

Incoming

➤ First tests of essential new kit from hi-fi's front line

EXCLUSIVE ★★★★★

JMLab Cobalt 816 S speaker £999

➤ The JMLab Cobalt 816 Signature is a tall, front-ported grey aluminium box edged with two-side cherry wooden cheeks and a metal grille which is claimed to be entirely acoustically transparent. At the back, the crossover is on show, hidden behind a clear plastic panel – beneath that is a pair of bi-wire terminals. The speaker is a two-and-a-half-way design, featuring a 165mm bass unit, a matching 165mm mid-range driver and a single 25mm inverted 'Tioxid' tweeter unit with a 19mm voice coil. This speaker is claimed to have a sensitivity of 91.5dB and a nominal impedance of eight ohms (which swings down to 3.3ohms at worst).

Like the plain Cobalt 816 before it (tested in *HFC 224*), the Signature combines strong bass with a near-holographic midband and treble, which extends way past the threshold of hearing. This might not mean super-tweeter style extended frequency range, but it does sound clean and more extended than most floorstanders at the price. That means a sound that is exceptionally open and detailed with fantastic imagery, but perhaps not the sweetest around. This makes a great sound for good classic hi-fi discs – the acoustic pop of *Rare On Air*, for example, sounds fantastic – but can be uncomfortably raucous with The

KEY FEATURES

- Two-and-a-half way speaker
- Floorstanding design
- 25mm Focal inverted tweeter
- 165mm bass/mid unit
- 165mm bass unit
- 91.5dB sensitivity
- 8 ohm nominal impedance
- Maximum power rating 125 watts

Strokes. On balance, though, the brightness is easy to live with, especially as you end up with a speaker with a stereo image normally reserved for electrostatics and ribbon designs.

While the Cobalt 816 S doesn't time like a decent sealed-box speaker – fast-paced rhythms tend





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to blur and slow thanks to the bass port – the bass depth more than makes up for the lack of precision timing. Again, this steers the speaker away from driving and raucous music, as The Clash will sound more like a mild ruck and Metallica more like flabby plastic than hard metal. But, on the *Dead Man Walking* soundtrack, this depth, allied to a stunning midband, will make you hungry for more.

One of the hidden joys of the 816 S is that the speaker uses tailor-made speaker drivers. This is common among JMLab speakers, with more than 200 different Focal drive unit designs in the portfolio. The advantage is in the crossover network which is a shade simpler than most at this price. This offers more revealing performance without the hike in efficiency such detail normally requires. It also allows the speakers to play loud if needed – Metallica's *Enter Sandman* can fill a room at concert levels easily.

But there are downsides. The speakers are not perfectly shielded and also need more space than most. They come with foam port bungs, but this is a speaker that lives and breathes for free space – and lots of it. Also, there is the not insignificant matter of run-in. Normally speakers of this price level are working at their best within a couple of weeks

of use – but in this case hundreds and hundreds of hours are recommended to rid the speakers of the peaky treble that appears from time to time.

Overall, these speakers win out. They image with stunning precision, have a vanishing 3D midband and treble, even if it has a touch of brightness. Even the bass is good and deep, if not the fastest in hi-fi. In short, if you have a big room and want a vivid and vital sounding speaker for around a grand, this French newcomer is a must-listen.

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THE 'S' EFFECT

The differences between this model and the standard Cobalt 816 are small but significant. The tweeter sports the latest Tioxid 5 anodising process and the midrange speaker has been tweaked for even greater clarity. This has also meant the crossover has been revoiced and modified slightly. Finally, the Signature features damping material from the more up-market Electra range.

JMLab can revoice its speaker drive units with ease – it not only makes loudspeakers, it makes its own drivers thanks to its drive-unit manufacturer division, called Focal, which also makes drive units for many of the other top loudspeaker companies, too.