostly left to robots) with neodymium magnets – ELAC suggests the Vela FS 408’s frequency response can achieve a dog-bothering 50kHz.

Below it are positioned a couple of 180mm examples of ELAC’s distinctive ‘crystal membrane’ drivers. These are sandwich drivers, with a paper cone bonded to the back of each stamped aluminium cone – the look, it has to be admitted, is vaguely reminiscent of a crystal, and the intention of the stiff, lightweight construction is to improve power-handling and reduce overall coloration. ELAC, with no apparent sense of overkill, calls this AS-XR technology, which stands – or, rather, doesn’t quite stand – for Aluminium Sandwich Membrane with Extended Frequency Range.

ELAC is quite vocal about the AS-XR drivers’ long stroke potency and ‘excellent’ large-signal behaviour – so both drivers sit in aluminium cages and are supported by large ▶

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▶ roll surrounds. If ever a pair of drivers looked like they wanted to represent ‘authority’ and ‘power’, these two do.

Sensitivity is a reasonable 88.5dB, though a nominal impedance of 4 ohms suggests the Vela FS 408 may need to be shown the whip just a little for optimum results. Crossover occurs at 450Hz and 2550Hz, and the incoming signal is delivered to chunkily purposeful bi-wire speaker binding posts just above the bottom plate at the rear of the cabinet.

Using a handy Naim Uniti Star as both amplification and streaming source, and with additional source options offered by both a Clearaudio Concept turntable via Leema Elements phono stage and a Cyrus CDt, the Vela FS 408 joined the system via QED XT25 biwire speaker cable. And from there, with a delay of just a few short hours to allow for borderline-obsessive fiddling with room position – eventually the FS 408 end up roughly 35cm from a rear wall and toed in just slightly towards the listening position – it’s game on.

The most immediately impressive aspect of the way the ELACs go about their business is their beautifully even, unified tonality. That most unlikely of early examples of sampling, The Jungle Line from Joni Mitchell’s *The Hissing of Summer Lawns* [Asylum], sounds as if it’s derived from a single piece of material, despite being a fairly coarse collision between The Royal Drummers of Burundi, Joni’s inimitable vocal and some grainy Moog keyboard.

The JET5 tweeter, certainly, delivers on its reputation from the off. There’s genuine substance and body to treble sounds, yet they’re airy and spacious at the same time. Momentum is never an issue, and the combination of clarity, space and polite

attack makes the top of the frequency range smoothly convincing. At this sort of money there are more determined and forceful speakers around where treble is concerned, certainly – Bowers & Wilkins’ driver-heavy 702 Signature floorstanders come to mind – but without exception they’re made to sound slightly ham-fisted by the clean, agile top end of the Vela FS 408.

There’s a similarly high-gloss, good-taste aspect to the way the ELACs treat the midrange. Detail levels are impressively high, and consequently there’s a sense of immediacy to the vocal – the purity of Joni’s tone comes across vividly, despite the fact that she sounds like she’s mic’d from mere nanometres away. There’s a hint of warmth in the 408 midrange, just enough to offer a touch of muscularity but not so much that timing is affected – the ELACs sound like they’re up on the balls of their feet almost as much as they look it.

The handover between drivers is seamlessly achieved – the crossover between JET5 tweeter and AS-XR midrange driver is imperceptible, and that between midrange and bass drivers is unobtrusive too. And down at the bottom of the frequency range the Vela FS 408 prove just as sprightly and focused as elsewhere. Wilton Fender’s peerless Aria bass guitar playing on ‘Edith and the Kingpin’ is impressively shaped, alive with the finest details of texture and string-gauge, and absolutely straight-edged when describing the attack and decay of individual notes. Despite significant extension and body, there’s nothing muscle-bound or congested about the way the ELAC bottom end sounds. Those AS-XR drivers may relish large signals and enjoy long travel, but they’re a deal more sophisticated in their attitude than those characteristics might suggest.

The commonality of purpose demonstrated by these three drivers contributes no end to a very pleasant facility with timing. The soundstage the ELACs generate is by no means the most expansive – in the context of the size of the cabinets it’s probably slightly disappointing, although their rather fussy shape eats into their internal volume somewhat – but it’s well defined and coherent. Combine this with the clarity, rapidity and square-edged attack of the sonic signature overall, and the entire frequency range hangs together like a well-made suit.

This deft ability to unify a recording into an entity with convincing singularity of purpose and execution makes the ELACs almost instantly likeable. And you know what they say about first impressions, right? So welcoming and so instinctively ‘correct’ do the Vela FS 408 sound in this respect, it’s hard to imagine ever taking issue with any other aspect of their reproduction.

But switching to the considerably more rough-around-the-edges *Mark’s Keyboard Repair* by Money Mark [Mo’ Wax] shifts the ELACs out of their comfort zone just a little. Thanks to those impressive detail levels, the analogue squelch and grind of massed analogue keyboards is delivered in its entirety – and they have no problem revealing the hesitancy and approximate pitching ▶

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▶ of Mark Ramos-Nishita's voice. The treble response remains a paradigm of transparency and spaciousness, too. But where broad-strokes dynamics are concerned, there's a rather hesitant quality to the FS 408 – they value control and expression above pretty much everything else, and consequently don't quite give the big dynamic variances in this recording quite the emphasis they require.

That's not to say they won't dig deep and/or hit hard. Autechre's *Montreal* [Warp] wants for nothing where low-frequency extension is concerned, and despite the tune's best intentions the bass information never gets out of hand. It's properly controlled and is always on the front foot – but, again, the ELACs don't have the sort of explosive dynamic potency that the bald numbers (of driver count and size, of cabinet displacement, of retail price) suggest they might. So if it's sonic fireworks you're after, you'll need to think long and hard about whether the ELAC Vela FS 408 fit your particular bill.

Oh, be in no doubt that their talents outweigh their shortcomings to an almost laughable degree – as well as the stuff around tonal consistency, adept timing and expressive midrange reproduction, they're also very accomplished when it comes to describing a recording environment. Once through Erroll Garner's *Concert by the Sea* [Columbia] makes the size and shape of the Sunset Center Assembly Hall explicit – and from there the ELACs make any number of pertinent observations about the number of attendees, the distance and reflectivity of hard surfaces and so on. It seems unlikely you'll get a fuller or more vivid picture from any price-comparable alternative.

So as a combination of passably contemporary looks, undeniable quality of build and finish, impressive (and, in places, very individual) specification, and even-handed, effortless and prodigiously detailed sound, the ELAC Vela FS 408 are right on the money. There's little to teach them about timing, or the minor second-stage harmonic details that can make all the difference to the sound of a solo piano. 'Attentive' is too mild a description for the attitude the ELACs adopt.

And anyway, should you really expect an aesthete to be able to hold their own in a brawl outside a pub? It's possible to make demands of the Vela FS 408 that they're uncomfortable trying to fulfil – the dynamic switch from 'solo triangle player at the rear of the stage' to 'every section of the orchestra attempting to overpower every other section' is not where the ELACs excel. But take them on their own terms and they have more than enough about them to make every listen a smooth and informative journey. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: 2.5-way; bass reflex port;

Driver complement: 1 × JET5 tweeter;
1 × 180mm AS-XR midrange driver;
1 × 180mm AS-XR bass driver

Frequency response: 28Hz–50kHz

Crossover frequency: 450Hz; 2550Hz

Impedance: 4 Ohms nominal
(3.6 Ohms minimum)

Sensitivity: 88.5dB/W/m

Dimensions (H×W×D):
1142 × 276 × 332mm

Weight: 27 kg/each

Finishes: High gloss white; high gloss
black

Price: £4,500/pair

Manufacturer: ELAC Electroacoustic
GmbH

URL: elac.com

UK Distributor: Hi-Fi Network

URL: hifi-network.com

