The French connection

Blending style and sonic flair, David Price auditions this small but perfectly formed Gallic standmount loudspeaker

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Focal is on the move. You’d think with such a vast speaker range it would have already hit every possible niche, but apparently not. The striking Kanta N°1 is best described as a high-end standmount speaker aimed at those who put design flair before convention. It’s certainly something different for this French brand and is one of its most expensive standmount loudspeakers. Focal describes it as “a new vision for a premium speaker,” no less…

Regular readers who saw the £6,999 Kanta N°2 floorstander review back in HVC 435 will remember the Kanta range is the first time that the company’s beryllium tweeter and flax mid/bass drivers have been combined. Another innovation is the range of smazy baffle colours offered with the gloss black cabinet paint finish – carrara white, gauchoise blue, solar yellow and black lacquer are also available. There’s also a walnut wood option, where you get a choice of ivory, warm taupe, gauchoise blue and dark grey baffles.

Personally, I’m a big fan of both Focal’s beryllium tweeter and its flax mid/bass unit. The new pure IAL 3 27mm inverted-dome tweeter combines the principles of Infinite Acoustic Loading and Infinite Horn Loading to improve the absorption of sound waves to reduce the resonant frequency of the tweeter, according to Focal. Although it’s two-and-a-half times lighter than titanium, it is seven times more rigid. At 2.4kHz it crosses over to the 36mm flax sandwich cone mid/bass unit, said to have low mass, high rigidity and excellent damping. It uses Focal’s Tuned Mass Damping and Neutral Inductance Circuit technology to stabilise the magnetic field to provide perfect definition and better-controlled bass, says the company.

The crossover has large tracks that minimise circuit resistance, with direct paths from input to drivers and selected film type capacitors and low distortion air coils. A silico steel laminate core inductor is used for the mid/bass part of the crossover. It’s a third order for the tweeter and second order for the mid/bass unit. The front baffle is made out of a high-density plywood, said to be 70 percent denser than MDF, 15 percent stiffer and with one quarter as much again in terms of damping. The back of the box is made of wood, and sports a largish bass reflex port for which a foam bung is supplied port bung. As is typical, a supplied ‘beret-type’ grille attaches to the lower drive unit magnetically.

Obviously, mounting on a stand is essential and Focal’s offering is an excellent visual match, but costs a stiff £900 per pair. The speaker works best placed over half a metre from the rear boundary wall, although you can push it a good deal closer if you use the supplied port bung. As is typical, a modest amount of toe-in is needed. Claimed sensitivity is 88dB and the Kanta N°1 specifies a frequency response of 46Hz to 40kHz (+/-3dB), power handling of 25 to 150W and nominal impedance of 8ohm.

Sound quality

The Kanta N°1 sits at an awkward price point where it’s starting to get into serious high-end territory, so needs to be a serious performer. The good news is that it is – although it’s not flawless. The first thing that strikes me is its general cleanliness; there’s the sense that I am peering through a far more translucent lens than with standmounts at just £1,000 less. Both its drive units are of genuinely high
Q&A
Mike Smith
Head of Focal UK

DP: What’s special about the driver construction and what qualities does it bring?
MS: Kanta N°1 is equipped with a new generation IAL (Infinite Acoustic Loading) tweeter, featuring a beryllium inverted dome, along with a flax sandwich mid/bass driver. Developed over a five-year period, this unique cone material is constructed from a high-quality flax fibre core enclosed by two thin layers of glass fibre to deliver a high-performance diaphragm with high internal damping, high velocity of sound and high flexural rigidity. This combination of driver technologies is unprecedented and dramatically reduces distortion, guaranteeing a precise, detailed and warm overall presentation across the whole frequency range.

What was the design approach of the Kanta series and how long did it take to realise?
As with all Focal loudspeakers, performance drove the design. Crucial to the three-year R&D process, which is housed at our Saint-Etienne HQ along with component manufacture, was the acoustic performance. The goal was to achieve. Once we had the sound, the industrial design was created to complement all of the acoustic elements. Industrial design is a very important part of any Focal product, but always at the service of Focal’s sound signature.

What kind of buyer is the Kanta series aimed at?
The Kanta customer is a music lover but always at the service of Focal’s sound signature. Industrial design is a very important part of any Focal product, but always at the service of Focal’s sound signature.

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In Sight

27mm beryllium tweeter
Reflex bass port
Single-wire binding posts
165mm flax mid/bass driver

How it compares
KEF’s £4,499 Reference 1 standmount (HFC 414) is a direct rival – and a tough one too. It runs a 255mm/125mm tweeter/midband driver array, together with 165mm bass driver, to pack a lot of power into a small space. This three-way sounds a little more relaxed in some ways, and shines with its superb stereo imaging thanks to the Uni-Q driver that KEF is known for. At just 205 x 440 x 430mm, it similarly struggles to move serious amounts of air at high volumes, and isn’t the world’s easiest speaker to drive – serious solid-state power only, please.

The Kanta N°1 very much gives the sense of dissolving out of the equation, letting the music shine through with everything located in its correct place and the soundstage running far left and right while falling back with impressive depth. It’s on simple, well-recorded material like this that this speaker really shines.

Speak Like A Child

Kanta N°1 is without doubt a fine standmount loudspeaker. Its excellent drive units meld together well, fitted to a great cabinet and the result is a bouncy, musical and engaging sound that’s nevertheless couth and refined. It gives an open window onto the recording – but only up to a point because it can’t defy the laws of physics, and so becomes limited by its size and design constraints at very high volumes. Not only does it sound fun, but it’s gloriously styled and comes in a wide range of eye-catching finishes.

Conclusion
Focal’s Kanta N°1 is without doubt a fine standmount loudspeaker. Its excellent drive units meld together well, fitted to a great cabinet and the result is a bouncy, musical and engaging sound that’s nevertheless couth and refined. It gives an open window onto the recording – but only up to a point because it can’t defy the laws of physics, and so becomes limited by its size and design constraints at very high volumes. Not only does it sound fun, but it’s gloriously styled and comes in a wide range of eye-catching finishes.

HiFi Choice

Our verdict

Sound Quality
4

Value for money
3

Build Quality
5

Ease of Drive
5

Conclusion

OVERALL

LIKE: Open, detailed, musical sound; build quality and style

DISLIKE: Slight compression at higher volumes

WESAY: A super-stylish premium standmount that needs plenty of power to deliver its best

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