Focal hero

Chora series flagship delivers music in style

Quad Vena II Play
Bijou all-in-one streaming system with hi-fi credentials

MUSIC LEGENDS
Remembering blues guitarist BB King

GROUP TEST
Sound of silence
Six noise-cancelling cans that shut out the world

PRODUCTS ON TEST:
Bose, Fyne Audio, Klipsch, Paradigm, REL & Sennheiser

EXCLUSIVE
Rega amp
Aethos integrated puts sonics first

Going Solo
Meze’s dynamic in-ear perfects personal stereo
Focal hero

Introducing the new entry-level range with innovative cone material. David Vivian reckons it’s something to sing about

French loudspeaker maker Focal pours a lot of time and money into R&D – probably more than most of its competitors. Originally known as Focal-JMLab, the company was founded in 1979 in Saint-Étienne by the engineer and hi-fi journalist Jacques Multal and, from the very beginning, a restless desire to stay ahead of the curve fuelled innovation. The mission could easily be subtitled “...and the search for the perfect driver diaphragm.” It’s a continuing (and presumably never-ending) quest, but Focal’s track record thus far in bringing new materials and composites to market is impressive.

Since the early eighties these have included titanium, titanium dioxide, poly kevlar, polyglass, and flax, and for its premium lines, beryllium and the mysteriously named ‘W’ composite. Now slatefiber makes its debut, not as a state-of-the-art proposition later to be trickled down to more mainstream fare, but a ready-to-roll game changer for a high-end sector traditionally teaming with premium lines, beryllium and the only slightly pricier Kevlar.

Secret to its success

They might be on shaky ground with the Chora 826. Focal notes that its aim has always been to make high-quality accessible and cites the popularity and acclaim afforded Chorus as a measure of its success. It suggests Chora is on another level altogether. Its objective with the new range has been to capture something of the sonic character and visual appeal of its most advanced and expensive speakers for the lowest price possible. If accomplished, that’s quite some prospect.

Mid and bass drivers built around slatefiber cones (the name refers to the attractive slate-grey colour, not an ingredient) seem to be the key. The TNF tweeter, set in a shallow waveguide, is unusual, too. As well as sporting an inverted 25mm aluminium/magnesium dome (concave rather than convex to make it less directional), the suspension between the dome and its bracket incorporates Poron, a material with what Focal refers to as ‘shape memory’. It’s a similar arrangement to the one Focal employs for the famous beryllium tweeter in its high-end Utopia range. The benefit of this suspension, claims the company, is that it makes it possible to reduce distortion by a factor of three to around 2.5kHz where the human ear is at its most sensitive, but the 28kHz frequency ceiling is impressive, too.

For much effort and ingenuity devoted to the drivers, it wouldn’t be too terrible to find evidence of cost-paring elsewhere. True, the Chora achieves a conversation piece like the Kanta, Sopra or Utopia ranges would be, but it is smart and stylishly finished (in black with piano gloss baffle, light wood with cream baffle or dark wood with grey baffle) and holds its weight in the fray...
its own with the more expensive Focal Aria line, positioned one tier up. A magnetically attached grille covers the mid and two bass drivers, leaving the tweeter (protected by a glowing steel mesh cap) and reflex ports on show. But I reckon Focal is right, the standfiers drivers look too good to hide away. If you agree, you’ll notice that the midrange driver has a conical dust cap while on the bass drivers’ it’s flattened out over a greater surface area of the cones. The reason is that as well as locating the 826 more securely, they also lift the endoears back by a few degrees to time-align the drivers – essential for properly focused imaging, says Focal.

Sound quality
I wish I could claim that I undertake extensive plinths on/off comparisons to be able to hear the effect, but the speaker sounds so good with them fitted, I don’t feel inclined to double Focal’s word on the matter. Any experimentation that does take place is confined to discovering whether the tall and slightly tilted-back Chora 826 is confined to discovering whether the midrange or floorstander, and it’s clearer, more sumptuous and richer balance and transparency but suffers from a lack of weight, rigidity and damping on paper, but it’s bad news for the standmount. That it sounds quite different, set a different path, as mentioned, B&W’s 802.3 makes it all but irresistible as a three-way tower in a small room with my recent reviews of the B&W 803 and B&W’s superb H900 (HFC 427), despite their nominally identical 2x 60W power outputs which, even in the larger room, proves more than enough to drive the sensitive 826 (rated at 91dB) so very healthy levels. As has become increasingly clear with my recent reviews of the B&W 803 and KLH Kendall, there are some things a well-designed and engineered three-way floorstander of a certain size can do that are simply beyond even the best standmounts or smaller floorstanders with fewer drivers. It’s a kind of easy-going generosity that unseals a recording more completely for appreciation. The B&K succeeds through the midrange and treble with stunning clarity, resolution and openness, while the KLH has a warmer tonal balance and deeper bass without being quite so transparent. Both exhibit that appealing three-way uninconstrained largeness.

If anything, it’s even more apparent with the Chora 826. For instance, that lovely walking double bass that introduces Simply Red’s ‘Sad Old Foot’ brushes rather than feeling as if it’s being squeezed out of a construction. Sarah Jane Morris’s ‘Singing’ John Martyn’s Sweet Little Mystery happens in a soundstage with believable scale and solidity, her soul-drenched huskiness portrayed with a richness and depth that tugs hard on the emotions. No, the Focal isn’t quite as resolute as the B&K or as tightly warm as the KLH, but it does chart a very comfortable path between the two that, straight away, gives it falsehood likability.

Also, better than both those speakers is the Focal’s ability to project an extraordinarily huge and spacious soundstage with a strong sense of height as well as depth – maybe a result of that backward tilt. It works to stunning effect when I cue up jazz albums with their huge stereo boundaries, and how it fares with a variety of integrated amps. Again, the Focal remains coolly agnostic, effortlessly and enjoyably delivering a sound characteristic that introduces Simply Red’s ‘Sad Old Foot’ to stunning effect when I cue up jazz albums with their huge stereo boundaries.

The wood ebb and flows with a fluency and cohesion that’s easy to relax into area of the cones. The reason is that they have different functions. On the midrange driver, it is shaped to put the squarish on interllfere and so reduce distortion, but on the bass drivers caps are flattened to enhance cone rigidity and improve definition and impact at the bottom end. Normally, I steer clear of screw-on plastic plinths as, while undoubtedly increasing the stability of the loudspeakers to which they’re attached to create a new cone-material technology exclusive to Focal, for our entry-level range of speakers. Historically, we have used a polycarbonate cone. For Chora, we wanted a product that was totally developed and made in France, so we created a new industrial tool to fabricate the cones, making sure the design would suit our entry-level range. Slatefiber is made of recycled carbon filaments and thermoplastic polymer and has some very interesting acoustic properties: good rigidity, high damping (close to flax and ‘W’ membranes) and extremely lightweight. The upshot of this is that the sound characteristic of slatefiber offers excellent clarity in the midrange, which represents a huge upgrade in performance over the previous, polycarbonate technology used in the Chora. At Focal, we tend to find our speakers have a “Focal sound signature” and slatefiber delivers a sound characteristic that we feel is very reminiscent of our more premium models.

Three-way floorstanders offer a whole new layer of detail and precision at the top end. It’s a great listenability.

The Chora 826 clearly receives many of the suggested drivers experience norms. In 2015, it introduced Vox line drivers (essentially the presence of the ASC experience Corea) for its more affordable and more stylish drivers. The switched core features the layer in the line to between the layers of Charcoal. This was chosen for its mechanical properties, the hollow core (combining neutrality and lightness while its low distortion and high rigidity are similar to that of carbon and flax.

Conclusion
The Chora 826 silently resolves any debate about whether to go for a standmount or floorstander, and it’s bad news for the standmount. That it can deliver the mythical advantages of a three-way tower in a small room makes it all but irresistible.

A DRIVER FORCE
In Focal’s quest to create the best driver units for its various speakers, there have been many materials have been introduced over the years, including drivers for the tweeter, midrange, and even bass drivers, which is used for the tweeter of its high-end drivers. In the mid-80s, the French company decided to add a new driver to its cone for its midrange and bass drivers. The idea behind slatefiber was to create a new cone-material technology exclusive to Focal, for our entry-level range of speakers. Historically, we have used a polycarbonate cone. For Chora, we wanted a product that was totally developed and made in France.

1 Slatefiber is named after its colour, not its properties.

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IN-DEPTH
FOCAL
CHORA 826
EL.300

Q&A
Mégane Montalbanel
Product manager, Focal

DO: How do the properties of a slatefiber cone differ from those of a woofer or a tweeter?
MY: Slatefiber is made of recycled carbon filaments and thermoplastic polymer and has some very interesting acoustic properties: good rigidity, high damping (close to flax and ‘W’ membranes) and extremely lightweight. The upshot of this is that the sound characteristic of slatefiber offers excellent clarity in the midrange, which represents a huge upgrade in performance over the previous, polycarbonate technology used in the Chora. At Focal, we tend to find our speakers have a “Focal sound signature” and slatefiber delivers a sound characteristic that we feel is very reminiscent of our more premium models.

How did the slatefiber cone material come about?
For Focal, slatefiber was to create a new cone-material technology exclusive to Focal, for our entry-level range of speakers. Historically, we have used a polycarbonate cone. For Chora, we wanted a product that was totally developed and made in France, so we created a new industrial tool to fabricate the cones, making sure the design would suit our entry-level range.

Are any new models likely to be introduced to the Chora range?
In 2020 we’ll be introducing some exciting new members of the Chora family, to cater for a range of multi-channel setups. Watch this space!