



Fashion statement

Here's a loudspeaker that seeks to mix high style with sublime sonics and **David Vivian** is smitten on at least one of those counts

By its very nature high-end hi-fi is rather contentious. Some people say it's more about attitude and mindset than absolute monetary worth, hence presumably the emergence of 'affordable high-end' – on the face of it an oxymoronic proposition that begs the question whether conspicuous over engineering, exotic materials and a five-figure price tag are necessary if all you want is sublime sound quality. It presents something of a conundrum for a loudspeaker brand like Focal. The French manufacturer has made its

It doesn't fixate on the forensic at the expense of the larger musical picture

name with a range that embraces both the budget friendly and reassuringly expensive, though it's undoubtedly the latter that has garnered the most glowing critical acclaim in the UK. And so the mission: to make an ostensibly 'entry-level' high-end floorstander at the lower end of the reassuringly expensive spectrum that comfortably outperforms the high-value, over-achieving floorstanders from the company's mainstream layer yet isn't so magnificent that it embarrasses, and therefore undermines, the very ethos of the seriously big ticket items – in Focal's case peaking with the Ferrari-priced Grande Utopia EM.

The model tasked with this precarious balancing act is the Kanta N°2 you see here. At a pound under £7,000, its price is firmly in aspirational territory for most, yet it costs a breezy £3k less than the Sopra N°2 from the next tier up in Focal's 'high-end' portfolio. Little wonder, perhaps, that it took three years of research and development to see the light of day. It isn't a one-off, but establishes what will become a

Kanta range with a standmount and a larger floorstander in due course.

Not that the Kanta N°2 is exactly a shrinking violet – in size, aesthetic impact or technical ambition. Focal describes its genesis thus: "By utilising many of our proprietary acoustic innovations with newly researched techniques, we have created a three-way floorstanding speaker that combines the exceptional performance the brand is known for, with an exciting new industrial design that will blend in perfectly with any interior".

I've removed the word 'compact' from that overview as, at 35kg and standing some 110mm taller than my regular large room DALI Rubicon 6 towers, the Kanta only looks dainty next to Focal's apartment block-sized Sopra and Utopia floorstanders. As for blending in, the beaming, matt-finish Gauloise Blue baffle of the review pair doesn't. Fortunately, there's enough choice in the colour chart to inspire even the most timid inner interior designer. The side panels can be had in a lacquered black high gloss finish or a walnut veneer. Gauloise Blue in matt or gloss serves both, but the beefy, curved composite baffle is available in three colours for each of the two cabinet finishes: gloss Carrera White, Solar Yellow and Black Lacquer to go with the black gloss side panels, matt Ivory, Warm Taupe and Dark Grey for the walnut panels. By any standards, the Kanta N°2 is a striking speaker – no more so than with a blue baffle.

Truth is, the look of the drivers is just as interesting. This is the first Focal to combine its flax sandwich cone tech for the midrange and bass drivers with the company's lauded pure beryllium tweeter. The contrast of organic and metallic looks so good I doubt the vestigial, magnetically attached fabric grilles will ever be required. This particular 27mm tweeter, positioned below the midrange driver but above the twin bass units, has been designed

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Focal Kanta N°2

ORIGIN
France

TYPE
3-way floorstanding loudspeaker

WEIGHT
35kg

DIMENSIONS (WxHxD)
321 x 1,118 x 477mm

FEATURES

- 27mm beryllium tweeter
- 165mm flax midrange driver
- 2x 165mm flax bass drivers
- Quoted sensitivity: 91dB/1W/1m (8ohm)

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and developed specifically for the Kanta. Focal's pursuit of the lowest possible distortion means combining the very light and very stiff beryllium with the IAL (Infinite Acoustic Loading) and IHL (Infinite Horn Loading) principles it has developed for its flagship Utopia models. The intention is to improve the absorption of sound waves and reduce the resonance frequency of the tweeter to blend more seamlessly with the midrange driver.

Taking the flax

This is where flax comes in; something that is very much a Focal thing. Locally sourced and handmade in France and patented, the fibre weave has proved its worth in several of the company's key designs. By sandwiching flax fibre between two thin layers of glass fibre, the resulting cone is claimed to have high internal damping and high flexural rigidity. It's used in three of the Kanta's drivers. Both the 165mm midrange and two bass units benefit from Focal's so-called Tuned Mass Damping (TMD) and, to stabilise the magnetic field, its Neutral Inductance Circuit (NIC) – the overarching goal being better control and definition with lower colouration.

That big, bluff and time-aligned full-length baffle isn't just a treat for the retina. Part of the R&D phase was taken up researching a new material that would combine high rigidity with favourable acoustic properties. The result is a high-density polymer (HDP) ▶

The built-in spikes lift the enclosure as much as 60mm from the floor



which, Focal asserts, is superior to MDF, being some 70 percent denser, 15 percent more rigid and 25 percent better damped. The smooth, angled edges are to defeat diffraction and allow sound waves to 'effortlessly flow across the surface'. And the overall rigidity of the structure is bolstered by the rear part of the enclosure, which is internally braced and constructed from moulded multi-ply wood.

There are two bass reflex ports, one front, one rear – an arrangement dubbed 'Power Port' for which Focal claims deeper bass response and less dynamic compression. A degree of bass management also falls to the four-footed Zamac (metal alloy) base structure, which plants a stabilising footprint without splaying out too much and hoists the enclosure at least 60mm from the floor, slightly more if the adjustable spikes are deployed. It's a good look, too, as is the dark glass plate that dresses the top panel.

The Zamac 'foot' is very securely anchored to the base of the enclosure, which is just as well, as 'walking' the Kanta into position – unless you're into bear hugs and feeling especially strong – is the preferred method. In my larger listening room, it doesn't

take long to get things to the fine-tuning stage and it's pretty close to the initial intuitive placement – about a metre away from the rear wall and only slightly less from the side walls, with a mild degree of toe-in. Any closer to boundaries and the fulsome, well-extended bass gets just too much of a helping hand.

Actually, and unsurprisingly, the choice of amplification plays its part here. Given the Focal's claimed high (91dB) efficiency, using a modestly priced integrated isn't out of the question, so long as it has the required minerals. Hegel's H90 (HFC 427), despite boasting a 'mere' 60W a side, sounds quite lovely and, with its very high damping factor, has no trouble keeping the Kanta's generous lower frequency output in check. No less remarkable, the £700 Cyrus ONE (see p50) can call on its ample Class D power to rock the room, if without quite the finesse and vice-like bottom end grip of the Hegel. In the end, though, I settle on an interpretation of 'affordable high-end' in the shape of Emotiva's BassX PT-100/A-300 pre-power combo, which so impressed me

HOW IT COMPARES

Q Acoustics' £4,000 Concept 500 (HFC 426), is beautifully built and finished, does most things the Kanta can – only losing out slightly at the frequency extremes – and might just seal the deal with its more conservative design and £3k saving. PMC's superb twenty.26 (£5,750) also puts up stiff opposition with great detail and exceptional bass performance. If going fully active is a possibility, the studio-fit ATC SCM40A (around £6,800) arguably delivers the most convincing sound of all and, given that the power amplification is taken care of, is a bit of a high-end bargain.

when I reviewed it back in issue 429. With its potent current delivery, fine transparency and grippy, tactile sound, the sleek Emotiva duo isn't in the least overawed by the Kanta, bidding it to project a full, expansive but precisely formed soundstage into the room at little more than a jog.

Sound quality

Even with the extraordinary detail resolution on offer from a front end comprising Cambridge Audio's CXC CD transport (HFC 401) and Chord's Hugo 2 (HFC 428), the Kanta doesn't fixate on the forensic at the expense of the larger musical picture. Spinning up *Sister* from Tracey Thorn's latest album *Record* – basically Everything But The Girl after a double dose of Barocca – the sound is revealing and rich with a firm grasp of tempo and rhythm, but most importantly, the music ebbs and flows with a lucidity that nearly always evades lesser speakers trying perhaps a little too hard to impress. There isn't much to snag your attention in a purely hi-fi sense, not even the preternatural clarity of the beryllium tweeter. It wasn't always the case, but after years of assiduous development and evolution its contribution is seamlessly integrated.

If you want more than a taste of the real high-end, this is the place to start

Walk into the room with the Kanta playing and the tendency is to relax a little, even if the volume is motoring on and Emerson, Lake and Palmer's *Jerusalem* is approaching its shuddering climax. With the eternally gorgeous *Bittersweet* from Lewis Taylor's eponymously titled 1996 debut, it's the deft dynamic shading, the absence of strain, the panoply of tonal textures and colours and the seductively sumptuous yet supple bass that conspire to draw you into a truly immersive, zero-fatigue listen.

There's nothing particularly sketchy, impressionistic or editorialised about the Kanta N°2's presentation. Nor does it seem in the least processed, hyped or manipulated. But plenty of flesh on the bones? Most definitely. Here's a speaker with real bandwidth, grip and insight that delivers music in a tangible, coherent way with excellent weight, drive and rhythmic impetus. And it's that breadth of talent, which is easy to hear straight away that separates the Kanta from the less

IN SIGHT



- 1 165mm flax midrange driver
- 2 Bass reflex power port arrangement
- 3 Binding posts
- 4 Adjustable floor spikes
- 5 165mm flax bass drivers
- 6 27mm beryllium tweeter

FOCAL POINT

Focal has been in business for more than 35 years and has built up an impressive portfolio and a reputation for excellence much larger than the company itself. Based in Saint-Étienne, it manufactures loudspeaker drivers, domestic hi-fi and multimedia loudspeakers, car audio systems, monitors for recording studios and a range of headphones that stretches comfortably into the high-end. Some of Focal's loudspeaker technologies, such as its beryllium tweeters and flax cones have become distinct developments in the hi-fi industry. Their use together in

the Kanta is another first. All Focal products are designed and developed in France: many are the recipients of patented acoustic technologies. The company has chosen to continue manufacturing in France, where it believes the quality and high standards of workmanship place the brand above its competitors. A market leader in France, it exports more than 80 percent of its production, mainly to Europe, North America and Southeast Asia. In 2011, Focal merged with the UK's Naim Audio Limited forming a partnership with shared ideals and standards.

expensive options that over achieve against cost but over promise in terms of longer-term musical satisfaction. And it's here that the Kanta really begins to justify its elevated but far from extravagant asking price.

Conclusion

In a sense, the Kanta expands and elaborates on the qualities that have kept the £3k DALI Rubicon 6 (HFC 399) as a floorstanding reference in my larger listening room for such a long time. As with that speaker, the need, however subliminal, to make allowances for the volume of the enclosure, the number of drive units and the success or otherwise of their integration fades away and an immersive sense of realism takes over. I come back time and again to the release, the letting go, the relaxation. It really is a kind of watershed, the place where the power of the music, rather than the limitations of the transducer, commands the listening experience.

Style is a personal thing and, even by Focal's standards, the Kanta N°2 is strong medicine, and I'm not sure I could live with the review pair without redecorating the room. It probably tells you something about the sound quality that I'd do it in a flash. If you want more than a taste of the real high-end, the Focal Kanta N°2 is a fabulous place to start ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Gorgeous sound quality; super build; impeccable finish
- VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Full-on style statement that's likely to split opinion
- BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★ **WESAY:** A not inconsiderable investment for a very considerable sound. A terrific loudspeaker
- EASE OF DRIVE** ★★★★★

OVERALL



Q&A

Andy Oattes
Head of sales and marketing, Focal UK



DV: What special sonic qualities does the flax and beryllium combination bring to the table?

AO: Kanta N°2 is equipped with a new generation IAL tweeter featuring a beryllium inverted dome and flax sandwich cone speaker drivers. This is an unprecedented combination of technologies never heard before, with a drastic reduction of distortion for precise, detailed and warm sound throughout the frequency range.

The design approach seems quite a radical departure for Focal. Was the three-year R&D period a given from the start?

We took a long time to consider the sound concept we desired, and the loudspeaker design was at the demands of the acoustic project to achieve the Focal sound signature. Focal's latest acoustic innovations have been integrated into these floorstanders and encompass a modern and distinctive design in a loudspeaker that has its own strength and identity.

Do you envisage a different type of buyer for the Kanta to the usual 'high-end' Focal buyer?

The Kanta customer is a music lover, as with all Focal customers. They are perhaps more technology oriented rather than marketing lead. They do not like design for design's sake, but love very strong and differentiating design that's driven by performance, and enjoy premium products throughout their life.



This is the first Focal to combine flax sandwich midrange cones and bass drivers with its famed beryllium tweeter